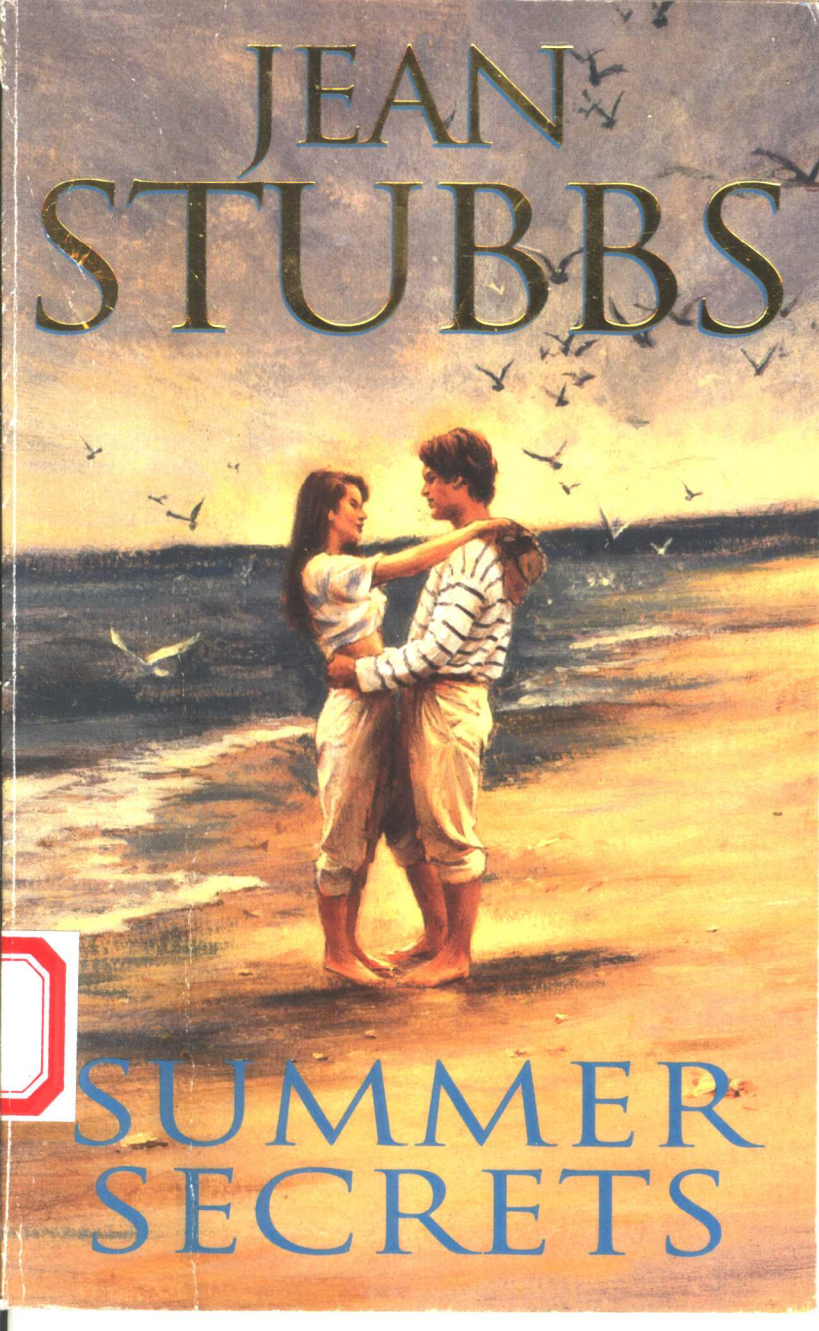
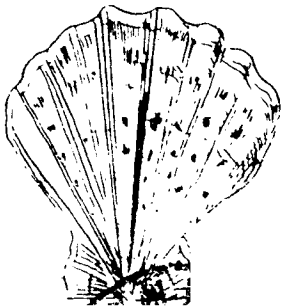
JEAN STUBBS



SUMMER SECRETS

Jean Stubbs

SUMMER SECRETS



First published 1990 by Macmillan London

This edition published 2001 by Pan Books
an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Ltd
25 Eccleston Place, London SW1W 9NF
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.macmillan.com

ISBN 0 330 31916 7

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

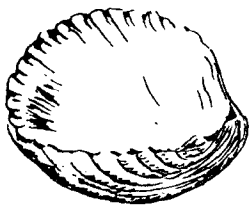
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due to Stephen Ivall of the *Helston Packet*, for allowing me time and space in his office to study the newspapers for 1975; and to my editor Kate Jones, for being a corker!

The author and publishers wish gratefully to acknowledge the following for permission to reproduce material: Unwin Hyman Ltd for an extract from *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkein; Faber and Faber Ltd for lines from Canto IV from 'Autumn Journal' in *Collected Poems of Louis MacNiece* and lines from 'Marina' in *Collected Poems 1909–1962* by T.S. Eliot.

ONE



February 1975

I would not have believed I could cry so much, but I must not cry now. If I begin I shall not be able to stop, and this rack of a day is only at the first turn of the screw. A merciless winter wind searches me. The daffodils bend and blow wildly, helplessly, but do not break. A miser's powdering of snow whitens the mounds of earth by the graveside. Cold intensifies my pain.

The ritual observers are frozen in sorrow and silence: women in retreat behind their dark veils; men tallow-faced, gloved hands clasped before them, bared heads bent to receive benediction. The funeral has taken us over, transformed from a quiet family affair to a public meeting. A family affair. These chief mourners are strangers, related to each other only by marriage. They congregate only on life's three great occasions. Weddings. Christenings. And now death.

Should we have had her cremated? But, then, what does one do with the ashes? Theatrical to scatter them, and where would she have liked to be scattered? On

what wind would Sarah like to ride? And afterwards where can you keep the urn, so that it looks neither conspicuous nor neglected?

And yet, to putrefy. The flesh is not grass but corruption. A stench of lilies that fester. Obscene. And worms shall try. But Sarah's undoubted virginity was not long preserved, did not even reach the stage where it might be tried. My daughter was only nine years old.

My mother Ethel, who barely reaches my shoulder for I am a tall woman, grips my arm and gives one short rough sob as the coffin is lowered. I shall not look at her. Nor at Mrs Tavey, who took care of the twins while I went out to work, and is grieving for Sarah as for her own child. I am grateful for the fine black fluttering of chiffon between myself and the world. To keep my lips stiff and my eyes dry, I stare beyond the pit and the crowd of people to the yew trees at the other side of the churchyard.

He is still there, the tall young man in a sober suit and dark overcoat, who removed his hat as the cortège passed and revealed a fleece of fair hair. I thought at first that he was on some sad errand of his own, and merely paid us passing respect. But he has remained in the same place, head bowed, throughout the service. Since he appears to be taking part at a distance, is he someone we should know? Someone connected with Sarah, whose face and name and importance I have forgotten? Should we invite him to the house afterwards? I have no wish to offend anyone, and there are so many who could be offended, for Sarah collected and attracted friends throughout her life. Her bright brief life.

My lips tremble. My mother would like me to cry with her, but I will not. I look at my husband instead. His face is as mild and gentle as Madox Brown's *Light of the World*, but he is slighter, warmer, browner than

that. A subtly handsome youth masquerading as a man. Technically younger, I seem far older than he. People instinctively like and trust Giles and treat him as a favourite brother, whereas I know they fear me a little and try to impress me. In his profession as a teacher of boys Giles reveals an *alter ego* and wields considerable authority. In private he raises no eyebrows, causes no strong currents, is more peaceable than me, and the easiest of companions in the good times. But in our present crisis we have become strangers.

To be kind and thoughtful is good, and is appreciated. But when kindness stops short of frankness, when thought is extended no further than filling a hot-water bottle and making a whisky toddy, the heart of the relationship is lacking. We had shared confidences in our early years together, made our aims one. And if, looking back, those aims were largely material, limited to making life an aesthetic experience, they were at least a fair beginning. But they had no answer to a child's mortal sickness. And when we sought that answer in ourselves we could not find it.

Giles's reaction to Sarah's death is to retreat into total silence on the subject. He will massage my neck when I am tense, but if I try to tell him why I am tense he will evade the conversation even to the point of leaving the room. So there is no communication, and my grief freezes me.

Between us stands our son. We hold his small hands firmly, to reassure him of our love and to remind him to match his behaviour to the occasion. For Joshua, who was Sarah's twin, has refused to accept his loss. Even before her illness he was a problem to us, though not to her. Now, unable to cope with this winter world, he has retreated into the summer of their old contentment. Of course, he is in a state of shock, as we are. But in sorrow, as in all else, appearances are of paramount importance. To forgive, it is necessary to understand.

My rigid composure, Giles's mute white silence, my mother's tears are understandable. But no one will understand a plain bespectacled little boy smiling secretly to himself, as if he were in bed on Christmas Eve and knew that a bicycle waited for him downstairs by the lighted tree.

He was always a second-hand version of his twin. Sarah's dark-brown eyes were large and brilliant, his shy and shortsighted. Sarah's flowery pink mouth paid a compliment to her femininity, his was too soft and full for a boy. Her hair was a rich black mane like mine: his clung to the skull, fine and silky. She held herself like a wand, he stooped like a scholar.

Now Joshua's lips move in silent conversation. He whispers to himself, catches a chuckle or an exclamation before it escapes. In this joyful communion, despite the spectacles, he bears an uncanny resemblance to his sister. Feeling my fingers tighten on his, he looks up at me quickly, half afraid, interprets my message and is solemn again.

Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

It is over. One by one the chief mourners shovel a little trowelful of earth on Sarah's coffin: my mother and Mrs Tavey crying openly, Giles and I in numbed disbelief, Joshua carelessly as if it does not matter. Some earth falls on his shoes but he takes no notice. It is I who bend down and brush the soil away with a handkerchief. He pays no attention to that, either. His face is once again transformed, and as I come close to him a faint hum is audible. He is actually humming to himself. Oh, Joshua, Joshua.

My mother Ethel, who monitors and ministers to all my humours, realises that I have had more than enough of my son.

She turns to him, as to a knight errant, and says, 'Here, my lad. Come and take care of your old grandma for a change!'

Her smallness, her unimportance and her dependence divert him. He returns to this moment, gives her one of his rare smiles and proffers his arm. Thank God, he has learned some manners at the preparatory school. Pray God he will learn more at boarding-school.

They walk off together slowly: an odd couple. Was he her favourite grandchild? I wonder. She had doted on Sarah as on me, but related far better to Joshua. Perhaps she found his inadequacies more comfortable than Sarah's gifts.

Giles and I have a few words with the vicar: one of those robust and modern pastors who encourage pop groups to perform in church, and have laughing games of table-tennis at the local youth club. He has correctly placed us as present-day non-believers, using the church as a traditional background against which to act out our baptisms, marriages and deaths. We have nothing in common.

He says to our frozen incredulity, 'Of course, I realise that is difficult for you to believe that Sarah is with God, but indeed she is. Only her body was interred today. Her soul is free and joyful.'

He ventures further, watching us carefully for signs of hysteria or disapproval. 'We cannot explain why a beloved child should be made to suffer as Sarah did, and be deprived of life so young. I can only say that if we have faith in a power greater than ourselves, and a destiny which is meaningful even though we cannot interpret it, then comfort will come. Mourn, and ye shall be comforted. Were you churchgoers I should say – trust in the Lord.'

Which is the last thing I shall do.

I never knew my own father, who died in the war, and my mother's God was and is a narrow-minded, unforgiving and unsociable deity. So God the Father meant nothing to me, though I paid Him lip service until I left home. An adult in a sceptical age, married

to an intellectual man, I had no need of religion. Now, as far as I am concerned, He has blown any chance He ever had. In my judgement the Lord, if He exists, has proved Himself to be either incompetent or sadistic.

Sarah died bravely and died slowly. A quicksilver child, she had never been patient. Leukaemia taught her patience. Endless, unbelievable patience, with treatment, with pain, with the knowledge that all this suffering could not save her. She forgave us our ignorance, who could not lighten her darkness. In the end she was bald and blind and beyond our reach. My daughter.

My eyes sting and I clutch my husband's arm. To hold tears at bay I remark upon the young man who has shared the service with us, and is still standing beneath the yew trees. Giles turns his head and glances covertly at our uninvited mourner, puzzled and perturbed.

'Do you know him? Is it someone we've forgotten?' I ask.

'*I* don't know him!' says Giles emphatically. 'But I suppose he must be here for some reason.'

He hesitates, thinking. He is irresolute. Then he makes up his mind.

'Stay here a moment, Rina,' he says. 'I shall have to find out.'

I brace myself for unwanted conversation with passing mourners who desire, or feel obliged, to stop and speak to me.

'Marina, my dear, what can one say? That lovely little girl!'

I should have liked a private funeral, but Sarah's long dying became a public concern. They are all here. Our friends, her friends. Adults, children.

'Such wreaths, Marina. I never saw such wreaths!'

Against my express wishes, against my very grain, they send their pierced blooms to flutter and freeze and die on my child's grave. We, too, have had to give

a wreath, because it would look strange if our tribute were less imposing than the others. Our cushion of white and yellow daffodils is set in Oasis, and has Sarah's name picked out in scarlet tulips. It is intensely pretty and she would have loved it. But best of all I like the large and small bunches of spring flowers sent by children, because they can be collected afterwards and given to the local hospital, so that someone can enjoy them. Flowers are for the living, and should be enjoyed in the lifetime.

'You must come and stay with us, Marina, as soon as you feel able. We promise to wait on you hand and foot, my dear.'

And after this ordeal comes another, the funeral feast. If it is called a feast. Up north they call it a funeral tea. 'They buried 'im with 'am!' Is that a saying or a song? I can't remember. Well, we shall bury Sarah with an especially splendid cold buffet and excellent wines. As hostess to such an event, how shall I strike the balance between private desolation and social warmth? What more will they expect of me?

'Darling Rina. So wonderful. You've been so wonderful all along. I say no more, darling. You know how we feel. You know where to find us.'

If only they would leave me alone. If only I could be left to lie on Sarah's grave and cry for her, call for her. Sarah. Sarah.

But I continue to mouth platitudes and to remain composed.

The meeting between the two men takes only a few minutes. Giles gives the impression of being courteous but firm. Our mourner receives his words with suitable mortification, bows his head, replaces his hat, and walks quickly away. My husband stands there for a few moments, looking after him, seeing him off the premises, as it were, and then returns.

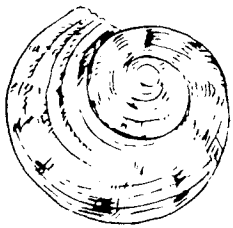
Apparently the reason for his presence is neither

mysterious nor poignant. At any other time Giles would be jaunty, grinning at the absurdity of the situation. But his face is sallow, his smile a mere grimace.

He says, for my ear alone, 'No one we know, or who knows us. Just some nutter who likes attending other people's funerals! I asked him to have the goodness to leave us alone.'

This news gives a final air of unreality to the occasion. My husband takes my arm and we walk away, leaving our daughter by herself for eternity in an ocean of flowers.

TWO



March 1975

I have been up in Lancashire, nursing my mother through a sharp bout of bronchitis. She caught a cold at Sarah's funeral and was really ill at one stage, coughing and crying, 'They might as well bury me with that little lass!' An attitude which helped nobody. As soon as our Dr Guthrie said she was fit to travel I drove her home and stayed with her for ten days while she convalesced. This was easier on all of us.

Quite apart from the pall of misery hanging over the entire household, Giles's kindness, Joshua's devotion, and my most hospitable efforts can never disguise the fact that my mother is not at ease with us, nor we with her. This is only partly due to our different life-styles. She is not at ease anywhere but on her own ground, so much of a hermit has she become. Her insularity is further complicated by a total lack of trust in herself and others, and her conversation is laced with worries. She doesn't want to be a nuisance to anyone, she says for the hundredth time. And for the hundred and first, 'I should never have left Mrs Greenhalgh in charge of the shop!'

The corner shop in Salford has been in my mother's family since the turn of the century, providing a modest living for two generations of widows and fatherless daughters from two world wars. Virtually a museum piece in a run-down area, it is certain to be demolished sometime in the future and replaced by an office block, council flats or a supermarket, but I hope that will be after my mother's death. The shop is Ethel's home and her being.

So I took her back, and also took myself back, because I could find no solace in my immediate circle. Mourn, and ye shall be comforted, said the vicar. But people have different ways of mourning, and none of them seem compatible. Friends avoid the subject of Sarah, lest they upset me. Giles is taking out his grief in work and silence. And if I see Joshua's secret smile or moving lips just once more I might be driven to slap him.

Inwardly Ethel is delighted to have me to herself for a while and to vaunt me and my apparent devotion before her neighbours. Outwardly she bemoans the trouble she is causing, and frequently leaves her bed to do so. Clutching a crocheted shawl modestly to her throat, she displays the skirt of a winceyette nightdress, a pair of old blue-veined ankles and scuffed carpet-slippers.

'As if you hadn't enough without this. And to think of a lady in your position, serving in a shop. Whatever will Giles say . . . ?'

'He'd think it was amusing, Mother. After all, I'm used to serving the public. An estate agent's office is only another sort of shop.'

'A sight posher shop than this!' she replies tartly.

Despite years of failure and exasperation, I try to bolster her self-image. 'Shops are shops are shops, Mother. I don't mind and Giles doesn't mind. Now, please will you go back to bed instead of shivering

on the stairs? I'll bring you a cup of tea as soon as the rush-hour's over.'

'Rush-hour! What rush-hour?' she cries scornfully.

'Between the children coming out of school and the mothers doing last-minute shopping for high tea. I'd call that rush-hour, wouldn't you?'

I have pleased her. The shop has a rush-hour, like London traffic. She stands there smiling tentatively, in her sick-pink nightdress, small and old and cold. God knows where she bought the thing. I sent her a couple of enchanting Welsh red flannel gowns with tucked bibs and frilled collars and cuffs, and have never seen them since. This garment is strictly utilitarian and devoid of style and charm.

'Off you pop!' I say humorously, covering my impatience.

She drives me dotty at times and we have nothing in common apart from the blood tie, which too often constricts. But because I loved my daughter and know how much my mother loves me, I feel guilty that I can't return her love in adequate measure.

Curiously, I find life more bearable here than in London, though a dozen times a day I am reminded of the chasm between her standard of living and ours. The front parlour upstairs is set aside for a myth known as 'visitors'. In this she keeps her uncut moquette three-piece suite, her floral carpet, framed photographs of her wedding and mine, and a sprigged china tea-service in a glass-fronted cupboard. Though everything is dusted each day, polished once a week and spring-cleaned annually, I can only remember it being used on one occasion, for Grandma's funeral. My wedding reception was held in a chic little restaurant near Putney, and Giles and I paid for it.

There is one other sacred place in the household. The back parlour sideboard has been set up as a shrine to my father, who died for his country in 1943. We

never knew each other, and I have felt the lack of that vital relationship since early childhood. For years I pretended he was alive and would one day march round the corner of the street and claim us. But I was roundly discouraged from such fantasies, and gradually relinquished them. He was not a local man, so no one really knew him. There was no family on his side to remember him for me, nor were my mother or grandmother imaginative enough to re-create him. Instead they set him up as a symbol of his generation, an unsung hero, and made him a mere obituary notice in my life. Set on a lace doily and flanked by a couple of matching vases, his image stares uncompromisingly at the viewer. His brows are thick and dark and straight. His mouth beneath the dashing moustache is firm. An intensely masculine man with a hint of recklessness. I wish I had known him.

The rest of the house is a muddle of draughty passages, narrow stairs and chill rooms, of worn lino and odd rugs, and the sort of beaten-up furniture you see on a rag and bone cart. She lives in the back parlour behind the shop, stuffy and cosy, uses unmatched crockery bought from market stalls, nibbles and sips like a church mouse, and grudges the purchase of a new dishmop. Her income is small and her independence great. Giles and I would like to give her an allowance, but this she will not permit. When we try to help her unobtrusively she treasures our presents but does not use them. Yet it is not poverty which forces her to deprive herself of comforts but lack of self-regard. My mother is not worth much in her own opinion. She has always been like this. With great difficulty I persuade her to turn on the one-bar electric fire in her bedroom, pleading her bronchitis and the wintry weather. I expect she turns it off as soon as I go out.

But in her eyes I am the most wonderful person in

the world, and on the rare occasions that I visit her she casts economy to the winds. All the luxuries we have given to her she saves for me. The electric blanket, the feather duvet and pillows, the pretty sheets, are on my bed. The dressing-table displays linen and lace mats I brought her from Belgium, a set of tortoise-shell and silver brushes. Her own contributions, on the bedside table, are a blue pottery bowl of assorted fruit, violets in a jar which (judging by its shape) once held Shippam's Paste, and (until I gave up smoking last year) a packet of my favourite brand of cigarettes, a Present from Blackpool ashtray and a box of matches in a red silk knitted cover.

In my youth I accepted this homage as of right, and lived up to the image she created. Even my name set me apart. Marina, after the Duchess of Kent. Lancastrians do not take kindly to airs and graces. Local children called me Lady Muck to my face. I was not allowed to play with them. Unfortunately, the sort of children my mother regarded as proper company were not allowed to play with me. So I worked my way up and out, in solitary pride and self-regard, and re-created myself, and married a man who was also on his way up in the world. As they say round here, I did well for myself.

Usually I am regarded as an exotic stranger and the social exchange is stilted. But this time my mother is ill, I am running the shop, and I have lost a child. Service and suffering make us temporarily equal. There is genuine compassion for me, as well as a sneaking satisfaction at watching me weigh out their goods and give them change with a smile and a thank you. Conversation improves.

And for me it is a distraction from the void I must confront when I return to London. I have some sense of identity here. They remember me as I used to be. They admire and envy, even if they dislike or despise, what