

The Truth Club

Grace Wynne-Jones

Chapter One

SOMETHING WEIRD HAPPENED YESTERDAY when I was talking to my sister April on the phone. She said, ‘I wonder what happened to Great-Aunt DeeDee.’

I said, ‘I thought she was dead.’

‘Oh, no,’ April replied. ‘She went missing. Just left home, when she was in her early twenties, and told no one where she was going. No one’s heard from her since.’ Then April added something that was entirely typical of her. She said, ‘You *know* that, Sally. For God’s sake, where have you been for the last thirty-five years?’ She was asking where I’ve been all my life, since I am thirty-five, though I’m often told I look younger. That’s one of the things I cling to – that people say I look younger. I don’t see it myself. When I look in the mirror I see honey-coloured hair, brown eyes, highish cheekbones, and wrinkles and crow’s-feet and grey hairs.

‘Of course I’ve *heard* of DeeDee,’ I said. ‘But only a few times. Nobody ever seems to talk about her.’

‘Well, they wouldn’t, would they?’ April said. ‘After what she did.’

‘What did she do?’

‘I don’t know, but I get the impression people are really pissed off with her.’

‘How do you know all this?’ I demanded. I’m the one who is supposed to be privy to the family secrets.

‘I’ve known it for *years*,’ April replied, without going into detail. ‘Look, could you tell Aunt Marie I can’t get to her big do? I can’t believe she expects me to fly over from California for a finger buffet. I have my own life.’

She knew, of course, that I wasn’t going to say this verbatim to Aunt Marie. She knew I would find a way to be more tactful. Aunt Marie, who is my mother’s sister, feels she needs to corral family members every few years and frog-march them into some sort of intimacy. Somehow we all fit into Aunt

Marie's front room, though it's quite a squeeze. I usually end up saying, 'Oh, really? How interesting!' to the various younger relatives who are involved in important-sounding courses. I seem to come from a family that has a great involvement in further education. Then, of course, there are the ones who are methodically working their way up the Civil Service; they sound impressive too, especially the ones who have to make regular trips to Brussels. And there's a cluster of lovely bright young women who have married nice decent men and are having children or expecting them, and are teachers or social workers or aromatherapists.

I'd absorb more of what they were telling me if I weren't so fixated on trying to make a good impression myself. In some ways these gatherings feel like school reunions, at which we check up on one another and measure one another's achievements. But in another way they are nothing like school reunions, which are softened by genuine affection and curiosity and giggles about daft things in the past. Many of the people in Aunt Marie's front room are almost strangers. It says a lot for the force of her character that we show up at all. We are not the sort of large extended family that gathers for the fun of it. It's not that we don't like each other; it's just that we have other things to do, and other people to do them with.

I am beginning to dread Marie's next big get-together, because my separation from Diarmuid is bound to crop up in conversations, and there is no way I can make that sound impressive. At the last gathering I had just met him, and my parents must have mentioned it to someone, because suddenly the room was buzzing with the news that 'Sally has found a man!' Naturally I had found men before, but people had never got quite so excited about it. I suppose it was because I was over thirty and they felt I had better get a move on in the marriage stakes.

They were, of course, thrilled when I walked down the aisle. They gave me things like alarm clocks that make tea, and hostess trolleys, which are all now carefully stored in the smart suburban house that Diarmuid and I bought together and

where he still lives. The main thing I seem to have gained from my marriage is a very comfortable orange sofa that's too big for my small sitting-room. I enjoy lying on it when I watch TV.

My phone conversation with my sister ended when she said she had to go to a meeting. April was ringing from an office in San Francisco. She is twenty-four and she has started to look Californian – I know this from the very occasional photos she sends our parents; she hasn't come back to Ireland since she left three years ago. Her hair is sun-bleached blonde, her skin is golden-brown and her small snub nose looks cuter than ever. Her smile still has that steely, determined look to it, but her teeth are whiter. She has also acquired that wiry, lean look people get when they jog regularly and visit the gym and do Pilates. I have, naturally, not told her that I force myself to get exercise by occasionally walking an imaginary dog called Felix along a nearby beach. She is an important person in real estate, or it could be banking; it's hard to keep track of her career. Not too long ago she was involved in the vacation industry. April is a young hotshot manager, so her skills are easily transferable.

I, on the other hand, am a freelance journalist who has somehow ended up specialising in interior decoration and pets, with the occasional article on refugees and other worthy social issues. Since my separation, I also sometimes interview people who write self-help books and grill them on the secrets of a contented marriage. I make a kind of living from it, but freelance journalists aren't that well paid; and the big thrill of seeing my name in the paper above articles about bathroom tiling has, to tell the truth, sort of waned. Another thing is that loads of people want to be freelance journalists, because it's supposed to be so interesting, so you can't afford to be too bolshie with editors, because there's a horde of young eager beavers who would be more than willing to replace you. In an ideal world, April would regularly say, 'Oh, I wish my job was as interesting as yours,' but she doesn't. She has her own lovely sea-view condominium, a sports car and loads of handsome men taking her out for sushi. She is happy – and I keep feeling

she shouldn't be, because she never seems to want to talk about anything that really matters. Come to think of it, my parents are rather like that too.

The conversation about DeeDee was typical. Even though April said she wondered what happened to DeeDee, she didn't really want to go into details, ponder who DeeDee was and why she left; according to her, things are as they are, and it's pointless analysing them. Sometimes I envy her blithe indifference, but most of the time it just makes me feel lonely, so it's just as well I hardly ever talk to her. If you start talking about feelings to April, she always finds a way to make you feel foolish. When I tried to talk to her about the break-up of my marriage, for example, she said, 'Oh, well, these things happen sometimes. You'll find someone else. Go and have a facial. That always cheers me up.' I think she was trying to be kind.

DeeDee has been popping into my mind ever since my conversation with April. This is rather inconvenient, because I'm currently trying to write an article about bathroom accessories. Also, every so often I ask myself *why* I am writing about bathroom accessories when I have no real interest in the subject. Four years ago the editor of *The Sunday Lunch*, Ned Wainwright, said he wanted more articles for the 'Home' section, and I said, 'Oh, what kind?' with a big fake-interested smile. Freelance journalists can't afford to be too fussy. I didn't think I'd end up with a column – which, of course, was wonderful; *is* wonderful. I need the regular income, to pay for my mortgage and those extra little luxuries such as food, electricity and clothes. It's just that, quite a lot of the time, I wish I were involved in something else. This happened with my marriage, too. I'm beginning to wonder if it's a 'psychological pattern'. Perhaps I'll always have these dreams of elsewhere. Maybe I've inherited some of DeeDee's feckless genes.

As I said, since my break-up with Diarmuid I have interviewed a number of authors of self-help psychology books. Some of them say that people who aren't compatible should part, and some of them say that people who aren't compatible

should work out why they aren't compatible and try to make some appropriate changes; then, apparently, they may find they are far more compatible than they thought. Sadly, none of them offer advice on husbands who suddenly become obsessed with mice.

That's what happened with Diarmuid. He's a carpentry teacher, and he wanted to be able to teach biology too; so he started this biology course, and the mice thing just took off. We hardly ever saw each other because he was so busy studying mice. Sometimes he brought them home for the weekend, and gradually they moved in permanently. I started to feel sorry for them. It's not that I like mice all that much, but I hated seeing them in that cage. So one night, after a row and too much wine and wild, romantic music, I set them free in the tool shed. Diarmuid and I parted shortly after that. If we get divorced, I suppose the mice may be mentioned as a third party. He managed to lure them back using mature cheddar cheese. I still feel a bit angry with those mice. I feel, deep down, that they should have made a run for it.

When I left, I told Diarmuid I needed time to think things over. I didn't quite know what I was going to be thinking about, but it sounded like the sort of thing a woman bolting out the front door with a large cream suitcase should say. I liked the dramatic exit, but the whole effect was watered down somewhat because I had to keep returning for things like my hair-dryer and my jumpers and my transistor radio. And, naturally, Diarmuid and I got chatting, and I ended up hugging him because he was sad; I was sad myself, which is why I let him kiss me and run his hands tenderly through my hair. He kept saying he was sorry about the mice, which I noticed were still in the spare room and looking pretty contented despite their lack of freedom. He even said he'd get rid of them, but I said we could talk about that another time. Because what I was realising was that, even if Diarmuid made lots of 'appropriate changes' to help our 'compatibility', I still wasn't sure I'd want to go back to him.

We separated over half a year ago, and I'm not any clearer

about whether I should go back to him. I'm not even sure why I feel like this, because I'm thirty-five and old enough to know I'm not going to find the perfect man and he is such a decent, loving guy. I sometimes feel I don't miss him enough. But I miss the home we bought together. It's an ordinary suburban house, but it's detached and in a leafy area, and it has a big garden with nice shrubs and trees and scented plants. We wanted to move to the country after we had our two kids, but for the time being we were happy to live in a house near the Dublin mountains. We could see the countryside through our bedroom window. The main bedroom has an en-suite bathroom. I bought lovely thick white towels. The carpets still have a new, bouncy feel to them. Diarmuid now shares our home with a tenant called Barry, who's Australian and keeps wanting to have barbecues.

I suppose I'd miss my marital home more if I hadn't owned a house already. I bought this little cottage in my late twenties, before house prices became astronomical. I couldn't afford to buy it now. Even though it only has one bedroom and the orange sofa takes up a lot of the sitting-room, it's beside the sea and fairly close to central Dublin. When Diarmuid and I got married, we decided it was a good idea to keep my cottage and rent it out. We couldn't have shared it, because it's so 'cosy' – as the estate agents put it – that two people can barely fit in the kitchen.

When I left my marital home with my large cream suitcase, I think part of me must have been aware that the current tenants were due to leave in three weeks, though I didn't know I was being quite so practical. I stayed with my friend Erika until the cottage was free again. She's a good person to be sad with. We watched loads of DVDs and ate chocolate biscuits, and I took very long baths.

The kindest way to describe this cottage would be 'shabby but sweet'. The outside is painted Mediterranean blue, and it has big twinkly windows that overlook the sea. That's why I bought it: I wanted to look out at the sea and see it change colour. I wanted that vastness, that unbuilt space. It's a bit like

living next to a golf course, only nicer.

I look out the window at the sea while I try to decide whether to encourage readers to ‘experiment’ and personally decorate some of their bathroom tiles. It’s a sunny, blustery May afternoon; the sea is bouncing around, and the foliage on one of Dublin’s sturdy palm trees is waving in the breeze beside the beach. My neighbour’s wind-chimes are tinkling, and this is the sort of moment when I wish I owned a cat. I could pick it up and cuddle it and find the favourite spot behind its ears.

Tea. I need a cup of Earl Grey. I get up and pad, shoeless – I am wearing a pair of thick, soft pink socks – to the kitchen. When the tea is made and in my favourite wide-rimmed cream cup – a present from my extremely successful friend Fiona, who regularly visits Paris to discuss software – I decide to phone Aunt Marie. I want to ask her about DeeDee.

After I have told Marie that April won’t be flying back from California to feel uncomfortable in her front room, I say, with studied nonchalance, ‘Marie, you know Great-Aunt DeeDee...’

This is met with silence: a strange, hissing silence. I feel like I have lifted a seashell to my ear. ‘Hello?’ I say, wondering if she’s still on the line.

‘What do you want to know about her?’ Marie says brusquely.

‘Well, I was just... just wondering if anyone knows what happened to her.’

‘Of course they don’t,’ Marie replies, as if this is a blatantly idiotic question.

‘Has anyone tried to find out?’ I persist.

I hear a deep intake of breath. Then Marie says, ‘Sorry, Sally, I have to go. I have a lasagne in the oven.’

‘But –’

Marie sighs sharply. ‘I don’t know what happened to DeeDee. No one does. We don’t talk about her any more.’

‘Why?’

‘Because there’s no point. She’s gone,’ Marie says flatly.

‘Thanks for your call, dear. Bye.’ She hangs up the phone.

This is unusual. Marie is far from perfect, but she’s not usually rude. What on earth happened to DeeDee? And why doesn’t Marie share my curiosity? Perhaps DeeDee was just a feckless, uncaring, horrible person. Maybe that’s why no one misses her.

I go to the kitchen and fetch a chocolate biscuit, then head reluctantly back to my article about bathroom accessories. It seems that DeeDee will remain a mystery – for the moment, anyway. I’ll have to ask Mum about her. Perhaps she’ll be more forthcoming.

I start to type frantically, because someone might pop by for tea at any moment. My friend Erika says I should have been a geisha. Even Diarmuid regularly drops in for Earl Grey and almond cookies. We never mention the mice, naturally. When he’s sitting on our sofa – it is still *our* sofa, since we bought it together – I can’t help noticing that he’s a handsome man with great biceps and lovely broad shoulders. And his stomach is so flat and toned. I know I’m describing him as though he were a horse or something, but one of Diarmuid’s attractions is that he has a great body, and he’s very good in bed. Come to think of it, I really miss that too.

He’s not tall – about five foot ten – and he’s kind of stocky, but in a nice way; it’s muscle, not fat. His bum is firm and looks great in jeans. His face is well proportioned, and he has a strong jawline and thick black eyebrows to go with his wavy dark hair. His eyes always seem a bit distant, but maybe it’s because deep down he’s quite shy. When he gets up to leave, I always feel a pang of regret. Just for a moment I forget how lonely I was with him; all our differences seem so small, compared to his big strong arms around me.

When Diarmuid leaves, I always want someone to phone or drop by and show me I’m happy to be single, but they never do. It’s suddenly like a desert. Of course, at times like this you know you could ring someone yourself, but you also know they’ll probably be in the middle of something – they’ll be in the supermarket or a meeting, or changing a nappy, or really

preoccupied and unusually abrupt. That's the weird thing about life: sometimes you can hardly get a moment to yourself, and sometimes you're forgotten. When you ache with all your heart for a certain person to call you – when that call would make all the difference – they probably won't phone till three days later, when you have five people in the sitting-room and the neighbour's cat has just pooped on the carpet. It's just something you have to get used to. Tough titties, as my friend Fiona would say.

Fiona isn't very sentimental, even though she's sensitive – and not just about herself. My friend Erika, however, is sentimental. She is also a floating secretary. This doesn't mean she spends her time decorously poised above Dublin with a shorthand notepad; it means that, when various large corporations need temporary help for a variety of reasons, she's one of the people they call upon. And they call upon her a lot – which is just as well, because she doesn't make much money from her papier-mâché cats. She loves making and painting them – each one has his or her very own personality – but they take quite a while to get 'just right', and people don't pay all that much for them. In an ideal world, Erika could stay at home with her mashed-paper animals and not have to find her way intrepidly to her desk. Sometimes she makes it sound like Arctic exploration. Apparently the floors in many modern office blocks are almost identical and devoid of distinguishing features; her landmarks are things like red storage-boxes and water-coolers and photocopiers. Sometimes she even leaves little 'You are here' notes for herself.

Erika is small and blonde and has a sweet, turned-up nose and a slightly dazed expression, which is extremely attractive to men. Especially to someone called Alex. Alex is why Erika is on the phone right now. I was just typing, 'These zebra-patterned soap dishes are available from...' when she called.

'Alex said he doesn't want to leave his wife,' she says. 'Not yet, anyway. Because she may leave him first, and that would be so much easier.'

'Oh.'

‘His wife is getting very friendly with her yoga teacher. They even go out for herbal tea after classes.’

‘I see.’

‘He told me yesterday. We only met for half an hour because Alex had to collect his daughter from her tai chi class.’

‘Oh, dear.’

‘I didn’t mind.’ Erika suddenly sounds brave and adamant. ‘I had things to do myself. I... I had two marmalade-coloured cats to finish – a bride and groom. I’m making them as a wedding present for Fiona’s cousin.’

‘Oh. Good.’ And it is good. Erika adores making bride and groom cats; she loves painting on the tuxedos and long white dresses. The thing is, hardly any shops seem to want them. Most of them are sold to people she knows.

‘I’ve just read an article about how important it is to have your own life,’ Erika says. ‘Even if you meet your soulmate, you need to have your own life.’

‘Yes,’ I say, knowing that at any minute she is going to try to quote Kahlil Gibran.

‘As Kahlil Gibran wrote, “The olive and the... the...”’ There is a long pause. ‘I’ve forgotten what exactly, but anyway, they don’t grow in each other’s shade.’ Erika hasn’t got a great memory for quotations and jokes; when she’s telling one of the five jokes she knows, she usually gets to the punch line way before she’s mentioned any of the details that would make it funny. Diarmuid thinks she is a bit daft, but in a nice way that he doesn’t quite get but can tolerate. And Erika has never really told me what she thinks of Diarmuid, which probably means she isn’t that keen on him.

She is certainly very keen on Alex. I saw him once. He was in a bookshop, signing copies of his latest self-help offering. At this point I should probably mention that Alex writes hugely popular books about having healthy relationships. He was very tanned and earnest-looking and fairly muscular around the shoulders; his blue-grey eyes seemed kind and tired, but you could see how they might blaze with raw passion. I didn’t buy

the book. I just looked at him sniffily and walked by. I wanted him to see I knew he was a fraud – just like I am. He writes books about having wonderful relationships, and I write articles about having a wonderful home.

‘I feel such a fraud!’ Is Erika telepathic? ‘I keep telling Alex I don’t mind waiting. I keep telling him that I understand, that I want almost nothing from him. But I do! I... I want us to go to the supermarket together. I want to watch DVDs with him and... and eat crisps. I... I want to *kiss his eyelashes.*’

I don’t know what to say to this. Even though I’ve had quite a sobering romantic career, this is not a longing I have had to deal with. Maybe I should have wanted to kiss Diarmuid’s eyelashes. Maybe that’s what is missing.

‘Oh, Sally, I’m sorry.’ Erika sighs forlornly. ‘I shouldn’t be going on like this. I should be asking you about Diarmuid.’

‘I’m very glad you’re not,’ I say. ‘If you did, I wouldn’t know what to say.’

There is a long pause. Then Erika says, ‘Alex said something else. He said he loved me but he thought it might be best if we didn’t meet again. Ever.’

‘Oh, dear.’

‘Alex says he thinks we’re all heated up, and if we get together we’ll burst into flames and that will be it.’ Erika’s voice sounds distant and lonely, as though it’s coming from the bottom of the sea. ‘I said I understood.’ She is sobbing now. ‘I said he was right. And... and then Alex said he wasn’t so sure. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe we both need the combustion. Maybe we both need our lives to be totally different.’

I hold my breath. *Totally different.* The words seem to tug at my heart.

‘So then I had to be the one who was strong, and I said that lives don’t become totally different just like that. It takes patience and planning and probably years of therapy.’

I suddenly want to disagree, but I don’t. I suddenly think that maybe you can reach a point of desperation when things have to change; that maybe you *can* take a big leap

and end up somewhere different, even if you're not quite sure how you got there.

'So how did you leave it, then?'

'He said he'll be in town on Thursday.'

'He wants to meet you?'

'Yes,' she sighs. 'Yes, I suppose he does.'

'And are you going to meet him?'

'I don't know. I want to. I feel like... like maybe the whole thing can teach me something.'

Erika is forever thinking that things can teach her something. She thinks that life is one great big university, and that when she understands love better none of this stuff will bother her any more. But Alex has done relationship courses and he's got relationship certificates, and it hasn't made any difference.

After Erika hangs up, I get back to the article. I tell people to decorate their tiles with enamel paint, and I virtually order them to collect shells and make collages. I add that their shower curtains must be 'boisterous' and their bath mats 'sensuous'. As for flooring, I mention exotic stone slates that need to be imported from Hyderabad. So many people go on, these days, about how to make your house nicer. But it seems to me that they – and I include myself in the bunch – don't talk much about how to make a *home*.

Somehow the word 'home' always reminds me of the house we had when I was little – the old, shabby one where the cushions were faded and the carpets were frayed, and dust motes danced in the light. There was a curved drive and tall trees and a big lazy lawn that never got mowed enough. That was how we lived. We all sort of pottered around, and Dad practised his cello and went off and gave concerts every so often. Sometimes pets died, and I was inconsolable – the world was virtually torn from me when I laid guinea pigs and dogs and hamsters in their final resting-places; but most of the time I was happy, and I didn't even know it.

The doorbell rings. I consider ignoring it. Somehow I have to make time to finish this article *and* visit my great-aunt Aggie,

who is old and frail and weird these days, living in a nursing home and convinced that her room is full of sheep.

I decide to ignore the doorbell. I just don't have time to answer it. But I do creep over to the window and peep out between the curtains.

It's Diarmuid – and he's seen me. He's waving and smiling and looking rather pleased with himself. I assume this is because he's carrying a large bunch of flowers, and they clearly weren't bought in a garage. They are beautiful, and they are swathed in soft pink paper, with a ribbon round them.

I open the door and let him in.

