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LOOKING FOR GINGER

by

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I lock the door of our holiday cottage, home for the past two weeks, and sigh. It has been a wonderful time combining house hunting with our annual holiday in Devon but so far with no result.

I gaze at the expanse of blue glinting in the sun - Where was our ideal home?

Tom toots, anxious to be off, I run across and scramble in.

He ruffles my hair "Lets enjoy our last day"

"Just one more look " I say, he nods as we drive away Harriet bouncing in the back.

"Why has the place remained empty so long?" I question the Estate Agent.

It seems strange that no one has snatched up this rural gem.

"Needs a bit of up-dating and a fair bit of work to be done on the garden". Seven year old Harriet, flushed with excitement demands to live here. Tom squeezes my hand - "I think she likes it" he grins.

It hasn't been easy to find our ideal home, I want us to settle in now we have a second child on the way.

We accompany the Estate Agent outside to look at the view, and step over a large ginger cat asleep on the threshold.

"Perhaps he comes with the house?" Tom laughs

We love the place and discover from the deeds that generations of Bartletts have lived here. I wonder about those yeoman farmers who tilled the land.

The farmhouse nestles in a valley, beyond woods there is a glimpse of the sea. A peaceful scene, hard to imagine this small corner of Devon a training exercise ground for U.S Troops in World War 2. We had done our homework and couldn't believe 3,000 people were compulsorily evacuated from their homes and bombs and live ammunition exploded in the air. Now, from the kitchen window I watch the dawn rise like a cat ready to spring into the pink and gold morning, breakfast mug warm in my chilly hands. I am captivated, the sense of history is overpowering.

Harriet now enrolled at the village school means the school run twice a day, Tom has dashed back to finalise his relocation. I'm not lonely - I stitch new curtains, start to tackle the jungle-garden. We have a daily visitor - Ginger . The cat has become my shadow, he's nervous and won't come in. I leave his saucer on the step. When I bend to stroke his soft fur he is off to hide. I'm not happy that he roams all night, the December air is cold. Tonight, Tom phones while we drink hot chocolate in our dressing gowns, I can't wait to see him.

Harriet opens the next box on the Advent Calendar and afterwards we walk past the Christmas tree newly erected next to the church to find the village shop and discover Gwen. Gwen, quick, like a little bird must be in her eighties a font of local knowledge. I learn a lot about the neighbourhood – Mrs Luscombe's asthma, Mr Wood's feckless daughter and the times of the bus to Kingsbridge.

“Do you know anything about a stray ginger cat?” I say.

“Yes, I know about him.”

“He seems to have adopted us.”

She stares at me. “Yes, he would.”

After a while she says “He is always in your garden at this time of year his family is away”.

I am indignant, how can they leave the poor old cat?

“Oh, we look out for him,” she says.

I hand Harriet her sweets.

“Look, there's that girl again”.

I look through the shop window but can't see anyone.

“Come on”, I say buttoning up her coat

That afternoon she is busy in the garden and helps me clear the leaves. “Daddy will be surprised” she pants, pump cheeks rosy as she struggles with the wheelbarrow.

“Yes he'll be home on Friday, just in time for Christmas”. I look at my daughter and think how fortunate we are to have her and the long-awaited baby who will soon arrive. I breathe deeply in the fresh Devon air. When Tom returns, we will be a family again.

“Look here's Ginger” she calls as he ambles out from the undergrowth.

“Hi Ginger,” I say and see Harriet has moved to the holly bush and is deep in conversation, she seems to be talking to the air – there’s no one there.

“Who are you talking to?” I ask

“Just Rosie – she lives here, she’s wearing her party dress.”

I smile. I had an imaginary friend round about her age.

“Time to go in now, it’s getting cold”

Harriet runs to the bottom of the garden, waves goodbye to invisible “Rosie”. Soon there will be a real live companion for her to play with, we’ll tell her at Christmas.

We make an early start. I drop Harriet at school and return home. Our Christmas tree stands in the hallway and the smell of pine needles drifts in. The kitchen is warm and cheerful with bright rugs on the tiled floor, fresh gingham at the window, I sigh with satisfaction. Suddenly I feel uneasy as if I am being watched and then I see her. She stands in front of the open door, her hair a silver halo lit by the pale winter sun, but it is her eyes which hold the attention - large and grey, huge in her pale face. Still watchful she kneels on the mat, peers across the kitchen as if looking for something. She’s about Harriet’s age, but smaller. Then I realise she isn’t imaginary after all.

“You must be Rosie, Harriet’s friend. Are you looking for Ginger? He’s in the garden”.

She says nothing and backs through the doorway her mournful enormous eyes staring at me. I run outside but there’s no sign of her or Ginger.

“The mystery of Ginger is solved at last.” I confide to Gwen as I pick up my shopping, “Rosie came around yesterday looking for him. They must be home for Christmas.”

Gwen seems unusually speechless and the empty shop is silent. After a while she says “Have you noticed the date to-day?”

I confess I haven’t.

“Well, it’s December 20th and she always comes back a few days before.”

“Before what?” I say.

“The anniversary of our evacuation, December 20th, 1943.” She looks sad. “I was nine but I’ll never forget. We were up early to see all our possessions loaded into lorries Knee deep in mud and the trucks had a job getting us out. They sent some sailors over to help us. It was frightening, some of the older folks had never been out of the village in their lives.”

I strain to hear her words, lean towards her. She tries to conceal her emotion but I notice her clenched hands and her trembling lip. Her words come in a rush “A light rain was falling and everything was dank, I didn’t know if I would ever see my home again. Everyone was hugging and crying. The Navy brought lorries to take us away – some were late because there were no signposts along the road. I heard Rosie Bartlett next to me sobbing for her cat– she thought he had run away, it wasn’t possible take him with them, there was no room in the billet, so her mother took him to the vets to be put down. She couldn’t bear to tell Rosie.”

My eyes are wet, Gwen’s face a blur.

“Even the ratings sent to help were upset, she was inconsolable you could hear her cries all over the village”

I gulp, murmur something and she continues, “By the end of the day there wasn’t a soul left”.

“What happened to them, what happened to Rosie?” I ask

“Some went to live with relatives, some with friends. We went to my Auntie Betty at Teignmouth.”

She pauses, wipes her eyes. “Much later some of us returned. It was a different village – craters, ruined buildings, brambles and weeds, rat infested, the church damaged. It took ages but it rose again It’s lovely now” she said, a touch of pride in her voice.

“But...Rosie..?”

“The Bartletts went to Plymouth and sadly the whole family were killed in the Blitz, a direct hit they said. Rosie is part of this village now, part of our history, we are used to her annual visit. Normally, village people only see her, so you are accepted as one of us.”

“And Ginger, is he..?” the question hung between us.

“No, bless you, Ginger is as real as you are, he just needs a loving home”.

I knew then I would take Ginger in, he would relish being thoroughly spoiled. A strange fluttery sensation, a butterfly feeling tells me of the precious new life within me. I place my hand on my stomach and rest it there.

“If you are a girl”, I whisper, “I’m going to call you Rosie.”