

TWO GIRLS MEETING ACROSS TIME...



TOMORROW'S GHOST

TANYA LANDMAN

CARNEGIE MEDAL WINNING AUTHOR

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EU Authorized Representative: HackettFlynn Ltd, 36 Cloch Choirneal, Balrothery, Co. Dublin, K32 C942, Ireland. EU@walkerpublishinggroup.com

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*For Rod and Louise,
who showed me the house*

Light danced on the water. "Like diamonds," Mummy said. The air was cold. Clear. An icy wind nipped at ears and noses. Steamships, blowing clouds of smoke through great black chimneys, crowded the river. Barges with billowing red sails were carried towards the sea on the ebbing tide. And here, on a little stretch of beach beside the great grey Thames, Mummy was poking around in the mud, getting her clothes dirty, looking for something.

There was nothing but dirt and rubbish. Yet Mummy kept stabbing at the ground like a crow, picking up a tiny piece of green glass here, a fragment of blue and white china there, a broken yellow button, a chipped orange marble. She rinsed each one off in the river water before dropping them into the bag she had asked Etty to hold.

"What are you going to do with them all?" Etty asked.

"Our world is broken, Etty." Mummy's eyes were red with crying but her smile was very big, very bright, like a clown's. "Things do get broken, you see? Sometimes they get smashed into little pieces. But all those little pieces can be put together and made into something different, something new. Something beautiful. One day, the world will be lovely for you again, Etty. You'll see, my darling. You'll see."



SUMMER 1976

Anna woke suddenly. It was oppressively hot, but she had that cold Sunday night feeling in the pit of her stomach – a niggling fear that she'd forgotten something followed by a vague dread of what Monday morning might bring. Why did she have it now? She was tucked up safe at home in bed and the long summer holidays had already begun. There was no homework left undone, no maths test looming. Even so, her heart was beating hard against her ribs. What had woken her?

She lay still and listened. Her aunt Maggie was on the phone in the hall downstairs, talking so softly that Anna couldn't catch the words. That didn't necessarily mean anything. It was late at night and the walls between the houses on their street were wafer thin.

Mrs Jones next door would complain about being woken up if Maggie spoke any louder. It was probably something to do with work, Anna thought. Maybe Maggie needed to go in early tomorrow or stay late. That wasn't a problem, Anna was used to taking care of herself.

So why did she feel uneasy?

Anna tried to smooth out her rumpled thoughts. The phone must have woken her when it rang, she thought, and yet ... no ... there was something else...

A dream, perhaps? Yes – she recalled it in a sudden flash. The foreshore of the River Thames, light dancing on the water, a woman in a hat and long black coat grubbing around for bits and pieces in the mud. A little girl, also wearing black, watching her. Just for a moment, Anna could see the grey river and hear the crunch of gravel as the girl's mother moved across the little beach. The dream was faintly familiar, as if she'd had it before.

Anna lay in the dark, listening to Maggie talking, and started to slide back towards sleep. But then her name was mentioned and Anna's ears pricked up.

"Anna? Well, yes, I suppose she could... No ... no plans... I'm working, of course... No, her best friend's away for the whole summer, Anna would only be mooching about here by herself... No, no trouble...

Yes ... twelve, but only just. Her birthday was last week... Oh yes! Very sensible for her age... You've what? Really? Gosh ... that's a surprise! When did you get that? Oh, I see... She'll love it! Yes, of course... I'll call you tomorrow morning, let you know what train she's on. Will you be able to meet her, do you think, or should I give her money for a bus?"

Anna stopped listening because a bubble of anger was swelling inside her chest. Grown-ups were talking about her behind her back again. Plotting things and making decisions without asking her what she'd like to do. Whatever it was that Maggie had agreed to, Anna knew she had no say in the matter. Clearly, she was about to be sent away. Posted off like a parcel, just because some relative or other had decided to do a "good deed" and "help Maggie out" by having Anna come and stay with them for a week or two.

It couldn't be Granny and Grandpa, could it? Surely not! There had been a big falling out a while back when Maggie accepted a promotion at work. Granny and Grandpa said she ought to be thinking of getting married and settling down and, as far as Anna knew, Maggie still wasn't speaking to them. Besides, they'd moved to Spain when Grandpa retired and you couldn't catch a train *there*!

Oh God, please God, please, please God, not Uncle

Peter and Auntie Sheila! No! They wouldn't ask her again, surely? They'd been "very kind indeed" last Easter and invited her to stay with them for the whole holidays while Maggie was away on a course. Anna's cousins were older than she was – boys, all with loud voices, competitive spirits and a savage sense of humour. She'd had to play endless board games with them when it rained. Monopoly. Chess. Draughts. She hadn't won a single game. When the sun shone she'd had to endure football in the park. She was always put in goal and was sure they aimed the ball at her deliberately. She lost count of the times she'd ended up sprawled on the grass, gasping for breath. While the others cackled with laughter, the eldest, Tom, would call sarcastically, "Good save, Anna! Well done!"

Even Uncle Peter's house had seemed to tease her. When she went to bed at night she could hear the walls whispering, "Is there *anything* you're good at?"

Whoever Maggie was talking to now, whatever the plan was, Anna should put a stop to it. She should stand up for herself; tell Maggie that she wanted to stay at home. Her best friend Suzy had gone away on holiday before. OK, so Anna wouldn't be able to go swimming or shopping with her, or hang around in the park, but she'd be perfectly happy here with her books and her daydreams. She wouldn't be any

trouble! In fact, she'd be a help, not a hindrance. She could do the housework, or cook dinner when Maggie got home from work!

Even as the imaginary conversation with her aunt played out in Anna's mind, she knew it was one she'd never have. She could spend all night thinking it out, practising every sentence, but in the morning the words would evaporate and she'd say absolutely nothing.

Anna's parents had died when she was just a baby. They'd gone out for the evening to celebrate their wedding anniversary, leaving her at her aunt Maggie's. There had been a car crash, and they'd never come back. Anna didn't remember either of them, but what she did recall in bright technicolour detail was overhearing a muttered conversation between Auntie Sheila and Granny on Boxing Day when she was perhaps four or five. Her own name had been mentioned, and then Maggie's.

"It's a lot to take on!"

"Bringing up a child is hard at the best of times, but when you're on your own..."

"And working full time!"

The conversation was cut short the moment they figured out Anna was listening, but she'd heard enough. Anna had realized with a shock that she was

a burden which Maggie was bravely carrying. And her young child's mind resolved that from then on, she had to behave as well as she possibly could to lighten Maggie's load.

Since then, every book she'd read that had an orphan as the main character reinforced that belief. Orphans in books were saintly and loving – they transformed the lives of everyone around them. There was Pollyanna, who was constantly cheerful. Charmingly chatty Anne from *Anne of Green Gables*. The girl in *A Little Princess* managed to make friends with the rats in her attic room. Even Mary in *The Secret Garden* – who started off grumpy and unlikeable – became a heroine who healed a sick boy so he could walk again.

Maggie's phone conversation was over. Anna heard the click of the receiver being put back in place and then her aunt was climbing the stairs, heading to bed. It wasn't long before the soft sound of Maggie's snoring announced that she'd fallen asleep.

Anna lay awake, staring up at the ceiling. Whatever was going to happen tomorrow, wherever she was being sent and whoever was waiting at the other end, she'd face it the way she always did – with a bright smile pasted on her face to hide her sinking heart.