



EMMA ELSON

Growing up in Shakespeare's Stratford upon Avon filled Emma's mind with tales of the theatre and the magical world, and she began writing her own stories aged just seven. Now grown up, Emma still holds on to childlike magic and wants all her stories to fuel the adventurous side of her readers.

When she's not scribbling in her notebook, Emma loves to snuggle up with a good book, or sing her heart out in the kitchen when no one's listening. She spends most of her time flitting around the world, often exploring countries that might spark a new adventure.

About Under the Velvet Seats

It's 1940 and the blitz is in full blaze over Coventry. Bobbie feels trapped more than ever. Dad's dead, she's stuck in a mindless job, and her dreams of the theatre are slowly being squashed by everyone around her. As she struggles to act 'normal' in a country torn by war, Bobbie can't stop thinking about the audition she found in one of her theatre articles.

She's determined to go, but when she discovers something in the ruins of an old cinema, and the biggest downpour of bombs makes it to the city, Bobbie is suddenly left with no home, no mum and a new responsibility. There's trouble around every corner as Bobbie struggles to make a new life for herself. Can she manage it? Or was everyone else right all along?

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UNDER THE VELVET SEATS

Chapter One

The Telegram

Dear Mrs Alice Goodwin **STOP**

It is with greatest sympathies and regret **STOP** That we inform you that on the 3rd September 1940 your husband Private Frederic Goodwin lost his life in battle **STOP** He fought with valour until the end

STOP

Mum read the telegram in our pokey living room. Her voice was steady, but her hands shook, crinkling the paper she held. When she had finished, the grandfather clock continued to tick softly, making our silence almost deafening. I stood and listened to the quiet, my breaths deep, falling in time with the incessant ticking.

My eyes locked on to the mantelpiece above the fire, on the photographs of our lives. There was the holiday at the beach in Brighton, the bicycle rides through Devon, and my favourite photograph of all; a picture of all three of us. We're in our best clothes, the ones we usually save for church, and we're huddled together outside the main doors of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. We all have grins across our faces. Mum has one because she has an excuse to wear her favourite pearl necklace, Dad's grinning because he has the chance to eat Sherbet Lemons without being told he had had enough, and me? I'm smiling the biggest because it's my birthday and we're at the theatre.

It was the last photograph we took together. Dad made sure to develop it

before he left for the RAF, and Mum found a frame to put it in. We both made a habit of kissing our forefinger and placing it on Dad's cheek before we went to sleep.

Now I kissed my fingertip one last time and said goodnight to our old lives.

Chapter Two

Auditions

It was November before I rediscovered the stage again. Mum and I had spent three months wallowing in self-pity, refusing visitors and only accepting tokens of care from our neighbours. But now I was tired of moping and wishing that Dad was alive. I kept hearing his voice in my head saying, 'Chin up, Bobbie Bud, no use crying over spilt milk.'

It wasn't spilt milk this time, but the idea was the same.

I sat on the floor of my bedroom with a pile of magazine clippings and posters in front of me, and a confused best friend behind me, trying in vain to tease my hair into a style.

Flora stuck a kirby grip into the back of my thick brown hair and I winced.

'Stop moving, Bobbie.' She leant over my shoulder, picked up one of the clippings she was using as a reference and squinted at Katharine Hepburn's perfectly polished face. 'This is ridiculous. There must be magical pixies living in that hair style. There's not a single human being who can pull that off.'

I took the clipping from her. 'It can't be that hard.'

'Do it yourself then.'

'I can't reach the back of my head, can I?'

'Oh, bother you.' She shoved another kirby grip into my hair. Flora was not easily deterred when it came to perfecting the look of the stars. I smiled a little as she busied herself again.

'Don't move now.'

I turned my attention back to the pile of clippings and sighed as I read another article about the latest opening shows in the West End. They were all

I thought about. Standing up there as the crowd cheered and clapped was my idea of bliss. Yet, living in Coventry, a pokey, little city in the centre of England, my hopes of getting there stopped at the local theatre group. And what with this horrible war, even the theatre group looked likely to disappear. The only props available for our most recent show, *A Christmas Carol*, were made from whatever was left over from building the latest school Anderson Shelter.

I turned the page over and looked at the auditions listings, a weekly section in *West End Now* magazine. Even though all the auditions were for London, and never needed child actors, I'd spent years hoping that one day I'd find the perfect audition for myself.

And suddenly, I did.

It glowed on the page in big, bold text, the words blasting up from the paper and into my head. I double blinked, certain I was reading it wrong.

I wasn't.

It was perfect.

It was meant to be.

I squealed and leapt from the floor, clutching the page as tight as possible.

I'd startled Flora; she had her hand to her heart and her eyes were wide.

'What did you do that for?'

I thrust the page under her nose. 'Look, look, look!'

'I'm looking, I'm looking ... what am I looking at?'

'The listing, Flora. Look at what it says.'

She snatched the page from my hand, rolled her eyes in a fond sort of way, and read:

Young ladies! Your time has come. Searching now; ALICE! The Shakespeare Memorial Theatre is hosting an open call audition for young girls between twelve and sixteen to play the part of Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*. Auditions run from 20th November.

We didn't say anything for a moment. Our mouths gaped open in awe and our cheeks were flushed pink with excitement. I suddenly felt the need to sit down, and perched myself on the edge of my bed. 'I've finally got a chance. I could do that audition.'

‘It’s certainly perfect.’

I sighed in bliss. ‘To perform on the Shakespearean stage ... how magical. I’d be perfect for the role. I’m fourteen, and look, I’m not too tall. I already know all the lines from the book, and my hair would look great with a white hairband in it!’ I thought back to the photograph on the mantelpiece, our last theatre visit. My last happy moment. I could recreate it, couldn’t I?

‘What about your mum though?’

‘What about her?’

‘Would she let you go?’

I slumped. ‘Oh.’

It was true that since Dad’s death Mum had done everything in her ability to stop me from setting foot out of the house. She rarely let me go into the city centre alone, always insisting she had shopping to do as well, even though she always bought her groceries from the shop at the end of our road. I bit my lip as I imagined asking for permission.

Flora sat next to me on the bed. ‘She wants you close, doesn’t she?’

I sighed. ‘For how long though?’

Flora placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. ‘It’s only been three months, hasn’t it? I’m sure she’ll relax soon enough.’

I doubted it. She was different now: all pinched and quiet, all rules and chores. Mum used to sing, laugh and act out my theatre group lines with me. My dreams of performing were once hers too, now they were nothing but nonsense to her. We used to be a whole family of theatre nuts. What were we now?

There was a knock at my door, and Flora and I both jumped. Mum walked in without waiting for an answer and crossed her arms over her floral apron. There was a nasty frown on her face. ‘Roberta Goodwin and Flora Ainsley, you’re making far too much noise. I’ve told you before, if you’re going to be in the house, keep it down.’

‘Sorry,’ we chorused.

‘It’s time for you to go now I think, Flora. Bobbie has chores to do and she’s been delaying them long enough.’

Flora hopped off the bed obediently and gave me a hug. ‘Will you still be at theatre group tonight?’

I nodded. ‘Wouldn’t miss it.’

‘See you, Mrs Goodwin. Thanks for letting me come over.’

Mum’s face softened. ‘Anytime dear.’ She liked Flora possibly more than me now. She was obedient and quiet – the opposite of me. With her perfect, blond hair, blue eyes and demure character. I was reckless with messy brown hair and bold, daring eyes and a too curious attitude.

Flora disappeared, and we heard the front door shut behind her. Mum picked up a handful of article clippings off the floor. There was an awkward silence.

‘What have you been reading?’

I shrugged. ‘Just articles.’

‘Anything interesting?’

I opened my mouth about to tell her about the audition listing but changed my mind. ‘Just a few about the theatre and the war. There’s going to be a showing of a pantomime in Covent Garden for the soldiers this Christmas.’

Mum simply nodded.

I pressed harder. ‘I think it’s a splendid idea. Don’t you?’

She dropped the articles back on the floor. ‘Your chores need doing. There’s a mountain of washing in the back garden that needs sorting. Hurry up.’ She left me and went back downstairs. I felt numb. How could she have been so quick to shut down a conversation about the theatre? It was as though even the thought of it terrified her. She knew I wanted to act, and she knew that would mean I would move away from her.

I sulked my way downstairs, avoiding eye contact with the smiling faces in the photo frames that decorated the walls. Despite the grins, I felt as though Dad was judging us both. Neither of us were doing what we wanted. ‘I’m trying, Dad,’ I whispered. I wasn’t giving up on Mum yet.

I walked through the kitchen, ignoring Mum, and headed outside into our tiny garden. I grabbed the washing basket by the back door as I went. In our garden, the clothes swung lazily in the winter breeze and our allotment was nearly ready for harvest. Mum was proud of the allotment; England was being encouraged to dig for victory, and she was certain her carrots would win the war for us. I snapped off the clothes pegs, screwed up the clothes and threw them into the basket, not caring if they creased.

A sudden low rumble shook my body and I craned my neck upwards to

the cloudy sky. A plane was coming closer and closer. An allied one? I held my breath as the wings came into view. A Spitfire. I sighed in relief and listened to the roaring engine swoop over my head towards the city. The noise was so loud I clapped my hands over my ears, and my body buzzed with excitement. It was over as soon as it came, and reality, in the form of a clean bedsheet flapping in the wind, slapped me in the face.

How I wished the roar of the engine was of a cheering crowd instead.

I thought about the audition as I resumed pulling the washing off the line. Would Mum let me go? And even if she did, would she let me out for rehearsals every night if I got the part? I was meant to be growing up now, putting the stage behind me and focusing on my work. The horizon of family life bloomed up ahead like a nasty pimple on the end of my nose. The idea of that life made me feel nauseous. I picked up the washing basket, leant it against my hip, and went back into the kitchen. I dumped the basket on the table and slumped into a kitchen chair, my mind filled with the theatre.