



One

Renate von Hasselmann arrived in London in February, 1960. Caroline was eleven and Maggie was eight, and their mother was pregnant, though neither of them knew, which is maybe why it was so hard to understand what she needed an *au pair* for.

They'd employed a nanny, of course, when they were newborns, a retired nurse with a silver bun and a fob watch, who dispensed nappies and sterilised milk, whose job it was to usher discipline and routine into the household. Since then there'd been the char, Mrs Phelps, who made the carpets shine like a field of *Frosted Flakes* when she hoovered with the brand new upright—the girls thought it a shame to even walk on them, they'd rather tiptoe round the edge.

Throughout that torpid Saturday morning, they waited for this Renate on the hall stairs, having plonked themselves on the bottom step like a couple of sixpenny bits, sitting so close with their arms around each others' necks, and Maggie chewing on her hair. Their mother paced, setting things up,

putting them in order, picking up the telephone directory and moving it from the top shelf of the vanity to the bottom, then back again, tugging on her pencil skirt where it had ridden up from all the pacing. Finally she wrested herself away to stand in front of the hall mirror to paste on that crimson lipstick of hers, pulling Olive Oyl mouths in the mirror, popping her lips then blotting them with a tissue. She flipped open her powder compact, the silver one with shepherdesses on, that their father bought her at Fortnams, and as she patted her nose, powder floated into the air like flour.

Then Jack Whitaker appeared, *deus ex machina*, dressed in Saturday twills, pressed to a crisp with generous double cuffs and smelling, so his older daughter always thought, of the dry-cleaners.

“C’mon along, Trubshaw.” That was her favourite of his many terms of endearment, and how he summoned her then, one eyebrow tipped toward his charmingly receding hairline. His invitations were invariably delicious, if understated. “Time to up and at ’em!”

And Caroline instantly abandoned her sister without as much as a backward glance. Maggie, inured to such betrayal, shoved her thumb deeper into her mouth. Through the froth and furl of her upper lip, only an eavesdropper might have heard it. “I d-d-d-on’t care. I hate you both.”

Her “d’s” always silenced her. They dumbed her down.

Into this delicate peace will barge Renate. She will smell of incense and Christmas trees, dark sweet chocolate cooking

on a stove, Renate who should have known better, who should have heeded their warnings.

At the end of this day, Renate will settle the children to sleep for the very first time, and they will sit up, suddenly, the two of them, wide-awake and delighted with their defiance. And they will sing to her their dead men and daisies song: “When will they *e-ver-rr* learn, when will they *e-ver-r* learn?”

“It’s the hymn,” the older one will inform her, “for all the women who lost their sweethearts to the First World War, for the ones who never even met the men they would otherwise have married. It’s horribly sad, isn’t it, Renate, never even to meet your husband?”

Though it won’t be Renate’s husband they will be warning her about.