Author of *The Axeman's Carnival* and *Pet*

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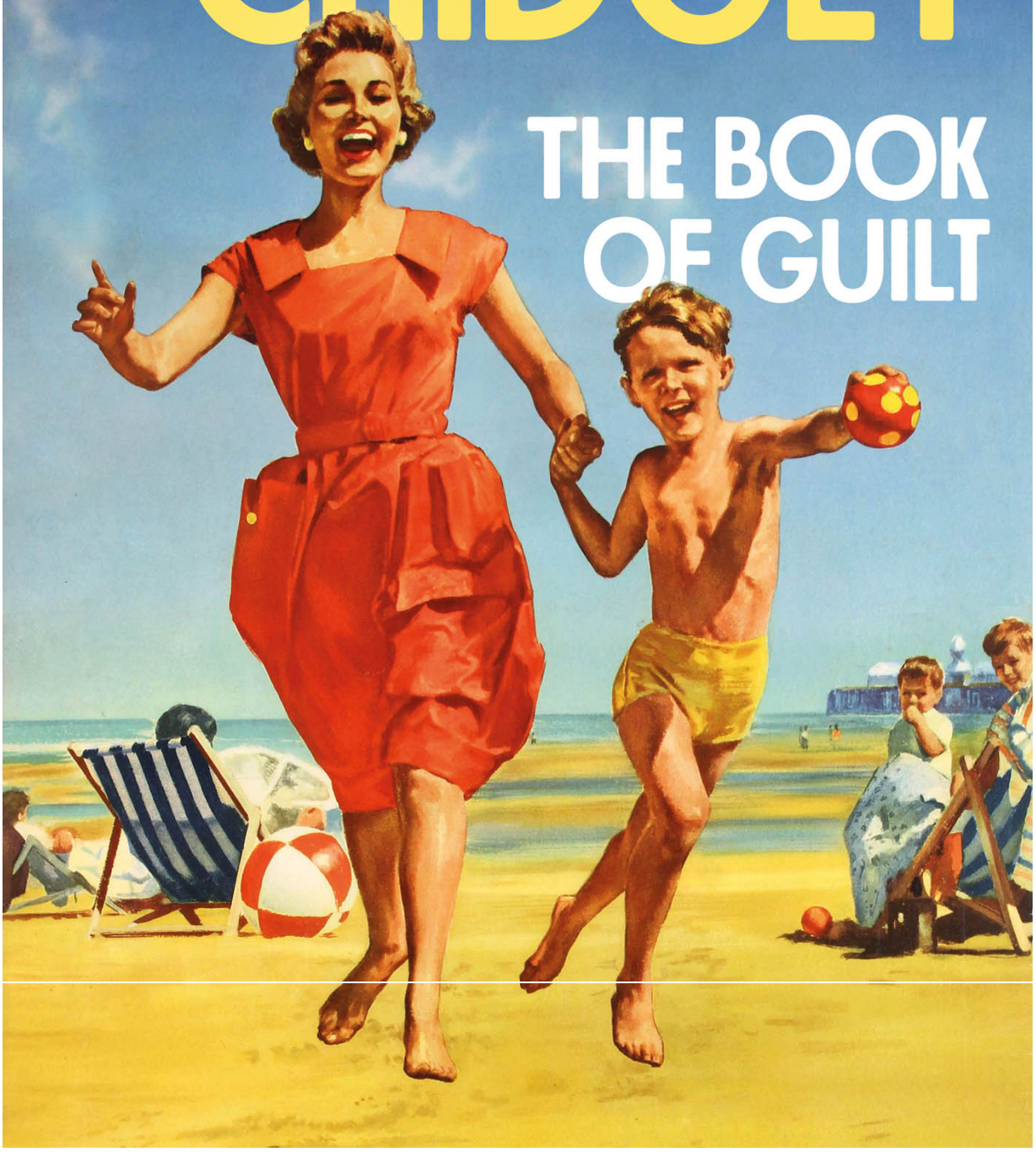

THE BOOK OF GUILT

ALSO BY CATHERINE CHIDGEY

In a Fishbone Church

Golden Deeds

The Transformation

The Wish Child

The Beat of the Pendulum

Remote Sympathy

Pet

The Axeman's Carnival

FOR CHILDREN

Jiffy, Cat Detective

Jiffy's Greatest Hits

CATHERINE CHIDGEY

THE BOOK OF GUILT

JOHN MURRAY

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For Bill Manhire

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PART ONE

The Book of Dreams

Vincent

Before I knew what I was, I lived with my brothers in a grand old house in the heart of the New Forest. It had blue velvet curtains full of dust, and fire surrounds painted like marble to fool the eye, and a panelled Entrance Hall hung with old dark mirrors. An oak griffin perched on the newel post of the creaking staircase; we touched its satiny wings for luck whenever we passed, and whispered the motto carved on the scroll across its chest: *Verité Sans Peur*. We can't have been far from the ocean – I realise that now – but we'd never been beyond Ashbridge, never seen the water. We dreamt of it though, the three of us, conjured a gentle hushing as constant as the hushing of our own breaths, our own blood. Close, we thought, to the sound children heard before they were born, so that something in us – some old instinct – made us long for it. One day we'd go there, we said, to the place where all life began.

The house was one of the Sycamore Homes purchased in 1944, after the war, to accommodate children like us – although numbers dropped over the years. Perhaps you've heard of the Scheme . . .? But then again, perhaps not. For the most part, for decades, everyone ignored us – never gave us a second thought. And afterwards, people didn't like to talk about the Homes because they didn't like to feel guilty, which I can understand. Anyway, they're all gone now: boarded up or bulldozed, or turned into flats that bear no trace of what happened there.

Ours was for boys. It stood on the edge of the woods just across the river from Ashbridge village, and was called Captain Scott after the great doomed explorer. The outside was painted white, but here and there it had flaked away, and you could make out the rust-red brickwork showing through. The grounds were enclosed by a high flint wall with broken glass set in the top to keep us safe; we were very special, our mothers told us, and needed looking after. If we went outside early enough we could see the low sun shining

through the pieces of glass, shards of amber and emerald alight in the quiet morning, and the flint opaque, like chunks of gristle in a white rind.

My brothers and I spent a lot of time in the garden, collecting horse-chestnut leaves big enough to cover our faces, cutting worms in half to find out if they would regenerate, digging for ancient coins and treasure because we'd heard of farmers unearthing fabulous hoards, and who knew what was under our feet? We trapped centipedes and kept them in matchboxes and jars, caught peacock butterflies and blew on their powdery wings that were patterned with eyes to scare away predators. We made sacrifices to the garden gods: little cairns of beetles, moss pressed into the shape of a bird, a circle of heart-shaped petals plucked from the white camellia bush, a snail rammed onto a sharp stick like the head of a traitor on a pike. In the fernery we studied ourselves in the gazing ball – a mirrored sphere that changed us into peculiar creatures and stretched the Home behind us out of all proportion. Good boys, helpful boys, we gathered peppery watercress from the nearby stream to put in our sandwiches, and mushrooms to make the stew go further, but we knew not to touch the death caps, or even the false death caps, which were also poisonous. When we were quite alone we poked at patches of long grass in the hope of flushing out adders, though we kept that to ourselves. From the ancient lemon tree we picked the knobbled lemons and took them to Mother Afternoon, who cut them in half and juiced them by hand on the glass lemon-squeezer, pausing every few moments to scoop out pips or pulp. The discarded skins gathered at her elbow, their insides all silky and ruined, and she poured the juice into ice-cube trays and froze it.

We never dreamt of trying to escape. Those days were happy days, before I knew what I was.

Our mothers had their own quarters in the North Wing of the house, which we hardly ever saw, and each day they came to look after us in shifts. They weren't our real mothers – we understood that from the start – but they seemed to love us as their own; often they said they'd like to gobble us up. At any time we were permitted to take the albums from the shelf in the Library and look at the photos of them holding us as babies on their laps, shaking rattles at us, bathing us, testing the heat of our milk on their wrists

to make sure we wouldn't burn our little mouths. It was all documented. There we were, lined up with the other Captain Scott boys in our highchairs, banging our spoons on our teddy-bear plates. We had no memory of these scenes, but our mothers told us how hungry we were, how they used to tickle our tummies and say *You'll pop! You'll explode!* In the albums, too, curls of our downy hair tied with ribbon – how white it was, how fine – and labelled *Vincent*, *William*, *Lawrence*, because otherwise you couldn't have told one curl from another. Our first teeth, also labelled, also identical. We knew how special we were when we looked at the precious little bits of us our mothers had saved. Oh yes, they loved us. If they had favourites, they never showed it.

Mother Morning's shift began at 5 a.m., when we were still sound asleep. Silently she unlocked the door in the upstairs passageway separating their wing from ours, then crept down to the Kitchen to relieve Mother Night. They had a quick chat, keeping their voices low so as not to risk waking us, Mother Night passing on to Mother Morning any information that might be useful for her to know. One of us was talking in his sleep, one of us had wet the bed again – ordinary things like that, we supposed. While we slept on, she made her way to the Laundry, where our dirty clothes waited at the bottom of the chute to be washed, and our clean clothes waited to be ironed and folded and given back to us – green shirts for Lawrence, red for William and yellow for me. We were always nicely turned out; that was important, Mother Morning said, because people judged other people on things like clothes and hair and fingernails – it was just human nature.

At half past six, tucking The Book of Dreams under her arm, a floral housecoat buttoned over her plain skirt and blouse, Mother Morning tiptoed up the stairs to our room.

Sometimes we woke before she entered, and we made ourselves lie there still as stones and think of our dreams and only our dreams. Underneath us the sheets had wrinkled and twisted, and we longed to wriggle our bodies clear of the bulky seams where the candy-striped cotton had been repaired – but if we started to move, if we so much as opened our eyes, the dreams might trickle away to nothing, and we'd have to say we were sorry but we couldn't remember. Mother Morning would speak to us in her sad voice

then, as if we had hurt her, jabbed at some soft and secret part of her with the nail scissors that were not a toy. More often, she woke us, touching our shoulders and whispering our names. On those mornings we scarcely knew she was there; we were recounting our dreams to ourselves, we felt, still more asleep than awake. Lawrence slept nearest the door, so she went to him first, sitting on the edge of his bed and opening her Book, entering the date and his name, waiting for him to speak. Next she went to William, who slept by the old fireplace, and at last she came to me, over by the windows. I had to block my brothers' voices as they gave their accounts, otherwise their dreams would creep into my own, and that would really mess things up, said Mother Morning. That would seriously muddy the waters.

'Vincent,' she'd murmur when it was my turn, her pen poised, her freckled face and auburn curls beginning to take shape in the brightening room. 'Tell me everything you remember.'

'I'm wandering across the empty heathland and out of nowhere a pony rears up in front of me,' I'd reply, or 'I'm eating my lunch and I bite down on something hard, and it's one of my teeth come loose,' or 'I'm wrapping a present and I want to keep it for myself, but Mother Afternoon says that's as good as stealing.' My brothers and I always spoke in the present tense for our sessions with Mother Morning, pretending we were still dreaming the dreams, because that was how she preferred it. The past tense, she said, distanced us from the material; it was full of forgetting. 'I'm trying to light a fire, but the matches won't work. I'm sewing name tags into my new clothes, and every time I look the pile is bigger, and I don't know how I'll ever wear that many jumpers.'

She wrote it all down in her Book, day in, day out. All the nonsense, the garbled fragments. Sometimes, when I think of those mornings now, they smudge and flatten into one long morning, one long dream. Our sleepy voices. Our crochet blankets made by Mother Night slipping from our beds. The feather pillows that huffed out invisible dust. Mother Morning's pen scratching across the page as she noted every detail.

You probably don't remember your own ancient dreams, let alone somebody else's, so you might not believe me when I say that I remember one of

Lawrence's dreams with total clarity. It's such a long time ago now – March 1979 – but I remember it because it was the first I heard of *her*.

'I'm chasing a girl through the woods,' he said, still half asleep.

'A girl?' said Mother Morning, something different in her voice. Something brittle. 'How old is this girl?'

'About my age – about thirteen. It's springtime, and I've picked a bunch of bluebells for her.'

William said, 'Lawrence has a *girlfriend*,' and I laughed even though I should have been concentrating on my own dream.

'Quiet!' hissed Mother Morning, who never spoke to us like that. 'Lawrence, go on. What does the girl look like?'

'Skinny. Bare feet. Long black hair.'

'And her clothes?'

Lawrence was silent.

'What is she wearing, Lawrence?'

A pause. The air in our bedroom taut, charged. 'Nothing,' he whispered.

I laughed again; I couldn't help myself.

'*Will* you be quiet!' said Mother Morning. 'Now, Lawrence my darling, do you catch this girl?'

'No. She keeps looking over her shoulder at me, laughing, but I can't catch her. That's the end.'

'Nothing else?' said Mother Morning. 'Are you certain?'

'That's the end,' he repeated.

After we'd made our beds and washed our faces and gone outside for Morning Exercise, William and I tried to find out more. Was she a sexy girl? Was it a sexy dream? We'd just begun to have those, the three of us, losing control of our bodies as we slept, waking to wet sheets that we bundled down the laundry chute. At first we were worried we might be sick, or even dying, but Mother Morning said it was just something we had to take in our stride, unpleasant as it might be for all concerned.

Lawrence shrugged off our questions and did the stretches we had to do at the start of Morning Exercise so we didn't injure ourselves. He grimaced when he rotated his shoulders, circled his hips, raised his bent knees to his chest; his joints had been hurting for a few weeks. She was just a girl, he