

Tomorrow's Tomorrow

Jane sniffed the air. Shading her eyes from the implacable sun she peered through the haze to the field where browned wheat stirred. Yes, she thought, a change is coming.

'Come on, Ella,' she said to the small, brown-haired girl who squatted on the porch. 'Let's go and see the animals.'

'Ooh yes, Grandma!' cried Ella, jumping up.

'Wait,' Jane added, stooping, 'let's roll down your sleeves. What would Mummy say if we got you sunburned? Now, what else do you need?'

'My parasol!' cried Ella. It was dusty, it was faded, and she'd had it since she was three, but it was still Ella's pride and joy. A flicker of youth crossed Jane's face. She could see her daughter in Ella, and that was good.

As they set off across the sun-browned meadow she felt like she was back in Spain or the Americas. It was hot enough. They passed the floodpond where the water collected when the hard rains came. Right now the level was low, and Jane hoped she was right about the weather. She squinted up at the western sky. Of course, she could remember a time when floodponds weren't needed, when the rain came steadily through the year. A time when everything was easier. She grimaced and strode on. It didn't do to dwell on the past.

Ella's feet pattered along beside her grandma's. 'I like having you here, Granny,' she said from under the parasol.

'I like being here,' said Jane. 'It was kind of your mummy to take me in.'

'I wish Grandad could have come.'

'Yes, well, Grandad died,' Jane said. 'That's why I'm here.' And, she could have added, because nowadays the town's no place for a woman to be old and lonely.

'Where's Mummy gone?' Ella asked, as Jane held a gate open for her.

'She's gone to do some work,' said Jane. 'Up near Burford.'

'Where's that?'

'As far as she can walk in a day, dear.'

'Phew!' said Ella, with decision. 'That's a long way.'

They came to the pigsty. 'Hello Derek!' cried Ella, reaching through the fence to rub behind the pig's ear. She thought for a minute then said, 'What's Mummy doing in Bear-ford?'

'She's helping to make hay,' answered Jane. She hoisted the pail and tipped some feed into the trough, so that Derek lost interest in the ear-scratching. 'Then,' she went on, 'when your mummy wants to feed her goats and pigs, that farmer will give her some of the hay. So they're helping each other. Isn't that nice?' She mopped her brow. At least I'm outdoors, she told herself, and not drowning in a pool of sweat in the old flat. That's the best way to think about it.

Next they fed the goats before turning back towards the farmhouse, Jane easing out her shoulders as they went. There was definite motion in the wheatfield now. She'd get the turbine going after dinner.

'Of course,' she told Ella, 'we used money for everything when your mummy was little.'

'Everything?' said Ella.

'Pretty much. We used it to get paid, and to pay people. We still helped each other, though. Sort of . . .'

Ella stopped. 'But Daddy gets money,' she said, her voice quivering, 'and he hurts his face!'

They'd reached the porch. Jane pulled off her headscarf and eased herself into a wicker chair. 'No, dear,' she said. 'It wasn't the money that hurt his face. It was bad people. Daddy took some goats to market and sold them for money. But the bad people wanted his money and took it off him. They fought, and he got hurt.'

Now Ella's lip was trembling. 'But Daddy's gone to sell goats today!'

Jane sighed again. 'Yes, but this time, as soon as soon as he's sold the goats he'll get away from the nasty town before ever those bad people can find him. See? Then he'll be back safe on Thursday.'

Ella pulled a face. 'Tuesday is Today,' she said.

'Very good, dear.'

'Weddingsday is tomorrow.'

'That's right.'

'So Thursday,' said Ella solemnly, 'is tomorrow's tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow's tomorrow,' said Jane, looking into the sky. 'Yes, dear. Now, come on inside. We'll make some dinner.'

As always, dinner was simple: today, boiled eggs and buttered toast, with rosehip tea. While Ella ate quietly, Jane remembered noisy children in noisy cafes. Cafes where you could get paninis – Ismael always had tomato and mozzarella – and pecan brownies, and caffe lattes. She thought of the supermarkets, with their chickpeas and their mung beans and tuna steaks, and their grappa, and sake. In those days they had no thought for tomorrow, let alone tomorrow's tomorrow . . .

The wind came, the turbine turned; that evening they had power for the first time in a fortnight. Even though the summer dusk was still to fall, Jane had set a few e-lamps glowing.

'Grandma,' said Ella, a rime of milk on her upper lip, 'please can I see pictures of Grandad? Like you showed before?'

'Hmm,' said Jane. 'All right then. Just a few, while you drink your milk. It's a good job we've got electricity tonight, because I can use my old laptop. Let's see.'

Once the laptop had managed to boot up, Jane found a picture of a grinning couple in legionnaires' hats and sunglasses, with backpacks and stout boots. Behind the couple were stone ruins with wisps of cloud and deep valleys beyond.

'Is that grandad?' asked Ella, pointing. 'Who's that lady?'

Jane was blinking already. 'That's me,' she said. 'I was a lot younger then.'

'You're very smooth,' said Ella. 'Was grandad very smooth?'

Jane swallowed. 'Oh, yes, love. His skin was smooth like–' she sniffed '–like honey.'

But Ella was hurrying on. 'What's that pointy thing?'

'It's the top of a mountain,' said Jane, straightening her back. 'This is a place where people lived, a long time ago, high up in the mountains. It's called Machu Picchu, and it's thousands of miles away.'

'Is that further than Mummy can walk in a day?'

'*Much* further. Grandad and I had to go in an aeroplane, like you sometimes see in the sky. Now, you see this one?'

'That's you again, and grandad. You're by the seaside.'

'Yes, it's Icaria. We used to go there a lot.'

'Can I go there?'

'Oh, I'm afraid not, dear. It's a long way away.'

Ella pouted. 'But I *like* the beach.'

It had been a long day for Ella, and she'd had been very good; but still Jane ploughed on. 'This one's in Spain, dear,' she said. 'Grandad was born just near this beach. In those days we'd fly there. Not many people fly now. And the beach – well, it's gone. The sea got higher, and it's all under the waves.'

'But the fishes can use it? And the crabs?'

'And here are Grandad and me at the airport.'

'Is that an airpalane?'

'Yes. Very good, dear.'

'Were you being wicked?' asked Ella.

Jane frowned. 'What?'

'Mummy says airpalanes were wicked.'

Jane put a hand to her eyes. 'No,' she said. 'Ismael would never do anything wicked.' She shook her head. 'We didn't know, dear. We've almost stopped doing it now, but in those days people would think nothing of going anywhere in the world, for work, to see people, have holidays. But it was like motor cars. We had to stop, because we were killing the planet.'

'You mean like when Mummy's sunflowers got killed by the ants?'

Jane slumped her shoulders. Where was this going? 'Sunflowers?' she said.

'Yes, they're palanets.'

'Oh! No,' she said, 'they're *plants*. The *planet* is the earth. This place we live on. The World. Where all the countries are, and all the faraway places, and Mummy and Daddy and you and me.'

'Is it dying?'

'Yes,' snapped Jane, 'and it's all our fault. We've stopped a lot of the bad things now, but the earth is poorly. It's too late. That's why Grandad's beach went under the sea, and why we mustn't fly any more.' She stood, and clapped the laptop shut. 'Now, come on, time for bed! Don't ask any more silly questions.'

The washing-up done, Jane went out to padlock the gates. The sun had sulked below the horizon at last, and clouds were coming up in the west. There would be rain tonight, she was sure. Again she sighed. She'd tried not to miss Ismael; but tonight, as she'd looked at those pictures, she'd almost felt his breath on her ear again. She ran her finger down her nape, the way he used to.

Back indoors she took the last e-lamp and hauled herself up the stairs. As she reached the landing she heard a sniff. She pushed Ella's door open.

'Ella?' she said, holding the lamp high. Under the mosquito net, Ella was sobbing. 'Oh, what's the matter, love?' said Jane, putting the lamp on the sideboard. Crouching, she pulled up one side of the net and wriggled herself under it.

'I don't want the palanet to die,' sobbed Ella. 'I don't want Mummy and Daddy to die!'

'Oh, dear,' said Jane, hugging her as best she could under the net. 'You poor thing. I'm so sorry!' *Nice job*, she told herself. *Your first night in charge and you've made her cry already*. 'Ella dear,' she went on, 'you mustn't take too much notice of Granny. I'm sorry. I'm just a sad, tired old lady.'

'I'm never going in an airpalane,' said Ella, sniffing.

Jane produced a handkerchief and dabbed Ella's cheeks. 'No, dear.'

'I don't want everyone to die.'

Jane felt the tears standing in her own eyes. 'No, love,' she said firmly. 'We won't. For as long as we've got people like you, dear. For as long as we've got each other.'

'Can we stay alive then?'

'Oh yes, dear,' said Jane, holding her close, 'yes.'

'And can there still be beaches?'

'If we're very careful, dear. And all our tomorrows will have tomorrows.'

And she kissed Ella's cheek, and felt her own tears on her lips.