Beyond Summerland

Jenny Lecoat

Polygon

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by Polygon,
an imprint of Birlinn Ltd.

Birlinn Ltd
West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.polygonbooks.co.uk

1

ISBN 978 1 84697 653 7
eBook ISBN 978 1 78885 679 9

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on request from the
British Library.

Typeset by Initial Typesetting Services, Edinburgh

For Val Lecoat, 1937–2014,
whose childhood was taken by Occupation.
For all that she's missed.

Before

It was the vibration, not the sound, that woke her – the violent shuddering of the front door rattling in its frame as it was hit repeatedly with powerful, angry fists. The reverberation pulsing up through the brickwork, across the joists of the house and into the legs of her bed frame. Then she heard the voices shouting outside.

'Öffne diese Tür! Sofort!'

Barely awake, for a second she thought it was a dream. Then she heard her mother's frantic footsteps on the staircase, half running, half falling in her urgency, followed by the uneven clanking of the metal bolt as desperate fingers struggled to pull it back. Alone in her room, she sat upright in her bed, her heart pumping fit to shatter, horror-struck to find herself so vulnerable, terrified to leave the idiotic safety of her blankets. As the front door smacked open the sound exploded: the shouts of soldiers clattering into the hallway, their boots banging on the wooden floor that had been so lovingly mopped just the day before, her mother's anguished cry as she was pushed aside. Then they were tumbling up the stairs one after the other, a chaotic production line of orders on the move, hunting down their prey, focused only on their target.

By the time she found the courage and strength to cross the room and open her bedroom door, they had him. His pyjamas rumpled from the creases of sleep, his chin and chops sprouting their morning whiskers, it was only his slight stumble along the landing that alerted her to the cuffs behind his back. She heard her own voice, high and piercing above the others: 'Dad! Dad!'

He offered no resistance as they shoved him down the stairs, and asked only once why he was being arrested, while all the time her mother's low, animal wail echoed through the rooms, a bass hum in a soprano choir. Frozen, she watched through the banisters as they uncuffed him just long enough to pull on his shoes and coat before bundling him out of the house and into the Black Maria. She saw her mother sink down onto her haunches, her nightdress hauled awkwardly around her thighs, and scream into her hands. And then there was another voice, another set of howls and wails, and she realised they were coming from deep inside her, merging with her mother's cries, and that she might never be able to stop.

1

Jersey, Channel Islands
June 1945

Excitement billowed down the street. It poured out of every doorway and crackled in the air, tickling the back of people's necks, beckoning everyone into this thrilling, historic morning. And what a morning! Yesterday's storm had vanished north over the English Channel, leaving bright sunshine and a powder-blue sky. Now the whole of St Helier was waiting, rinsed and gleaming, impatient with anticipation. A stiff south-westerly gusted through the streets of the town, carrying the faint murmur of a distant, chattering crowd, and as she stood on her front path to breathe it all in, Jean felt a surge of genuine optimism. She ran her fingers through her mousy hair to revive its sagging shape, tugged at her jacket to make sure the moth hole in her blouse was hidden, then called back into the house: 'Mum! Hurry up, or we'll get stuck at the back.'

Violet Parris shuffled out, her ancient leather handbag perched carefully on her arm. Jean watched as she turned, methodically, to lock the Chubb. It was a habit that recent years had ingrained, and with pilfering still rife around the parish it made sense to be cautious, though everyone missed the days of open front doors. 'Things will settle down by Christmas,' people kept saying. And perhaps they would. Jean took in the pallid face beneath the battered felt hat and considered what a frail, brittle

figure her mother cut these days, the anxious, darting eyes and slight stoop of constant burden more pronounced in sunlight than in the gloom of the house. Certainly, most people would have guessed Violet to be older than forty-six. But then, Jean supposed, every living soul on this island had aged a lifetime in the last five years. She felt a sudden urge to reach out and hug her mum tightly but, knowing Violet would balk at such a display, offered her arm instead.

They set off at a pace that Jean calculated her mother could maintain for the half-mile walk. The street was filled with the sound of garden gates clanging as women shooed husbands and children onto the pavement, reknotting ties and smoothing errant strands of hair before scuttling towards the town centre. One or two of them carried folded Union Jacks ready to unfurl at the crucial moment, and Jean felt a pang of envy; their own flag had been used for kindling back in the winter, and no replacements could be bought now. But then, it would be inappropriate for the family to appear in any way frivolous. Jersey was a small island. People liked to talk.

By the time they reached the end of Bath Street the roads were already thick with people heading for the Royal Square. At the corner of the covered market on Halkett Place, two streams of moving bodies became a human river, pushing the pair of them along like paper boats, and Jean wished again that they had set off earlier. As a woman behind stumbled slightly, forcing them both forward, she felt her mother's fingers tighten on her arm; quickly, Jean tugged her away from the melee towards a quiet side street, where she leaned her mother against a concrete wall, supplying a handkerchief which Violet immediately dabbed across her forehead.

'All right?'

Violet shook her head. 'So many people. Why didn't we go down the Albert Pier, see the SS *Jamaica* coming in, or find a place along the Esplanade?'

Jean, who had suggested these exact choices last night, merely took the dampened handkerchief back and tucked it into her sleeve. As she did so, her eyes fell on the shop front, a small bakery set halfway down the turning. The display window had been boarded up to replace the shattered glass, but evidently the vandals had returned for a second visit, because now a huge swastika was painted on the plywood in black pitch. She glanced at her mother and saw that she too had become transfixed by it. Violet jerked her chin a little. 'Collaborators.' Jean nodded. What had the proprietors done to earn such a reputation? Had they served German soldiers their bread? Fraternised with them? She imagined the angry faces of men rushing towards the shop in the dead of night, bricks and rocks in their hands. What had happened to this island in such a few short weeks?

Liberation Day, less than a month earlier, had been the most significant, emotional event that any islander, young or old, had ever experienced. The most longed-for day in their history had come at last and, with the arrival of a British task force in the harbour and the official surrender of the German military, five brutal years of Nazi occupation had finally come to an end. So long and arduous had the Occupation been – Jean was a schoolgirl of just fourteen when it began – that for the first week or two of freedom she had found the transformation impossible to take in. To be able to leave the house without curfew . . . to speak openly on the street without fear of spies . . . to listen to the BBC news on a neighbour's radio! But best of all was the joy of eating a proper meal again, as the British army unloaded crate after crate of supplies, and the Red Cross ship, *Vega*, brought more relief parcels. Given the near starvation of the previous year, extravagances such as tinned meat, lard for cooking, sugar and tea had moved Jean and Violet to tears of relief as they unpacked their box. The sharp taste of raspberry jam, spooned straight from the jar in a moment of pure elation, would stay with her for ever.

Yet those early days had also brought bewilderment. After years of inertia, with entire months punctuated by nothing but the tedious struggle for food and fuel, Liberation brought a tornado of welcome but exhausting developments. They had dutifully exchanged their Reichsmarks for sterling at the local bank and watched the mines being cleared from the beaches; they had read the public announcements telling them that the non-native islanders deported by the Germans in the autumn of 1942 had been flown back to England, and that their return was imminent. They had even received, at long last, a letter from Jean's older brother Harry, released from service and now back home with his own family in Chelmsford. Horrified at the belated news of his father's arrest, Harry spoke of his frustration at being cut off from all island information for so long but, to Jean's delight, promised that he would visit as soon as regular transport services resumed. Encouraged by a sense of returning normality, she and her mother would sit at the kitchen table of an evening, cutting out every significant article from the *Evening Post* and pasting them all into a scrapbook for posterity. And as they pasted, in a whispered voice too soft for the fickle fates to hear, Jean would dare to speak of the coming weeks, and the news from the continent that even now might be on its way. Violet would nod and smile, but rarely responded. Hope, Jean calculated, was too heavy a burden for this exhausted woman in the final length of a horrendous journey; better for Jean to button her lip and direct her own dreams into the rhythmic movements of her pasting brush.

Not all the recent news was good. Among the celebratory headlines and the public announcements had been other, troubling pieces. Dreadful photographs of murderous Nazi camps where untold numbers had died. Accounts of local 'jerrybags' – island women who had slept with German soldiers – being chased through the streets by marauding gangs who shaved their heads and stripped them naked. Reports of the island's

insurmountable debts. And one terrifying front-page report of a local father and son, deported eighteen months earlier, who had both perished during their incarceration. After reading these, Jean would retire to her bed and lie awake for hours in the grip of a dark, low-level panic, before falling into a fitful sleep just as the sun rose. She told no one about this, especially not her mother. She could not pinpoint the exact moment when she had assumed the maternal role in their relationship, and suspected the shift had crept up on them over many months. But Jean now knew instinctively that her mother's shaking fingers indicated that Jean would need to peel the vegetables for dinner, or that Violet's single, hot tear on her book's page in the quiet of the evening required a warming drink and an early night. There would be time enough for her own feelings, Jean told herself, when this nightmare came to an end, which it surely soon would. So today, despite the sight of the boarded-up bakery and the unsettling feelings it brought, Jean squeezed out a comforting smile and placed a hand on her mother's arm.

'We can just go home now, if you want.' Jean thought of their still, grey kitchen at the rear of the still, grey house and dreaded her mother's nod. But Violet just gave a little frown.

'No, we've come this far. Come on.'

The Royal Square was, as expected, heaving with people. Men, women and children were squashed together like blades of grass, and stewards had placed barriers across the middle of the square to contain the crowd. Jean dragged her mother through the jostling bodies and, instructing Violet to hang on to the back of her jacket and not let go, began to slither her way through the crush, making the most of any tiny gap. She smiled helplessly at any gentleman in her path until he retreated, and threw apologetic backward looks when she trod on someone's foot or dislodged their hat, until they found themselves only two heads back from the barrier just as the official cars pulled into the square. A huge cheer tore through the crowd, and by

standing on her tiptoes and craning her neck Jean managed to find a sliver of a clear view.

The cars lined up outside the library. A young, uniformed Tommy opened the door of a shining black Ford. And suddenly there they were. Right there on the pavement in front of the States of Jersey government buildings, not thirty feet away, all the way from Buckingham Palace – the King and Queen! Jean gazed at King George, resplendent in his uniform, as he was greeted by low-bowing Crown officials. The Queen, magnificent in a feathered tam hat and draped decorously in a fox fur, accepted a huge bouquet of Jersey carnations. The cheers around the square were thunderous now, with snatches of patriotic songs breaking out here and there. Jean looked at her mother and saw her own excitement reflected back. But at that moment a woman next to them wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and grinned at Violet.

'Isn't it marvellous? I can't believe it!'

Jean felt her mother's body stiffen beside her as she dredged up a suitable courtesy. 'Yes, wonderful.'

'It's over, really over! We can start living again!'

Jean watched Violet's mouth turn to a grim line of sandbagged wretchedness. By the time her bottom lip began to tremble Jean knew it was over – public tears were a humiliation that could not be tolerated, and the window of fake composure was closing fast. With one last reluctant look at the graciously waving royal couple, Jean put her arm around her mother's waist and pushed out through the crowd until they were both back on the high street, breathless and unsteady. In the doorway of a shop, shielding her from passers-by, Jean again offered her handkerchief, and this time Violet pressed it across her face as she sobbed into it for several moments, emanating tiny stuttering sounds like a wounded cat. Eventually the shaking eased, and she took a deep breath.

'Sorry. It was just what that woman said.'

Jean rubbed her arm. 'I know. But it can't be long now. For all we know Dad's already on his way home. Could be out there on a boat right this minute.'

Violet nodded and managed a small wet smile. Jean, working hard to hide her disappointment at missing this once-in-a-lifetime spectacle, again offered her arm, and the two of them began the slow walk back to the house. Jean's mind was whirring. Was it right to offer such optimism? No one knew if her father was actually on his way home. It was fifteen months since he'd stepped on to that German prison boat, headed God knows where. Twelve months since his last letter. And not a word from the authorities since Liberation. She told herself they had no choice but to believe, but one thing was certain – for them, the Occupation was far from over.

★

'Philip Arthur Parris, correct? Born March seventh, 1898, living on St Mark's Road at the time of his arrest?'

Jean nudged her mother to reply.

'That's right.'

'And his shop?'

'Parris's ironmongers, on New Street. It's been closed ever since.'

'Well, Mrs Parris, I'm afraid that this seems to be all the documentation available . . .' The Constable scratched his head, going the long way round to the far side. Jean would have put money on it that there was never an itch there. She watched him shuffle his small sheaf of papers, placing the top one on the bottom, then moving it back again. He adjusted his glasses, cleared his throat, and sat back in his leather desk chair, finally looking her mother in the eye. 'In fact, there appears to be no record of Mr Parris after he was moved from Preungesheim jail in July 1944.'

'That must have been soon after the last letter we received.'

Jean noticed her mother had deliberately raised her levels of pronunciation, tamping down the broader vowels of her Jersey accent and aping the interviewer's more educated sounds. Neither of them felt like themselves in the Constable's visitor's office – with its polished wood-panelled walls and ancient, hand-drawn maps of Jersey in heavy glass frames – as they sat in front of this elected civil leader who had cleared space in his diary to speak with them in person. No wonder her mother was sounding peculiar.

Violet pressed on: 'He was only supposed to serve fifteen months, you see, so he should be free now. We thought perhaps he's already been released but doesn't have the right papers to travel. Do you think maybe that's what's happened?'

But the Constable's eyes were now on the window, as the sound of far-off shouting and chanting drifted through the two-inch gap at the base of the sash. Jean followed his gaze, aware that the volume of the sound was rising. With a small sigh he got up and shut the window with a bang.

'I do apologise. Protesters, on the green.'

Jean nodded: 'Yes, we passed them on the way here.' In fact, the sight of so many people gathered for a demonstration, after five years of strictly enforced obedience, had quite shocked her. There must have been several hundred men there, all listening intently – and in some cases, yelling their replies – to a man on a makeshift podium, behind which hung a banner hand-painted with the words 'Jersey Democratic Movement'. The man was talking through a megaphone about the need for social security and something called a graduated tax system. Jean recalled her dad talking about the group a couple of years before, angrily dismissing them as a bunch of Commies who only wanted to cause trouble. Out of loyalty to him, Jean had rolled her eyes to Violet as they walked past on the opposite pavement. Hadn't the war given everyone their fill of politics for a good long time?

The Constable peered out for a moment, then returned to his seat and picked up a pen.

'Your husband was charged with illegal possession of a wireless?'

'Yes.'

'Which was found on his shop's premises?'

'That's right. He thought it would be safer there than at home. He used to let people listen to the news in the back room – customers, neighbours sometimes.'

'And the trial was . . . eighth of February last year?'

Violet scoffed. 'Call that a trial! Didn't even provide a proper translator, we didn't know what was going on. He was going to jail from the moment they arrested him. Isn't that right, Jean?' Violet's voice cracked with pain and indignant fury. Jean pressed her hand onto her mother's, while her other hand unconsciously fluttered to her neck, fingering the small gold locket her father had given her on her twelfth birthday. When she touched it, she recalled the delight in his eyes as he watched her open the box, her mother's beaming smile as he hung it around Jean's neck, struggling to fix the catch with his stubby fingers. That moment had crystallised in her mind, a perfect snapshot of their happy, loving family, and in recent months the locket had become a talisman, a connection to her father's absent self. She felt the tiny metal heart under her fingers and took a deep breath.

'What we're trying to say is, my dad's not a criminal.' She looked into the Constable's eyes, willing him to see it. 'He's a good man, he should never have been put in prison at all, never mind sent to some foreign jail. We just want him back . . .' She realised that she too was speaking in a strangely elevated accent and felt foolish. But her English teacher at school always said people with good vowels got to the front of the queue, and right now the Parrises badly needed official attention.

The Constable folded his hands in front of him and looked from one to the other with a solemn expression.

'Technically what Mr Parris did was illegal, under Occupation law. Our government did warn residents not to violate such laws, no matter how unjust they felt them to be.' He glanced up, and must have taken in their startled faces, because he quickly cleared his throat again and hurried on: 'But, of course, you have our greatest sympathy for this distressing situation, and rest assured that the States of Jersey, as your governing body, will do all within our power to locate him. I must warn you, though, it will take time. After D-Day, German administration on the continent became extremely chaotic, and much paperwork has been mislaid.' He looked back at the documents on his desk and thought for a moment. 'I'm told the Red Cross can be very helpful, would you like me to write to them?'

Violet nodded vigorously. Jean squeezed her hand even tighter.

'We'd be very grateful.'

'Consider it done. I shall also see if anyone from the current Home Office contingent can be spared to look into this, while they're in the island. Quite a number of London CID officers in the Civil Affairs Unit, I believe. Smart chaps, I've no doubt.' He smiled with encouragement. Jean did her best to return it.

'Thank you.'

'Meanwhile, do remain positive.' The Constable was on his feet now, indicating that the interview was over. 'We'll get Mr Parris home soon.'

Moments later Jean and her mother were outside on the pavement, blinking in the afternoon glare. Violet fiddled with the contents of her handbag, pretending to be searching for something.

'Do you really think he can do anything?'

'Of course he can!' Jean's voice jangled with deliberate gaiety. 'Look at all the things the Red Cross achieved during the war.'

But Jean's attention was half on the noisy mob down the road. She couldn't see much from where they stood, but the shouting from the man on the podium seemed to be louder and

angrier, as did the heckles of the crowd, and she was relieved when her mother turned resolutely in the other direction. Soon they were in the small maze of streets, filled with nineteenth-century cottages, that led them through town and towards the long, sweeping terrace of St Mark's Road.

As they reached their front door, her mother turned to her. 'Do you think he'll be the same man?

'Dad?' Jean's heart skipped. 'In what way?'

'We don't know what he's gone through. Look what happened to that poor father and son, how they was treated. Just wonder if he'll be the same person when he gets back.'

Jean's second-favourite image of her father leaped into her head – his lanky frame draped cross-legged across a deck chair, laughing eyes squinting into the sun. She thought of his low, throbbing chuckle, the way he'd push stray hair from his forehead on a warm day. The thought of any difference was unbearable. She knew her mother must feel the same.

'Dad was sent to a regular prison over there. He'll be fine.'

Violet nodded, turned the key in the lock and let them in, then pulled out her first genuine smile of the day. 'Anyway, start of next week, Eddie will be back. He'll know what to do.'

Jean felt a numbing gloom trickle through her. Uncle Eddie, her father's younger brother. With the paunchy gut, the wiry moustache and the raucous laugh. Eddie, who shared his brother's love of an argument but lacked the grace to know when to end it, and who shouted at her when, as a child, she'd accidentally knocked over a hideous porcelain vase in his house. She hadn't seen him since the week before the Germans arrived and, until last week's telegram, had been fairly certain she'd never see him again. As she hung her mother's hat on the hall stand, a clear memory surfaced of her dad, pink with fury, slamming the front door as he announced his brother's decision to evacuate. Words like 'shame' and 'backbone' had been spat down the hallway. But now Violet's eyes were softening with anticipation.

'Eddie knows the whole story, does he, about what happened to Dad?'

'First letter I wrote, soon as mail to England was working again. He'll know how to handle this, if anyone does.'

Jean turned away before her thoughts crept onto her face and revealed themselves. 'I'm sure he will, Mum. Come on, I need to make a start on dinner.'

★

'. . . and where do all our Jurats and Constables hail from, these men who wield such power in our island parishes? Wealthy families who know nothing of ordinary lives! What we need is properly paid representatives, sourced from the working population of this island.'

'Hear hear!' Hazel Le Tourneur heard her voice ring out across Parade Gardens towards the podium. Several male heads turned towards her, their eyes, shadowed beneath the peaks of their caps, connecting to register their shared silent mirth. But Hazel didn't care. Let them stare! Let them mutter to their friends and make their little jokes. She saw worse every day in the back row of her classroom, and such attitudes only reminded her how far Jersey had to go to take its place in the new post-war century. She tilted her chin to catch the speaker's next words as they emerged, crunched and buckled, through the mechanism of his ancient megaphone.

'And why,' the young man was shouting, his finger jabbing at the air, 'are our daily battles – the ageing of frail parents, the illnesses of children, the struggle to pay rent – not at the heart of our island's policy? Why should the older worker be fearful of retirement, the labourer be afraid of sickness or injury? We need to take these burdens from the poor and create a society where everyone, not just the rich, has some protection from life's realities.' He lowered his device in the hope of applause, and

Hazel obliged. At last. After years of being scared even to share news with a neighbour for fear of being reported by an enemy agent, this outdoor gathering in a public garden felt like so much more than an airing of views. It was a restoration of hope. Small as this meeting might be – she had failed to convince any of her fellow teachers to accompany her and had slammed the door of the staff room with unnecessary force on her way out to make her feelings plain – it felt like a leap she had only dreamed of during the Occupation years. Those long, cold nights, huddled in the makeshift bed next to her father's without even a candle. Now she raised her face to the sun to relish its hot rays on her cheek, delighting in its obvious metaphor, and ignoring the instruction drummed into her throughout her childhood that girls of her snow-white complexion should never expose their skin to the June sun. But the announcement of a change of speaker pulled her back to reality and forced her to check her watch. Four thirty – time to head home.

By the time Hazel reached New Street, her bag of books was cutting into her shoulder and the rough fabric of her wooden-soled clogs was blistering her feet, making hard work of the eight stone steps up to the flats' entrance. New shoes, she decided, would be the first purchase from her next pay packet, now that supplies were starting to arrive. As she fumbled in her pocket for her key – for once, one of the other tenants had actually bothered to close the communal door properly – she glanced down at the shuttered shop that occupied the ground floor, the painted words above it fading and peeling for lack of attention. *P. Parris, Ironmongers.* She thought of the tall, gangly owner with his badly disguised bald patch and wondered where he might be now. Since Liberation Day a few shocking reports had appeared about the fate of some imprisoned by the Germans overseas, but she had heard nothing of Parris. Most likely, Hazel thought, he had sat out the remainder of the war sewing groundsheets in some damp French prison and, if pressed, she

would say that was no more than he deserved. In truth, she had given little thought to her erstwhile neighbour since the day the shutters went up.

She recalled the day that soldiers had burst into the shop, emerging minutes later with the offending wireless. Then their second visit, just a few days later, ransacking the pitiful stock, carrying off precious screws, tin pails and mousetraps, while residents looked on from a distance in silent, impotent fury at this shameless robbery of vital commodities. She remembered standing at her kitchen window, which overlooked the tiny rear yard, watching from behind the curtain as the junior officer in command smoked a furtive roll-up and examined a small chisel he had obviously taken for his own personal use. Even at the time Hazel had wondered what on earth an occupying soldier could possibly want with a solitary woodworking tool. But that was fascism, of course – take, take, take, then work out later what you actually wanted it for. In any case, Philip Parris himself would have no use for it, not for the foreseeable future.

Hauling her exhausted frame up the rickety staircase, Hazel let herself into the flat. Her father was sat, as always, stooped over in his chair by the hearth, pushing his gnarled fingers into tortuous shapes in an effort to write in his journal, and, as always, called over his shoulder as Hazel entered.

'That you, Haze?'

'Yes, it's me.' Who else, Hazel thought. She could barely remember the last time anyone else had crossed the threshold. Not since those odd cousins from Trinity had visited the week of Dottie's funeral. No neighbours in this building ever knocked on the door, or popped in for a chat, though they were courteous enough in the communal areas. Not even that handsome, ambitious trades unionist Hazel had stepped out with for a few weeks last summer had been inside this wretched apartment, although that was largely due to Hazel's discouragement, shamed as she was by the smell from the drains.

'You go to that rally?'

'Yes, just for a bit. Not a bad turnout.'

'Be careful. They'll be upsetting a few round here.'

Hazel patted her father's icy, bent fingers. 'Well, if they're not causing trouble, Dad, they're not doing any good, are they?'

He beamed at her, amusement pushing past the pain in his eyes. 'You're right there, my love.'

Hazel piled some poetry textbooks up on the tiny table and pulled back the ancient floral curtains to let in more of the golden midsummer light. Without bothering to ask, she wound up the gramophone, their most prized possession which, by a miracle of determination, had escaped barter these last few years, and lifted the needle onto the record. The soft voices of the Ink Spots floated across the room; she waited till the melody soothed her father's weight into the back of his chair, his eyes closed in an expression of peace. Then she took the reddish-brown bottle from the shelf.

'Medicine time.'

He emitted a tiny scoff. 'Don't do any good.'

'Doctor told me there's a new arthritis drug they've discovered in Sweden. Maybe now the war's over, we can get you some of that?' Her voice was bright as glass as she proffered the spoon, but she knew from his expression and his grip on the chair that it would be a battle to get it down his throat. Just one night, she mused, if she could just have one night where everything was easy . . . then realised she had long forgotten what such a night would even look like. With a small sigh she pulled the stopper from the bottle while the Ink Spots crooned out their jollity in the background.

★

The Albert Pier was thronged with people as the boat glided into dock, stoking a ripple of anticipation. Jean watched the

thick plaited ropes being hurled across the void, and listened to the shouts of seamen pierce the summer's evening, their voices pitched over the grind of the engines and the clanking metal of the cranes. The ship's towering red funnel stood bright against the pale mackerel clouds, and the gulls circled it, squawking their desire for fish. Jean pulled her jacket a little tighter and closed her eyes to smell the salt on the air, trying to push aside her black, dominant memory of this quayside: the German prison boat bobbing on the tide, the Jerries with their rifles cocked, her father being hauled from the prison truck. She had been back here since then, of course, to welcome the Red Cross ship last Christmas, and to watch the Tommies coming ashore; one bad recollection couldn't be allowed to keep her away. This dock was as central a part of Jersey life as anywhere on the island. Her father used to say it was the nature of island folk all over the world, with their innate vulnerability and dependence on larger land masses for survival, that instinctively drew them to piers and harbours, filled with the hope of replenishment and the expectant thrill of the new. She looked around; everywhere, people were hanging off railings or climbing onto the roofs of cars for extra height, scrabbling in pockets for spectacles, scanning the distant figures of those on deck. The excitement was tangible, a fizzing energy from those waiting in the evening sun. For this was no ordinary boat.

Her eyes rested on a couple in their thirties huddled against the breeze. The husband clutched at his wife's waist as if he feared she might suddenly leap into the harbour, while the woman herself stared at the mosaic of passenger faces on the deck above, her own face rigid with hope and apprehension. They were waiting, Jean was certain, to meet their child – or, at least, the young stranger who had been their child on a hot, frantic morning in 1940 when they had pushed them, screaming and terrified, onto an evacuation boat. One family of hundreds who had thrown the dice in those scant, witless days, reluctantly concluding that

a perilous journey across the Channel and an unknowable life alone in England was a better bet than Nazi occupation, and that if they were not able to go themselves, at least their children should be given the chance. What would such a fissure do to a family? Jean wondered. Five years of separation, kids raised by distant relations or foster parents with alien customs and new words, without phone calls or letters to keep memories fresh. Would they even recognise their parents now? And would the adults know the windswept adolescent who walked off this ship, probably more at home among the other evacuees than with their own flesh and blood? Jean imagined a life apart from her father in those tender years and shivered.

The gangplank was put in place and passengers began to stream off. A hub formed immediately around it, a seething throng of hugging, laughing and crying. Jean and her mother stood back, Violet's hands, as ever, gripping her handbag, Jean's folded neatly in front of her. Suddenly, amid the stream of newcomers, a bulky figure, clutching a large suitcase in one hand, clumped heavily down the gangplank, and, without even getting a good look at his face, Jean knew it was Eddie. He had lost weight and there were streaks of grey in his curly, sand-coloured hair, but she knew her uncle instantly. In the previous days she had persuaded herself that seeing him would somehow be the next best thing to seeing her father, that being around his flesh and blood would somehow bring her dad closer. But as soon as she saw Eddie marching towards them, his open trench coat flapping in the wind, she realised how foolish that had been. He pulled her into a bear hug, expressing predictable surprise at how grown-up she looked, and the smell of his body – a combination of sweat, tobacco and something sickly sweet – was foreign and wrong. If anything, he felt more like the opposite of her father.

'Stone me – need to get some hot dinners in the two of you!' Eddie cackled, looking them up and down. Then he looked

around. 'Still – place hasn't changed too much, by the look of it.'

Violet snorted. 'You wait. Plenty of changes round the coast. Bloody ruined St Ouen's.'

'Yeah, I heard old Adolf got a bit carried away with the fortifications. Any more news of Phil?' The question was barked, official-sounding.

'Nothing yet. They say they're doing all they can.'

'He'll be all right.' Eddie nodded to a distant, imagined audience. 'If anyone knows how to look after himself, Phil does. Right – how we getting back?' He began to make his way up the pier, walking awkwardly to balance the weight of the suitcase. Jean and Violet had to run to catch him up.

'Our neighbour Bill Syvret, he's going to meet us up the top with his car. But . . . aren't we waiting for the others?' Violet asked. 'Where's Maureen and the children?'

'Still in Exmouth. I said in the telegram I'd be coming on my own.' He was staring straight ahead.

'No, you didn't . . .? Why didn't they come with you?'

'Jersey doesn't want loads of women and kids coming back, not till they get things straightened out. Just men in certain lines of work. Like builders.' He thumped his chest with his free hand, as if Jean and Violet were unaware of his profession. Jean thought of his wife, a slip of a woman who always looked permanently exhausted, and the cousins she'd played with as a child, and noticed her uncle's eyes darting around, as if trying to avoid direct contact.

'Will they be all right over there, on their own?' Violet pressed him.

Eddie laughed. It came out as mockery. 'Don't worry about them! Maureen, she's friends with half the town. What kind of car does this Bill have?' Jean saw that her mother was having trouble keeping up and had placed a hand on his arm to slow him down, but he took no notice. 'Only I'd like to get straight

up to the house. Want to see what state it's in, get an idea of what needs doing.'

'Your old house? You want to go there right now?' Only the anxiety in Violet's voice now stopped Eddie in his tracks.

'Why?' He looked from one to the other, and Jean saw something start to disintegrate. 'Why, what's happened?'

★

The front room at St Mark's Road was quiet and still, the only sound the faint crack of the fire in the grate and the chime of the grandfather clock in the hall on the quarter hour. Jean, long acclimatised to chilly evenings and steeped in Occupation thrift, had questioned the use of firewood on a June evening, even a chilly one, and argued that another jumper would suffice. But her mother insisted a small fire would make the place a little homelier, and Jean had dutifully hauled in the logs from the shed after tea.

It was just gone eight – too early to excuse herself for bed. She realised six pages in that she had read this soppy romance from the library not a year ago, and in her distraction, she found herself hypnotised by Eddie's cigarette as it sat propped in the stand-up ashtray. Engrossed in his newspaper, Eddie had let it burn low in its groove, and Jean watched the tiny column of ash cling on, teetering, waiting to fall, while the coils of grey smoke rose towards the ceiling. Long ago before the war, when tobacco was cheap and available, her father, too, would let a Rothman burn halfway down on the same ashtray. He was home so rarely that such occasions were precious, and Jean would curl up at his feet, picking at the loose threads of his slippers, obedient to the rule that the children were not to talk until he finished the paper (chatty, impatient Harry always got into trouble for this). But silences with her dad never seemed tense. With Eddie, Jean was constantly aware of a distant, gathering squall. And since their

trip to his house three nights ago, her uncle's rage had simmered like a stewing pot.

The fifteen-minute drive up to St Saviour's, sliding about on the hard rear seat of Bill's car, had seemed endless. Eddie had impatiently drummed his fingers on the passenger door, while Jean and her mother exchanged silent, nervous looks. Eventually Violet sat forward in her seat and took a deep breath.

'You must understand, Eddie, what it was like here in those early months. The Jerries went through the shops like locusts. Wasn't just food. Clothes, crockery – you name it, they took it, sent it all back to Germany.' Eddie continued to stare at the road ahead. The back of his head was greasy with sweat and ancient hair oil. 'Then the food ran out completely,' Violet persisted. 'And you needed stuff to barter with. People were desperate.'

'So they decided robbing evacuees was all right?' His voice was different now, quieter and charged with anxiety and anger.

'We didn't know if you'd ever be back. You can't blame people for taking what they needed.'

'It's not just that, though,' Jean murmured, frightened of her uncle's coming reaction if they didn't prepare him. But her mother nudged her in the ribs across the back seat, and Jean said nothing else.

As Bill Syvret's car turned the corner of the leafy lane and pulled up in the short driveway, the look on her uncle's face told Jean everything she needed to know about his evacuation. Instantly she felt bad for all the times she had resentfully pictured him in some cosy English village, enjoying a pint in the local pub or listening to the wireless by a blazing fire. While she and her mother had spent the last five years praying for deliverance, now she saw that Eddie had spent those same years dreaming of this moment – a triumphal return to the Shangri La he had built with his own hands fifteen years earlier. He had imagined the joyful turning of the key in the lock, finding a scuttle filled with fresh coal, bread and cheese in the larder. Now he climbed

slowly out of Bill's Austin and, in the dimming twilight, strode towards the wreckage of the house, gingerly entering through the space where the front door should have been, until he was standing in the centre of what had once been his living room. It wasn't the absence of his personal possessions, Jean sensed, that shocked him – the disappearance of chairs, curtains and rugs. What he was struggling to absorb was the extent of the annihilation – the smashed glass, the doors torn from frames, the holes in the floor where boards had been ripped out. The removal of the upstairs windows had allowed the rain of many months to soak and rot the upper floor, part of which had now crashed onto the floor below. Black mould sprouted everywhere, and at one point a pigeon fluttered from its nest somewhere in the upper rafters. Jean and Violet, standing well back, watched him move hesitantly towards the kitchen, where they knew he would find the sink ripped from the wall, and the water heater on the floor, smashed up for spare parts. The entire place was nothing but a derelict collection of damaged walls. There was nothing for it but to gut the building and start again.

When he returned to the car, they sat in silence for several minutes. Finally Violet assured Eddie he could stay with them as long as he wanted – a sentiment Jean had anticipated but which still filled her with a mild dread – and he nodded his acceptance. Poor, embarrassed Bill started the engine and began the sombre journey back to town. For a long time, Eddie said nothing. Then: 'How long's it been like that?'

'It happened slowly, over time,' Violet murmured. 'Things were really bad last winter – people burned anything just to warm themselves. Germans did the same.'

'It was my home,' was Eddie's only reply. For the rest of that evening, and through the days since, he had split his time between the local public house and her father's old armchair, accepting the meals and cups of tea the women brought him, and at night reading every inch of the *Evening Post*, as if the

answers to this new alien world might be found within its pages. Jean watched from a distance, her sympathy mixed with undefined misgivings.

Deciding to make excuses and spend the rest of the evening in her room, Jean was just placing the marker in her book when there was a ring on the doorbell, so sudden it made both women pop in their seats. She hurried to the front window; on the doorstep stood a local uniformed policeman. Realising no one else was going to move, she scurried into the hallway to unbolt the door. Her fingers, she noticed as she slid back the metal, had already begun to tremble.

The officer smiled benignly, but with a touch of disappointment – clearly, he had hoped to speak to someone older.

'Is this the Parris residence?' he asked. Jean nodded. Her legs were losing their strength. 'I have a gentleman here who has requested to speak with you.' The policeman stood to one side. Behind him stood the figure of a small, hunched man of indeterminate age, who peered at Jean with sad, bush-baby eyes. What little hair he'd managed to retain on his head stuck up at rakish angles, and his skin was the strangest shade of lilac grey. He looked, Jean thought, like an illustration of a goblin from a children's picture book.

'Madame Parris?' the man whispered in a strong French accent.

'Miss Parris.' Jean's voice was unrecognisable to herself. 'My mother—'

'I'm Mrs Parris.' Violet was behind her now, and Jean could sense the additional presence of Eddie in the parlour doorway. 'Can I help you?'

The man looked hard at Jean's mother, as if assessing her.

'You are . . . Violet?'

Jean's stomach dropped into another cavity within her body. How did this odd little man know her mother's name? From the corner of her eye, Jean saw her mother nod.

'My name is Charles Clement.' He stopped, as if this speech had been rehearsed many times, but the performance of it was not turning out as well as he had hoped. He wiped his face and began again. 'My name is Charles Clement, I was a prisoner in Germany with your husband, Philip.'

He pronounced her father's name the French way, with the extended second syllable. Jean reached for the door for support and saw her mother reach similarly for the frame. They waited, but nothing else came. Eventually Violet found her voice.

'You know my husband? Where is he?'

Clement hesitated, and at that moment Jean knew. In her mind she begged him not to say any more, to turn and walk away now so that she would never have to hear it. But it was already too late.

'I am so sorry, madame. I am here to tell you that Philip is dead.'