

Translated excerpt

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The ship in a tree. A summer adventure

Translated by Helena Ragg-Kirkby



CHAPTER ONE

- in which we really don't want to go to Bottombutter

There was absolutely nothing there. Ollie and I immediately realised that this was going to be the most boring summer ever.

"You'll enjoy it," Mum had said. "Aunt Polly can't wait to meet you, and Uncle Pete's lovely. And they've got a dog and a cat and some chickens - and it's not for ever. I need some time on my own, just for once!"

Mum had spoken very quickly and increasingly loudly until she was almost shouting. Tears sprang to her eyes and started spilling down her cheeks. She wiped them away with the back of her hand.

But Mum didn't understand.

Three weeks was an eternity.

Three weeks might as well be for ever.

Three weeks was an entire summer.

We had to pack.

"Have they got a computer?" Ollie asked.

"They're bound to have one," said Mum.

Ollie packed his favourite games.

"Have they got a DVD player?" I asked.

"They're bound to have one," said Mum.

I packed my fairy-tale films.

"Is there a swimming pool?" Ollie asked.

"There's bound to be one," said Mum, and Ollie fetched his snorkel and flippers and the big green plastic crocodile from the cellar.

We put everything into the suitcase in between the freshly laundered clothes that smelled of home, and Mum zipped it up.

"Now, there's no need to look so glum," Mum had said. "Bottombutter's beautiful - you'll see. I spent loads of time there as a child."

Outside, the cars were hooting angrily, the tram squeaked shrilly round the bend, and I couldn't help thinking about Maisie with her pink-painted fingernails. Maisie, who would now be dipping her feet into Lake Maggiore. *Lago Maggiore*. The way she had said it.

Laaago Madjeeoray, Laaago Madjeeoray, Laaago Madjeeoray.

"How about you, Katharine? What are you doing in the holidays?" Mrs Brightfoot had asked.

"They're having a naycation," Maisie giggled. "That's what they always do!"

"Shut up," I had hissed. "My brother and I are going to Bottombutter, Mrs Brightfoot."

Mrs Brightfoot hadn't even managed to raise her right eyebrow before all hell broke loose.

"Bottombutter! Did you hear that? *Bottombutter!*" Maisie was shaking with laughter.

"Bottombutter! Let's have some for lunch!" Max Numbskull was slapping his thighs with amusement.

"I don't believe it. BOTTOMBUTTER!"

Even silent Dennis Cobbler had grinned.

"Now, there's no need to look so glum," Mum had said. "Bottombutter's beautiful - you'll see. I spent loads of time there as a child."

The city smelled of summer, of fresh tar, of waffles, pizza and petrol. The doves were cooing; the swifts were nosediving above the rooftops; the bass came booming from car radios through the open windows.

Once Mum had quietly shut the door behind her in the mornings, Ollie and I would get straight up. We would gobble some porridge oats with sugar, water and cocoa powder before racing off.

We knew all the shops' computer departments; we knew all the latest games and were always the first to grab the joysticks. It was the school holidays, and we knew that there was no better place to spend the holidays than in a computer department. We knew all the tricks: we knew when to hop it; we knew which shops would let us stay without chucking us out. When Mum came home in the evening and asked us if we'd been bored, we just grinned and shook our heads.

No, we really didn't want to go to Bottombutter.

"Why've you got to go to this spa place?" Ollie had asked. Mum had merely pulled her concerned face and had said that she needed a break. Doctor's orders. There was no choice. "Now, there's no need to look so glum," Mum had said. "Bottombutter's beautiful - you'll see. I spent loads of time there as a child."

CHAPTER TWO

in which Uncle Pete prepares for a long journey

The whole kitchen was filled with the smell of strawberry jam. Aunt Polly was standing red-faced by the stove. Beads of sweat stood out on her forehead. She had set the clean jam-jars out on a fresh tea-towel.

"She used to come here all the time, Pete!"

"That was thirty years ago!"

"So? There's no need to be such a grump."

"We were thirty years younger, Polly!"

"We're hardly doddering now!"

"But I like my peace and quiet!"

"You'll barely see them. They'll be playing outside the whole time."

"Wrecking everything! Trampling on my beetroot, tormenting the dog, pestering the cat, scaring the chickens. You wait and see, Polly!"

"Poppycock! They're nice children, and it won't harm to have a bit of life in the house. It's not for ever. Pull yourself together, Pete Feddersen, and take that mardy face off!"

Aunt Polly held the spoon out to him.

"Try it!"

Uncle Pete licked the jam off the spoon.

"And they'll eat us out of house and home."

But he said it so quietly that Aunt Polly couldn't hear him.

"Have you taken the dog out yet?"

Uncle Pete shook his head.

"Well, off you go, then!" said Aunt Polly. "That creature needs some exercise."

Uncle Pete took his cap from the peg and left the kitchen without a word.

Outside, sunlight was filtering through the leaves of the huge walnut tree which stood in front of the little thatched house. The swallows were practising their nosedives, and their loud twittering squeaks resounded above the roof.

Uncle Pete shuffled slowly down the front garden path until he reached the beech hedge where a little white gate separated their property from the rest of the world. An ancient shaggy dog was dozing in the shade of a lilac bush.

"Come on, Friday," said Uncle Pete. "Her indoors wants us to go for our constitutional."

The dog wagged the tip of its tail sleepily, then opened its mouth and yawned widely.

"Come on, Friday. She's watching us. There'll be trouble if you don't get up."

The gate squeaked softly as Uncle Pete opened it. The dog stood up reluctantly, stretched, and then trotted off behind Uncle Pete, its tail down.

The narrow street from Bottombutter to Greater Widdle was lined with apple trees.

It cut straight across fields of oats and corn which were separated from one another by high hedgerows. The apple trees all grew at the same angle, and it looked as if they were trying to cower in the oat-fields.

Uncle Pete knew every tree. When he had planted them, he had staked every single baby stem - but the wind had been so strong then that the stakes hadn't been sufficient, and the trees had grown at a slant regardless of how often Pete Feddersen had tightened their sisal moorings.

"Forget it, Pete. There's nothing you can do against the wind here," Aunt Polly had said.

"And in any case, it'll be much easier to pick the apples. Or are you still planning on climbing ladders when you're ninety?"

"You listen, Friday. When a woman's right, she's right," Uncle Pete murmured to the dog. "But children coming? That's wrong. I'm telling you, Friday, that's our peace and quiet scuppered. And we won't be able to go on long journeys any more, either. You can't leave children on their own. Their heads are full of nonsense. Just you listen to me, Friday. That woman doesn't have the faintest idea what she's letting us in for. It's just typical. She's always taking too much on. And I've told her. I said: leave it, Polly. Not at our age. But oh no: once she's got an idea in her head, there's no stopping her. It's always been the same with her, Friday. Always been the same."

The bus shelter wasn't as slanty as the apple trees. It was made of old wooden boards, with a bench inside. The bus stop sign glittered in the sunshine.

"Look, Friday," said Uncle Pete. "It's shady here. And when the bus comes, we'll go on one of our long journeys. You and me. Just like in the old days. Across the oceans, Friday. You're the best ship's dog in the world. That'll make her sit up. We'll soon see how she manages with the children. And we won't be there, Friday."

Friday the dog panted and curled up beneath the bus-shelter bench. Uncle Pete sat down with a groan, shut his eyes, and began to wait ...

CHAPTER THREE

in which we fear the worst after a long journey

Mum had hired the car. It was red and still smelled new, and the stereo was loud.

We were in the back. Between us was the basket with the sandwiches and biscuits and bottles of water. When Mum had packed it, she had laughed and hummed tunes and had generally been happier than she had been in ages.

"If you're going on a long journey, you need provisions, my dears!"

"She seems pretty glad to be getting rid of us," Ollie had whispered.

"I can hear you!" Mum had trilled. "And it's not true. I'm just glad for you."

"Then at least one of us is."

"Grumpy-pants!" Mum laughed.

Just our luck that the sun was blazing down from a cloudless sky: to think that we could have spent the whole day playing on the Playstation in a nice cool department store. Typical.

On days like this, computer departments were more or less deserted.

The sales assistants dozed at their checkouts, waiting to go home.

But we were heading south to Bottombutter.

The stereo was booming away and Mum drummed her fingers on the steering wheel to the beat of the music.

"Does the swimming pool in Bottombutter have a water flume?" Ollie called.

"It's bound to," said Mum, without looking round.

"I'm going straight in the swimming pool when we get there," said Ollie.

I helped myself to a biscuit.

"You'll see," said Mum. "It's fabulous there."

I could see Mum's eyes in the rear-view mirror. There was a deep frown-line above her nose. I knew full well that the frown-line meant something was wrong.

But I kept it to myself so as not to scare Ollie.

When my brother is scared, you see, he starts whining. And when he starts whining, he's unbearable.

I leaned my head against the buzzing window and counted the cars coming in the opposite direction.

I must have fallen asleep, because I opened my eyes to find Ollie lying half across me, snoring softly. I tried to catch Mum's eye in the rear-view mirror, but she had put on her huge, dark sunglasses and I could see that the frown-line had become even deeper.

The heat was shimmering behind the windscreen. If I screwed up my eyes, it looked as if the car might melt.

There was nothing in front of us. I turned to look through the rear window.

Nothing. No cars, no lorries, no motorbikes. Nothing. To the left of the motorway were pastures and meadows and yellow cornfields. A couple of cows were huddling against a little tree. No towns, no houses, no church spires. Nothing but this endless flat land dozing away to itself in the shimmering midday heat.

Ollie had woken up too. He was also looking out of his window.

"Bit dreary, isn't it?" I said. That was when Ollie started whining.

"Mum, are we nearly there yet?"

Mum started, and turned the radio down.

"What did you say, sweetheart?"

"Are we nearly there yet?"

"Soon, sweetheart."

"Mum, I'm bored of sitting."

"Not long now!"

"Mum, I'm hot."

"Then have a drink."

"Mum, the water's too warm."

Mum indicated and turned off the motorway.

"Mum, I've got no room. Kat's in my space."

I nudged Ollie in the side.

"Mum, Kat hit me!"

Mum turned the radio up again.

At the edge of the road was a hare that had been run over. Two crows flapped away from it as we passed.

"What were they doing?" asked Ollie.

"Didn't you see? They were eating rotting hare," I replied.

"Mum, Kat's saying horrible things," Ollie yelled.

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We still hadn't seen a single other car. Maybe the area was contaminated by radiation and nobody was allowed to enter, and Mum had simply failed to notice the huge skull-and-crossbone warning signs while we were asleep.

I was just wondering whether to pass this on to Ollie when a tractor appeared in the far distance.

Once it had passed, the old farmer turned round to look at us. Ollie and I looked back, expecting to see his tractor go plunging into the ditch.

"We'll see Apple Tree Avenue any minute now," said Mum. "It's a dead straight road from Bottombutter to Greater Widdle. I always used to ride my bike that way when Aunt Polly left the sugar behind in the shop. Uncle Pete planted the trees himself."

Greater Widdle sounded promising. It did at least sound as if people lived there.

Ollie and I craned to see through the front windscreen.

Lo and behold: we were heading for a church steeple. For a long while it looked as if the church steeple were in the middle of the road, and I thought we might have to drive slap-bang through the middle of the church. But then I saw that there was a bend in the road beyond the sign at the entrance to the town. Immediately beside the sign was a second sign made of wood. "Hello and Welcome to Greater Widdle!" Ollie and I read.