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When Will There Be Good News?

Kate Atkinson

I

In the Past

Harvest

THE HEAT RISING UP FROM THE TARMAC SEEMED TO GET TRAPPED between the thick hedges that towered above their heads like battlements.

‘Oppressive,’ their mother said. They felt trapped too. ‘Like the maze at Hampton Court,’ their mother said. ‘Remember?’

‘Yes,’ Jessica said.

‘No,’ Joanna said.

‘You were just a baby,’ their mother said to Joanna. ‘Like Joseph is now.’ Jessica was eight, Joanna was six.

The little road (they always called it ‘the lane’) snaked one way and then another, so that you couldn’t see anything ahead of you. They had to keep the dog on the lead and stay close to the hedges in case a car ‘came out of nowhere’. Jessica was the eldest so she was the one who always got to hold the dog’s lead. She spent a lot of her time training the dog, ‘Heel!’ and ‘Sit!’ and ‘Come!’ her mother said she wished Jessica was as obedient as the dog. Jessica was always the one who was in charge. Their mother said to Joanna, ‘It’s all right to have a mind of your own, you know. You should stick up for yourself, think for yourself,’ but Joanna didn’t want to think for herself.

The bus dropped them on the big road and then carried on to somewhere else. It was ‘a palaver’ getting them all off the bus. Their mother held Joseph under one arm like a parcel and with her other hand she struggled to open out his newfangled buggy. Jessica and Joanna shared the job of lifting the shopping off the bus. The dog saw to himself. ‘No one ever helps,’ their mother said. ‘Have you noticed that?’ They had.



'Your father's country fucking idyll,' their mother said as the bus drove away in a blue haze of fumes and heat. 'Don't you swear,' she added automatically, 'I'm the only person allowed to swear.'

They didn't have a car any more. Their father ('the bastard') had driven away in it. Their father wrote books, 'novels'. He had taken one down from a shelf and shown it to Joanna, pointed out his photograph on the back cover and said, 'That's me,' but she wasn't allowed to read it, even though she was already a good reader. ('Not yet, one day. I write for grown-ups, I'm afraid,' he laughed. 'There's stuff in there, well . . .')

Their father was called Howard Mason and their mother's name was Gabrielle. Sometimes people got excited and smiled at their father and said, 'Are you the Howard Mason?' (Or sometimes, not smiling, 'that Howard Mason' which was different although Joanna wasn't sure how.)

Their mother said that their father had uprooted them and planted them 'in the middle of nowhere'. 'Or Devon, as it's commonly known,' their father said. He said he needed 'space to write' and it would be good for all of them to be 'in touch with nature'. 'No television!' he said as if that was something they would enjoy.

Joanna still missed her school and her friends and Wonder Woman and a house on a street that you could walk along to a shop where you could buy the Beano and a liquorice stick and choose from three different kinds of apples instead of having to walk along a lane and a road and take two buses and then do the same thing all over again in reverse.

The first thing their father did when they moved to Devon was to buy six red hens and a hive full of bees. He spent all autumn digging over the garden at the front of the house so it would be 'ready for spring'. When it rained the garden turned to mud and the mud was trailed everywhere in the house, they even found it on their bed sheets. When winter came a fox ate the hens without them ever having laid an egg and the bees all froze to death which was unheard of, according to their father, who said he was going to put all those things in the book ('the novel') he was writing. 'So that's all right then,' their mother said.

Their father wrote at the kitchen table because it was the only room in the house that was even the slightest bit warm, thanks to the huge temperamental Aga that their mother said was 'going to be the death of her'. 'I should be so lucky,' their father muttered. (His book wasn't going well.) They were all under his feet, even their mother.

'You smell of soot,' their father said to their mother. 'And cabbage and milk.'

'And you smell of failure,' their mother said.

Their mother used to smell of all kinds of interesting things, paint and turpentine and tobacco and the Je Reviens perfume that their father had been buying for her since she was seventeen years old and 'a Catholic

schoolgirl', and which meant 'I will return' and was a message to her. Their mother was 'a beauty' according to their father but their mother said she was 'a painter', although she hadn't painted anything since they moved to Devon. 'No room for two creative talents in a marriage,' she said in that way she had, raising her eyebrows while inhaling smoke from the little brown cigarillos she smoked. She pronounced it thigariyo like a foreigner. When she was a child she had lived in faraway places that she would take them to one day. She was warm-blooded, she said, not like their father who was a reptile. Their mother was clever and funny and surprising and nothing like their friends' mothers. 'Exotic', their father said.

The argument about who smelled of what wasn't over apparently because their mother picked up a blue-and-white-striped jug from the dresser and threw it at their father, who was sitting at the table staring at his typewriter as if the words would write themselves if he was patient enough. The jug hit him on the side of the head and he roared with shock and pain. With a speed that Joanna could only admire, Jessica plucked Joseph out of his high-chair and said, 'Come on,' to Joanna and they went upstairs where they tickled Joseph on the double bed that Joanna and Jessica shared. There was no heating in the bedroom and the bed was piled high with eiderdowns and old coats that belonged to their mother. Eventually all three of them fell asleep, nestled in the mingled scents of damp and mothballs and Je Reviens.

When Joanna woke up she found Jessica propped up on pillows, wearing gloves and a pair of earmuffs and one of the coats from the bed, drowning her like a tent. She was reading a book by torchlight.

'Electricity's off,' she said, without taking her eyes off the book. On the other side of the wall they could hear the horrible animal noises that meant their parents were friends again. Jessica silently offered Joanna the earmuffs so that she didn't have to listen.

When the spring finally came, instead of planting a vegetable garden, their father went back to London and lived with 'his other woman' – which was a big surprise to Joanna and Jessica, although not apparently to their mother. Their father's other woman was called Martina – the poet – their mother spat out the word as if it was a curse. Their mother called the other woman (the poet) names that were so bad that when they dared to whisper them (bitch-cuntwhore- poet) to each other beneath the bedclothes they were like poison in the air.

Although now there was only one person in the marriage, their mother still didn't paint.

They made their way along the lane in single file, 'Indian file', their mother said. The plastic shopping bags hung from the handles of the buggy and if their mother let go it tipped backwards on to the ground.

‘We must look like refugees,’ she said. ‘Yet we are not downhearted,’ she added cheerfully. They were going to move back into town at the end of the summer, ‘in time for school’.

‘Thank God,’ Jessica said, in just the same way their mother said it.

Joseph was asleep in the buggy, his mouth open, a faint rattle from his chest because he couldn’t shake off a summer cold. He was so hot that their mother stripped him to his nappy and Jessica blew on the thin ribs of his little body to cool him down until their mother said, ‘Don’t wake him.’

There was the tang of manure in the air and the smell of the musty grass and the cow parsley got inside Joanna’s nose and made her sneeze.

‘Bad luck,’ her mother said, ‘you’re the one that got my allergies.’ Their mother’s dark hair and pale skin went to her ‘beautiful boy’ Joseph, her green eyes and her ‘painter’s hands’ went to Jessica. Joanna got the allergies. Bad luck. Joseph and their mother shared a birthday too although Joseph hadn’t had any birthdays yet. In another week it would be his first. ‘That’s a special birthday,’ their mother said. Joanna thought all birthdays were special.

Their mother was wearing Joanna’s favourite dress, blue with a pattern of red strawberries. Their mother said it was old and next summer she would cut it up and make something for Joanna out of it if she liked. Joanna could see the muscles on her mother’s tanned legs moving as she pushed the buggy up the hill. She was strong. Their father said she was ‘fierce’. Joanna liked that word. Jessica was fierce too. Joseph was nothing yet. He was just a baby, fat and happy. He liked oatmeal and mashed banana, and the mobile of little paper birds their mother had made for him that hung above his cot. He liked being tickled by his sisters. He liked his sisters.

Joanna could feel sweat running down her back. Her worn cotton dress was sticking to her skin. The dress was a hand-me-down from Jessica. ‘Poor but honest,’ their mother laughed. Her big mouth turned down when she laughed so that she never seemed happy even when she was. Everything Joanna had was handed down from Jessica. It was as if without Jessica there would be no Joanna. Joanna filled the spaces Jessica left behind as she moved on.

Invisible on the other side of the hedge, a cow made a bellowing noise that made her jump. ‘It’s just a cow,’ her mother said.

‘Red Devons,’ Jessica said, even though she couldn’t see them. How did she know? She knew the names of everything, seen and unseen. Joanna wondered if she would ever know all the things that Jessica knew.

After you had walked along the lane for a while you came to a wooden gate with a stile. They couldn’t get the buggy through the stile so they had to open the gate. Jessica let the dog off the lead and he scrambled up and over the gate in the way that Jessica had taught him. The sign on the gate said

'Please Close The Gate Behind You'. Jessica always ran ahead and undid the clasp and then they both pushed at the gate and swung on it as it opened. Their mother had to heave and shove at the buggy because all the winter mud had dried into deep awkward ruts that the wheels got stuck in. They swung on the gate to close it as well. Jessica checked the clasp. Sometimes they hung upside down on the gate and their hair reached the ground like brooms sweeping the dust and their mother said, 'Don't do that.'

The track bordered a field. 'Wheat,' Jessica said. The wheat was very high although not as high as the hedges in the lane. 'They'll be harvesting soon,' their mother said. 'Cutting it down,' she added, for Joanna's benefit. 'Then we'll sneeze and wheeze, the pair of us.' Joanna was already wheezing, she could hear the breath whistling in her chest.

The dog ran into the field and disappeared. A moment later he sprang out of the wheat again. Last week Joanna had followed the dog into the field and got lost and no one could find her for a long time. She could hear them calling her, moving further and further away. Nobody heard her when she called back. The dog found her.

They stopped halfway along and sat down on the grass at the side of the track, under the shady trees. Their mother took the plastic carrier bags off the buggy handles and from one of the bags brought out some little cartons of orange juice and a box of chocolate finger biscuits. The orange juice was warm and the chocolate biscuits had melted together. They gave some of the biscuits to the dog. Their mother laughed with her down-turned mouth and said, 'God, what a mess,' and looked in the baby-bag and found wipes for their chocolate-covered hands and mouths. When they lived in London they used to have proper picnics, loading up the boot of the car with a big wicker basket that had belonged to their mother's mother who was rich but dead (which was just as well apparently because it meant she didn't have to see her only daughter married to a selfish, fornicating waster). If their grandmother was rich why didn't they have any money? 'I eloped,' their mother said. 'I ran away to marry your father. It was very romantic. At the time. We had nothing.'

'You had the picnic basket,' Jessica said and their mother laughed and said, 'You can be very funny, you know,' and Jessica said, 'I do know.'

Joseph woke up and their mother undid the front of her strawberry-covered dress and fed him. He fell asleep again while he was sucking. 'Poor lamb,' their mother said. 'He can't shake off this cold.' She put him back in the buggy and said, 'Right. Let's get home, we can get out the garden hose and you can cool off.' He seemed to come out of nowhere. They noticed him because the dog growled, making an odd, bubbling noise in his throat that Joanna had never heard before.

He walked very fast towards them, growing bigger all the time. He was making a funny huffing, puffing noise. You expected him to walk past and say 'Nice afternoon,' or 'Hello,' because people always said that if you passed them in the lane or on the track, but he didn't say anything. Their mother

would usually say, 'Lovely day,' or, 'It's certainly hot, isn't it?' when she passed people but she didn't say anything to this man. Instead she set off walking fast, pushing hard on the buggy. She left the plastic bags of shopping on the grass and Joanna was going to pick one up but their mother said, 'Leave it.' There was something in her voice, something in her face, that frightened Joanna. Jessica grabbed her by the hand and said, 'Hurry up, Joanna,' sharply, like a grown-up. Joanna was reminded of the time their mother threw the blue-and-white-striped jug at their father.

Now the man was walking in the same direction as they were, on the other side of their mother. Their mother was moving very fast, saying, 'Come on, quickly, keep up,' to them. She sounded breathless. Then the dog ran in front of the man and started barking and jumping up as if it was trying to block the man's path. Without any warning he kicked the dog so hard that it sailed into the air and landed in the wheat. They couldn't see it but they could hear the terrible squealing noise that it was making. Jessica stood in front of the man and screamed something at him, jabbing her finger at him and taking great gulps of air as if she couldn't breathe and then she ran into the field after the dog.

Everything was bad. There was no question about it.

Joanna was staring at the wheat, trying to see where Jessica and the dog had gone and it took a moment for her to notice that her mother was fighting the man, punching him with her fists. But the man had a knife and he kept raising it in the air so that it shone like silver in the hot afternoon sun. Her mother started to scream. There was blood on her face, on her hands, on her strong legs, on her strawberry dress. Then Joanna realized that her mother wasn't screaming at the man, she was screaming at her.

Their mother was cut down where she stood, the great silver knife carving through her heart as if it was slicing butcher's meat. She was thirty-six years old.

He must have stabbed Jessica too before she ran off because there was a trail of blood, a path that led them to her, although not at first because the field of wheat had closed around her, like a golden blanket. She was lying with her arms around the body of the dog and their blood had mingled and soaked into the dry earth, feeding the grain, like a sacrifice to the harvest. Joseph died where he was, strapped into the pushchair. Joanna liked to think that he never woke up but she didn't know.

And Joanna. Joanna obeyed her mother when she screamed at her. 'Run, Joanna, run,' she said and Joanna ran into the field and was lost in the wheat.

Later, when it was dark, other dogs came and found her. A stranger lifted her up and carried her away. 'Not a scratch on her,' she heard a voice say. The stars and the moon were bright in the cold, black sky above her head.

Of course, she should have taken Joseph with her, she should have snatched him from the buggy, or run with the buggy (Jessica would have). It didn't matter that Joanna was only six years old, that she would never have managed running with the buggy and that the man would have caught her in seconds, that wasn't the point. It would have been better to have tried to save the baby and been killed than not trying and living. It would have been better to have died with Jessica and her mother rather than being left behind without them. But she never thought about any of that, she just did as she was told.

'Run, Joanna, run,' her mother commanded. So she did.

It was funny but now, thirty years later, the thing that drove her to distraction was that she couldn't remember what the dog was called. And there was no one left to ask.

