



I was near by anyway, so I had every excuse to do it, to ignore the old adage and do something I'd been thinking of doing for many years. "Never go back. Never go back." Those warning words kept repeating themselves in my head as I turned right at the crossroads outside Tillingham and began to walk the few miles along the road back to my childhood home in Bradwell, a place I'd last seen nearly fifty years before. I'd thought of it since, and often. I'd been there in my dreams, seen it so clearly in my mind, but of course I had always remembered it as it had been then.

Fifty years would have changed things a great deal, I knew that. But that was part of the reason for my going back that day, to discover how intact was the landscape of my memories.

I wondered if any of the people I had known then might still be there; the three Stebbing sisters perhaps, who lived together in the big house with honeysuckle over the porch, very proper people so Mother always wanted me to be on my best behaviour. It was no more than a stone's throw from the sea and there always seemed to be a gull perched on their chimney pot. I remembered how I'd fallen ignominiously into their goldfish pond and had to be dragged out and dried off by the stove in the kitchen with everyone looking askance at me, and my mother so ashamed. Would I meet Bennie, the village thug who had knocked me off my bike once because I stupidly wouldn't let him

have one of my precious lemon sherbets? Would he still be living there? Would we recognize one another if we met?

The whole silly confrontation came back to me as I walked. If I'd had the wit to surrender just one lemon sherbet he probably wouldn't have pushed me, and I wouldn't have fallen into a bramble hedge and had to sit there humiliated and helpless as he collected up my entire bagful of scattered lemon sherbets, shook them triumphantly in my face, and then swaggered off with his cronies, all of them scoffing at me, and scoffing my sweets too. I touched my cheek then as I remembered the huge thorn I had found sticking into it, the point protruding inside my mouth. I could almost feel it again with my tongue, taste the blood. A lot would never have happened if I'd handed over a lemon sherbet that day.







That was when I thought of Mrs Pettigrew and her railway carriage and her dogs and her donkey, and the whole extraordinary story came flooding back crisp and clear, every detail of it, from the moment she found me sitting in the ditch holding my bleeding face and crying my heart out.

She helped me up onto my feet. She would take me to her home. “It isn’t far,” she said. “I call it Dusit. It is a Thai word which means ‘halfway to heaven’.” She had been a nurse in Thailand, she said, a long time ago when she was younger. She’d soon have that nasty thorn out. She’d soon stop it hurting. And she did.

The more I walked the more vivid it all became: the people, the faces, the whole life of the place where I’d grown up. Everyone in Bradwell seemed to me to have had a very particular character and reputation,

unsurprising in a small village, I suppose: Colonel Burton with his clipped white moustache, who had a wife called Valerie, if I remembered right, with black pencilled eyebrows that gave her the look of someone permanently outraged – which she usually was. Neither the colonel nor his wife was to be argued with. They ruled the roost. They would shout at you if you dropped sweet papers in the village street or rode your bike on the pavement.

Mrs Parsons, whose voice chimed like the bell in her shop when you opened the door, liked to talk a lot. She was a gossip, Mother said, but she was always very kind. She would often drop an extra lemon sherbet into your paper bag after she had poured your quarter pound from the big glass jar on the counter. I had once thought of stealing that jar, of snatching it and running off out of the shop, making my getaway like a bank

robber in the films. But I knew the police would come after me in their shiny black cars with their bells ringing, and then I'd have to go to prison and Mother would be cross. So I never did steal Mrs Parsons' lemon sherbet jar.



Then there was Mad Jack, as we called him, who clipped hedges and dug ditches and swept the village street. We'd often see him sitting on the churchyard wall by the mounting block eating his lunch. He'd be humming and swinging his legs. Mother said he'd been fine before he went off to the war, but he'd come back with some shrapnel from a shell in his head and never



been right since, and we shouldn't call him Mad Jack, but we did. I'm ashamed to say we baited him sometimes too, perching alongside him on the wall, mimicking his humming and swinging our legs in time with his.

But Mrs Pettigrew remained a mystery to everyone. This was partly because she lived some distance from the village and was inclined to keep herself to herself. She only came into the village to go to church on Sundays, and then she'd sit at the back, always on her own. I used to sing in the church choir, mostly because Mother made me, but I did like dressing up in the black cassock and white surplice and we did have a choir outing once a year to the cinema in Southminster – that's where I first saw *Snow White* and *Bambi* and *Reach for the Sky*. I liked swinging the incense too, and sometimes I got to carry the cross, which made me feel very holy and very important.