

CHAPTER 1

Finding Liquorice



When I was your age, I used to walk a mile to school every day. Years of days have merged into one memory of that clockwork journey.

My sister went to a girls' school and my brother was too young, so I walked alone. The way to school took me along Ellersly Road, past what used to be called the Scottish Spastic Centre and is now cleverly renamed Capability Scotland. Further on, the road turned into a leafy avenue and continued down the hill to Saughton Hall, where it met the main Edinburgh thoroughfare, Corstorphine Road.

At this busy crossroads, lorries roared past with their heavy loads and buses, bursting with rush-hour commuters,

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loomed large. Mother had warned me not to take any chances.

Salon La Greca was on the corner. This is where we all had our hair cut. If you look it up on Google street view you'll see that it is still there, I suppose on account of there being no haircutting app yet!

The last part was a bit of a humdrum slog up the hill, but there was an elderberry tree. If I stretched out over the low stone wall, I could just reach the black, luscious berries.

That day, it was drizzling when I set off. Drizzle is actually quite hard to describe because it is so much more than just light rain. It is overwhelmingly grey, slow in falling yet persistent to a fault. It lasts quite a while (sometimes weeks) and it seeps insidiously into your clothes and hair and skin, dampening you to the core.

I thought of fastening the buttons on my blazer but it was already done up as far as it went and the knees beneath my shorts glistened with this Scotch mist.

It was the 31st of October, almost half a century ago now when I come to think of it. I was not yet half way to school when the overcast sky relented briefly to give away the sun's hiding place and it was at this moment that a very

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elegant figure stepped out from the shrubs near Harmony Cottage, Ellersly Road.



It was Halloween

‘Miaow,’ she said with her head slightly on one side as if she expected me to understand. She rubbed against my legs and repeated her opening gambit, ‘Miaow!’

I reached down to stroke her silky fur and felt her arch into my touch. She purred as I rubbed under her chin. I had never seen her before and yet she didn’t act as if I were a stranger. Her green-gold eyes looked into mine unblinkingly.

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I stood up. At this rate, I was going to be late for school. But as I carried on she followed me. Just like Mary's little lamb would you believe, she came with me all the way to school, stopping only at the gate where she sat down and watched me enter the school grounds.

'Miaow,' she reiterated.

I hoped she would still be there when I came out of school.

'Wait for me,' I whispered.

She sat there, her tabby coat gleaming despite the pervading damp of the day. My mother hated cats with a vengeance but all day (through the beheading of Henry the Eighth's wife, the reduction of fractions and on during various examples of onomatopoeia) I mulled over the unthinkable – taking her home and somehow secretly smuggling her in.

The moment the last bell rang I was up and out like a shot, running to the gate. She wasn't there. My eyes scanned the street. I couldn't see her. My mother would never have allowed a cat in the house anyway. And yet I loitered and even when I finally trudged home I looked over my shoulder every now and then – just in case.

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‘Shut the front door properly, please. How many times do I have to ask you?’

‘Yes, Mother.’

‘You’re terribly late back.’

‘A cat followed me to school.’

‘Well, get your blazer off and lay the table. And call your brother and sister down for supper,’ she replied.

That evening the wind rattled the window panes and the moon shone brightly as if it had been hung in the night sky especially for Halloween. Some trick-or-treaters knocked on the door but my mother didn’t open it. She said they were probably Americans. The flames of the fire in the grate leapt up and danced making the light flicker across the pages of my book.

‘Yes? Hello? Oh Ellersly House Hotel. A stray cat?’

I looked up. Mother was speaking on the phone.

‘Sorry no idea whose it might be. Can’t you just turn it out?’ she paused, and then, ‘I hardly think a little rain would hurt it,’ she laughed.

It hit me like a bolt of lightning. I leapt up. ‘The cat!’

‘Mother, I know where she came from!’ I shouted.

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So Mother told them to bring the cat round and we would take her back to Ellersly Road in the morning.



The man from Ellersly House Hotel

I had to practice for my violin lesson the next day but I couldn't concentrate at all. My fingers fumbled and stumbled through the piece; I was too busy listening out for the sound of the doorbell. Finally, I heard voices in the hall and the door close. I just couldn't wait another minute and setting my violin aside, rushed precipitously into the empty hall.

'Where is she, Mother?'

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‘In the cardboard box in the garage, and,’ she continued seeing the look on my face, ‘I think that’s the best place for it to stay until you take it back tomorrow morning.’

‘But Mother...’

‘Muffin won’t have a cat in the house you know,’ Mother stated firmly.

Muffin was our beloved, good-natured golden retriever. I thought Muffin probably wouldn’t mind but there was clearly no point in arguing.

I went into the garage. She might be frightened. I opened the box. Even in the poor garage lighting, I was astonished by what I saw. Very small, cowering in the corner with eyes as big as his head, was no tabby empress but a kitten with fur as black as a Halloween night.

I picked him up and carried him back into the house.

‘Mother,’ I started. She didn’t look round.

‘Can’t you see I’m busy,’ she said in the weariest possible voice as if I were some kind of idiot who simply hadn’t been able to figure it out.

‘I’m going to bed,’ I replied and trundled upstairs where my sister had locked my brother in a wardrobe and was engaged in some kind of negotiation whereby he had to pay her all his pocket money before he was allowed out.

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As soon as she saw the cat in my arms though, she abandoned her game of extortion to coo at, and cuddle the tiny, sweet bundle of fur.

‘Let’s feed him,’ she said.

‘Shall we try and catch a mouse for him?’ I said.

Some stifled sobbing sounds were emanating from the wardrobe in which my brother was still locked.

‘No, you cretin, she’s a kitten. She should have milk. Don’t you even know that?’ my sister (did I mention that she was my *older* sister?), retorted.

I unlocked the wardrobe door and the words,

‘I’ll pay, I promise,’ tumbled out of my brother’s mouth.

‘Forget that,’ I said. ‘Look! A man brought this kitten round because I thought it was the one that followed me to school today.’

‘You’ll have to get rid of it,’ he said looking positively fearful. ‘Mother won’t have it. She’ll go mad.’

‘We’ll keep him in secret,’ my intractable sister said pouting.

He slept on my bed that night. First beside me, then on my chest and when I woke up in the morning I had fur up my nose and he was in a deep purring sleep right on my

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face. My brother and sister came tearing in as soon as they woke up.

‘What are you going to do?’ they asked me.

My heart thumped in my chest. I couldn’t remember a time when I had wanted anything more than I wanted to keep this cat.

Downstairs, Mother was preparing a typical Saturday breakfast of slightly overcooked eggs, slightly charred toast (because the damned toaster still wasn’t working properly) and Coco Pops (which were fine as they are protected by consumer laws).

‘If I find out you had that cat upstairs...’ she said sternly giving me a penetrating gaze that made me suspect that she already knew I had.

I like to think that I was about to man up and explain that it wasn’t the same cat and I didn’t know where he came from and that I would do anything to keep him but my sister interjected,

‘The cat that followed him to school was a tabby cat, not this kitten. Can we keep it Mother?’

Mother turned round and drew herself up a few inches.

‘Please Mama, he’s so sweet and he’s got nowhere to go and he can stay upstairs. You’ll hardly even know he’s

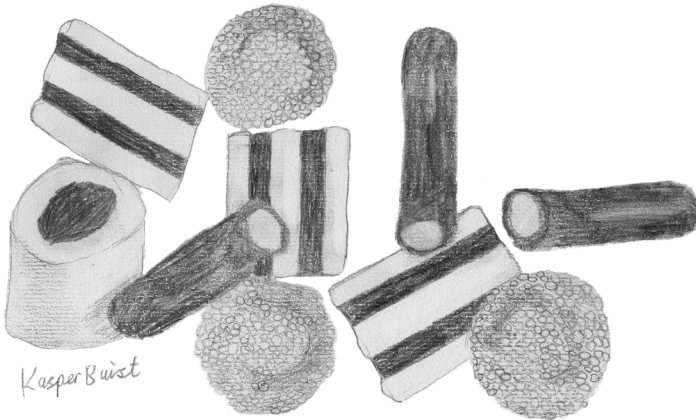
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there.’ A little black nose poked out from her dressing gown.

Mother contemplated the fluffy black, quivering, tiny little creature for a moment. She didn’t like cats but then again, it was going to be quite a bother getting rid of it.

‘He’s as black as Liquorice,’ she said, ‘and a bit of all sorts,’ she added scrutinising his face as if his breeding (or lack thereof) could be clearly seen in it.

My sister and I smiled at each other. Bassett’s *Liquorice All Sorts* were my mother’s favourite confectionary.



Liquorice All Sorts