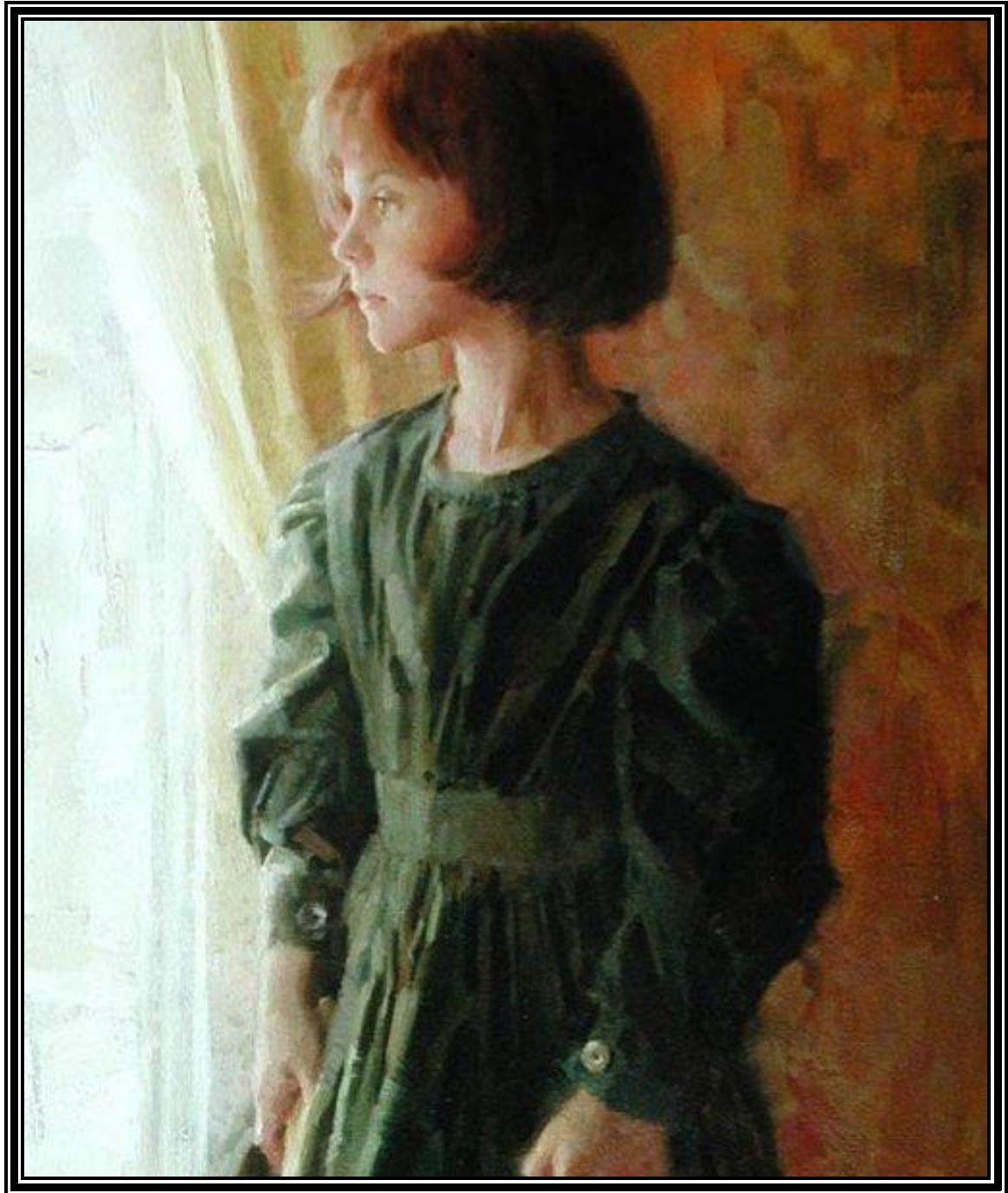


First Kiss

Bradley Stoke



The rain which only a moment ago seemed like a mere threat was now in full pelt. There had been nothing more than pinpricks on the face or hands a mere five minutes earlier. Then it graduated to huge drops which struck the grey, dry earth and splattered it with a polka-dot of brown. And now, its smell, let alone its insistent rhythm on the roof of the hide, was unmistakable. A gust of wind pushed against the latched door, not strong enough to burst it open, but certainly fierce enough for a puddle of dampness to seep through the gap at the door's bottom and along the woodwork on its upper edge.

How could the weather change so quickly? One moment, the day had been calm, a few grey clouds scattered about amongst the fluffy white ones and the odd chink of blue through which the sun occasionally shone, pooling shadows beneath the spreading beeches and oaks. Now, the sodden earth was erupting in puddles that coalesced and widened over the slithery clay soil. And the driving rain hammered down on the ferns and shrubs of the woodland through which the path had led.

And it had led here, to this hide, where there were no birdwatchers, perhaps because they were all doing their bit for King and Country, to give Jerry a bloody nose, and to show Hitler that the British had real spunk. Inside, as secure as in an Anderson air-raid shelter from the rain, the downpour was an incessant rhythm beating against the walls and roof, while what little light there was entered through the hooded narrow gap where men with binoculars would normally be gazing at the striding herons and wading coots still outside in the huge lake, wholly undeterred by the ferocity of the elements.

Edward strained up on tip-toes to peek through this gap at the pounding rain

that agitated the water surface into a mosaic of widening ripples, while rivulets slid off the leaves of the dark overhanging branches and cascaded onto the reeds below. The sky above was a thoroughly filthy coal-black colour, like the ashes left in the grate when the fire had been left to snuff out. Or maybe like the smudged newsprint on Edward's fingers when it was finally his turn to read the Daily Mirror, impatiently turning the pages to the cartoons. He especially liked the *Jane* comic strip: the girl who sometimes managed to lose most of her clothes to the delight of British servicemen and to the dismay of his tut-tutting mother.

“Golly! It really *is* raining outside!” Edward exclaimed. “It’s raining cats and dogs!”

“Not real cats and dogs?” Katherine wondered. “That’s just a saying, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is, silly!” Edward said. “It means it’s raining lots and lots. Listen to it! There’s tons of rain coming down.”

“I don’t like the sound,” Katherine confessed, staring at her bare knees as she knelt cross-legged in the corner of the hide, only her face and knees at all illuminated by the narrow band of light coming through the gap where Edward was looking out so intently. “It’s like when the planes come at night. When they drop bombs. It’s frightening! Do you remember when they bombed Armstrong Avenue? That was horrid.”

“Armstrong Avenue?” Edward wondered, turning his head round to regard Katherine, his ears sticking out prominently from the sides of his short cropped head, the few still remaining freckles pale and pink against his maturing features. His voice was on the cusp of breaking: sometimes like a radio broadcast cracking into so many

inaudible fragments, sometimes cohering into a childish chime and sometimes hinting at the man's voice to come. "That's near where you live, isn't it? We've not had many bombs fall round our way. Jerry must like your part of town."

"It was horrid! Horrid!" Katherine repeated. "Does it look like it might stop raining? I didn't think it'd get as bad as this. Mummy said it might rain a bit. She tapped her barometer thing in the hallway. She said: don't stay out too long, it might rain. Didn't she?"

"I don't know. I only met you in the park, remember."

Katherine nodded. The park seemed such a long way away now: its swings, slides, bowling green and football field just memories after Edward and she had slipped through the gap in the wooden fence and strolled along the path to the lake where the birdwatchers would often congregate. Katherine would like to see a birdwatcher now, in his tweed jacket and brogues, flat cap on his head and binoculars secured around his neck and resting on his chest. Perhaps he could help get them away from all the rain.

"It's not stopping, is it?" Katherine asked.

Edward shook his head. "Not yet it isn't. But it can't last forever. We'll wait for it to stop, or at least not rain so much, and then we can run back home."

Katherine sniffed. "I hate the rain! It's made my shiny shoes so muddy! Look! And I've got some horrid black splodges on my nice white socks. Mummy'll be ever so mad when she finds out!"

Edward laughed. Girls! They were hopeless! No wonder it was men that went off to fight the war and the women stayed behind: working in the factories and driving

the buses and teaching in the schools. War was man's stuff. It wouldn't do if you were a girl and worried about getting muddy shoes while Jerry was goose-stepping all over France and Russia. He leaned up against the walls of the hide to look at the rain outside. His bare knees rubbed against the rough planks of the wall, his toes straining to support his whole weight. He was taller than he used to be, the ruler marks on the yellowing kitchen walls didn't fib, but he was still not as tall as he'd like to be.

He settled back down on the flat of his shoes, one sock still pulled up to just below his knee, the other flopping above his scuffed black shoes. He turned round and regarded Katherine, in her blue and yellow dress, with the glass bead necklace around her neck and over the slightly raised bumps on her chest. Like him, Katherine was also growing towards that mysterious destination of puberty, but in such an obviously different direction. Edward was at the age now where he was beginning to realise that the girls of his own age, equally awkward in their early adolescence as he, were developing towards being the girls of his masturbatory imaginings, the ones whose images he and the other boys had perused guiltily by the bicycle sheds, their full voluptuous bosom teasingly hiding a mystery that demanded to be revealed, and, beneath whose tight trousers, which only models or Hollywood actresses ever really wore, there was a mysterious area that excited the boys' imaginations. Edward had seen nude sculptures of course, but Billy said that real women had something else under their skirts which they never showed in sculptures. Billy's sister had told him about it, but except for it being hairy he couldn't remember too much of what she'd described of it.

Edward sat down next to Katherine, an uncomfortable swelling under his

shorts which he'd long ago found out did not mean that he needed to go to the toilet. Although when he was younger he recalled rushing outdoors into the privy, only to be puzzled by the perplexing behaviour of his willy. And if George hadn't told him what his Daddy had told him, who knows when he might have learnt just what this strange new phenomenon meant?

"Gosh! That looks funny, Eddie!" Katherine commented, pointing at his tented shorts. "What's that?"

Edward wasn't sure whether to boast or blush. Being on the threshold of so many things, he chose to boast. "It's my cock," he said, uttering a word that still sounded awkward to his ears.

"Your 'cock'?"

"My willy. My pee-pee. You know, Kathy!"

"But it's sticking up, like a sort of soldier."

"It does that!" boasted Edward. "It means I'm growing up to be a real man."

"Really!" Katherine exclaimed, her cheeks burning, but their gleam hidden in the shadows of the hide. "And what did you call it?"

"A 'cock'. It's called a 'cock'."

"That's silly!" Katherine laughed. "Why not call it a willy. Why name it after a bird?"

"That's what you call it when it grows up and starts getting stiff."

"Gets stiff?"

Katherine's face had a very strange look about it, her eyes shining in a way that Edward was in no way able to interpret, although they shone out relatively

brightly in the darkness. She looked down at Edward's strangely crumpled lap, the woollen fabric of his shorts pushed up enough for the legs to let through more than a comfortable breeze of rain-chilled air. She glanced back at her own lap, and held her gaze there for longer than Edward felt was right for something of so little apparent substance, before returning her gaze back to Edward's lap.

"Let's see," she said.

The hormones struggling for supremacy in Edward's body erupted into a blush which burnt his cheeks with almost flu-like intensity, while his penis became, if anything, even stiffer, the glans pushing through the constraints of his foreskin, rubbing against the cotton fabric of his underpants and adding an extra degree of distress to his predicament.

"What did you say, Kathy?"

"Let's see!"

"What? Look at my cock?"

"Yes!" Katherine said firmly, and quite breathlessly.

Edward nodded. Well! Why not! He just hoped Katherine wouldn't tell his Mum. He undid his belt, pulled down his shorts to his ankles, pushing his arse off the ground to ease them down. And then, seeing Katherine's large brown eyes widen at the glimpse of erect penis through the crack at the front of his underpants where he'd normally put it through when he needed to wee, he repeated the operation with the last cotton frontier, until around his ankles were bunched not only his wayward socks but his shorts and underpants.

"Golly! It's big!" Katherine exclaimed.

Edward nodded, looking down at his perfectly average sized erection. It was a sight for which he was acquiring a greater affection. His penis stood out erect, perhaps five or six inches perpendicular to his waist, a thick garden of hair bunched densely at its base and one or two sprinkled along its length, a shovel-shaped purple glans at the tip, puckered and sensitive, even released from the constraints of the underpants, and its length, a twitching pole of manhood, on which the veins were so very clearly delineated.

“Your balls are big as well!” remarked Katherine with awe.

“Balls?” wondered Edward. He’d never thought much about them, but so they were. And then suddenly, ooh! That was an odd feeling. “Urrggh! Why’d you touch them?”

“I don’t know!” admitted Katherine, surprised at the intensity of Edward’s reaction from such a gentle prod.

“What do you think, Kathy?” asked Edward, his bosom swelling with pride.

“It’s a funny thing,” remarked Katherine, with some indecision. “I knew it got big, but not sort of like this!”

Edward sat down on the wooden planks of the hide, his legs as wide apart as they could be, now that he’d totally removed his shorts and underpants, and his penis standing out swollen with pride and manliness between his thighs.

All the while, the rain, which had seemed so much the centre of the two adolescents’ attention a few minutes ago, had gradually lessened. The thundering against the walls and roof of the hide had dropped down to the merest whisper of a beat, like a drummer in a big band teasing his cymbals with a brush. And the smutty

grey skies had broken into fragments. And then several fragments parted to let through a window of blue and the brilliant rays of the late Spring sunshine.

“Ooh! Look!” Katherine exclaimed, as the sunlight illuminated Edward’s penis, showing it up as brilliant white and startlingly purple, casting a black shadow on his still-hairless thigh. “It’s such a wonderful sight!”

And then, Katherine leaned forward, her plaits falling on the shoulders, her glass beads hanging down below her neck and themselves glinting in the sun, and her lips pursed in the way she might squeeze them when she kissed her mother goodnight. She brought her face closer and closer to Edward’s penis, until the beads rested on his thigh, the ribbon of one plait trailing down the outer side, her eyes wide open and full of a wild gleam that frightened Edward, who had never before suspected that eyes could contain so much unrestrained desire, and then she pressed her lips against the purple head of Edward’s penis.

It was brief. It was barely two or three seconds of contact. But a few seconds that caused Edward to tremble in an uncontrolled and unsuspected way, his eyes almost popping out of their sockets as he strained to watch while feeling equally unable to move, his penis jerking quite slowly and steadily more upright. Katherine’s wide-open eyes and her creased cheeks appeared both to mock and to be in awe of him. Her lips were yet to be rouged by her mother’s lipstick. And the teeth behind those lips were still somehow too large for the face that contained them. And those lips then telescoped away from Edward’s fevered gaze, as did the brush of Katherine’s plaits and the coldness of her glass beads, leaving him feeling somehow more naked and vulnerable than he’d ever felt before, his shorts and underpants by his side,

splinters in his bare bum and his penis twitching between retreat and triumph.

And that was that.

Edward's penis was back inside his shorts and underpants, its prominence steadily becoming as much a memory as that of the heavy rain now totally dissipated by the breaking clouds and the fresh rays of the sun. The hide was no longer so dark and mysterious, and a new urgency gripped Edward and Katherine as they reflected that a birdwatcher might yet choose to come this way. And anyway, wasn't it going to be teatime soon? So, the hide was abandoned and the two youngsters hurried along the path back to the hole in the fence at the park where they'd met by chance only an hour or so earlier.

When Katherine got home, her mother had also returned from the munitions factory where she worked, her nails chipped and her hands coarse from the work she'd been doing. There was still a dark smudge across her cheeks. She was perched on the stool in the kitchen smoking a Woodbine and smiled as her daughter entered the room.

"You didn't get caught in the rain, sweetie?" she asked. "I was ever so worried you might."

"No. We sheltered in a hide. By the lake."

"*We*?" wondered Katherine's mother. "Who's *we*?"

"Me and Eddie," said Katherine, feeling a little nervous.

"Eddie? A boy is it? Not a girl's name, like Edwina?" wondered Mrs. Kenyon, narrowing her eyes.

Katherine nodded her head, feeling the chastisement of her mother's eyes.

“What did I say about you and boys? Or you and girls for that matter? You *were* a good girl, weren’t you?” She lowered her gaze towards Katherine’s crotch, hidden beneath her flowery dress.

Katherine nodded her head again. “I’ll never let anyone touch me there, Mummy!”

“It’s for your own good, dear!” said Mrs. Kenyon, blowing out a ring of blue-grey smoke. “You don’t want people to look there until you’re much older. You don’t know what they might think. I know it’s normal for a girl to want to ... to want to get to know boys better, but it’s just not normal, is it?”

“No,” agreed Katherine. “Not with the war and everything.”

“Indeed not,” sighed Katherine’s mother. “Nothing’s normal. Your Daddy in North Africa and Hitler dropping the bombs and you growing up to be quite a different kind of person to what we thought you might be... It’s not normal at all!”

Katherine felt awkward as she always did when her mother hinted at things which even in the modern world was difficult to discuss without embarrassment. “What’s for tea, Mummy?”

“Tea, Kathy?” Mrs Kenyon said with a broad smile, ruffling up her daughter’s hair with the hand not holding her untipped cigarette. “I got some rashers from under the counter at Mr. Deacon the Butcher’s. He’s a gent. Saved them for me. And there’s some jam I got from Mrs. Banks. She makes her own, you know, from the strawberries growing in her garden. We’ll have a real feast, you and I!”

Katherine smiled. Her mother was so kind to her. Although it was difficult for her working in the factory, and looking after her daughter, and all the while anxiously

waiting for a parcel of mail from some undisclosed address in the British Empire where her father was defending Freedom and Democracy. The two of them busied themselves in the kitchen, before settling in the living room to listen to the BBC Home Service, seated around the dining table that still seemed somehow empty without Mr. Kenyon in his place at the table insisting that they say grace before tucking in to their victuals.

And then, not long after the last sip of tea from the delicate china cups, there came that high, piercing note that Katherine recognised so well.

“Oh no!” she said. “It’s been ages since the last raid! I thought they’d stopped!”

“No such luck!” Katherine’s mother sighed, hastily gathering together a book and her knitting needles. “At least we’ve eaten first! It’d be horrible to stay out all night hungry!”

While Katherine and her mother sheltered in the air-raid shelter, with no sounds at all to disturb them, no roar of aeroplanes or the ack-ack of anti-aircraft fire, and the occasional piercing howl of a fox or owl, the girl’s mind wandered back to the similar time spent in the hide with Edward. When Katherine had compared the downpour of the rain to the downpour of the bombs that destroyed so much of Armstrong Avenue. That really had been like sheltering from rain. Only a much more deadly rain. One that tore houses apart from the inside. One that ripped sofas into shreds. One that left the shell of houses with the wallpaper facing the street, sometimes with pictures still hanging from the wall and sometimes with coal-scuttles still beside fireplaces.

The memory of Edward's erect penis was prominent in her mind, making it impossible for her to focus on the text of her many times re-read *Swallows and Amazons* novel, whose words swam unfocused under the candle-light. Katherine glanced up at her mother who was knitting some gloves in the pale glow of the paraffin lamp. What would her mother say if she knew? But at least now she had something for comparison. And she now knew a little of the smell and even taste of a boy's willy. And he called it a 'cock'. A strange word, so unlike the word 'penis' that her mother and the eminent London doctor employed to name it. Cock. Penis. Willy. Katherine wasn't sure which word she liked the most, but 'cock' being so short and abrupt somehow sounded like the naughtiest word. And the fact that it sounded so naughty made it sound altogether more exciting.

"Touch wood. Quiet night so far, Kathy sweetheart!" exclaimed her mother.

Katherine nodded. Most times the siren went off it was like this. Well, not even Mr. Pike, the Air Raid Warden with the tin helmet, knew what Hitler's dastardly plans were. She imagined Hitler with his generals in a big room giving orders to say which road and which hospital or school to bomb. Why did he choose Armstrong Avenue that night? That was so frightening. The bombs dropping only a few roads away, the vibrations shaking the shelter, while Katherine gripped her mother around the shoulders, her back being patted and her hair stroked, gaining comfort from the embrace of her mother whom she loved so much. And all the while those horrible thuds, thumps, crashes and even, she fancied, the sound of rotor-blades as a dive-bombing aeroplane swooped low over their house. And what had poor little Susan McDonald done to deserve losing her house in the bombing? Why did Hitler tell the

Luftwaffe to bomb her house? And all those other houses?

And then, rather sooner than it did on that other terrible night, the air-raid sirens called out the all-clear. And as it always did, when that piercing sound resonated through the Anderson shelter, there was a kind of lifting of a weight from inside Katherine's chest. Though on that previous night, there had also been a kind of dread and apprehension that maybe her own house had been hit by one of Hitler's horrible bombs. She could imagine Adolf Hitler himself in the plane laughing as he dropped one of those tear-shaped things on her collection of Arthur Ransome books. And maybe burnt that old teddy bear of hers into a cinder as well.

"Well, now we can sleep in the comfort of our beds tonight, sweetest!" said Katherine's mother gathering up her knitting and lifting up the paraffin lamp so that it reflected some very strange long shadows across her face.

And not have to smell pooh in the chamber pot, either, thought Katherine, but not voicing her thoughts.

Mother and daughter emerged from the Anderson shelter, where it was built at the very end of a garden now dedicated to the cultivation of vegetables, whereas once it had sported a lawn and flowerbeds. Mrs. Kenyon led her daughter along the paving stones they'd laid out together early on in the war when ration cards were quite the new thing, and kissed her gently on the forehead.

"Now you can sleep under your comfortable quilt, sweetie. Isn't that nice?"

"Yes, Mummy!" said Katherine, reciprocating the kiss by hugging her mother round the shoulders and then dashing upstairs.

She stopped at the landing to look down at her mother, who hesitated with an

extinguished candle and her half-knit gloves. She smiled at her mother, who smiled sadly back, and then scurried into her bedroom.

And then, at last, the privacy that had been denied her for so long, while she sheltered with her mother. Katherine washed herself, scrubbing her teeth furiously and impatiently, before pushing open the door to her bedroom. She hoped her mother wouldn't come to kiss her goodnight, as she used to do when she was younger, and pulled her clothes off as quickly as she could, the memories of her brief encounter in the hide so vivid to her, that first kiss, which she fancied she could still taste on her lips, and then stood, naked, in front of the wall-length mirror that was framed into her tall wardrobe.

'*Cock*'. That was what Edward had called it. And it had been pretty big, Katherine thought. Huge! Of course, Katherine had only ever seen one for real in her whole life, and therefore at least knew that the penises on those classical statues, whose pictures she saw in those art books her father had left behind, were smaller than the real thing.

Well, not that much smaller, Katherine reflected, holding her penis between her thumb and forefinger, but when it got stiff, as it was getting now, as she remembered the time she'd kissed Edward's cock, it was much much bigger than the one sported by, say, Michaelangelo's David. But Edward's was bigger even than her own! Perhaps hers too would grow to those dimensions, but was it possible? Her body was taking on the contours of a woman's body. The mounds of her bosom were swelling to new dimensions and her nipples sometimes felt as sensitive as her glans.

Katherine knew she was a special girl. Her parents had made her aware of this

from as early an age as she could remember, just as they assured her that her oddness wouldn't mean that they loved her any the less. And now, that strangeness becoming more pronounced as her body grew in two separate directions both independently and simultaneously, Katherine also knew that she was in many ways not as strange as she'd feared. Having seen, having even felt and tasted, Edward's own erect penis, she now knew that the worries and anxieties that had so frightened and worried her, and about which she knew, just knew, she couldn't divulge to her mother, now she equally well knew, and that discovery relieved her more than she could say, that other penises, and not just hers, also became stiff, and erect, and pushed against the constraints of one's underwear.

But one worry still remained, as Katherine lay naked on her front on her bed, stroking and fondling her erect penis, her head burrowing into the comfort of the feather-filled pillow, her buttocks thrusting slowly but urgently with a rhythm that Katherine had never been taught, but came from deep inside her. Did other penises also do what hers did when hers got so stiff? Was she alone in having a penis that behaved in such a strange way?

And as the semen exploded, warm and gooey and smelling so rich, over her fingers and onto the sheets, Katherine wondered also not just whether other penises ejaculated as hers did, but whether they left boys quite as exhausted as hers left her after it had released its liquid wealth. Would boys also be left, hot and sweaty, the drool on the pillow damp against the cheek? And, after that first kiss in the shelter of the hide, whatever her mother said, this was something that one day, Katherine was determined to find out for sure.