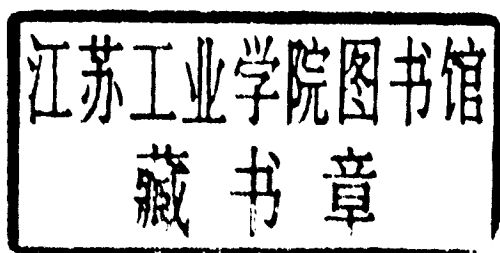


The
Silver Bead
HELEN DUNMORE



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The Silver Bead

"I want to know what it all means," Zillah says. Granny Carne nods thoughtfully.

"Yes, you're ready for knowing that," she says. "It means changes, Zillah. Your life's going to go in another direction, not the one you know. You've got to face up to it now. You'll need a fighting spirit where you're going. That's what the seals have showed you."

"What do you mean – where I am going? I can't leave here. This is my place. I can't live anywhere else."

"Katie had to leave her place," says Granny Carne. "She was at home in London, and then she came here and now she's at home here. You can do more than you think you can, Zillah. You'll leave, and you'll come back, and you'll be strong, just like the seals showed you how to be. You won't let anything push you down."

Look out for the other books in this trilogy:

The Lilac Tree
(previously published as *Zillah and Me*)

The Seal Cove
(previously published as *The Zillah Rebellion*)

Also by this author:

Snollygoster

Praise for Helen Dunmore's books:

The Lilac Tree

"well-written, funny and sad too"
Ella Fraser-Thoms, 12, Daily Telegraph

"two utterly believable child characters whose
emotions leap off the page"
Daily Telegraph

"Dunmore is a wonderful storyteller"
Observer

The Silver Bead

"a novel about friendship, courage and change"
Independent on Sunday

"lively and thoughtful"
Sunday Times

Snollygoster

"Concise. Beautiful."
Daily Telegraph

"beautifully crafted"
Books for Keeps

CHAPTER ONE

"School's out for ever!" yells Zillah, and she hurls her book-bag into the air.

"Zill! It's gone right over the hedge!"

"I'm only bothering to fetch it because I don't want our cows to get bellyache," says Zillah, as she lifts the loop of baling-twine and opens the gate.

"Aren't you sad about leaving?" I am. I can still feel the tightness in my stomach when we sang "One More Step Along the World I Go" at leaving assembly. I'm still sad, but Zillah doesn't care at all.

"I've been going on that old school bus for about a million years," she says. "And all the furniture in our classroom's too small. I've got bruises from trying to fit my legs under those tables. Everything's too small!"

Zillah whirls her book-bag above her head again.

"Mind out, Katie! I'm going to get it up on our barn roof!"

• • •

We're leaving. We're leaving. We're really leaving. We've been saying it so long that it's a shock to find it's not true any more. We're not leaving, we've left. Next year

there'll be other kids sitting in our seats, or telling the little ones to get off the chestnut stump at playtime because that's where we sit. And Mr T won't be telling his jokes to us, or trying to teach us computer language so we can put stuff on our own website, or writing words in Russian or Greek or Arabic on the board so that we can understand that all alphabets work in different ways but they all do the same thing ... COMMUNICATE! Mr T is crazy about communication, but it won't be us he'll be communicating with any more ... and that seems strange to me, and a bit sad. The more I think of it the more the whole of primary school seems strange and far away and small...

• • •

It's the first morning of the holidays. Zillah and I are lying on her bedroom floor, surrounded by heaps of stuff which Zillah is throwing out.

"The worst thing is that my mum still treats me like a little kid," says Zillah. "And my dad thinks still thinks he's doing me a huge favour if he lets me drive the tractor. *There you are, girl, steady now, remember where your brake's to.* I've been driving that tractor since I was nine years old. I'm not going to roll it."

I've never driven a tractor, but Mum lets me drive our van up and down the lane from the farm to our cottage. I know how to change gear, and brake and steer and everything. Yes, I did scrape the wing once, but our van is so old and beaten-up that any new scrapes soon blend into the old ones.

Zillah and I have spent the whole morning sorting stuff into piles. Clothes that are too small, books with cartoons or pictures of cute animals on the front, and Zillah's amazing collection of sticker-books, are crammed into a jumble-sale binbag. Her school-books, millions of drawings, old diaries and all the rubbish from under her bed are in another binbag.

"Are you really going to throw your diaries away?"

"No. I'm going to burn them. When we've sorted out your stuff as well we'll have a huge bonfire."

"Um..."

I'm not sure I want to throw away quite as much as Zillah. I *like* old books I've had since I was about six, and maybe when I'm grown-up I'll want to look back at my school-books and...

"You have got one sock and two Barbie dolls without heads in your binbag," says Zillah two hours later, when we've finished doing my bedroom.

"Is it a white sock with a blue stripe down the side?"

"Yeah ... whitish..."

"I've been looking for that one! Give it here, Zill."

"You're down to two Barbies without heads, Katie."

"OK, they can go. Oh no, wait a minute! Zillah, remember that man in the Friday market who sells vintage Sindies and Barbies for about fifteen pounds each? Maybe he'll give me lots of money for these."

"I've never seen any headless Barbies on his stall," says Zillah, snatching the binbag from me. "Katie, your bedroom doesn't look any different."

"It's tidier."

"But is it emptier? Don't you want to change things, now we're going to secondary school?"

"Of course I do," I lie. "Zillah, you know those sticker-books you're throwing away? If you really don't want them..."

"You do."

"Mmm ... maybe..."

"OK. If you agree to throw away your Blue Peter poster."

"Blue Peter poster? I haven't got a Blue Peter—"

"And you're not having my stickers either. We're *secondary-school* students now, Katie. *Old*."

"Zill, it's half-past two. Quick, we've got to help your mum set up the tables."

"Don't think you're going to make me forget about that bonfire, Katie."

But we are really late, and so we have to run up the lane and there's no time to talk about throwing things away or changing things or secondary school any more. Which is good, because I hate talking about it.

Zillah's mum, Janice, does cream teas for visitors up at the farm. Zillah and I are waitresses, and we also lay the tables, wash up and do the accounts, while Janice makes the tea, whips cream, and bakes batch after batch of scones and cakes. All the jam is home-made, too. We get paid two pounds an hour, and we get tips. Sometimes we get tips in foreign coins, which is annoying when the people who leave them are English. Sometimes we get twenty pence, or fifty, or even a pound if it's a big group and we smile loads. (I have had to give Zillah some

training in this, as she is usually prefers scowling at strangers to smiling at them.) Zillah and I split all our tips.

• • •

It's a busy afternoon.

"They had two lots of cream, Zillah, did you put both on the bill?"

"What do you think?"

Zillah is brilliant at maths. She adds up like a streak of lightning, and she keeps trying to make Janice charge more for the huge, delicious cakes she bakes.

"You'll never make a profit if you don't even charge enough to cover your ingredients, Mum!"

"Well, Zillah, our hens laid the eggs which I used in the cakes. I didn't have to pay for them."

"Then you should charge even more, Mum! Free-range, home-made, organic, no chemicals. Let's put that on our sign!"

Five minutes later a camping van turns into the lane. Mother, father, grandma and two teenage children. Five cream teas, two walnut and coffee sponges and three strawberry tarts. And they bought one of Janice's chocolate cakes and left us a two-pound tip, and said they'd tell their friends to come here.

Janice sweats in the kitchen, warming up tray after tray of the scones she'd made that morning, filling teapots and making sandwiches for a family who decide they might as well have a proper meal while they're here. People have started buying whole cakes to take away, as

well as the slices they eat here, because Janice's cakes are so good. I keep telling her she ought to have her own TV cookery programme. She is wonderful to watch in her kitchen, because she is so quick and sure and not clumsy at all. It's quite strange, because Janice is often clumsy outside the kitchen, with people as well as with things.

But maybe Janice wouldn't really make a TV star – not in her white pinny with red polka dots on it, and the frown that makes her look cross even when she's enjoying herself. If Janice was a waitress, I don't think she'd get that many tips.

We're going to make loads of money helping Janice with the cream teas every day, all summer.

The last customers finish their cream teas and drive away. I pick a fat red strawberry out of the bowl and eat it while the late-afternoon sun pours down, warming my back. The moment is as perfect as the strawberry.

• • •

It's the twenty-fifth of July and we've finished school and we're never going back. At least, not until September, when we start at secondary school in our new uniforms, all scared and not knowing where anything is and –

We were the oldest ones at primary school, but at secondary we'll be the little ones again. We won't know what to do or where to go, who are the nice teachers and who are the horrible ones. Or who the bullies are. But I'm not going to think about that now. It's six weeks away – nearly seven. That's like for ever.

It's the beginning of the school holidays and life is wonderful. As long as Zillah keeps forgetting about that bonfire, and I can sneak my Barbies back into the cupboard. I might find a couple of spare heads somewhere...

I don't play with them. I design clothes for them. I might be going to be a clothes designer, or maybe an interior decorator. I know what I want things to look like, and Mum says that's the most important thing. You've got to have vision.

CHAPTER TWO

They arrived this morning.

• • •

I'm in my bedroom now. The mist has come in suddenly and there's white woolliness over everything and glistening wet. I can't see anything but all the sounds are magnified. Zillah's dad's cows are joining in with the foghorn, and Mum's got her radio on while she works in her studio.

It was clear this morning. I was up at Zillah's place, painting the new sign (about the free-range eggs and organic jam) when we heard the engine. It came labouring up the road, then it slowed down.

"Someone for the caravan park," said Zillah. "I'd better go and see, Mum's gone over to Eglos Farm to borrow jam-pots."

At the top of the lane there's a gate into the field where Zillah's parents run their caravan park. It's just a field, with portable toilets and rubbish bins and everything. There's a sign telling people to call at the farm first, before they drive in. But when we got to the farm gate, a girl had already unlatched the gate to the caravan field,

and she was swinging it open. Zillah frowned.

"You got to book your pitch at the farm first," she said. "And pay."

The girl looked us up and down.

"My mum said to open the gate and she'd drive into the field," she said. "Can't leave a van the size of ours blocking the road."

"You can pull in on the verge," said Zillah. "That's what people do."

"Your place, is it then?" asked the girl, as if she was laughing at Zillah.

"It's my mum and dad's farm."

But the gate was swung right back by now and the engine revved.

It was the biggest van that had ever come into the field. It skimmed the gateposts on both sides, but the girl's mum took it steady and got it in without a scratch. She was a big, frowning woman with two strong arms on the wheel.

It was not a normal cream-and-chrome holiday caravan. It was rusty orange, and it looked as if it had once been a small furniture van. There were windows cut into the metal sides, with bright flapping curtains. Strapped on top of the van was what looked like a sofa, wrapped in plastic. The van doors at the back were open, and a little red-haired boy was hanging off the metal bars. Inside, the van was bursting with stuff and people. Zillah and I stared at each other. Zillah said something to me but I couldn't hear over the noise of the van.

The woman backed her van into a big space by the granite hedge, near the stream. She'd picked the best pitch on the field. The engine raced and roared as it backed, then suddenly it stopped, the van lurched, and was still. Birds sang. Two campers who were on their honeymoon pulled back their tent-flaps and stared out.

People began getting out of the van. The little red-haired kid jumped off first, then a man holding a baby. He didn't look like the girl's father – he was much too young. He reached back into the van and fetched out another baby and then tucked them one under each arm, like puppies. Twins.

The last person out of the van was a crunched-up old woman who looked as if she was everyone's great-grandma. The girl helped her carefully down the step. Her face was brown and dry and wrinkly, and her eyes were the colour of the damsons on the tree by our cottage. She looked much too old to be bumping around the countryside in the back of a van. But maybe she liked it. She was the only one who looked happy. She gazed around and her damson eyes took in everything – the field, the honeymoon couple, the bright, fresh stream with ferns and flowers growing by it, and Zillah, and me. She hobbled over to the stream, sat down on a stone, pulled off her shoes and stuck her feet into the running water. I knew how it felt. I've paddled in the stream loads of times on my way back from school, after a long day and a hot ride on the bus. The water's icy cold and it tickles and prickles like fizzy lemonade.

"Are they twins?" I asked the girl.

"What do you think?"

"Boys or girls?"

"One of each."

"Wow."

"Five months old," said the girl. I couldn't tell if she was pleased or not. Her face was expressionless.

"I'm Katie, and this is Zillah."

"I got to help my mum now."

Quick and neat, the girl unfastened the straps on top of the van. The man gave one baby to the little rusty-haired kid, and the other to the old woman, then he helped the girl lift down the sofa. Carefully, they unwrapped the plastic. Underneath, the sofa was blue velvet. They brushed it clean, carried it over to a soft patch of grass by the stream, and set it down.

"You rest now, Great-Gran," said the girl. "I'll make your tea."

"Good girl yourself," said her great-gran, settling her bones into the soft blue sofa, closing her eyes, letting the sun warm her.

"You're all right now, Great-Gran," said the girl.

Slowly, Zillah and I moved away. It didn't feel like Janice and Geoff's caravan park any more. It felt like someone else's home.

• • •

There are huge arguments going on in Zillah's house. Geoff wants to move the van people off the farm right away.

"They're trouble," he said. "I know their sort."

Travellers. They won't pay us a penny and they'll squat here the whole summer, driving decent people away."

"She gave me fifty pounds," said Janice. "For the first fortnight. They don't how long they're staying yet."

"We charge five pound a night for a van that size. It ought rightly to be seventy pounds, for two weeks. And how do you know we'll see any more of their money, once the two weeks are up?"

"We haven't got anyone else wanting that space," Janice pointed out. "Fifty pounds is better than nothing."

"They'll be hanging their washing all over the campsite, making fires and leaving rubbish, letting their dog get at the stock—"

"They haven't got a dog," said Zillah.

"You sure of that? Dogs out of control I won't have on my land."

"There's no dog," said Janice.

"You sound as if you want them here."

"It's not what I'd have chosen. But she's got twin babies with her, and she paid her fifty pounds up front."

Geoff wasn't happy.

"You don't know what you're starting, letting travellers stay on the farm. I don't know what our neighbours'll say. What if there's another vanload of them coming up our lane tomorrow? You don't know what you're starting, having them here. Mind, if they make any trouble—"

"I can't turn off a woman with two babies who's paid me fifty pounds," said Janice, beating furiously at the chocolate-cake mixture for tomorrow's teas.