

15 October, 1940

When a major historical event occurs, usually, if one is alive when it happens, that person can remember exactly what he was doing, where he was, what he was feeling (and felt afterwards) and quite possibly the exact thoughts that were running through his head at the exact moment that it happened. One might say: "I was sitting in class gnawing on the end of my pencil while we were being lectured about the geographical features of Idaho." Or another person might say: "I was writing a report about paint drying methods when my father came into my room and told me."

In 1941, Tobias Clay was a twenty-two-year old black man with a college education underneath his belt and options of what to do with his life still running free in his head. He was tall, much more handsome than he would ever admit and living with his mother in an apartment in the small town of Crownsberry, Connecticut. Whenever somebody ever asked Tobias what he was doing on Sunday December 7, 1941, he would always lie and say either something along the lines of "I was actually sleeping in when it happened – my ma woke me up and told me." Or he would simply say: "I know you're not gonna believe me, but I don't really remember. My memory really isn't as good as it used to be."

Tobias told people these lies because on that very historical day, when the Empire of Japan attacked the U.S. Naval Fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, he was in fact sitting on the toilet, which wasn't something that he wanted to admit. And he would have been sitting on the toilet a great deal longer if his mother hadn't called from the kitchen:

“Tobias, you’d better come and see this.” There was an unfamiliar sense of urgency in her voice that wasn’t common and that was enough of an incentive for Tobias to attend to her quickly. When he emerged from the bathroom, he found his mother in the kitchen holding a newspaper.

A very strong, intelligent and fiery woman who had raised Tobias both with the stern hand of a father and the soft heart of a mother, Nina Clay wasn’t the sort of person who often allowed her emotions to show. When Tobias found her though, her face was crinkled up in a very worried expression. Nobody knew Tobias as well as she did, and before she even handed him the newspaper, she knew that whether by excitement or by a sense of duty, while Tobias might not *appear* to be interested now, he was eventually going to end up preparing for war. It can’t be explained exactly how Nina knew, but there are some things only a mother can predict.

He didn’t show it at first, though. He silently mouthed the words on the headline and the look on his face remained pensive as he handed his mother back the newspaper. “That’s a real shame,” he said, almost a little bit too dismissively. “I feel sorry for those fellas, I really do. They didn’t even see it comin’.” And he mentioned no more of it all day.

Over the course of the next three weeks, however, Tobias spent a lot of time thinking about current events. He was a Yale graduate, having graduated from the university in the spring of 1941 with a major in history. Even though he lived in the north, where things were far better for a black man than in the south, the fact still remained that he was a black man; therefore his options as far as career opportunities were limited. Upon graduation, he had decided to take a year off from doing much of

anything at all so that he might help his mother at home while pondering on what to do with his life.

For a while, Tobias had been toying with the idea of traveling abroad to England after his rest year had ended, so that he might pursue his graduate studies there. In England, the environment for a black person wasn't as nearly as bad as in America, so that would prove to be a refreshing change.

But then the attack on Pearl Harbor had come and the nation began mobilizing for war soon after, and that changed things significantly. The Monday immediately following the attack, five boys that lived in Tobias and Nina's building had already enlisted for the military – three for the army, one for the navy and the last for the Marines. Four of those boys had been eighteen and another had only been seventeen. Tobias was twenty-two.

At first the notion to join the military wasn't even in Tobias' head because he had the opportunity of a good life laid out before him and he didn't want to throw that away for a country that for the most part despised him and his people. But during the following days, he couldn't help but think about the possibility of America being invaded or bombed and what might happen to his mother and the rest of his family then, or the fact that his future destination of England was at war herself and it wouldn't be safe to live there before everything was over anyway. Unlike so many other black men, Tobias had nothing to prove to the country though, because he had already attended a prestigious university and ranked high amongst his white classmates and that was enough for him.

He finally made his decision based on the realization that a major historical event was unfolding around him, and as a devoted student of history, he would never forgive himself if he missed out on it.

“Ma,” he said after dinner one night. “I have something important to tell you.”

Nina just let out a small sigh and gave her son a tired smile. “It took you longer than I’d expected, Tobias, but I knew it was comin’ sometime. You’re joinin’ up aren’t you? Well you do what you have to do, because I know that no amount of my talkin’ is gonna stop you. You just make sure to come back to me, you understand?”

And that was that.

Tobias decided that he wanted to become a pilot, because aviation in warfare was a fairly new, very exciting technology and zooming around in a sleek aero plane sounded a whole lot more attractive than slogging around in the mud with the infantry. Besides, Tobias already had some flying experience via his uncle down in Tennessee, who was a crop-duster. With his decision made, he attempted to apply for the naval aviation program because the navy had higher standards than the army and Tobias wanted to serve with nothing except the best. Unfortunately, he was rejected due to the fact they didn’t accept black pilots. Next, Tobias tried the army aviation program, but the result was the same. It wasn’t until June of 1941, with the commencement of the Tuskegee aviation program that Tobias could pursue his goal of becoming a pilot.

He traveled to the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama for flight training with the newly formed 99th Pursuit Squadron, and after that flew missions in Tunisia, Sicily, Austria, Hungary, Poland and Germany. Tobias and the rest of the Tuskegee airmen gained a well-deserved reputation as dangerous and effective fliers, so much so

that the Germans tried to avoid them as much as possible. That didn't prevent Tobias from getting wounded, however, high in the skies above Germany while on a bomber escort mission. It wasn't a Messerschmitt that had gotten him, because the German fighters were more concerned about attacking the American bombers rather than their escorts.

It was a splash of flak that had wounded Tobias, bursting very close to the starboard side of his craft, damaging the plane's fuselage and starboard wing and causing a good amount of metal and glass to lodge themselves into Tobias' arms, neck and face. Blood was splattered all over the cockpit and the plane was trailing smoke, but neither Tobias nor his machine were damaged badly enough that he had to bail out over Germany. He was able to fly back to England, where he was treated for his wounds. After that, he was granted a brief medical leave.

Tobias decided to stay in London during this period, and he spent a great deal of his time wrapped in his leather flier's jacket wandering around the bombed-out streets and thinking about a multitude of things, the foremost of those his mother back at home, and what might happen to her if America ever came under attack. On one Sunday afternoon, as he was walking down a Peartree Lane, something caught his eye in one of the ruined gray hulks that surrounded him. He approached what was left of the building and saw that there was a spot of red color sticking out of a mound of rubble and ash.

What he pulled out of that pile was some sort of journal book, bound with red leather. Tobias flipped through its pages, surprised that the thing hadn't been destroyed with the rest of the building. There was a lot of soot and dust on the paper, and the cover was a little burned in places, but other than that the book was intact and the handwriting

was still legible. In the very back of the book, a dozen or so yellowed envelopes had been tucked away, and on the inside front cover in very nice cursive handwriting read: “The Journal of Penelope Plum, 1940.”

“Penelope Plum,” Tobias said to himself with a smirk. “That’s a nice little name. I wonder where Miss Plum is now.” He looked around the area, almost as if expecting the journal’s owner to appear behind him and request back her possession. Nobody was there of course, so he focused back on the book.

“It’s been lying here for five years,” he thought to himself. “And nobody has ever picked it up...I wonder why I, a visitor of London who just happened to be walking down this random street on this day, noticed it when nobody else has in all this time. I can’t believe I’m thinking this, but maybe I was *meant* to pick it up. If that actually is the case then I guess that I was also meant to read it.”

And that is what he began to do. Tobias turned to the first page and this is what he read, no more and no less:

1 July, 1940

I don't know what to say. What a stupid gift this is. It looks to be about a hundred years old. I would bet any amount of money that Auntie Abigail simply dug this thing out of the basement, or attic, or whatever else other crummy dark place there is to stash forgotten things, and gave it to me so that she wouldn't have to get me a real birthday present. If I was with mum, I'm sure that I would have gotten a proper gift. Why would I even want something to write in when I do enough writing at school?

I am deciding right now that I won't write anymore. That'll show her. This book will sit on my dresser unused and covered with layers of dust, and hopefully Auntie Abigail will decide to open it one day and read the only things that I have written...which of course talk about how much I detest this gift. Maybe then she'll realise just how thoughtless of a person she really is.

The end.

27 July, 1940

If you're reading this, Auntie Abigail, I just want you to know that I'm only writing in this thing due to the fact that I am extremely bored and have nothing else to do....Because as you know, Caitlin and Amy left with their mum to go stay with their grandmother in Cheshire. Caitlin told me that they found out that their dad is going to be coming home from the hospital soon and won't have to go back to the war again. So he's going to be joining them in the country, which is nice for them I guess, but I suspect that just means that they will become so very happy there with the open space and the farms,

and probably won't even bother coming back to London even when the war's over.

Caitlin said that she will name a scarecrow after me, but despite that, I don't really expect her to think much of me.

So, I think that I am to remain friendless and bored for a very long time unless somebody else my age moves in. And since people seem to be moving OUT of London instead of IN, I don't think that this is going to happen...until after the war ends of course. But by that time I shall be quite content with being friendless and I won't want any new friends. And that's all I have to say about that I suppose.

Surely this is going to be the last time that I write in this thing, because not only do I intend to NOT give Auntie Abigail the satisfaction of knowing that I am actually using the journal book that I so openly showed contempt for, but I honestly have nothing else to write because I don't do a single thing all day besides read the same old books that have been sitting in my room since last September.

Good bye then.

And good riddance.

27 July, 1940 (Part II)

Oh very well, so I am returned. The day became increasingly more dull after I left last (I was most recently writing in the afternoon if you should know), and realising that I am to be faced with even more days like this – maybe even years' worth – I thought that it would be much better to have something to do rather than sitting around and letting my brain grow flat. There are books, yes, but I have read all of them so many times that I get a headache whenever I try to read them now.

Auntie Abigail refuses to let me buy new books with my own money, even though it is MY money and not hers at all. She says that I shouldn't waste it on such "trivial pleasures" now, because when the war ends it will be very useful. Well I think that the war is going to last for a great deal longer than anybody expects, so if I am to follow Auntie Abigail's method of thinking, I might as well put all of my savings in a metal box and then bury it in the front yard for all the good that it's going to do me. Perhaps if I actually had some letters to read then I wouldn't need to rely on books to keep me occupied.

Since he's been in the hospital, Caitlin's dad has been sending them (while they were here) two nice, thick envelopes filled with many-paged letters every other day -- one envelope for Caitlin and Amy to read together and another for their mum. Yes, I understand that he's in the hospital with nothing better to do besides write his family lengthy letters, but think about it – a new letter every other day! My head swims when I think about the prospect of that happening to me. With that many letters, I wouldn't be able to keep up! I could stay in my room for days on end and not ever once worry about boredom.

Of course, I do get letters, but they are too few and far in-between. Jonathan sends a letter home every week, but his are always so short and are just filled with how wonderful flight training is. Lord knows that the last thing I need is to read Jonathan's ongoing rants about how great it is to fly amongst the clouds and the birds in a fantastic, state-of-the-art flying machine, while I am trapped in Auntie Abigail's stuffy old house here in London, dreaming about what it would be like to be in his situation. It's sheer torture I tell you, and sometimes I think that it would be better if he didn't write at all!

Dad writes once in every three blue moons, and even though he says that he wishes he could write more, I really don't blame him for his lack of correspondence. After all, who would want to waste time writing letters when he is busy wandering around the wild heart of Africa? I know that *I* certainly wouldn't, and since I think I get my sense of adventure from dad, he probably doesn't like bothering with such a thing either.

When the war is over and dad comes back, I will be sure to pester him long and hard until he agrees to take me to Africa. If there is one place in the world that I think would be the most different from England, I think that Africa would be it. I imagine that it is something like India with the jungles and all, and I have a pretty good idea of what India is like because of *The Jungle Book*. The elephants are larger in Africa though, and there are no tigers. I know this for a fact.

Anyway, how wonderful would it be to sail down a winding river right through the middle of some lush African jungle? It would have to be an open ferry though, so that the passengers could be able to feel the tropical air and hear the birds and smell the jungle around them. And of course the ferry would be far enough from land so that the animals wouldn't be able to get at it, but there would most definitely have to be special telescopes outfitted along the railing, whose sole purpose would be peering into the jungle and observing the animals in their natural state – quite undisturbed by adventurers.

The one animal book that Auntie Abigail has here lists only ten African beasts and those are the ones that everybody knows – lions, elephants, rhinoceroses, giraffes, etcetera, etcetera. How stupid that is. Of course everybody knows about lions and elephants, so why not put in a few that nobody has ever heard of? For example, quite

some time ago, in the library I read about a fly (I wish I could remember its name) whose bite makes you fall asleep! How many people have ever heard of that one? Hardly anybody most likely, because all the books that anybody can find are filled with things they've already heard of.

~~If I go to Africa~~

When I go to Africa, I will be sure to take along my sketchbook so that I can not only pictorially record every single creature that I see, but I will also include detailed descriptions of where they live, what they eat, what their habits are – all things that should be found in any good animal book. That way I won't have to rely on these moldy old texts that don't say much of anything in the first place.

I've been wondering about something though – dad's supposed to be in Africa, right? But every time I open one of his letters, there are great bunches of sand in the corners of the envelope. Of course, it is very exciting to be looking at sand from a totally different part of the world, but I always thought that the deserts in Africa were only in Egypt and the Sahara. Dad said he was in Ethiopia, not Egypt. Aren't there supposed to be jungles in Ethiopia? Or is Africa really covered with nothing but deserts, and the same moldy old books that give inadequate animal information have also been deceiving innocent readers like me with romanticized descriptions of the geographical conditions? I wouldn't put it past those conniving editors. As long as their books sell and they get money in their already overstuff pockets, then they're happy. Well bugger them.

I think that I've yawned at least twenty times in the past three minutes, so perhaps it is time for bed. It is still fairly early in the evening though, but that's okay because tonight I'm sure I will dream of Africa...

-Penelope

29 July, 1940

Hello again.

Ever since I have written about it, the whole thing with dad and the sand and Africa has been bothering me. I finally made a point to ask Auntie Abigail about it at lunch this afternoon, and surprisingly, she seemed to know a great deal about Ethiopia. She said that there were actually three climate regions in the country, one being semi-desert like, another being very tropical and the other being "actually quite nice" as she put it. She then said that dad was in the desert and thank god for that because if he was in the jungle, he probably would have died of malaria or some other terrible disease by now. "Quite dead," she had added as if I hadn't understood her the first time.

Since she already seemed to know so much about the place, I then asked Auntie Abigail if she wanted to come to Africa with us when the war was over. Instead of being delighted by the idea as I half-expected her to be, she told me in a scolding sort of way to quit dreaming like a child. She said that only a fool would even consider leisurely travelling around the world after the war because it would be very difficult for people in England and elsewhere in Europe to get back on their feet...and scooting around the globe was just prolonging the hardships that were sure to come. She told me that even if mum found a suitable enough place to stay in America until the end of the war and sent

for me, we would still have to come back to England eventually. I pointed out that the war was in Europe and not in America, and that America would probably be a better place to live in the end. But always a naysayer, Auntie Abigail said that America probably wouldn't stay out of the war for long, and then it would probably end up being just as bad as Europe.

I just think that Auntie Abigail is bitter at us for being so young and restless and adventurous, and at her being so old and baggy. Mum and Auntie Caroline always used to make fun of Auntie Abigail behind her back and say that she looked like an old walrus, and they would thank god that she wasn't THEIR older sister. I myself think she looks more like a blood hound than a walrus though, because she certainly has the long floppy jowls of one, not to mention the droopy eyes....And also like a bloodhound, those eyes are always red – not naturally though, but from staying up late and reading playbooks by somebody named Jonathan Webster. I have no idea who that is, but she absolutely adores the man's work...so naturally I was curious if I could read one of his plays for myself one day, but Auntie Abigail said that such material was too gruesome for my "soft, impressionable fourteen-year old mind," and that I should "entertain myself with reading that's more appropriate for my age."

Fah.

I have read far more, test far better and have a much larger vocabulary than anybody in my class, and my teachers say that I should really be a years and years above where I am. Auntie Abigail very well knows this, so she should be encouraging me to read adult material, not doing her best to keep it away from me. She won't even let me walk to the library (or leave the grounds anymore for whatever reason) because she

thinks that the bombs are going to start falling any day now, which is difficult to think about – bombs falling over London that is. The only think of hers that Auntie Abigail allows me to read is *London Carney Interest Quarterly*, which is a circus magazine that she subscribes too. This month talked about bear-soothing techniques, paint-removal methods and featured a cover story on unicycle safety.

Rubbish!

She listens to PM Churchill's radio programmes in her room whenever they come on, but she absolutely refuses to let me listen to them because as she once so grandly put it: "Paranoia is one of the three coattails of youth, along with irresponsibility and stupidity. And when one coattail gets waggled, then they all tie themselves together and become a knot so heavy that they drag the unfortunate child to the bottom of whatever dirty, devilish depths that had previously been under curious inquiry."

This could only be a stream of nonsense desperately tailored specifically to put me in my place right on the spot, because not only is the idea of having threes coattails much too absurd to take seriously, but everybody knows that paranoia comes with age – when the valleys of the wrinkles on one's head are so deep that they rub across his or her already-shaky brain and erase most sense that is common and good. In fact, since I know that Auntie Abigail's main goal is to one way or another keep me shuttered up inside of this house for the duration of the war, it would probably do her some good to design and streamline her words of "advice" so that she can effortlessly pass them down to me when the time is appropriate, instead of standing there with her face screwed up like a raisin, thinking so hard about what to say that the lining of her overpriced wig begins to smoke.

At least that way she won't waste so much of my time when she feels there is a need for reprimanding.

I understand that Auntie Abigail is the closest relative, and that mum will no doubt soon send for me from America, but I've been here for barely more than a month and I have since long ago been wishing that I had harassed mum even more than I had, even though she gave the thoroughly logical reason that I couldn't come with her because it would have been much too expensive and risky to take me to America and right back to England if we were forced to return. I wonder though...if mum doesn't think so highly of Auntie Abigail (at least, as far as I can tell she doesn't), then why did she leave me with her? All of our relatives haven't decided to go live abroad. I know that I have an uncle walking around somewhere in Yorkshire. Isn't that close enough?

I can remember the first time that I met Auntie Abigail (I was three) and I honestly thought that she was going to eat me. She's such a large woman, you see, and I was one the floor while she was coming towards me with such speed that I thought that she was going to stoop down, pick me up and throw me into her wide mouth, swallowing me with one gulp. She didn't eat me (obviously), but she picked me up and held me close, and her large dresses always smell like dust and feel like one large mass of crumpled up paper. So while I did remain out of her belly, I still suffered by sneezing myself into oblivion and having my soft face smashed into this uncomfortable paper-like fabric.

For years, whenever dad took us to see her, I always remained in a perpetual state of fear from right when we entered her house all the way through to when we left. The house itself was scary enough, because it is a large empty mansion that belonged to her

late husband's family for generations and is cluttered up with generations' worth of their stuff. But to have this saggy old woman emerge from days on end spent wandering around in that dark house like a bitter ghost – to see her shadow-filmed squinty eyes peer out at us from the small sliver of a crack between the door and the frame...that was simply terrifying for me. As far as I was concerned, we were like four unsuspecting children entering the lair of a witch, who, on the occasion of completely winning our trust and friendship, would boil us alive and then enjoy our meat slabs with caramelized fruit and pecan preserve.

Those fearful thoughts are laughable now when I look back on them, but I WAS only a child please remember. By the time that I was seven, I had visited her so much that Auntie Abigail stopped seeming so scary and I began to realise just how strange of a woman she was. Her dresses were always the colour of prunes, because according to her the spirits of the home (including that of her dead husband) had kindly asked her to wear that colour, and if she did indeed comply with their wishes, then they wouldn't bother her too much.

Whenever she goes to bed, she always makes sure that the books in her room with faces of people on their covers are turned over because she doesn't like the idea of those faces watching her as she sleeps. Once when I was nine, she took me and Jonathan to see a psychic in Soho. The woman was obviously a fraud because she informed us of events that had already happened – sometimes hundreds of years in the past. These events were always in other countries though, so I think she had been hoping that we hadn't heard about them.

Usually once or twice during family dinners at her house, a long, winding cyclone of nonsensical words would burst from Auntie Abigail's mouth -- swirling around the room and filling every little nook and corner with her irrelevant wisdom. The words would tickle our facial muscles in different ways – Jonathan and I would smile because it really was rather amusing to watch; mum would be trying her hardest not to laugh and dad would be trying his hardest not to look embarrassed.

For some reason I have difficulty forgetting the words that she said at these times, even years after she said them. Here is an example of one, which just so happens to also be my favourite: “If you name a pig before it fries, or more importantly, before it flies, then you as the pig-pilfering poacher, who steadies himself with picturesque portraits of sullied ice creams that happen to walk and swim, but refuse to talk...will look upon the broom handle idling in the corner, harbouring its resentment of the ungrateful straw that has long-since discovered yellowier pastures that succeed in jeering the colour blue (even though it isn't green) and it will approach you in a most unlawful, unconstitutional, unorthodox way.”

Absolute gibberish, yes I know, but it was the only time that Auntie Abigail wasn't her usual dry, stuffy self, so Jonathan and I found her fits of unfocused literary passion to be quite refreshing. Of course, as we grew older, these outbursts became less and less frequent, and since the war has started, she hasn't said anything of the sort at all. The only things that she does these days are as follows: 1.) Clean everything in sight (and force me to help her), everyday twice as much as it should just because it doesn't need to be cleaned; 2.) Scold me for not cleaning properly; 3.) Scold me for wanting to leave the

house too much; 4.) Scold me for sitting around too much; 5.) Read Jonathan Webster; 6.) Listen to the radio; 7.) Sleep.

And on occasion I think that she'll scold me just for the sake of scolding because I think that's her own special method for overcoming boredom.

(The animal of boredom is as brash as a badger and as patient as a panther. It hides around corners sniffing the air with its wet snout and when least expected, leaps upon innocent young girls, who are barely able to fend it off, despite the combined aid of a pen and paper, and the opportunity to jot down thoughts.) I should think that one day this ennui-oriented beast shall strike so hard and fast that I won't be able to get back up at all...and the truly miserable part is that I will probably be content with collecting layers of dust just like all other useless things in the house.

Oh well. It's late and I'm tired.

Goodnight

-Penelope

31 July, 1940

On Tuesday (yesterday), the boredom was so palpable that every time I opened my mouth for a yawn, it was there – stuffed between my cheeks like cotton balls. I don't know whether this was because I've been here for far too long, or because of the fact that it's the middle of the week. Indeed, on very dreary weeks Wednesday can be just like the middle of a very long tunnel where the light of neither exit can be seen. In those cases, it usually feels a whole lot better to just sit in the centre rather than use up energy walking towards something that you can't see and after a while doubt is even there.

While the afore-mentioned is usually my solution to such a dilemma, yesterday I tried to approach the problem differently by doing something creative, because I know that each coming week in this unbearably-clean prison is going to exhibit the very same tunnel qualities of the last. I found one of my old school notebooks that wasn't filled the entire way sitting underneath some papers, and I decided that I was going to use it to write a story.

I was quite excited to begin on this personal voyage to places unseen or unheard of by any other human on the planet; places that were to bright colours and imagination, as London was to grey and dullness. I often spend a great deal of time envisioning myself somewhere else besides where I am and I really am surprised that I haven't taken to writing those adventures down...but then again, I suppose that I haven't been this bored either. So I sat down at my desk, prepared to write, but as soon as that notebook was opened and waiting in front of me and when this very pen in my hand was hanging anxiously over the page, the ideas just...dried up....Bits and pieces of dreamt-up people and places and things are always swimming around in my head like the restless eccentric relatives of fish, but the moment that I try to collect those ideas and place them in a permanent, stable home via the paper, they quickly jet away and hide within the darkest crevices and caves of my mind so that I cannot find them.

Frustrated but determined, I tried to coax the ideas out of hiding by opening the story with a poem that had come into my head so suddenly it was almost as if somebody had placed it there as a gift. It read like this:

Timothy McPound's at the playground

Seeking a profitable day

He finds a boy and offers him a toy

Then whisks him quickly away

It didn't work. And what's more, after re-reading the poem at least a dozen times in an attempt to use it as a sort of home-grown inspiration, I realised just how disturbing it sounded. I tore the page out of my notebook, crumpled it up and tossed it onto the desk, not thinking for one second that Auntie Abigail could find it and use it as fodder for one of her regal lectures.

In the end, my attempts to write a story turned out to be nothing more than an exercise in futility. I spent the rest of Wednesday afternoon staring at the open pages of the notebook and occasionally writing phrases like "Once there was...", or "Many years ago...", or "In a land far away...", which was the longest of all of them, measuring in at five words. None of them amounted to anything though, so after a good several hours of this, I closed the notebook and sat back in my chair, tilting my head to stare up at the cobweb-adorned rafters of the ceiling. Instantly the colourful ideas swam out of their hiding places to populate the main stage of my head once more. I didn't try to snare them again though, but merely sighed at the unfairness of it all.

After that, the day played out to be as boring as all the other ones had been since Caitlin's departure to Cheshire and the unfortunate commencement of my authentically-doleful house arrest under the great prune-coloured gloom of Auntie Abigail's German-courting paranoia. There was a small oddity in the events however, which came when

the day had actually ended and I had already gone to bed. I had awoken in the middle of the night with a real need to use the toilet and I was creeping from my room through the main corridor, trying my hardest not to make a sound and alert Auntie Abigail to my presence. She's a real hard master about young children going and staying in bed when the night is old and when they're told, so it was in my best interest not to get caught.

As I passed her room, I saw that light was coming through the crack in the door as it usually did when she was up reading. The only peculiar thing this time was the addition of voices – not PM Churchill's voice on the radio or Auntie Abigail reading out loud lines from the plays....Well, one of them DID belong to Auntie Abigail, but she wasn't the only one in the room – there was another voice and it sounded like that of a man!

“How scandalous of you, Auntie Abigail,” I thought. “Inviting a companion into the house when you believed me to be asleep – how scandalous indeed!”

Honestly, do you think that now I had heard them there really was any way for me to pass by without having a listen? No, there wasn't. Quietly as I could I snuck up close to the door and gently pressed my ear against the wood. I had a good view of the room that was exposed through the crack of the door, but from the angle I was standing at, all I could see was Auntie Abigail's bed and not her currently-occupied reading chair, which was at the other end of the room. The mysterious visitor must have been at that end of the room also, because I couldn't see him either.

Even though I was forced to use my imagination to picture how they were standing and interacting with each other, I could still hear their voices as clear as if I had been in the room standing right next to them:

“Are you absolutely sure about this, Abbey?” the man said. “Soon enough I – *we* – will be discovered and then there will be an immeasurable amount of trouble for the both of us. You well know that it is the farthest from any of my intentions to bring any sort of scandal upon you or your family.”

“It’s quite all right,” Auntie Abigail said with a casual air. “I’ve told you this a dozen times – you won’t be discovered. As long as I’m here, then you can stay, and as long as you stay, then you won’t be found. Now stop worrying about it before you give yourself an ulcer. Sit down and have some milk, then. You look as if somebody has sprayed you with a fire hose.”

“I can’t have milk, Abbey,” the man said in a feeble voice. “You know that.”

“Ah,” Auntie Abigail replied thoughtfully. “Ah yes. Of course...silly me. I apologise for my ignorance. You have been visiting for so long, you see, but I’ve never once offered any milk to you except for that first time, and to tell you the truth, I’ve forgotten all about that...I’ve gotten so used to you coming that I’ve forgotten all about your, erm, condition. This old mind isn’t as sharp as it used to be, you know.”

“Decay is never a good thing,” the man agreed. “I know that all too--” Suddenly he stopped talking at normal volume and whispered: “There’s somebody at the door. Oh, Abbey, I think they’ve found me!”

And right at that moment my body went rigid as fear froze my blood solid. I had been discovered spying on an illicit tryst! How would she, a woman who had veins bulging out the side of her head at the sight of smudge marks, handle the prospect of her niece – who was supposed to be asleep in bed – eavesdropping on a conversation that she

was having with her lover; a conversation that detailed their worries about the consequences of their scandal?

I had expected to hear the groan of Auntie Abigail's reading chair as she raised from it...I prepared myself to cringe at the rustling of her nightgown and the sounds of her huffing breaths as she shuffled angrily towards the door...But none of that had happened. Instead, Auntie Abigail breathed a tired sigh and said all-too-knowingly: "You hear somebody at the door, do you? Well, there is really no need for you to hide because it's just my niece."

There had been silence for a heartbeat.

"Come in here, Penelope," Auntie Abigail ordered, and I obeyed immediately, furiously racking my brains for the right words that could be stitched together into the right excuses that might possibly purchase me some of the smallest scraps of forgiveness. I approached Auntie Abigail with my head bowed and my eyes locked firmly onto the text resting facedown on her lap (*The Duchess of Malfi* it was) in an attempt to avoid her stern gaze.

"I would very much appreciate if I could see your eyes," Auntie Abigail said. I timidly raised my head so that I could see directly into her eyes, which, despite the age and crinkliness of the head that they rested in, were remarkably sharp and blue. My own eyes quickly darted back and forth across the room so that I might catch a glimpse of the mystery man, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"Don't be so dodgy," Auntie Abigail snapped. My eyes immediately focused back on her.

“Better,” she had said, leaning back in her great chair and crossing her arms. She sat there for a few moments, eyeing me in the same fashion that a cat might have eyed a trapped mouse. I remember that I kept looking at the sly smile played over her wide mouth, and at that moment the childhood fears of being devoured by her in one gulp suddenly didn’t seem quite as hilarious as they had been before. Prior to that night, I had never in my life encountered anybody who could make me feel so small and scared by barely even moving a muscle, let alone by saying not a word. Auntie Abigail changed all of that though, for as wordless and static as she was, I was still scared and cringing and desperately wishing that I was safe in bed, regardless of whether I had used the toilet or not.

Fortunately for me, Auntie Abigail must have been aware of her terrific powers, because the moment of intimidating scrutiny didn’t last as long as it could have. “What are you doing out of bed, Penelope?” she asked finally.

I said that I had been using the bathroom.

“Is the bathroom in front of my door?” Auntie Abigail then said, her face as straight and serious as it could be.

I had shaken my head no.

“I should hope not,” Auntie Abigail sighed. “Because while I have never been one to assume things, for the past number of years I have been entertaining myself with the belief that I was forever finished with *that* sort of cleaning.” She smiled. “You can laugh if you want to, Penelope – that was a joke.”

I did not laugh.

Auntie Abigail sat in silence for a beat more and then said: “Well?”

Well what?

“Aren’t you going to ask who he was?”

I assured her that I didn’t want to know.

“Of course you do,” Auntie Abigail said. “You’ve been asking ever since you walked into the room, but you’ve just been too shy to hear yourself.”

I hadn’t and I still don’t know what she had meant by that exactly, but she didn’t wait for me to respond. “He’s my brother-in-law,” Auntie Abigail said. “Timothy McPound.” I almost jumped at the name. “Yes,” said Auntie Abigail said with a knowing smile. “Dear brother Timothy McPound. He isn’t really my brother-in-law actually, but he was such a good friend to my husband that they practically were brothers. So it wouldn’t be too strange to call him my brother-in-law, would it, Penelope?”

No, I had said, it wouldn’t.

“Of course not. Right. Well, all of your snooping has paid off for the most part it seems, and there’s no point in waiting here for Timothy to show his face, because he doesn’t want to be seen by you, so he’s not going to come out of hiding. So hurry to the toilet and then off to bed immediately. Do I make myself clear?”

Crystal, I said.

“Excellent. Good night then.”

I left without a word, not even bothering to go to the toilet, but straight back to bed. I didn’t, I still don’t and I probably never will really figure out the exact nature of the game Auntie Abigail had been playing, but my best guess at it is that she had discovered the crumpled up poem (which I should have torn up and thrown away) that I

had so foolishly left on the table top and then had decided to scold me for writing such a despicable thing in her unique Auntie Abigail way.

I should think that's the last poem I am going to write in this house, if not ever again....And I will have to make an effort to find a much better hiding place for this journal, because thinking about the things that Auntie Abigail could use it for if discovered makes my stomach churn.

That's all for now I suppose.

Until next time,

-Penelope

1 August, 1940

Today I got another letter from Jonathan...but it's just more of the same – flying machines and lighting quick aerial maneuvers and a reminder of how exciting his life is and mine isn't. I don't much feel like writing today.

-Penelope

2 August, 1940

On Wednesday and Thursday night I barely slept at all because I was still very shaken up about my encounter with Auntie Abigail. I was expecting the following days with her to be filled with awkward unpleasant encounters, but while *I* was certainly feeling uncomfortable during the times that we were together, she seemed like her normal self...perhaps a bit more smug than usual. I think that any embarrassment or shame that

she might have felt at being discovered was superseded by the delight she had experienced from having gotten the chance to play such a clever trick on my then-groggy mind.

However, I find it interesting that during meal times, instead of remaining almost totally silent as she usually did when we ate together, she seemed eager to engage in conversation. At breakfast, she talked about the old unused wine cellar in the front yard that was now filled with junk and how it would be very useful in protecting us when the Germans began dropping bombs on the city. She said that it was a good thing that I spent some of my free time there (and I do because it's such a fine portal for imagination) for becoming acquainted with it now was good preparation for when we had to spend long nights hiding. I was only partially correspondent during this meal because I didn't like talking about bombs over London. She had told me earlier that week that RAF airfields on the island were being attacked already, and the thought of the Germans so close makes my stomach queasy. I suppose that I'm in a state of denial in thinking that the Germans won't come any closer to London than they already are, but it doesn't hurt to dream does it? And who knows? Maybe they might get driven away in the end.

The other reason that I spoke so little during breakfast was that I was still suspicious of Auntie Abigail's suddenly open mood, and harboured the belief that if I spoke too much or said the wrong words, then she would once again shut up like a clam, making sure to surround the ever-elusive pearl of friendliness with a thick coating of her signature brand of icy disapproval. Fortunately, this did not happen and after breakfast I helped her finish the morning cleaning, feeling not nearly as glum as I had been ever since mum had left for America.

When lunch came, Auntie Abigail surprised me by suggesting that we bring chairs and a table outside onto the front lawn so that we might eat in the afternoon sun. Of course, I was more than happy to oblige because there aren't enough sunny days in London and there wasn't enough of my getting fresh air, so we enjoyed a delightful little meal of salad and strawberry tart while the rays of the sun warmed our arms and faces. I was much more willing to accompany Auntie Abigail in conversation at this meal, and indeed this time our humorous natter of dad's inferior cricketing abilities flowed with the ease and smoothness of a silk ribbon.

After lunch, when my portion of the cleaning was done for the day and Auntie Abigail had vanished somewhere into the house to resume her ever-scrolling quest for perpetual neatness, I returned to my room and sat down at my desk with intent on giving the whole story-writing venture another crack. But as with the day before, as soon as the book was opened and the pen in my hand, the myriad of colourful ideas vanished to their usual dark hiding places. However, there was a slight improvement this time, even though I was only able to come up with one opening line, for it was longer than any of the others that I had concocted the day previous:

“There once was a man who lived on Perryhouse Pier and preferred the company of perfect strangers over conventional acquaintances...”

And that was it. My mind's eye wasn't quite as sightless as it had been the first time, because I at least had a setting. The scene was of a dreadfully dreary, rain-filled grey morning and a little shack standing at the end of a water-slicked pier...the

untamable waves relentlessly throwing themselves against the legs of the pier with such fury that one might think that they had actual intentions to wash it away.... Also, there was an out-of-place yellow light shining from within the shoddy wooden construction of the shack. THAT image was as bright and clear as if I were actually standing there on the pier getting doused with seawater and inhaling the salty smell of the crisp air. But it moved no further after that. I couldn't picture the man in his shack, nor could I picture what was at the base of the pier, for it just stretched on forever and ever. And the water before it was just water – no large oily ships belching out thick grey smoke and bleating their horns like over-sized goats, no sounds of sea birds mixed in with the constant looming howl of the wind...just water and nil else.

As soon as the book was closed, however, and the pen was set down like the sword of a defeated general, the ideas came rushing back into the centre stage of my head and I was able to paint such a vivid picture of the scene – one that was filled with even more fantastic things than those little details that I just described in the preceding paragraph. Maybe in my next attempt at writing a story, I will be able to allow myself the addition of characters...but come to think of it, if there are characters, then they probably won't have faces. And if, the time after that, they acquire faces, there won't be any words to fall from their lips. And then after that, the words that begin to fall from their lips won't have any purpose – they'll just be tangled knots of irrelevant nonsense....I have the worst feeling that this story writing endeavor is going to turn out to be a very long and tedious process although it gives me something to look forwards to everyday.

While afternoon tea was pleasantly filled with more light talk about how bad of a cricketer dad was, and how Jonathan had been unfortunate enough to inherit that particular trait from him, dinner that night was even more enjoyable than lunch and tea time put together because Auntie Abigail told me some stories about the supposed ghosts who walk through the house; how they chill the long stretches of corridor whether the sun is up or down and how most of the more timid ones only allow themselves to be seen when they think that nobody is watching. She talked first about Miranda Nickleby, who had lived in the house long ago and had accidentally gotten herself drowned in the upstairs bath when she had been only nine. Auntie Abigail said that years ago Miranda used to pop into the tub occasionally when she (Auntie Abigail) bathed in there, and they used to have delightful little chats.

But now nobody uses that bath anymore because of problems with the plumbing. Auntie Abigail said that once, while on a late-night cleaning binge, she spied Miranda sitting alone in the tub brushing her hair and looking extremely sad. Auntie Abigail said that she feels sorry for her, but also realises that Miranda needs to learn how to be alone because even though she is just a young girl, she's also, well, dead...and in death, according to Auntie Abigail, you're supposed to be alone. However, now that I know about little Miranda, I think that I am gong to have to visit that upstairs bath in the very near future, just to see if I can spot her myself.

Among the dozens of other ghost stories that Auntie Abigail told me that night, she also spoke about Tobias Nickleby, who would have been Miranda Nickleby's nephew. She said that when he had been alive he had been something of an accomplished pianist who favored playing pieces by Chopin and Liszt over anything else.

Since dying of throat cancer over half a century ago, Auntie Abigail said that now he just sits in the second floor music room at the piano, staring (liszt)lessly at the keys because he doesn't remember how to play anymore. I think that's terribly depressing, but at least explains (if it's true) why I always think that the second floor music room is such a sad place to be even when the curtains are drawn open and the sun is filling the room with light through its large windows.

Auntie Abigail filled my head with a good number of haunted tales that night, even long after dinner was over. Most other girls would be as white as snow and afraid to walk through the house by themselves anymore after such an evening, but I found these stories to be rather fascinating even though I'm not sure whether to believe them or not. Auntie Abigail has spoken about the houses ghosts before, but never in such depth...so in a way I feel privileged.

I still wonder what has brought about this change – what has made her so verbal and friendly? Surely it couldn't have been my bungled attempt at espionage...or could it? Perhaps Auntie Abigail was so accustomed to everybody obeying her every whim that when somebody challenged her (even though I hadn't meant to be discovered doing it) it was a breath of fresh air?

Well, I don't know. Years down the road, perhaps if the flower of this unexpected friendship continues its gradual path towards full bloom, I might just feel comfortable enough to voice my curiosity at the start of it all. But for now I think that I shall be content merely with sustaining it, because even though it was barely just a day ago that we did not converse as true comrades, I sit here and I reminisce...and only in retrospect can one really see the truth I think, because it's so much easier to see the

genuine nature of the Funnel of the Present when you're not INSIDE of the Funnel.... So as I sit here looking into the infantile past, I realise just how lonely I was during those first weeks in the house, even with Caitlin still around in London and my ability to leave the house grounds intact.... And while I may have believed myself to be satisfied with my then-current circumstance, I now know that such a feeling was really the spirit of loneliness in disguise – a mostly successful attempt by a force that wanted to deceive me into keeping its company.

I don't ever want to return to such a state again. After all, what if over time the numerous dreams of exotic lands and flying machines completely fill up the cavity carved into my body by loneliness, like a sort of misleadingly pleasant jam? What type of person should I become then, who lives completely in fantasy and can no longer function in the real world – whether in the dull streets of London, or if I should get the chance, in the steamy jungles of Africa? I should think that when the war is over, and when mum and dad and Jonathan are all together again, they would hardly recognise me!

In that case, if Auntie Abigail truly does become a companion of mine, then years from now, when I am confident enough to ask certain questions, I will also make a point to thank her.

Indeed.

That is all for tonight I think. Tomorrow is Saturday, so there won't really be as much work to do as on the weekdays, but I am hopeful that there will be just as much cheer and laughter as there has been today.

Farewell for now,

-Penelope

4 August, 1940

Isn't it ironic that on Friday I was gushing about how wonderful life actually is when it isn't overtaken by dreams, and then barely two days later my head is mercilessly filled with memories of a dream that seems even more authentic than real life? It certainly is an odd thing though, because I can usually never remember my dreams – not even mere seconds after I wake up, let alone hours after that. I suppose that my head is so full with dreams of the day that there simply isn't enough room to accommodate the recollections of those from the night.

With that said, even though it's right after lunch, I thought that I had better commit this dream down onto paper now, before it, in the fashion of the other fantastical ideas floating around in my head, tries to stuff its big fluffy self into an impossibly-deep cave. It was actually quite a simple dream though, but still very bizarre.

So here it is:

I was standing in a wide-open field, which was covered with grass that was as green as any that could be found in England, but unlike in England (or anywhere else in the real world) the sky above me wasn't blue. Instead, it was a mixture of four bright and vibrant colours that blended right into each other beautifully and created an image that was far superior to even the most glorious of sunsets that could be found in real life. A rich, deep purple the colour of a pansy violet was the top shade, and this blended right into a rosy red colour that reminded me of Auntie Abigail's rouge. Next was an orange that was ten times as more powerful than a real life sunset all by itself, and this colour bled into a yellow that was as rich as that of a sunflower.

A good number of metres before me stood a gigantic red cross that was so tall that it easily towered over any building in London...the funny thing about this cross though, is that I remember myself thinking that it was the same shade of red as St George's cross, and I remember thinking that that's what it should look like, but that dream cross and St. George's cross weren't similar in proportions at all. On this cross, all four bars were equal in length and it was a rather squat thing despite being so tall compared to me. I'm not sure why exactly, but I felt a great deal of discomfort about the shape.

Curling out from the foot of the cross was a wide red stream. It wound past me and stretched on forever into the horizon. I remember stooping curiously close to it so that I could examine the abnormal colour of the water, but then I realised that it wasn't water at all, instead a thick red paint that actually seemed to be melting off of the cross's face. I held my hand close to the fluid, and surprisingly the thick substance reacted to the close proximity of my presence by beginning to quiver like a bowl of jelly; the closer to it that I moved my hand, the more violent that the substance would shake.

I finally stopped with this experimentation after I noticed that there was a boat on the stream...I don't really know how I couldn't have realised before that a boat was coming towards me, since it was practically level with where I was standing at the time I noticed it, but that's the magic of dreams I suppose!

This boat wasn't an ocean liner or anything, but rather a small rickety rowboat. As it drew closer I could see that the wood of this vessel was splintered and worn, and in some places great chunks of it were missing altogether. Even though I was standing right there watching it drift towards me, I was astounded that the thing could even float. I

stepped closer for further inspection, but instantly retracted that step (and added several others away from the stream) when a man suddenly sat up straight in the boat.

He had come up with the snappish suddenness of a jack-in-the-box and he was still swaying from side to side a bit, yet always managing to keep his face turned towards me. He was very unusual in appearance, the most noticeable thing being that he didn't have a head. Well, actually he had a head but it wasn't a real HUMAN head – it was a small, upturned burlap sack, tied at the opening with a thick rope that sat between his shoulders and was meant to resemble a head. His face consisted of two large black eyes and an extremely wide, crooked smile that had been sloppily created by a of line black paint.

The rest of him was quite regular though – he seemed to have a normal torso and a pair of normal arms, which were dressed in a red and white-striped frock coat that was placed over a red vest and a white dress shirt, which in turn was adorned with a black bowtie. And on top of his burlap crown was a head of normal brown hair, which was, in a very normal fashion, neatly combed and parted down the middle.

Despite his very synthetic appearance, I knew from the moment that I had laid eyes on him that he was a living creature and not a puppet. It's very hard to explain just how I knew this, so I won't bother trying to present a proper rationalization...but I will say that just by the fact that it was MY dream, I could know certain things that didn't need to be told to me. For example, how did I know that the gigantic cross was the EXACT same red as St. George's cross, when in fact it was? I just knew – that's how.

And before the man raised his very-human hand in greeting, I knew that he was a living thing. And despite how downright peculiar he looked, I did not turn and run when

his boat beached right in front of me, nor did I flee when both of his hands clutched the edges of the boat so tightly that his knuckles began to turn white, and he began to lift himself from it. I think the fear that should have been present in my body had been long since washed away with waves of curiosity mixed with that unexplainable feeling of simply knowing that this man meant me no harm. I was very anxious to discover what this man would do and say (if he could even speak) and I was overridden with disappointment when at that moment the dream ended.

Well. I suppose that there's nothing more to say about this dream because nothing that happened in it beforehand gives any indication of what was to come.... And even if there had been hints, subtle or obvious, god knows that whatever was being hinted at would turn out to be exactly the opposite of anything that I can ever hope to expect while still in a conscious state of mind.

It would only be fair I think, if the story were to continue where it had left off as soon as I fall asleep tonight and begin to dream. But, remaining hopeful for such would be idiotic because I know better....And even if by some miracle, or by sheer will power this does happen...then I should expect to forget everything by the first two blinks of awakening.

So is the irony of life.

Very well. Good-bye for now,

-Penelope

11 August, 1940

Something most extraordinary has happened within the course of the past seven days – something that will give good reason for my weeklong absence. Unfortunately, I am so exceedingly exhausted from it all that I do not think this entry will show one shred of the excitement or enthusiasm that I felt...and I do wish that I could make this a short installment, because I am VERY eager to go to bed, but with the events that transpired, it cannot be anything but lengthy.

It was Sunday afternoon when all of this started, coincidentally right after I had completed the last entry, and an hour or two before four o'clock tea. Since Auntie Abigail doesn't do any cleaning on Sundays, I'm free to do with myself whatever I please. And since there are no longer any new books to read in the house or a story to write, I usually spend my Sundays alone in the cellar.

There's something very exciting and mysterious about being down amongst those old crates, stumbling and bumping around in the dim orange light that's given off by the single cellar lantern. Whether the sky is clear and blue outside, or grey and thick with clouds, the cellar is always the same dark place that is filled with just enough things that can provoke my imagination, but not to the point of complexity or clutter where the awareness of those objects and the real world begins to inhibit the fantasy.

Yes, yes – I know that a little bit more than a week ago I spoke of investing more time in the real world and with Auntie Abigail, but one day or two out of seven spent locked in a world of my own isn't going to hurt me is it? And besides that, Auntie Abigail likes to take long naps on Sundays – from lunch, all the way up to teatime, and

then from tea to dinner. Although she's never struck me as a religious woman, she still seems to take the "Day of Rest" thing rather seriously.

Anyway, so there I was on that overcast Sunday afternoon, no longer in an old cellar, but instead on the main deck of a Royal Navy submarine – the *HMS Wily* – totally encapsulated by the cold, black grip of the Atlantic's unforgiving depths. The night was cold and young above us, and my craft was stealthily approaching an unsuspecting German destroyer that was boldly ploughing through the quiet waves. An old pipe that I had found lying next to a box of cheese made for an exceptional periscope, and I used it to survey the enemy craft with a presumptuous satisfaction, the order to empty the torpedo bay balanced precariously from my bottom lip. The moment was far too delicious to rush – the hundreds of kraut crewmen who were fast asleep in their cots, or casually pacing the cold deck, surveying the surrounding ocean...it was the obliviousness of so many people that made my toes tingle.

I was just about to give the order to fire, but at that moment I was viciously yanked back into reality by the sound of a box falling to the ground behind me. The submarine deck and the German destroyer were barely a pinpoint in my mind's eye and I was eager to return to them...but at the same time, my curiosity had been awakened. I knew that I could not put all of my effort into the upcoming attack if I did not investigate what had fallen. I figured that it probably had been nothing more than maybe a stray cat in the cellar with me, but I had to know for sure.

I turned around and carefully made my way through the short towers of crates, making sure to sweep the floor thoroughly with my eyes. Auntie Abigail only cleaned the cellar and the attic of the house once a month, so I thought that might explain how an

animal could have stayed in there unnoticed. I remember thinking that I saw a flash of something vanish around the corner of one of the crates sitting perpendicular to the direction that I was walking, and I dropped down on all fours to follow it.

After scrabbling around for some time and finding nothing, I lifted my head from the floor and found myself face-to-face with the largest, most crooked smile that I had ever seen. It was quite an eerie thing to behold in that dark cellar, and I admit that I let out a little squeal of fright and quickly backed away as fast as my hands and knees would allow. My heart was pounding like an African tribal drum during the frenzied climax of a fireside ritual, and I ventured another quick look at the intruder to see if he had given chase, but he had not.

He remained right where I had discovered him and it was only after a good seven or eight seconds of intense staring that I realised who it was. I honestly thought that I had gone completely nutters at that point, but there standing in front of me, his body half hidden in darkness, was the man from my dream! Instantly the fear evaporated and I was cooled with relief. Indeed this was odd, but it was also an actual dream come true! How could anything possibly be better?

The man must have sensed my comfort because with a quiet squeaking noise, he slightly came out into the light where I could see him fully. When he was completely exposed, I saw what I had not seen of him in the boat, and also what was no doubt the cause of the squeaking: His legs may have been covered by white slacks that any other normal man would have worn, but below his ankles was anything but typical.

He was sitting on a shiny red unicycle you see, but he didn't have any feet and his ankles were actually made of metal and were attached onto the vehicle's pedals by a

tangle of wires and screws. He didn't rock back and forth in an attempt to balance himself, as it was with other unicyclists, but he instead stayed quite still, even leaning his body vaguely to the side like a true master as he looked at me.

Not feeling a tick of shyness myself, I asked him what his name was, but he did not answer. I then figured that since he was from my dreams, that it would only be logical if *I* were the one to give him a name. So I did. I wanted his name to be something exotic – African to be more specific. But I didn't know any real African names, so I called him "Ethan," which reminded me of "Ethiopia."

After I told Ethan what his name was, he did a most peculiar thing – he reached underneath the sack that made up his head, rummaged around, and once he withdrew his hand, it was holding a yellow scrap of paper. He offered it to me and I took it and looked at it. On the paper, scratched in red pencil (in very bad handwriting I might add) was: "Ethan."

"This must be how he talks!" I thought excitedly to myself. I nodded vigorously at him and said that his name was indeed Ethan, and I asked if he liked it.

Ethan produced another piece of paper, this one reading: "Yes."

After that, words came flowing out of my mouth nonstop. I told Ethan about everything – Auntie Abigail, Jonathan, mum and dad, the war, my story writing attempts – everything. It was so wonderful to have somebody to talk to at last besides Auntie Abigail, even though Auntie Abigail is getting better to talk to everyday. But I have been with her for so long that Ethan was a fresh breath of air. However, I wondered if perhaps I took to Ethan far too hastily.

I can imagine if Caitlin or any other girl at school were in my position, they would probably have run screaming from that cellar and would have demanded that it be torched. I'm not strange for NOT having a similar reaction am I? I don't think so, but if even technically I am, I know that I did the right thing because Ethan is simply delightful, even if he doesn't say much!

I must say anyhow, that this wouldn't be a complete fairy tale without some sort of problem, and there most definitely is one problem with Ethan, which just happens to be the reason why I have been so tired and unable to write anything recently. On that Sunday afternoon, I must have been talking to him for only about fifteen minutes or so, when he made a noise that sounded like a sneeze. I thought that I must have misheard because he doesn't have a nose (not even a drawn one!), but the noise came again and this time I was positive that it had been a sneeze.

I was about to tell him bless you, but before I could, I noticed that green rows of tiny plants had appeared in-between the wooden boards of some of the nearby crates...and there were little plants coming from the floor too! I opened my mouth to ask Ethan if he knew anything about this, but he sneezed again and when he did, the plants tripled in height and some of them even sprouted buds. He sneezed again and the plants grew larger with more flowers, and besides that, even more stems and vines that I hadn't seen before spiraled out from the darkness. He sneezed again and again and the plants grew larger and more beautiful.

However pretty it might have looked, I knew that Auntie Abigail would still throw a real fit if she came down to the cellar to clean on her appointed cellar-cleaning day and discovered a garden hiding in there. And then whatever friendship that we had

built up to that point would come crashing down around my ears because I knew that she would automatically know I had something to do with it, even if I managed to hide Ethan away.

So I climbed out of the cellar and crossed the front lawn to the garden shed where I gathered an assortment of snipping, shearing and hacking paraphernalia. I hurried back to the cellar where I set immediately to work. I hacked and cut and snipped and sawed like I was completely mental, but Ethan kept sneezing and the garden kept growing! It was only after inhaling a good bit of dust while bending close to a box that I realised how much of an idiot I had been. It was the DUST that was making him sneeze. “Of course!” I thought to myself. “How could I have missed that?”

I dropped the tools and ran into the house, stopped at the cleaning closet and grabbed a feather duster, a number of rags and filled myself a pail of water in the bath. Upon returning to the cellar, I set about cleaning everything, while at the same time trying to step around the mass of plants that was growing larger with each sneeze.

It took me until tea time Wednesday to completely clean every bit of dust from that cellar and to cut away all of the plants, all the while keeping up with my regular chores so that Auntie Abigail would not become suspicious. On that day, when it was all finished finally and I was about to leave for tea, Ethan (who had mimicked in helping with both the cleaning and the cutting) had handed me a piece of paper that said: “I do not understand.” I explained to him that if Auntie Abigail discovered that he was living down there, she probably wouldn’t have let him stay and that he would have to go somewhere else.

Then I left for tea and returned to the cellar to find that Ethan was missing. Desperate, I searched everywhere in the cellar and everywhere in the house, but it wasn't until I went up into the attic that I found him – surrounded by more dust than ever and sneezing up another garden. Now please realise that the attic of this house is gigantic, with three levels of shelves that stretch all the way up to the ceiling. There really isn't a way in the world that I am going to be able to clean it thoroughly. I decided then, that I would just have to settle with cutting everything everyday, which probably wouldn't turn out to be so bad if I kept on top of things because Ethan would be helping, and he didn't seem to sneeze as much when he was helping me cut.

...And that is what I've been doing all week. I've asked Ethan many times to move to a clearer location, but he always replies with a piece of paper that says: "I can't tell the secret if I move." I didn't know anything about a secret, but still I ask him to just tell me what it is right then and there, but then he says: "Secret is only spoken." So until I can figure out how to make him actually speak, I'll just have to keep cutting.

I'm going to bed now because I almost collapsed onto my desk three times since I started writing this entry.

Farewell for now,

-Penelope

17 August, 1940

More of the same...perhaps I shall write next week.

-Penelope

25 August, 1940

Bombs fell on London last night. They were too far away to be of much concern to us, but what if the Germans come for our area next? I used to think that the war was so far away from us and that we would never really see any of it, but now I am beginning to get scared. My dreams have materialized in the real world in the form of Ethan, but now I want the real world to disappear into a dream...or at least I want some parts of the real world to. How great would it be if I could take mum, dad, Jonathan, Auntie Abigail and Ethan – maybe even this entire house – into a world where there are no wars and people don't have to worry about bombs falling on them as they sleep?

I suppose that for one dream to come true in a lifetime is more than most people can ask for, so I have to resign myself to hoping for the best in the real world.... I guess that dreams and daydreams and adventures of the imagination seem a little bit silly now, when compared to what's actually happening. Auntie Abigail has never stopped saying that I should stop dreaming and start being more aware of what's going on around me. Perhaps I would be right in listening to her now.

I'm not sure I will be able to sleep tonight, or the next night after that, but I guess that I should go try.

Farewell for now,

-Penelope

3 September, 1940

Good news!

I got a letter from dad today! I'm excited, truly I am, but I haven't read it yet, believe it or not. There's a very good explanation for this actually. I was quite intent on reading it as soon as Auntie Abigail had handed me the envelope after lunch. I ran right up to the attic to show it to Ethan so that we might read it together, but I couldn't see where he was. I could hear the snipping sounds of his shears and the squeak of his wheel though, so I decided to let him work and read the letter myself first. I sat myself against a tall box, and I eagerly tore open the envelope and removed the actual letter, unfolding it and watching with great pleasure as the usual sand grains tumbled onto my lap.

Before tossing the envelope to the side, I took a good whiff of the inside and couldn't help but giggle at the smell – it was musky and warm and exotic, and reignited my dream of travelling to Africa after the war. I closed my eyes for a moment and once more my head was filled with the jungles and the people and animals that exist there...and that felt very good to experience again, but I think that I got so lost in it that I began to drift off, for my chin had started to dip towards my chest, so I quickly opened my eyes and began to read.

The letter started out like this:

My Dearest Pen-Pen,

I can never apologize enough for how little I have written you in these past few months...

I smiled at this, and re-read that line again, because I wanted to take my time and savor every single word of the letter – let them seep into my brain so much so that I could

actually picture dad writing them. However, every time that I re-read that first line, my eyelids drew closer and closer together. This was very frustrating because I had waited so long for a letter from dad and I wanted to read it, not sleep! I remember looking up and seeing Ethan, who had suddenly appeared, standing watching me and my eyes closed again. As soon as they had, there was suddenly a blue sky and a strong wind whipping at my cheeks. I forced my eyes open again and found myself back in the attic, but my time there lasted only a few seconds more because once again my lids drooped and the blue sky and the winds returned.

Note: this is really only the second dream in my entire life that I have ever remembered clearly, and I am happy to say that this one was twice as good and clear as the first. While in the first one, I was standing firmly on flat ground, at the beginning of this one I believed myself to be flying...but only for a breath of a second, because once I looked down at my feet I saw that while I was indeed kilometres and kilometres into the air (twice as high as any skyscraper and maybe half as high as a tall mountain) but I was still standing on something. It didn't take me long to figure out that I was perched on the bottom of a gigantic rosebud, which was turned upside down and hung suspended in the air, slowly rotating horizontally in an anti-clockwise direction, in a casual, yet graceful fashion that made me think that it was dancing to some sort of mystical waltz that unfortunately eluded my ears.

The petals of this rose weren't red, or pink, or white, but instead matched the same colour pattern of the sky from the first dream – a deep purple that bled into a dark pink, then to a glorious orange and finally to a bright yellow. There were dozens of these gigantic overturned roses floating through the air, each a good distance from each other

and at various heights from the ground, but every one of them dancing to its own personal waltz.

I didn't know how I was going to get down from where I was, because despite my altitude, I could see that there were buildings below me, but they were so far away that they looked like handfuls of white sand thrown carelessly onto a short-grass field. It would have been fantastic in this dream if I could jump off the springy petals and fly down, but I knew that I possessed no such ability.

So there I was – stranded and very frustrated at being suspended high above a potential adventure with no way of getting down to it. Suddenly I saw something shift beside me out of the corner of my eye and I actually wasn't too surprised when I turned my head to find Ethan standing there. Without a word he offered me his hand, and without any hesitation I took it, and we were off: he began to pedal his unicycle across the rose we were on, but not fast enough that I had to run to keep up – I didn't even have to walk very quickly.

Off the rose we went, falling through the air with him pedaling and steering our direction, and me gliding behind him, my hand still grasped firmly into his. We landed on the closest rose down...and then the next, and the next and the next until finally we touched the ground. We set down on a cobblestone street that was located in-between two rows of two-story shop buildings. People were milling about everywhere -- window-shopping or sitting at café tables talking, or simply strolling about. No matter what they were doing, everybody there seemed to be quite happy.

Ethan led me along, and as he did I noticed that a great many thick vines and flowers were growing along the sides of the street and around the faces of the shops and

were draped across the table tops. They reminded me of the garden in the attic, but only with much larger plants. It seemed that the entire town had been overgrown with them, but the people didn't seem to mind at all.

I didn't think anymore about the plants though, when Ethan brought me to one of the outdoor cafés. For sitting at one of the tables was my dad. He sat there sipping a cup of coffee, with his nose buried in a book – *Great Expectations*, which was his favourite. He was dressed in his brown military uniform, but didn't look exactly the same as I remembered him. I decided that it was his face, which used to have a good number of lines running across it, and the skin used to be tough and rough and pulled tight around the bone. But now it was smooth and soft like in the old photos of him that I had seen, and his cheeks were rosy with the colour of youth. I didn't understand -- I had always thought that war made people age, not grow younger!

But I didn't worry about that when his eyes lifted from the book and began to sparkle madly like dark gems when they found me. "Pen-Pen!" he cried happily. He made as if he was going to get up and hug me, but he seemed to think better of it and remained in his seat. The smile slowly faded from his face and he said: "What on earth are you doing here?"

I looked questioningly up at Ethan before I told dad that I had come to visit him, because I couldn't really think of any other reason to give as to why I had been brought down there.

The smile returned to dad's face. "Just visiting you say? So you're going to leave when you're all done, then?"

I said that I was, but I felt confused and a bit hurt that dad was hinting at my leaving so quickly. My face must have betrayed how I felt because dad hurriedly said: “Don’t take it the wrong way, love. I really am glad to see you, make no mistake about that, but you shouldn’t be here – you should be out in the real world, enjoying life and growing up. Staying here would be such a waste of time if you can still do so much out THERE.”

I asked why he was there then.

He just flashed me that sly smile of his that I had gone so long without seeing and said: “I suppose...I suppose that it’s the weather...yes I think that’s it. The weather. It’s a lot nicer here than in Ethiopia, you know. And not nearly as many pesky bugs.”

With the mention of Ethiopia, I remembered that I had so much to ask him and so much to tell him about. I let go of Ethan’s hand and pulled out a chair opposite from dad, but as soon as I did – poof – the dream ended and I found myself back in the dusty old attic; no more vegetation-entangled buildings, no more cobblestone street and most miserable of all, no more dad.

I was sad that the dream had ended so abruptly, especially since it had seemed so realistic, but I knew that it was just a dream, and it would have been silly to shed tears over something that was really nothing at all.

I’m going to read this letter of his now, and then tuck it between the back cover and the last page of the journal as I have already been doing with all the other letters that I have gotten. Then it’s off to bed.

Farewell for now,

-Penelope

8 September, 1940

Bombs rained over London again last night. I was woken up when Auntie Abigail yanked me out of bed and dragged me through the house, out the door and into the cellar. The house had been rattling as if it had been caught in an earthquake, and I was afraid that it was going to collapse on us. When we were outside running to the cellar, I could hear the planes overhead buzzing like a swarm of gigantic wasps. The wail of the air raid siren gave me a headache.

I expected a bomb to fall on us and blow us to pieces as we ran, but that did not happen. As we were cowering inside of the cellar, I worried about Ethan alone in the attic and I thought that when we emerged, we would find the house to be nothing more than a pile of rubble...but that did not happen either. Even though the dull thud of the bombs could be heard banging steadily throughout the night, our area of the city remained relatively untouched.

Still, afterwards when it was all over, I was so shaky and scared that that I could barely work in the attic today...I still am scared – terrified even. I'm going to go to bed now, but I doubt that I'm going to sleep. I think that I will only be able to lie in my bed, awaiting the bombs to begin falling and for Auntie Abigail to come get me again.

Farewell for now,

-Penelope

15 October, 1940

It has been over a month since I have written last, but my absence comes with good reason. Since the eighth of September, bombing raids have been happening over London every night. On most nights, Auntie Abigail and I are already safe in the cellar long before the raids start. I can never sleep on those nights, let alone write any entries because I am much too worried that a bombardier overhead will get extremely lucky and one of his bombs will fall through our cellar door. I either worry about that or the possibility that in the early hours of the morning, I will climb out of the cellar to find that the house has been reduced to ruins. Fortunately, that hasn't happened yet. I always think about Ethan while I am in the shelter, but lately I have been worrying about him less and less because I have a strong feeling in my heart that he will somehow be safe even if a bomb does destroy the house.

On other nights, I knock up Auntie Abigail to see if she is prepared to go out to the cellar, but when she answers the door and tells me to come in, I find her sitting in the big reading chair with her small round reading glasses halfway down her nose and an open Jonathan Webster playbook in her hands. The first time that I encountered this scene, I asked her why she wasn't preparing to go to the cellar and all that she said was: "No bomb will fall anywhere near this house tonight, dear. Go to sleep."

Of course, that first time I thought that she had gone completely mental and tried to persuade her to come with me, but she always replied with the same thing and stayed put. I went to the cellar myself that night and I sat there scared and shivering, waiting for the familiar heavy buzzing of the German planes to fly overhead and the steady beat of

the explosives to begin sounding like thunder.... But when the buzzing eventually came, it was very distant, along with the thunderous noises of the bombs.

In fact, as time went by, the noises sounded farther and farther away. Auntie Abigail had been right. Even after that night, though, it took me three more times to completely have faith in her predictions, but when I finally did, I could at last get a good night's sleep.

During the day, we don't clean as much as we used to, seeing as how we are both usually napping. I still go up to the attic to hack away at the garden every day, even though if a bomb hits the house, whether there's a garden up there or not won't really matter. I don't have to cut much anymore because Ethan is usually up there all night and all morning cutting. He says he does this because he notices how exhausted I have begun to look.

If I didn't have something important to say today, then I wouldn't be writing now – I would actually be in bed sleeping because Auntie Abigail has already announced that this will be no bombs for us on this night. But something exciting indeed has happened today, and if I wait until the bombings are over to write it, I might forget some things.

This afternoon, following tea, I went up to the attic as usual, but found that Ethan wasn't cutting anything. He was standing at the top of the attic stairs, apparently waiting for me to arrive. In his hand, he held a rose that's petals were painted in the same fashion of those in my dream with dad, and as soon as he saw me, he reached underneath his head and pulled out a scrap of paper. On it read: "I think I understand now." He then offered me the rose.

It was a very strange flower, that rose – it was larger than any I had ever seen and it acted in more of a curious fashion than any I had ever seen, for it seemed to be breathing. Its smooth petals heaved in and out slowly and slightly, and when I drew my nose closer to it, they almost seemed to stretch towards me. The smell of this plant was intoxicatingly strong, but it was also the greatest thing that I had ever smelled in my life. The only problem is that as much as I want to, I cannot describe the fragrance in any sort of detail for it smelled honestly like nothing else on the planet!

My head drew closer and closer to the rose in an attempt to breathe in as much of the aroma as I could. I bent so far down that I did a little summersault, and when I landed flat on my bottom, I was on one of the rose's very large petals. It felt like silk against my bare legs and it gave me a good sensation as I slid down it like a slide – spiraling deeper and deeper into the rose. All of a sudden the petal slide ended and I was standing on the edge of a flat gray rock, with clear blue water lapping at my feet. Ethan was standing beside me and the rose was still clutched in my hand.

I looked around and saw that I was standing in the middle of a small cove, and the sun was shining brightly above us. The air was pleasantly warm and a light breeze was ruffling my hair. I thought that perhaps this was another dream, because that could be the only explanation for suddenly being in paradise. I pinched myself on the arm, and numerous times I commanded myself to wake up, but there was no sudden re-emergence into reality, for I already WAS in reality.

“Hey, where'd you come from?”

I turned my head in the direction of the voice to find a skinny man (he was a boy really – no older than Jonathan) with water-tousled blond hair, treading the water and

looking up at me. A navy blue shirt and pants topped with a white sailor's cap sat crumpled up on the rock in front of him, and next to those were a shiny pair of black shoes.

"Are you supposed to be out here?" the boy asked. He sounded American.

"Where's your daddy?"

I replied automatically that my daddy was in Africa.

The boy looked a little puzzled at this. "Africa?" he repeated. "You British or somethin'? You sure sound like it."

I said that I was.

"Then what're you doin' in Hawaii?"

I said that I was visiting. Clearly the boy hadn't noticed Ethan, or else he would have been asking about him rather than me.

"So nobody you know works at the base?"

I shook my head. I didn't know what he was talking about.

The boy shrugged in the water. "Well, as long as you're supposed t'be here I guess...I know that *I'm* not supposed t'be." He smirked. "Well, uh, cheerio." And with that he began to backpedal towards the exit of the cove.

As soon as he had gone I looked up at Ethan and asked why I was in Hawaii. In response, he produced three scraps of paper. The first one said: "You're scared of the bombs," and the second one said: "Do you want to live here instead?" The third one read: "You must decide before the rose wilts." And I looked down at my hand and saw that indeed the petals were slowly turning brown and curling.

I asked Ethan if the Germans were going to drop bombs on this place too and he said that they weren't. The rose was becoming browner and smaller, and I was on the verge of accepting Ethan's offer to live there in Hawaii...it was a no-brainer really – the weather was nice, there was opportunity for adventure and most importantly no bombs were being dropped. If I stayed, I could probably write to mum and dad and Jonathan and tell them where to find me once the war was over, but that just left Auntie Abigail, who would still be in miserable old London. If I had decided to remain there, the poor old woman would have to clean the house by herself and hide in the cellar by herself and would probably worry herself sick over the fact that I had run away to Hawaii.

I asked Ethan if Auntie Abigail could come stay with me, but he said: "No. Only you." Petals were beginning to drop from the rose, so I quickly told Ethan that I would not want to stay there. As soon as I said this, he grabbed my hand and suddenly we were no longer outdoors in Hawaii, but instead inside of a building sitting at a broad wooden table...or at least I was sitting. Ethan stood beside me, and the rose was still in my hand, back to its normal healthy form for a bit, but then slowly began to wilt again.

I looked around and saw that I was in a library of some sort, and it was very cool and dark in there. Men in black robes sat around at tables, hunched over books. I only figured out that I was in a monastery and that the men were monks when a friendly-looking old monk approached me and said something in what I think was Italian. I don't know Italian, but I am fairly sure that I heard him say something about a casino a number of times, which couldn't be right because I don't think that a casino would ever be in a monastery.

All I could do was smile at the monk, and he smiled warmly back and then went away. Ethan asked if I wanted to live there, and I asked him the same question as before – if I could bring Auntie Abigail with me. His answer was no. So was mine. Immediately he grabbed my hand and we were no longer in the monastery but instead surrounded by a forest of dark-green hanging plants. I was standing on a large smooth rock that was one of many smooth rocks in the middle of a bubbling brook. The air was a bit crisp, but it smelled so clean that I didn't care.

I asked where we were and Ethan said that we were in Tokyo. I was quite perturbed by this, and I told Ethan that we could not stay there because the Japanese were our enemies too! But with one piece of paper he said: "They will treat you well." And another said: "I will make sure of it." And finally a third said: "Will you stay here?"

My request was still the same though, but so was his answer to that and in turn mine to his offer. He took my hand again and we returned to the attic of Auntie Abigail's house, and Ethan took the rose from my hand and pulled out a scrap of paper that read: "I will be able to speak tomorrow."

I excitedly asked him if that meant he would tell me his secret, and he said that he would. He said that as soon as the clock struck twelve midnight, I could come visit him in the cellar where I had first found him, and that he would tell me his secret...or I could wait until I got up in the morning and go to see him then.

So there it is. Tomorrow Ethan will tell me his secret and he'll never have to return to the dusty attic again, but we're going to have to cut up the garden one more time as I told him to stop cutting it before I left. Because while I still have the chance, I want to see what it would look like if it is allowed to grow overnight. But after that final cut,

there will be no more and it should be a thrill to be able to talk to him without working at the same time. Perhaps we can play chess.

Oh yes! I almost forgot to mention that I was able to start a story today – right after Ethan and I came back from our travels. I wrote three-and-a-half pages and I can't wait to work on it tomorrow. I think that I'll begin writing ideas for it in my entries from now on.

But now I am very tired, and I would like to get some sleep.

Farewell for now,

-Penelope

Tobias flipped a few more pages past the final words of the October 15th entry hoping to find something else, but all of those sheets were blank. He gently closed the book and stared hard into the gray rubble that had been Auntie Abigail's aged mansion. He wondered what Penelope had looked like in life, and what she might have looked like in death. Had they bothered to pull her body from the ruins, or hadn't there been enough left of her to do so? How could it be that Auntie Abigail had been so right with her premonitions on previous nights, but wrong on the final night?

Tobias's grip on the journal book tightened as he thought about how there could be hundreds of children like Penelope out there, in many different countries still getting blasted to pieces by young men who without question functioned as gears in the ever-turning war machine, but were so fatigued and scared and homesick that the harsh reality of their actions could not currently be realized. They were in the "Funnel of the Present" as Penelope would have put it. But now, how was Tobias ever going to be able to return to the air and aid those bombers in killing innocent people when he had read something like this?

"It's a real shame that one is."

Startled, Tobias turned to find that a red-faced old man, clothed in a brown jacket and cap was standing next to him, surveying the ruins of the mansion with a bicycle leaning against his hip. He shook his head. "A real shame indeed."

"Did you know them?" Tobias asked, slipping the book within his jacket.

"I know who she *was*," the man said. "But I didn't know 'er personally... But then, everybody knows who Abigail Nickleby was. Nickleby used to be a big name around here."

“Ah.”

“That Abigail was an odd one,” the man continued. “Probably became even stranger when her husband died, but nobody can know for sure because she turned into something of a recluse then. Hardly left the house ever. What I want to know is how she was able to get any food in there once she dismissed all the servants... I suppose it’s only proper that it be her final resting place though.”

Tobias sniffed. “It’s better to die asleep in your bed instead of getting gunned down in the streets I say. But then again, the best thing would be not dying at all, wouldn’t it?”

“I’ll drink to that, mate.”

They stared in silence at the rubble for a few moments more.

“You know it wasn’t bombs that did ‘em in,” the man suddenly said.

Tobias raised an eyebrow. “Strafing?”

The man shook his head. “Spitfire.”

“Spitfire?” Tobias repeated, “but that’s—“

“One of our own planes, aye,” the man finished. “That’s why it’s such a shame. It came hurtling down from the sky like a bloody comet and blew that house to red smoke. Most unfortunate and ironic I think.”

Tobias’ throat had become extremely dry and he whispered: “She was right after all.”

“What’s that, mate?”

“Oh, uh, nothing,” Tobias said quickly. “You’re right – it is very ironic that happened.”

“Aye,” said the man with a heavy sigh. “So is the irony of life.”

Tobias resumed combat three days later and finished the war without another scratch. He returned home to Connecticut and when his mother opened their apartment door after his knocking, the only thing that he could say was: “Hey, ma. The war’s over.” And that was the first time the he had ever seen his mother cry. He cried too, not only from finally being able to see his mother and hug her after all those years, but also because he couldn’t help thinking about Penelope Plum – whose journal he still carried – and all of the millions of other innocents who had died in the war.

After a few months spent at home, Tobias traveled back to England, where he pursued his graduate studies at Cambridge. Upon finishing his studies, he returned to America where he eventually got married and remained in Connecticut and in close contact with his mother until she died in 1965.

During all those years since 1945, Tobias had periodically read Penelope’s journal at least once every couple of months. And every time he read it, it had been as enjoyable as the first. He would have been content with just doing that for the rest of his life, but on one cold January evening in 1968, when he had just finished a reading of the journal, he realized something that he hadn’t realized before.

It was on the final page of the final entry in the paragraph that went:

“I excitedly asked him if that meant he would tell me his secret, and he sad that he would. He said that as soon as the clock struck twelve midnight, I could come visit him

in the cellar where I had first found him, and that he would tell me his secret...or I could wait until I got up in the morning and go to see him then.”

At first Tobias tried to blot out the idea that was forming in his head because he didn't want to embark on a wild goose chase, but his efforts proved to be in vain. He read the paragraph again and wondered if perhaps Penelope had decided to go visit Ethan in the cellar on that October night, and had learned his secret then, instead of waiting for daybreak. If she had, then there was a chance that she still could be alive.

Over the following days, Tobias became obsessed with the idea and decided that instead of wasting time looking for a girl who might be dead, he would look for the other members of her family, starting with her brother, because veteran societies would make it a whole lot easier to locate him. He wrote to every RAF veteran society that he could find, and very soon learned that Jonathan Plum was alive and well and living in West London. Tobias wrote a detailed letter to him, explaining that he had his sister's journal and wanted to know if Penelope was still alive so that he might send it to her.

Jonathan Plum wrote back and said that he didn't know whether his sister was alive or dead because they had never been able to find her body in the wreckage (it was presumed that she was dead), but nevertheless wanted Tobias to England for a visit. Tobias accepted the offer, but not before first copying down Penelope's journal, word for word into a notebook. As soon as he arrived in London and had stepped foot inside of Jonathan's house he saw what could only be her – forever preserved in a small black and white photograph sitting on the fireplace mantle.

She was a very pretty girl, with neck-length dark hair, tied into pigtails and topped with a bow, and a soft face that was broken apart by a wide smile that showed off two slightly buck front teeth. There were also photographs of the entire family scattered about – the mother and father, and other relatives, but none of Auntie Abigail as far as Tobias could see.

Jonathan looked almost identical to his father and he greeted Tobias warmly. They exchanged pleasantries and sat down for a cup of tea, during which they talked about their respective exploits during the war. After a while, Tobias pulled out the journal from his backpack and put it on the table. “I think this belongs to you,” he said as he slid it towards Jonathan.

Jonathan took the journal and flipped through it and when he found the letters in the back, tears came to his eyes. “Not one from mum,” he said sadly. “You know, I haven’t talked to her since the war has ended. She’s living somewhere in America I believe, and I don’t think that she had been planning to return to England even if I hadn’t been the only one of our family left.”

Tobias cleared his throat and shifted in his seat uncomfortably. “You mean your father is...?”

“Dead,” Jonathan said, nodding his head. “Got it in Africa in ’40. From what I’ve been told, he and a couple other chaps were crouched behind a tank for cover during a frontal attack, and they had just taken about five steps before the thing ran over a mine and blew! Took all of them out in a wink so they say.”

“That’s very...ironic,” Tobias said quietly.

“Painfully ironic,” Jonathan agreed. “And I almost died in an explosion myself, wouldn’t you know.”

“You did?”

Jonathan nodded. “Over London actually. I believe it was the fifteenth of October.... Yes, now that I think about it, I’m positive that it was the fifteenth. Like a lot of us back then, I was still fresh from flight training, but regardless had been thrown up into the sky to square off against experienced airmen who had been flying since the 30’s. I had been strafing one of those blasted 111’s that the jerries had favored using so much over Britain, and the turret gunner had gotten lucky and ripped my underbelly wide open. I don’t know how I did it, but I managed to bail out of the cockpit only a few seconds before the plane exploded and streaked towards the city like a bloody comet.”

He gave a little smile then, and Tobias noticed how much he looked like his sister, having the same slightly buck front teeth. “Wouldn’t that have been a sick little coincidence for the son to go in the same fashion as his father?”

Tobias nodded, suddenly not feeling very well. “So is the irony of life,” he said.