

PATRICIA ST JOHN

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MYSTERY
OF PHEASANT COTTAGE



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Looking back now, I often wonder why I did not ask questions sooner, for I was aware of some mystery surrounding my life from a very early age.

I think this awareness arose from the fact that, although no one had ever told me so, I knew quite well that I had not always lived at Pheasant Cottage on the borders of the Eastwood Estate. Far, far back there had been somewhere else, where skies were bluer, and a very tall man had carried me in his arms. I remembered perfectly well that he had once gone down on all fours and let me ride on his back. As I grew older I used to wonder if he could have been my father but, strangely, I never asked.

I can remember too the first time I really began to wonder. It was eleven o'clock on a May morning. I was at infant school, sitting with my friends under the apple tree in the playground. We were drinking mugs of milk. A warm breeze was blowing, tossing the pink blossom petals on to our hair, and beyond the asphalt stretched the lawn starred with daisies. Everything was perfect until Harvey Chatterley-Foulkes, the bank manager's son, suddenly fixed his goggle eyes on me from over the rim of his mug and said loudly,

"Lucy, why do you live with your granny? Why don't you have a mummy and daddy?"

I looked round hopefully for Teacher, because I knew she would help me. But Teacher had gone to look for Jeremy who liked to hide behind the roller towel in the cloakroom and eat lollipops, and we were all alone. All the other children were looking at me now, and I had to think of an answer quickly. I stared defiantly at Harvey

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and thought he looked like a fat frog, but not nearly so interesting.

"Because I don't," I replied. "Wipe your mouth, Harvey. You've got a milk moustache." This was what Granny said to me nearly every day, and so saying it usually made me feel confident and grown up. But Harvey took no notice.

"But why not?" he insisted. "I mean, where are they? Everyone has mummies and daddies. I mean, someone must have borned you!"

There was silence. If I said, "I don't know," they would all laugh at me and I should cry. Every eye was turned on me. Already I could feel the tears welling up.

"Perhaps they're dead," said Mary Blossom cheerfully.

"Or p'raps they ran away and left you," breathed Janie who read quite grown up storybooks.

"Or p'raps they're divorthed," broke in Bobby, who apparently knew all about it.

I looked round desperately and breathed a great sigh of relief, for Teacher was coming across the playground leading Jeremy, sticky and abashed. Everyone's attention was diverted, and I sidled up to her, slipped my hand into hers and felt safe. But Harvey was still determined to get to the bottom of my private affairs.

"Teacher," he squeaked excitedly, "why does Lucy live with her granny? I mean, why hasn't she got a daddy or...?"

Teacher's clear voice cut across his question.

"If I had a granny like Mrs Ferguson I shouldn't care if I had parents or not. She's as good as a father and mother rolled into one. You're a lucky girl, Lucy. My granny died when I was a baby... Wipe your mouth, Harvey, you've got a milk moustache. And now, everybody listen... as it's the first of May..."

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She paused dramatically, apparently enjoying the little shiver of happy expectancy. My parentless state was completely forgotten. What wonderful event was about to take place, because it was the first of May?

“Because it’s the first of May,” repeated Teacher, “instead of going back to the classroom for arithmetic, we’ll all go for a nature walk up to the spinney on the hill, and pick kingcups. They are right out.”

There was a shout of joy. Sixteen 5- to 7-year-olds skipped, ran or danced towards the meadow. Teacher strode behind because she knew she would easily catch them up on the hill. I trotted quietly beside her, still holding tightly to her hand and feeling rather shaken. I knew now that the question had been there for a long time, buried deep and never asked. Now, all of a sudden, everyone had asked it, and there was no answer.

“I’ll ask Granny today,” I said to myself, and then forgot all about it in the delight of the outing. Teacher was in front now because the hill was steep for small legs. She looked like the Pied Piper with all her class puffing and hurrying behind her, while she called back exciting instructions.

“See how many different kinds of wild flowers you can find... I said different kinds, Sally, not all dandelions. Look very quietly in the hedges. You might see a nest... Harvey, stop chattering! We want to listen to the birds, and you are frightening them all away. Now, stand still, everybody... you too Betsy, stop jumping up and down! Now very quiet... Can anyone hear that thrush singing?” Then we plunged into the oak wood, and I was the first to spy a gleam of gold in the shadows and to cry out that I’d seen kingcups.

Everyone broke into a charge through the undergrowth but Teacher shooed us all back onto the path, because last

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year Timothy Williams had lost a shoe in the swamp and his mother had made such a fuss. But there were plenty of flowers to be reached from the path and presently we turned home with muddy feet and pollen-powdered noses. Teacher's shoes were the muddiest of all, from running up and down on the edge of the marsh in her efforts to stop us falling in to it.

Parents were waiting, and one by one the children dispersed, clasping their golden bunches. But I lived a good way out, and had my dinner at school. It was four o'clock before Teacher put me on the school bus. As we waited, she picked some blossom petals out of my hair and tied back my curls from my face. Then she suddenly stooped down and kissed me, and I wondered why, for she had never done such a thing before. Perhaps it was something to do with the question. Perhaps she was sorry for me.

Granny was standing at the bus stop with Shadow, our big, black Labrador, straining at his lead, and barking for joy because he knew I was coming. We usually chased each other madly home, with Granny, staid and upright, walking behind. But Shadow must have been disappointed that afternoon because I did not feel like playing. I walked quietly beside Granny, hugging my kingcups. And then, suddenly, I asked my question.

"Granny, why do I live with you and Grandpa? Didn't I ever have a mummy and daddy?"

It seemed very quiet after I'd spoken. I could hear a bee buzzing in the lilac and a blackbird whistling. At last Granny answered.

"Your mother was our dear daughter Alice, Lucy. She died when you were a tiny baby. There was no one else to look after you, so Grandpa and I took you as our own little girl."

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“But didn’t I have a daddy?” I persisted. “And why didn’t he look after me? Is he dead too?”

There was a long silence while I waited confidently for the answer, because I knew that Granny was very strict about speaking the truth.

“He went right away,” said Granny slowly, “and we never saw him again. He was not a good man, Lucy, and he could not have looked after you. You belong to us now, and always will, just as though you were our own little girl. Look, there’s Grandpa! He’s seen us.”

We had reached our garden, and by the way she changed the subject and pressed her lips together, I knew that I was not expected to ask any more questions ever again. I did not mind. Beyond the beds of massed wallflowers and forget-me-nots, the front door of our cottage stood open and a delicious smell of baking came from the kitchen. Grandpa waved from his potato patch, his rosy face beaming a welcome. Above the chimney pots towered the feathery beech trees on the border of the Eastwood Estate. And I knew that beneath them lay cool, shadowed pools of bluebells, foamed with cow parsley. Home was a perfect place. What did I want with a father? Let alone a bad one!

Yet somehow that old far-away memory puzzled me, and the puzzle grew with the years. For if that tall man had been my father, then he could not have been wholly bad, or he would not have held me in his arms, nor would he have gone down on all-fours and let me ride on his back. But it was a riddle without an answer, and for five whole years I never mentioned it again to anyone.