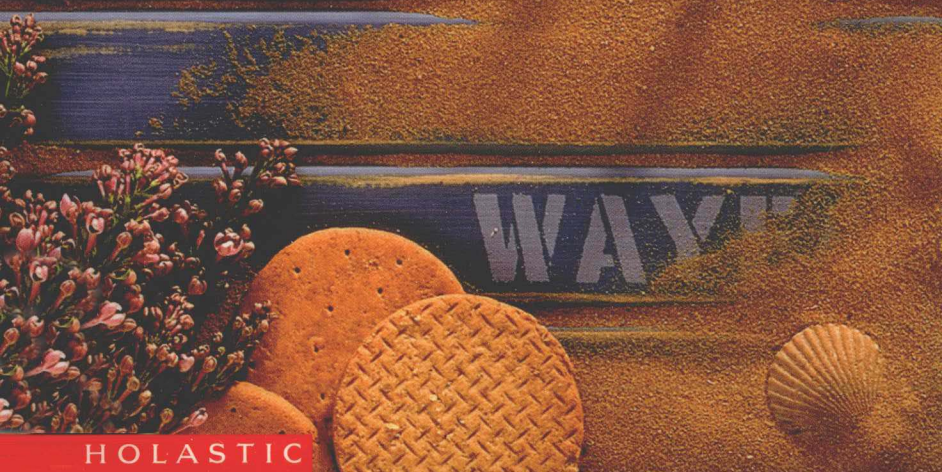




The
Lilac Tree

HELEN DUNMORE



HOLASTIC

*The
Lilac Tree*



HELEN DUNMORE

■ SCHOLASTIC

Scholastic Children's Books,
Commonwealth House, 1-19 New Oxford Street,
London, WC1A 1NU, UK
a division of Scholastic Ltd
London ~ New York ~ Toronto ~ Sydney ~ Auckland
Mexico City ~ New Delhi ~ Hong Kong

First published as *Zillah and Me* by Scholastic Ltd, 2000
This edition published by Scholastic Ltd, 2004

Text copyright © Helen Dunmore, 2000
Cover art copyright © Stuart Haygarth, 2004

ISBN 0 439 97767 3

All rights reserved

Typeset by DP Photosetting, Aylesbury, Bucks
Printed and bound by Nørhaven Paperback A/S, Denmark

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The right of Helen Dunmore to be identified as the author of this work
has been asserted by her in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or
otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the
publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in
which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition,
being imposed upon the subsequent purchaser.

The Lilac Tree

That was when I heard Zillah. Her voice came as close and clear as if she was in the room with me.

“I’m going back. I don’t want to meet some stupid girl from London.”

“Oh no, you’re not ~~young lady~~, and you can take that look off your face. And don’t dare ~~drop~~ those eggs or you’ll pay for them ~~out of your pocket money~~.”

It sounded like ~~part of a long argument~~ that went on most of the time, and ~~even though they~~ were bored with it, still they went on nagging.

“Why have you always got to be difficult, Zillah? Why can’t you try to be friends, like everyone else?”

Look out for the other books in this trilogy:

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

The Silver Bead

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

It's raining so hard I could write a message, put it in a bottle and throw it out of the window, and I'm sure it would float away. I wonder where the storm would take it? Maybe all the way back to London. I wonder if anyone would ever open it and read it.

Here I am, Katie Jenner, buried under the duvet, in my bedroom, in a cottage half a mile from the cliffs, just about to blow off the edge of Cornwall if this storm gets any worse.

Mum's asleep. How can she sleep? You can hear the thump of the sea on the cliffs. Punch, punch, punch, like a fight in a film. And the wind howling, and the rain spattering on the window. Or maybe it's hail.

At least it's warm in here, under the duvet. If you need the toilet you have to go downstairs, out of the back door, then down the path to the outside toilet at the bottom of the garden. Can you believe that we've come to live for a whole year in a cottage without an inside toilet? In fact there is no bathroom

at all. There's a sink in the kitchen where we can wash, and a tin bath which Mum says we can fill with hot water from the stove.

"We'll light a fire, and have our baths in front of it. It'll be really cosy. Just imagine, Katie, a bath by firelight."

Hmm. I can see that we won't be having baths too often. I think of the power-shower in our house in London, and feel a pang of homesickness. My friends would kill me if they knew that the first thing I missed was the shower. But at least we've got running water, and electricity, so I can read in bed. Imagine if we only had candles...

But the outside toilet is going to be a problem. The spider angle was the first thing I checked out. My findings were:

- 1) an exceptionally large black spider crouched on top of the toilet door, ready to zoom down as soon as anyone got comfortable;
- 2) a nest of spiderlings in the corner, waiting to turn into large spiders and join their mum on top of the door;
- 3) (last-minute discovery) a small brown spider with very hairy legs crouched inside the toilet roll, waiting for me.

"MUM! Come and get the spiders out of here!"

Mum doesn't mind spiders. In fact, she is always helping them out of the bath so they can have a better life outside. But today, after driving the van with our stuff in it all the way from London, she wasn't feeling very sympathetic.

"Oh, Katie! You aren't going to fuss about spiders all the time, are you? We're in the country now. You'll just have to get used to them."

Mum's put one of Dad's old coats on the hook by the back door.

"Wrap that round yourself when you go out, Katie. Don't forget to put your boots on. The garden's full of stinging nettles."

This is true. There are even nettles growing *inside* the outside toilet, along with the spiders, slugs and tufts of grass.

"It's perfectly clean, Katie," Mum said hopefully, as she sloshed another bucket of Jeyes Fluid round the toilet floor, which looks as if it is made of earth. "But if you don't like it out here, you can always use the chamber-pot. I've left one under your bed."

Chamber-pot! I looked at Mum to see if she was joking, but she wasn't. It's exactly like doing the Victorians in Mrs Ellis's class. Except that we're not doing Victorian life, we're living it.

"That's OK, Mum. I don't really mind the nettles."

The wind howls, and the cottage rocks. It's only October. What's it going to be like in the middle of

winter? It's all right for Mum – she *likes* weather. That's why we've come here. She's going to paint the weather. She's going to paint the rain and the sun and the hail and the snow and the way the light changes over everything when the clouds move. She's going to paint the light and the seasons and everything that happens in the whole year we're going to be here.

“You get all the weather in the world coming in from the sea,” she said to me when we'd unloaded the van. Her face was flushed and her eyes were bright as if she was about to open the best present ever. “Look, Katie!”

She pointed out to sea, at a heap of black cloud that was moving fast, straight towards our cottage, where it was going to dump bucket-loads of rain on our heads if we didn't get indoors quickly.

“Oh, yes,” I said. “Mmm. Looks good, Mum.”

Because I couldn't spoil it for her. I hadn't seen Mum looking like this, full of life and almost hopeful, for months and months. Not since. . .

I'd better tell you about it. Nothing makes sense until you know. In one way it's hard to talk about it, but in another way it's easy. I only have to shut my eyes to see it all as clearly as if it was still happening, somewhere in a world which I can't get back to any more. But if I could press a rewind button, I would

go back to the moment before anything happened. Then I'd pause the film and we'd stay there for ever, Mum still upstairs sorting out the laundry basket, me wandering out of the front door with a glass of orange juice because Jessie's phone was engaged and I was going to watch Dad for a few minutes before I tried her again, and Dad—

All of us happy without knowing we were happy, because we didn't even need to know.

What I see is a narrow terraced house in London: our house. In front of the house, jammed in by the front door, there's a sooty old lilac tree. It's grown much too big for the space, and we've got to do something about it. Dad wanted to cut it back himself. Mum wanted to get an expert to do it.

"Why don't you look in the Yellow Pages for someone who does trees?" she asked him.

"Yellow Pages!" Dad snorted. "Do you think I can't even cut a couple of branches off a lilac bush?"

The next thing we knew, he'd hired an electric saw and borrowed a ladder from Mr Riordan down the street. It was a steel ladder with lots of complicated safety locks on it.

I remember everything, so I must have been there. I *know* I was there. I can remember everything, only it's like watching a film. Not like a memory at all.

Dad put the ladder at the base of the lilac. Most lilacs are scrubby little bushes, but ours had grown

into a big, tough tree, branching up into the sky. It was so big it had forgotten how to flower, and everyone said it was damaging the foundations of our house.

Dad must have propped the ladder up. It was a tall ladder, made in two parts, and you had to join them together with safety catches. I wasn't really looking just then. I had my yo-yo but I wasn't doing tricks with it or anything. Just looking up the street and letting the yo-yo run up and down the string. Out of the corner of my eye I must have seen Dad fiddling with the safety catches. I didn't know that Dad hadn't really understood when Mr Riordan explained how to set the ladder up safely. It took him a while to do it. Maybe he thought about going back up the street to ask Mr Riordan again, but he didn't. Maybe he thought it couldn't be *that* complicated. *I must have got it more or less right.* I can almost hear Dad thinking that.

Dad was near the top of the ladder when something happened. There was a crackling noise and I saw Dad still on the ladder, going backwards with it through the little branches. His hands grabbed out, but the air flew past them. And he yelled out one word with all his voice: "MAGGIE!"

That's Mum's name. By the time she ran out of the house, Dad had fallen. The ladder threw him off on to the concrete path that runs from our front door to

the gate. Ran, I mean. I keep forgetting that we don't live there any more.

MAGGIE! His voice was gone, but I could still hear it. Dad was lying on his back on the concrete path, with his eyes open. He didn't see me. And then Mum was down beside him.

I remember that when we all went in the ambulance Mum kept saying, "He was only cutting back the lilac." As if that would make it all not true. People don't die in the middle of Saturday morning, because they've decided they'd better prune the lilac tree. But the ambulance went faster and faster, and I could hear the siren, only this time it wasn't somebody else being rushed to hospital, it was us.

When we talked about moving down here from London, Mum said, "It'll be good for us, Katie." She told me about how her old school-friend, Janice, had a cottage we could rent for hardly any money. (Janice married a Cornish farmer as soon as she left school, and as far as I know Mum hasn't seen her since the day of the wedding.) One day Janice was going to do up the cottage for holiday people, but she hadn't got round to it yet. "Just as well for us. It's a chance in a million," Mum said. "And there's a school in the next village. There's a school bus, Janice says. Her daughter goes on it. Just think, Katie, a year in the country, with the sea on our

doorstep!” Mum made it sound as if living in Cornwall was the one thing she’d always wanted to do. But later on I heard her on the phone to her friend Bridget: “I’ve got to get away from this house. I can’t go on living here. I can’t sleep, I can’t work.”

So that’s why I’m here, huddled up under the duvet, in my new bedroom in a cottage at the edge of the cliffs, in Cornwall, Great Britain, the World, the Universe. Because of a lilac tree.

Chapter Two

I heard Zillah's voice before I knew who she was. It must have been about nine o'clock, and I'd only just woken up. The storm was over, and the sky was a pale, clear blue, with thin white clouds racing over it. We hadn't put the curtains up yet, so I lay on my back and watched the sky and thought about getting up and helping Mum unpack the rest of the boxes. I could hear her moving about downstairs. The cottage is so small you can hear every sneeze.

My new bedroom is tiny, but I like the way the window is tucked deep into the wall. Unless you're in bed, you have to bend down to look out of it. The plaster is uneven, and the walls bulge outwards. Mum told me that they had to build cottages with thick walls round here, or they wouldn't last through the winters. So I was lying there, warm and sleepy, not moving in case Mum heard me and made me get up and start my new life. *My duvet is my only home*, I thought, and I nearly laughed.

That was when I heard Zillah. Her voice came as close and clear as if she was in the room with me.

“I’m going back. I don’t want to meet some stupid girl from London.”

“Oh no, you’re not, young lady, and you can take that look off your face. And don’t dare drop those eggs or you’ll pay for them out of your pocket money.”

It sounded like part of a long argument that went on most of the time, and even though they were bored with it, still they went on nagging.

“And I’m not sitting with her on the school bus. I don’t sit with *anyone* on the school bus. I’ve got my own place.”

“I know you have,” sighed her mum. “And I wish you hadn’t. Why have you always got to be difficult, Zillah? Why can’t you try to be friends, like everyone else?”

Zillah! Maybe her mum had chosen the wrong name, if she wanted her to be just like everyone else. Now they were quarrelling right under my window. I lay tight, frozen in case they saw me. But of course they couldn’t. And then they went nagging off towards the front door, and a moment later I heard Mum’s voice, all warm and pleased and surprised.

“Janice! How wonderful! Oh dear, you haven’t changed at all. I’d have recognized you anywhere.”

And then there was a murmuring, hugging noise

and Janice said in a quite different voice, not snappy or naggy at all, "Oh Maggie, what a time it's been. And so much happening to us both. Who'd have believed it? Well, thank God we can't see into our own futures. Oh, I'm sorry, Maggie dear, I didn't mean to upset you, I was always the clumsy one."

"It's all right, you haven't upset me. I'd rather talk about it. It's so much better than when people pretend nothing's happened."

"Don't tell me. *Lovely weather we're having, my dear, and let's not mention your husband.* People can be very cruel, without meaning to be."

Janice spoke as if she knew what she was talking about. I wondered if anything had happened to Janice's husband.

Then Mum said eagerly, "And who's this? Is this your daughter, Janice? She must be. She looks just like you used to."

"Yes," said Janice, in a funny, cross way, as if she wanted to be proud of Zillah but couldn't be. "This is my Zillah."

"It's lovely to meet you, Zillah. You must be just the same age as Katie. She'll be so glad to find a friend on the doorstep."

And that's as well as having the sea on my doorstep, I thought, dragging on my jeans and a sweat-shirt. Any minute now Mum would be bound to call me down to meet my new friend.

Sometimes I really wish adults could have the experience of being introduced in the same way as children.

“Mrs Jones, meet Mr Carter. He’s thirty-six, just like you! Off you go and play together, you’re bound to make friends.”

“Oh, there you are, Katie. I was just going to call you. Look, this is Zillah. She’s the same age as you, and you’re going to be in the same class.”

I smiled, and Zillah shook her hair further over her face and scowled at me through it.

“Zillah!” said her mother sharply.

“Hi,” I said. “Sorry, I’m not very awake yet. You must be Janice, Mum’s friend.”

I wanted them to stop looking at Zillah. It would only make things worse. But Janice didn’t seem to care about that.

“Zillah! Say hello to Katie this minute!”

Zillah shot me a look of pure hatred and muttered. “Hello, *Katie*.”

“Why don’t you two go and have a look around?” Mum suggested. “Katie’s hardly had a chance to see anything yet. We’ve been unpacking since we got here.”

“And I’m so sorry I wasn’t here to meet you,” said Janice. “But I had to go to Truro to see Geoff’s cousin – she’s not well, you know –”