

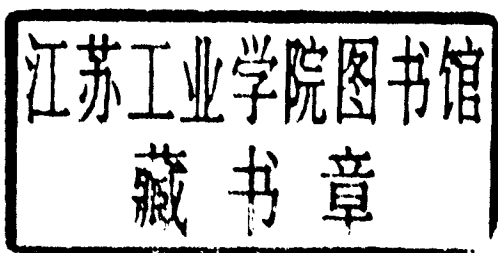
THE
SUN ROAD

HANNAH MACDONALD



THE SUN ROAD

Hannah MacDonald



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David Higham Associates. Apologies to Les Murray for using the title
of his poem 'The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever' (*Collected Poems*, 1994,
Carcenet Press) for one of my chapters.

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THE SUN ROAD

For Vivi – my mother
and my first piece of luck

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The Goddess Fortune be praised (on her toothed wheel
I have been mincemeat for several years)
Last night, for a whole night, the unpredictable lay in my
arms, in a tender and unquiet rest –
(I perceived the irrelevance of my former tears) –
Lay, and at dawn departed. I rose and walked the street where
a Whitsuntide blew fresh, and blackbirds
Incontestably sang, and the people were beautiful.

John Heath Stubbs

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Preface

The beginning of love will come, if you don't believe in it at first sight, as a tumble of coy generousities, sweet, greedy and semi-planned as bodies in a sun-filled bed. The gifts are offered with a clumsy, childish touch, a shrug and a hug, but our fake nonchalance is driven by need. It is the cajoling of love itself.

There are tangible gifts, the books and bracelets, chosen as if storing up memories for the future, nostalgia anticipated, a history created in precious metals and plastic and paper. And then there are the spoken presents, the emotional gifts, the declarations and promises, the ones that are less considered – rash, perhaps. Since these are the ones that crystallise expectations and form patterns of hope, more care should be taken over them than anything. But a hinted guarantee is easier to locate than an exotic flower and more meaningful than a crap hat.

In 1969 in the corner of Betty's Tea Room in Harrogate, North Yorkshire, Roger Standing passed a silver locket under the table to a shy, slippery woman called Lizzie Jordan. A gift given in the spirit of their surreptitious adventure.

Thirty-one years later Dan Frederick's first gift to Beth Standing was a news story he'd ripped from the local paper. They stood still among the sliding disco lights of his father Jacob's birthday party (who for the fifty-fifth year running had been given both charm and luck).

But not one of the parents or their progeny, at those two illuminated moments in time, understood the loss that is visited on both gifted and givers. The bravery it takes to fulfil promises given to both lovers and children.

PART ONE

1. Martin and Paul

Leicester, 1969

They are two small boys walking down the street. One would come up to your waist and the other up to your thighs. In slow, tired moments the littler of the two might reach and place a hand on your leg for support, as if you were a tree. The heat and light pressure of his small palm would work through your trousers and you would probably reach down to ruffle his head, your hand covering from the front to the back of the scalp, like some everyday priest. The two of them feel warm and wriggly – their faces are still pudgy – and on your lap, in your arms, they squirm like animals flattening grass or treading down earth, making a cave out of your embrace.

When undressed they are smooth and grabbable, their flesh moulded around soft, developing bones. Sometimes their mother thinks their limbs could be snapped, that Paul's thin wrist could easily be bent to a wrong angle and splintered inside, like a bird's wing.

Martin is older and slightly taller. He walks with purpose while Paul still seems to be dawdling in childhood, paddling his hands through the air of a stirring, chaotic world.

They are only little, and dressed in brightly coloured clothes. Martin chattering, on their way to the swimming pool, Paul stumble-walking with one hand stretched out ahead, as ever, high and far to an adult. It's a wonder one arm isn't longer than the

other. Paul has dark hair in a pudding-bowl cut, browner skin than his brother, a stubby nose and glistening eyes, and as he is pulled along almost sideways on he registers passers-by with an oblique stare. He doesn't much like swimming so he is in no hurry.

Martin is in a hurry though. He is fairer and prone to allergies – eczema and agitation. He doesn't sleep very well and sometimes wets the bed. He doesn't know why, only that it's inappropriate. He is a big boy now and yet he is constantly assailed by some urgent desire – to pee, to cough, to itch, to cry. He tries to dodge them, to preempt the urges; leaving the table before he's finished his tea, checking out the shallow end of the pool for bombers, climbing in carefully before anyone teases him to dive. Bombing is not allowed, but like so many things (swearing, spitting, shouting, stealing) people do it anyway. Is it not allowed because so many people are doing it already? So many that the ones like him, who are bound to do as they are told, must be bound to good behaviour. Someone must behave, he supposes.

They reach the local baths, which have only been open since the start of the year. Their dad, Gavin, holds the door open for the two of them, ushering them with grand movements through the arch beneath his right arm. As if he had just marched a whole orphanage of the things over from China, thinks the woman behind the counter. Gavin likes being a dad. He likes the noise and value of it, and he loves their trust and their big clear eyes. In them he can go back to the beginning again and create friendly worlds of talking animals and happy planets.

'One adult and two children,' he says, pulling a small leather purse for change out of his summer jacket pocket.

'Five bob altogether,' she says and he counts out the coins in front of her. She slides them noisily off the counter, long red nails scraping the surface, and, when she's done, looks under

her fringe at the half-moon face staring up at her and the curled hands sitting on top of her counter. She winks at Paul and his eyelids lift in surprise, as if he's just seen a shooting star.

Gavin herds them through the reception into the men's changing rooms. Unlike the swimming pools of his youth, you don't change in curtained cubicles round the edges of the pool – unpeeling your pants below the strip of material like some bawdy seaside postcard. Here you have silver lockers with keys and wooden cubicles with doors, as well as a central changing area for schools and groups – and families.

But Martin has other ideas. He likes the privacy of the stained teak cubicles; it's warm and cosy, possibly even a little smelly, and it feels a very safe place to get undressed in. It even has a lock.

'You don't want to go in there, Martin,' says his father. 'We'll be ready in two ticks. Come on, son.' He reaches out for Martin's shoulder but the boy flinches away and locks himself in the teak cabinet. Gavin sighs and sees himself as a big fat man in a changing room with a scared son who'd rather not be near him. He looks at Paul slowly undoing his laces. He is concentrating very hard. 'Sometimes,' Paul says in a considered way as his father takes over, 'I think things are harder to un-do than do-up.' His sensible brown lace-ups are very scuffed and have gone beige and bulbous at the toe. They used to seem ever so long, great flappy things at the end of his feet, but now they are tight and grubby like Chinese bandages. His mother would have put him in his new summer sandals, which are two bands of sharp-edged pale blue leather, but Gavin thinks they make the boy look like a girl.

After five minutes of goosebumps and awkward manoeuvring, of stepping in and out, of trying to hide one's private parts, they are ready. Now they must visit the wet toilet – which

scares Martin because there's no way of telling one kind of wet from the other – and walk through the chilly Verruca Pool. Verrucas came in the same hushed, threatening category as head lice, bottom worms and tramps. Sometimes Martin sees people in a single white sock, hiding their verruca. Only not hiding it because they are as good as branded in their plastic socklet.

There is a small paddling pool on the way out of the showers, for rinsing your feet before entering the main hall. The cold water slaps ankle-high and sometimes there's tissue floating on the top. The water dribbles through a pipe in the wall and drains slowly out of a mouth-sized gap in the ceramic tiles. It reminds Martin of the lips at the top of their bathroom basin. A nice, white, clean basin, with a small black hole leading to pipes and sewers and rats.

The machinery and innards and, yes, the rats of the Leicester Recreation Centre are equally hidden, only to be sensed when a staff member in shiny tracksuit bottoms opens a Restricted Entry door and heat and noise slips out. Or when Martin, clinging to the edge of the shallow end, presses himself to the corner and hears the blue chlorinated water sloshing and draining with a heavy slurp, in rhythm with the crowd-made waves that pull him away and then push him hard into the white tiles.

The animal sound of the glug and the echoing shouts of the gang on the other side of the pool make Martin want to cry with panic. He's all alone because he got in before his dad and Paul had made it down to this end. He already has water in one ear and chlorine in his eye. He's nose to iron with a grate. The water, and a brick-coloured corn pad, is flowing away fast, and he's spluttering.

'What you doing down there?' says his dad. 'You'll get sucked down the drain, hiding in the corner like that.' His father is right