

Geraldine

by Sho Botham

It was love at first sight. The quietness of the open-air train station struck Geraldine. She'd never been somewhere so quiet before. She felt as if she wanted to take a big breath into her city lungs and fill them full of country air.

There was only one person waiting on the platform. It must be him, she thought to herself. He walked towards her and rested his hands on her young shoulders. His body language was welcoming but his eyes had a coldness about them. He wasn't entirely what she expected but he would have to do. There was no one else.

Sitting in the front of the shiny green car, Geraldine's eyes were round with wonder. It was the first time she had been in a car. The first time she had seen so many tall leafy green trees. The first time she had seen the patchwork fields of yellows and greens and the narrow canals running along the side of the road providing opportunities for grey herons to do a spot of fishing. Geraldine was silent. It was all so new to her, the countryside.

When he turned the car into a large garden, Geraldine felt prickles running up her back. She had still not spoken one single word since she'd left the city early that morning. She patted the small faded bag sitting next to her, as if it might about to disappear. Her whole worldly possessions were carefully packed inside it. A dull grey, hand-me-down frock from a friend of the family, or so her mother had told her. A, once, white handkerchief with a small daisy embroidered in one corner and a worn, battered lipstick case that had belonged to her mother. Geraldine was too young to wear lipstick but just holding it in her hand made her feel close to her mother as if she was still alive. But she wasn't.

Geraldine's nine years and two months had all been spent in a tiny flat at the top of a run-down building next to a smelly, factory in the city. Her mother had worked at the factory for as long as Geraldine could remember. But the fumes got to her mother's lungs and she couldn't breathe any more.

A round, motherly woman bustled around Geraldine ushering her into the well-kept house. She let Geraldine hold onto her bag sensing its importance, as she guided her gently to the kitchen. Prickles started moving up her back once more. The woman was saying this was the kitchen - it was bigger than the whole of the flat Geraldine had lived in with her mother. It frightened her. She didn't know why she was going to live with the man and this woman, she had never met before.

She knew that they had never visited her mother in the city because in all of her nine years and two months, there had never been one visitor. Her mother didn't like visitors and told her daughter that there were too many steps for visitors to climb.

Geraldine still hadn't said one word. The smell of cooking in the big kitchen made her realise she was hungry. Geraldine didn't have any money to buy a bread roll for the train and she couldn't remember the last time she'd had a proper meal. Her mother died on Sunday and today was Friday so it would have been Sunday morning when her mother last gave her some bread. The woman sat Geraldine down at the big wooden table in the centre of the kitchen, making sure her bag was close by and put a bowl of steaming hot soup in front of her. She added a small plate piled high with chunks of warm bread and told Geraldine to eat.

The woman put her coat on and said goodbye to Geraldine and instantly her back was, once again, alight with prickles. The man appeared and said that Mrs Appleby would be back tomorrow to look after her. He led Geraldine up the polished mahogany staircase and showed her into a large blue room with windows that went all the way up to the ceiling and velvet curtains that went all the way down to the floor. He said goodnight to her and left the door ajar as he returned down stairs. Still Geraldine had not spoken one word. She felt frightened of all the space, of the enormous bed just for her. She had only ever shared a small, hole-in-the-wall bed with her mother. As she climbed into the bed wearing the clothes she had worn all day, she held her bag tight to her body for comfort. The prickles climbing up her back stopped Geraldine wondering why she was in the country with this well-dressed man she didn't know.

It was dark when Geraldine awoke next morning. He knocked and came into her room striding across to the windows and opening the long velvet curtains and letting light flood in. She looked at him in the light. His eyes were still cold. He said, "you'll find your voice, once you get used to being here. When you do, call me, father".