

Home

by Madeline Bayley, age 12

My family and I were forced out of our house by the credit crunch three months ago. We are now living in a hotel ten miles away from where we used to. It was devastating losing our house, because we had a beautiful place- a whitewashed cottage on the outskirts of the city where we now live, in a gloomy hotel, which is totally different to our old place. When we first moved there two years ago, when I was ten, it was a neglected place, yet it was like stepping into a fairy tale when we walked up the garden path, past the tangles of undernourished plants in the dry soil that lined it, towards the front door, which had evidently been painted in the past, but the paint had peeled and straw was falling off the thatched roof. I remember crossing the threshold and staring around the hallway, taking in the criss-crossing beams on the ceiling. I heard Mum conferring with the salesman on the doorstep. Abbey ran past me into the house and ran into the separate rooms, saying, "Can I pick my bedroom?"

In the end, we bought the house. We redecorated the place when we moved in. We repainted the front door yellow, and painted the walls of the different rooms. My bedroom was pale blue, my favourite colour, with a view of the green and gold fields and great oak trees with huge strong boughs, perfect for climbing, and translucent green leaves that dappled the ground beneath them with soft light in the summer. I had a lot of perfect, dark wood furniture, that contrasted somewhat with the airy, light room- a little bookcase for all my books, a chest of drawers and a wardrobe for all my clothes, a bedside table for my pretty lamp with the pale pink lampshade with the dark pink roses on it, and a bed with a pink duvet and pillow embroidered with little flowers and a gap underneath for my boxes of toys and more books. I remember waking up every morning and putting on my dressing gown and slippers to go down to breakfast. I remember eating my toast (without butter, of course!) with Mum, Dad and my little sister, Abbey. I remember dashing back upstairs to get dressed and hanging my dressing gown on my bedpost, instead of putting it back in my wardrobe. I remember kissing Mum and bad goodbye every morning as Abbey and I walked out the front door. I remember walking down the lane, overshadowed by the silver birch trees and alive with birds calls, to reach the bustling road that we would walk across to get to the school.

I dreamed this one night. It was magical to relive the times in that cottage in the country. When I woke up, it was almost unbearable to find myself under a musty grey blanket in a dingy hotel room, no longer in the past, when I had been ten, but in the present, when I was twelve. The curtains were not quite closed, and the dull orange light of a few solitary streetlamps was permeating the darkness of the room. Far away, in a distant street, I could hear the drunken yells of people meandering home from the pub. I rolled over and tried to get back to sleep, but it was impossible now that I was awake. Mum, Dad and Abbey were all asleep, lost in their own dreams. I wondered if they even missed the cottage we had once lived in. I missed it. Since I had left, I had never been the same. It wasn't the same waking up in a room with a view of the dirty, colourless buildings and roads littered with broken shards of glass and crushed cans, in a room that I shared with three people. It wasn't the same going down to breakfast and eating in a restaurant, where the toast and the cereals alike were soggy and tasteless. It wasn't the same, going upstairs and throwing my dressing gown onto my bed, instead of putting it over a bedpost. It wasn't the same

sharing the bathroom with the rest of my family. It wasn't the same getting a taxi to school every morning. It wasn't the same kissing Mum and saying goodbye at the school gates, watched by all our school friends and classmates alike. Nothing was the same anymore.

The school holidays used to be the best few weeks of the year. I had so much to do. I would invite my best friends, Adele and Michaela, around to the cottage and we would trek across the grassy field beyond the back garden fence, climb the tallest and strongest oak and talk for hours on end, until the sun went down and bleached the landscape red and gold. I would play with Abbey in the garden with her plastic dolls, pretending that they were heroic adventurers in search of incredible things. I would go to the park and play games on the climbing frames with Adele, Michaela and sometimes Harriet too, then go to the sweet shop and buy a bag of sweets to share, before going back to Adele's house for a refreshing glass of lemonade. At the hotel, we had hardly any money, and I was afraid to go wandering around the streets alone, so most of the time, I was stuck in the hotel room with nothing to do. More often than not, the pain became too much, and I ended up crying into my pillow, because I couldn't stand being shut away from the world like this.

One Sunday morning, I woke up so early that the streetlamps were still aglow outside the window. Knowing that I wouldn't be able to get back to sleep, I got out of bed and got dressed into my old pale blue and purple T-shirt and jogging trousers, which hadn't been washed for at least a week, before sitting on the windowsill, staring out at the depressing grey scene outside, and wondering.

I imagined the magical cottage, our magical cottage, the one with the yellow front door, the whitewashed exterior walls and the rooms painted in different colours, belonging to someone else. I imagined a young girl sitting on her bed in my bedroom, which had been painted a different colour. I imagined another family sitting on their sofa in our living room. I imagined the front door of the house painted a different colour and different flowers planted in the garden. I imagined another girl climbing up my oak tree with her friends. It was unbearable to me. I felt pain stab at my heart and my vision became blurry with tears. I wiped my eyes and stared out of the window again, but not really seeing anything.

We went down to breakfast at half-past eight. The food counter was laden with toast, cereals, eggs, bacon, beans, mushrooms, and hash-browns. I got my usual toast with no butter with a bowl of cereal with soya milk. Mum, Dad and Abbey tucked into plates of bacon and eggs. Mum peered at me anxiously over the table, but I pretended not to notice (I had been a vegan ever since I had seen a film about where our food comes from in Primary Four. Mum had been annoyed at this, and had been constantly persuading me to eat meat and dairy products again, but I hadn't cracked under the strain). I tucked into my toast, while the others attacked their plates, which were crammed with food.

After breakfast, we all tramped back upstairs to get dressed. As I was already dressed, I sat on the windowsill again. While Mum was in the bathroom, Abbey approached me.

"Why are you sitting there, Jayne?" she asked me.

I shrugged. I didn't feel like going into the matter with Abbey. She was too young to understand how I felt.

Abbey opened her mouth to say something else, but luckily, Mum emerged from the bathroom at that moment, wearing her turquoise and dark blue, stripy, long-sleeved T-shirt and her old jeans.

"Jayne, we're going down to the lounge for a while. Are you coming or not?" she asked, crossing to the desk and examining her hair in the mirror. "No thanks", I replied. "I'll stay up here and ...er..."

I was spared the trouble of inventing something that I would do while the others were away by Abbey moaning, "I can't find my book, Mummy!" which gave me an opportunity to slip past Mum into the bathroom. I dashed over the threshold, slammed the door and locked it.

"Well, see you later, Jayne!" cried Mum, over the sounds of Dad jangling the keys to the hotel room. "We'll be back for you at lunchtime, I expect. Julia wanted a few words with me. Bye!"

I heard Dad and Abbey muttering words that I didn't catch over the clinking of coat hangers on a metal rail, as Mum searched for their coats in the wardrobe. Then, I heard them go. The door closed behind them with a snap.

I sat down on the edge of the bath and buried my face in my hands. I didn't think I would ever be able to go outside this room again. I wanted to be in here so that I couldn't look out at the dismal sight outside the window and contemplate the empty hole inside me that was the loss of our perfect cottage. I wanted to stay in this warm, safe room forever, and never leave.

I thought back to one particularly happy day in the summer holidays at the beginning of August, just before we were due back at school, when Adele and Michaela had arrived to see me, bringing Michaela's little sister, Madison, along as well. We had played in the house for a bit (40-40, interspersed with glasses of cool lemonade and homemade biscuits), before we climbed over the back garden fence, and hurried across the fields towards our favourite oak tree. Climbing this tree was very simple if you knew how to do it. You had to place your foot on a knot on the trunk, seize the small yet sturdy branch above, and hoist yourself up. Then, it was simply a question of finding your way through the branches to the huge boughs above, where we normally sat and talked. Once we were all up there, we had a magnificent view of the patchwork of fields that stretched for miles. We sat for hours in the tree that day, talking and laughing as the sun moved across the sky and the pattern of the dapples on the ground changed, until the sun began to melt into the landscape, and the sky was red shot with gold. Reluctant though we were to get down from the tree, the knowledge that it was nearly dinnertime and that we had only had biscuits to eat since midday made us climb down through the criss-crossing branches and beat the familiar path back to the cottage. Then, Adele, Michaela and Madison had to go home, and I stood at the front door and waved to them until they were out of sight.

I had been watching the whole thing in my head as I sat there, as though it was a film that had been waiting to start. Even when the flashback was over, I didn't move. Even if I had wanted to move, I couldn't have. My whole body had frozen. Then, just as the tears began to prick my eyes, I heard the door of the hotel room open. I heard Mum and Dad's low, worried, serious voices, and what sounded like Abbey whimpering. I stood up, suddenly alert, and slunk over to the door to eavesdrop.

"How could they?" asked Mum in a quavering voice. "How could they do this to us?"

"Where are we going to go?" asked Abbey timidly.

"I don't know", replied bad solemnly. "But we'll find somewhere. Where's Jayne?"

I took that moment to exit the bathroom, and found Mum, Dad and Abbey, all shoving handfuls of clothes into suitcases.

"What's going on?" I demanded, staring from one stricken, tear-streaked face to the next.

Mum swallowed hard, then said, "Now ...this will ...b-be a bit of a...a shock ...for

you...and, well it was for us ...but...um..."

"Just tell me, Mum", I said calmly, looking directly into her eyes, which were sparkling with more tears.

"Oh, honey", she gasped. "I'm so sorry, but...we've ...been ...been..." "Been what?!" I asked urgently, desperately wanting to know. "We've been asked to leave", sobbed Mum.

For a second, I stood still. Then I said, "Why?"

"We've...got...n-no...money to ...pay to ...s-stay here any m-more", sniffed Mum.

"Since bad 1-1-lost his j-job, we've had v-virtually no money. We can't s-s-stay here anymore." Suddenly, the strain became too much, and she broke down completely and wept. Dad looked me in the eyes, and suddenly, something happened.

My jaw dropped. My stomach plummeted. My head span.

"We...w-w-we...can't ...stay here?" I stammered. Dad nodded grimly.

"But, b-b-but..." I stuttered. "Where will we go? Where will we stay? What will we eat?"

"We can deal with that later", said bad quietly over Mum's sobs. "First things first, we have to get out of here, or they'll force us out. Come on, pack some clothes."

He thrust a suitcase into my arms, and then returned to shoving his own possessions into his bag.

Half an hour later, we had packed our bags, handed in our room key, and were wandering the streets, arguing about what to do next. "I think we should go to Grandma", said Abbey.

"We can't, remember?" I said gloomily. Grandma hadn't wanted us to visit her since Abbey had got into a wild game with her dolls, and had thrown one of them across the room towards the mantelpiece, where her most prized vase was standing, and the vase had smashed all over the floor. Grandma had shooed us out of the house immediately. We had never been invited back since.

"We could go to ...er...my mate from work, Harry?" suggested bad.

"You said he lives in a tiny flat. There'd be no room for a whole family in there, as well as him and his wife", snapped Mum, heaving her heavy bag onto the pavement, as we crossed the road.

"You think of something better!" yelled bad.

"Theresa Graham's house! She'd be happy to let us in!" "Her kids hate me, remember?"

"Shut up!" I shouted at them, as Mum opened her mouth to retort. They both stared at me, shocked.

"We could go to Adele, or Michaela and Madison", I said half-heartedly. Mum didn't even reply. Dad stared at me.

"Or, er, we could go to ...er...the cottage ...again ...or something ...I mean..."

My voice trailed away. Dad was staring at me in disbelief, his eyebrows raised. Mum was ignoring me. Abbey was too busy sniffing to hear me.

We trailed around the city for the rest of the morning and afternoon, trying to find a place to stay. Finally, we had to accept that no one was prepared to take in a family with no money for rent, let alone food or clothes. By nightfall, we were still walking around. Abbey was howling. Mum seemed to be on the verge of tears too. Dad had been silent for a long time, and I knew that he was thinking hard about possible places where we could stay. I hadn't spoken since I had suggested going back to the cottage. I was worried that Mum was angry with me for telling her and bad to shut up, and that we would find nowhere to stay the night.

"Well, that's it", said bad at last, turning to face his family. "What's it?" I asked. "We'll have to find a place down aside-street or something", sighed bad, leading us down a dingy road. It was rather eerie, and smelled horrible. I stared at bad, my eyes filling rapidly with tears.

"Here?" I asked, my voice faint and croaky. Dad put his arms around me, at the same time throwing his bag onto a spare patch of gravel.

"I'm sorry. It's our last hope", he muttered. He sat down on top of his bag, and sighed. Abbey wasn't howling anymore- she was shivering and clutching Mum's arm for support. Mum was white as chalk, and appeared to be on the verge of fainting.

"We're homeless", she whispered faintly.

"I'm sorry", repeated bad.

"It's not your fault", breathed Mum, sinking onto the ground beside him and putting her arms around him. "Those people who forced you out of your job, they're to blame, but not you."

I sank onto the ground too, my legs finally becoming too tired to support my weight after a whole day of scouring the city for shelter. Too exhausted to do anything or say anything to anyone, I lay down on my suitcase, and fell asleep at once.

In the middle of the night, I woke up, stiff with cold, the glacial wind chilling me to the bone, my stomach aching with hunger, frightened and lonely. I slid off my bag and lay down next to bad in an attempt to warm up. When I couldn't get comfortable, I stood up and left them all lying there, deciding to go and find some food. I didn't know how, but I was going to feed my family, even if I ended up scrabbling through a dustbin.

The long road beyond the side-street was lined with shops and houses alike. I set off down past the doors, feeling nervous, shivering in the cold night air.

Most of the shops weren't open, but at the end of the road in the town square was a small, grubby, twenty-four hour shop. I went inside and approached the counter, where an old man was standing, reading a newspaper. He stared at me as I came in. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed, looking me up and down, taking in my unwashed clothes and my pinched, unhealthy, white face. "What happened to you?!"

I shrugged. I didn't want to tell a stranger about the events that had taken place in the last twelve hours, about how my life had changed so much in one day.

"Well, what can I do for you?" the man asked.

"I just ...sort of...thought that you could ...help me", I said faintly. The man raised his eyebrows, so I elaborated.

"I..my family ...doesn't have any ...any money", I muttered. "We haven't got anywhere to live, and we haven't got any food to eat ...or..."

My voice trailed away. The man stared at me sympathetically.

"Oh, dear, I'm sorry", he said. "We can't give away things for free."

I nodded. "I..I understand", I choked. The man noticed, and hastily said, "Well, I can give you a bag of crisps or something. Is that going to be enough?"

I nodded, and the man reached behind him for a bag of plain crisps on a shelf behind him. He handed it over with a smile which plainly said, "Good luck." I smiled back, then left the shop.

Back in the side-street, I knelt down beside bad again, and shook him awake. He opened his eyes, and blinked confusedly.

"What do you want?" he murmured.

"I've got food!" I whispered urgently, shoving the bag into his hands. Dad

merely continued to blink for a second, but then, he seemed to understand. "Wake Mum and Abbey", he said, opening the bag and smelling the contents. I nudged Mum and Abbey, and they awoke, sitting up and staring around. "What's going on?" asked Mum.

"We've got food!" I said delightedly, shoving the crisps under her nose. We all tucked in at once, cramming the crisps into our mouths as though we hadn't eaten for days. But the bag was empty within five minutes, and when we all settled down to sleep again, I knew that the others felt the same as me hungrier than they had been before the crisps.

A cold wind swept the side-street, and the empty crisp bag blew up into the air. The light of the streetlamps was becoming blurred as my eyes began to close. The taste of savoury crisps was still on my tongue, my stomach growled and I longed for more. And suddenly, the terrible truth dawned on me.

I couldn't survive.

We couldn't survive.

We were just going to die here, in this dingy street.

Suddenly, I desperately wanted to see the cottage again. If I was going to die, I wanted to die in the shadow of the house that I loved the most, among the rhododendron bushes in the front garden, that were probably shrivelling in the cold winter weather. I wanted to creep back into the house and sit in a corner of my old bedroom. I wanted to climb the oak tree and lie on its strong boughs when I died. I stood up so suddenly that I staggered sideways. I was going to go to the cottage, even if it took me all night. I walked down the side-street, and started up the road, away from the shop where I had bought the crisps, away from my family.

I stumbled out of the lane, overshadowed by the birch trees, brittle and bare without their leaves, which were scattered around the path, and saw the cottage, gleaming in the light of the crescent moon, which had slid out from behind a cloud. I saw the leafless rhododendron bushes in the flower beds on either side of the garden path, the yellow front door and the thatched roof, exactly as I remembered them. I ran down the driveway, and went up the front path, desperate to get into the house. But the door was locked.

I had expected this, but I felt disappointed, and a little rejected, as though the house had forgotten that I was coming to visit.

Instead, I trekked across the field towards my old oak tree, scrambled up to my favourite bough, and settled down to sleep. I wondered if I would just die here, in this tree. I felt terrible, deserting my family in this troubled time, but the desire to come back to the place where I had been happiest had been too strong.

I stretched out on the branch, staring up at the navy sky with the curve of silver that was the moon, striped by the branches of the tree. Suddenly, I felt so peaceful, I wondered if I had died without realising it, and was in heaven. Before I knew it, my eyes were closing, and I was asleep.

Two days later, I had had nothing to eat and nothing to drink, my throat was parched and my stomach was empty. I had not left the tree for two days, and I was beginning to lose hope of surviving. But somehow, I knew that, if I did die, I would be happier, wherever I went next.

The last thing I remembered doing was staring over at the cottage, thinking about Mum, Dad, Abbey, Grandma and my best friends, Adele, Michaela and Madison. And at that moment, I realised that I would terribly regret not saying goodbye to

them, and all the other people I loved. I felt in my pocket, and fished out a notebook and a pen, which I carried everywhere with me. I wrote a note to Mum. I wanted to write some last words to her, even if she would never read them.

"Mum,

How can I begin to explain what came over me? I didn't leave you all because I didn't want to be with you. I left because I wanted to come back to the cottage that we used to call home. I miss you all terribly, and I fear that I won't be alive much longer, as I haven't eaten for days. Give my love to Dad and Abbey, and tell them that I love them more than they will ever know. I love you too, Mum. I'm sorry that I can't be with you while I die. My heart will be with you always, and even in death, I will be with you all in spirit.

All my love for all eternity,

Jayne."

And that was the last thing I ever did again.