

'Hello, Nancy,' she whispered, brushing her thumb across the corner of the stiff yellowed paper. *'Why have I never heard of you before?'*

Sarah Steele

THE MISSING PIECES
OF NANCY MOON



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*Dedicated to the memory of
my dear and remarkable aunt Pam*

Prologue

Most journeys begin with a goodbye: to a friend or a loved one, often to a lover, and sometimes to a place. Goodbye sharpens the senses, reminds one of what might have been and excites one about what could be. It brings with it a little nostalgia, maybe some guilt or regret, hope perhaps, or even relief. Some goodbyes last merely for a few hours, but some will have to last a lifetime.

It was a muggy evening as they gathered for their own goodbyes, the end to one of those unexpectedly sultry days when city dwellers can't wait to get home and rip off ties and stockings, unbutton collars and loosen girdles and fling their heels across the floor, to open the windows of their flats and listen to the sounds of a city laid bare, finally free of the terrible smogs of winter. The wide glass canopy spanning the station platforms acted as a pressure-cooker lid, trapping the hot, dirty air in a cloud of noise and fumes mingled with the smell of several hundred damp bodies.

Who'd have thought you could get on a train at Waterloo station one evening, and arrive in France the next morning? From Wandsworth to Paris, just like that. She'd looked it up: it was only three hundred miles, the same as Wandsworth to Newcastle – although some Geordies had stopped her at Piccadilly Circus the other day to ask directions, and she reckoned

she'd have a better chance of understanding French. It was only for a couple of months, she told herself. London would still be here when she got back.

The platform was a chaotic tangle of passengers and sayers of goodbyes – family groups locked in tight huddles lest one of their young should break free, lovers exchanging one last kiss – and serious-faced businessmen marching towards their carriages, Crombies flapping behind them and trilbies pulled down over their eyes. She suddenly felt very English and unsophisticated in her hand-made dress, as she watched a Frenchwoman glide past on slim scissor legs, a long cigarette holder in one hand and a small dog tucked under the arm of her inverted-teardrop coat, while a porter scurried after her with her monogrammed suite of matching luggage. A couple of times she felt herself shoved as people hurried to find their carriages and get their orders in for dinner, but she barely noticed, floating above the melee and hearing the bland string of parting conventions that moved back and forth between her mouth and Peggy's as though through a partition wall. The words they both really wanted to say had no place in this public space, with Dorothy and Phyllis standing nearby, so instead they exchanged inanities, filling the last few minutes together with post-office-queue chitchat. The distant chug of the diesel engine did nothing to prevent conversation, even when there was nothing left to say: she missed the screaming of a steam engine gearing up to leave, the smuts floating in the air, that would have provided the perfect excuse for watery eyes. Instead, she looked down to pick at an invisible fleck on her sleeve.

She supposed she had secretly hoped that her parents would

come to see her off, and even if she wasn't surprised that they had stayed away, she couldn't help a sudden sad wave of disappointment, as she thought of Dad by now watching *Z Cars* on the new telly while Mum washed up the egg-and-chip tea they always had on a Monday. She was glad Peggy had come, even though she suspected it was partly to make sure she actually got on the train and didn't change her mind.

'All aboard, ladies and gentlemen. Last passengers for the boat train to Paris.' A uniformed guard bustled along the platform, chivvying the remaining stragglers.

'Well, I'd better be off, then,' Peggy said, and it seemed that one of those imaginary smuts had found her eye too. 'Better get back to Donald and . . .' Her voice trailed away. 'Well, you know.'

'I know.' She tried to smile, but none of the muscles she needed to perform this simple feat seemed to work.

Peggy hesitated, then gave her a quick Nina Ricci-scented peck on the cheek. 'You mustn't worry. Just have a nice time. And watch out for those Frenchmen, eh?'

She couldn't help but laugh. 'You sound like Dad. Now go on, clear off. I've got a train to catch.'

'I hate goodbyes. I wish you didn't have to go. I'll miss you so much.'

And before Peggy could reach into her pocket, Phyllis had appeared with a hanky for her, which Peggy blew into noisily. 'Here you go, Peg. Can't have you looking a state for your Donald when you get home. What'll he think?'

'You get off home, doll. Me and Phyl will wave her off.' She tried not to gasp as Dorothy wrapped an arm around her shoulders and squeezed hard.

Peggy could barely hide her relief. ‘Are you sure? I probably ought to get back – Maddie’s not been settling well this week, and I can’t leave Donald to nurse her.’

‘It’s fine,’ she said. ‘Go, Peg. The girls will sort me out.’

‘Clear off,’ Dorothy said kindly. ‘We can see her off from here.’

‘Oh, wait!’ said Phyllis. ‘We ought to have a photo of us all. Where’s your camera? You did pack it, didn’t you?’

‘Somewhere.’ She pulled the brown leather case out of her overnight bag and opened it.

‘Here,’ said Dorothy, and grabbed a young man rushing to his carriage. ‘Take a picture of us all, would you?’

He looked as though he wanted to say no, but as Dorothy leant her head on one side and pouted at him, he relented. ‘As long as it’s quick,’ he said reluctantly.

‘Here, bunch up, girls,’ Dorothy said, pulling her three friends around her.

One quick smile and they were done. The man handed the camera back and hurried on his way, pausing only briefly to look back at Dorothy.

‘I’d better get going too,’ she said, putting the camera back. ‘See you, then, Peg.’

They grasped hands and tried to find a few more words, but they were both spent, so Peggy squeezed her hand once more before turning away and walking briskly back along the platform. By the time the train pulled out, she would be on the number 44 bus back home.

As Peggy disappeared into the crowd, Phyllis and Dorothy positioned themselves on either side of her, and she wondered how comical they must look: Dorothy towering on one side

in her high heels and equally high white-blond beehive, and tiny Phyllis looking like a station pigeon on the other, dressed in office grey and balancing her buxom chest on spindly legs as her eyes darted around nervously.

‘Don’t you worry,’ Dorothy said. ‘Peggy’ll be fine. They all will be. You just concentrate on that fantastic trip of yours. Wish it were me, lucky cow.’ She nudged her playfully, but failed to raise the laugh she’d been hoping for. ‘Come on, girl. You look like you’re about to enter a workhouse, not go off to the Continent for the summer.’

Phyllis began digging in her handbag and muttering to herself.

‘Phyl, what are you doing? You look like a bloody terrier after a rabbit.’ Dorothy sighed, taking a bored drag on her cigarette.

Phyllis pulled out a small tin and a packet of custard creams. ‘Here,’ she said. ‘Thought these might come in handy. If you get hungry.’

‘They do have food over there, you know,’ Dorothy said, rolling her eyes. ‘She’ll be eating the best snails, not corned bloody beef. Won’t you?’ she added, then laughed. ‘Blimey, you’ve gone white as a sheet, darlin!’ Dorothy opened the handbag hooked across her arm and took out a half-empty packet of Pall Malls that she passed to her friend. ‘Here,’ she said, tucking them in her pocket and snapping shut the clasp on her handbag. ‘This is more like it.’

‘Whistle’ll go in about two minutes, madam. Best get a move on now. Don’t want to miss it, do you?’ A fresh-faced young porter took her case and lifted it onto a trolley, gesturing for her to follow him.

‘Come on, girl,’ Dorothy said gently, dropping her cigarette on the ground and grinding it with the pointed toe of her black patent shoe, ‘let’s get you on that train.’ She took her arm and pulled her along so that she found herself swinging in time with her friend’s trademark sashay, Phyllis’s quick little steps pattering close behind.

She almost tripped as she turned back to see if Peggy had waited for one final wave, but the space where she had stood was already filled with the ripple of passengers now hurrying to find their carriages, and there was no sign of Peggy’s olive-green summer coat and strawberry-blonde hair.

Was that other face somewhere in the crush, coming to say goodbye, or to beg her to stay? Maybe he’d got the day wrong. Maybe she’d written it down wrong.

‘No looking back now,’ Dorothy said, seeing where her thoughts were leading. ‘Onwards and sideways, eh?’ She brushed away the porter’s offer to help her friend into the carriage and pushed her up the steps in front of her.

‘Onwards and sideways,’ she echoed, looking down from the top of the steps. Even this old in-joke failed to bring the wished-for smile to her lips, however.

‘You’re sure there will be someone to meet you at the other end?’ Phyllis said, almost biting her lip off with anxiety.

‘Yes, Phyllis, for the hundredth time, they’re picking me up at the station.’

The guard began to work his way along the long train, slamming carriage doors and shooing non-passengers away from the edge of the platform. She pulled the window down and leant out. ‘Bye, then,’ she said, clasping her friends’ hands

in turn as Phyllis blew her nose heavily into a handkerchief and even Dorothy seemed to have something in her eye.

The whistle blew and the heavy train ground into motion. Phyllis ran alongside it, waving frantically, until Dorothy caught up with her and pulled her back. There was still time to change her mind, she thought as she watched the receding figures of her friends blur into small dots: the train was going quite slowly, and if she jumped off now, she would land on what was left of the platform with nothing more than a red face and maybe a bruised knee.

And then it was too late: the last of the platform had melted away and the engine was cranking up its gears. She had no choice but to see this through.

‘Stand back, please, miss,’ said the guard, gesturing her aside and slamming the window closed. ‘Don’t want any nasty accidents now. Which compartment are you in?’

Her ticket was still scrunched into her fist, and she took it out and tried to flatten it. ‘Here,’ she said.

He peered at it over his half-moon glasses, then pointed along the corridor. ‘Just on your left there. Someone will be along presently to sort out your refreshments.’

She picked up her overnight carpet bag and followed his directions, sliding open the heavy door of number 17, where she found her case waiting for her. The wood-panelled compartment, with its shiny brass and well-worn leather, exuded glamour. One of the girls from work had told her that the Duke and Duchess of Windsor used to travel on this night crossing when moving between Paris and London.

There was a gentle tap at the door, and a smart-uniformed steward who looked no older than sixteen poked his head

through to ask if she required dinner in the dining car, or whether he could bring her a drink before she went to sleep. She had never been able to make the small decisions in life, so she declined dinner but requested a gin and tonic and a hot chocolate, to cover all angles. He nodded, his smart little boat hat bobbing up and down on his Brylcreemed head.

After a minute or two, she let herself out of the compartment, closing the door quietly behind her. She walked along the corridor, mesmerised by the swaying of the carriage and the thunderous rush of southern England disappearing behind them, and wondering who was behind each of the closed doors, their blinds pulled down and hushed voices from both sides of the Channel barely audible above the clackety-clack of the train as it raced towards Dover and the boat that waited there to carry it on to Dunkirk, then the Gare du Nord. Checking the guard was nowhere in sight, she tugged at the window at the end of the corridor, leaning her face into the hot rush of dusky air that carried the scream of the engine with it, oblivious to the instant damage to the shampoo and set she had paid a fortune for, as she watched miles of English countryside relentlessly eaten away and eventually dissolving into black night.

For a moment she couldn't remember which was her compartment, and panicked at the long row of identical doors, until she remembered the number printed on her ticket. While she'd been gone, the bed had been pulled down and made, the soft tartan blanket and crisp white sheet tucked neatly in on all sides, and the bright overhead lights swapped for a soft night light. She gulped down the gin that waited for her on a thick paper coaster embossed with the train company's logo,

and quickly changed into her nightclothes, then took off her broad satin ribbon and brushed the wind out of her hair before settling herself onto the narrow berth.

Suddenly ravenous, she remembered the cheese sandwiches Peggy had made her for the journey, and ate all four in quick succession, washed down with the thick, sweet chocolate drink, only worrying afterwards whether she might lose them down the little toilet during the crossing. She'd never been on a boat before, apart from rowing on the Serpentine last summer, and had no idea whether she had sea legs or not. She'd find out soon enough, she supposed.

So this was it. She was on her way, her wardrobe made and packed with everything she needed for the next few months. She'd even brought her dress patterns with her; it had always been a bit of a ritual to collect mementoes of her favourite times wearing her dresses, and keep them in the original pattern packets. Mum said she was a ridiculous hoarder, but this wasn't hoarding; it was more like a diary, and one day when she looked through these packets and their contents, it would bring back memories of this trip more clearly than any photograph could.

There was no going back. Not for a few weeks, anyway. An amazing opportunity to see a bit of the world at someone else's expense. She had only once ever stayed at a proper hotel, so unlike the little B&B they always went to in Hastings for a week each summer, where you had to make your own bed and clean the communal bathroom when you'd finished with it. She couldn't imagine the French or Italians would kick you out after breakfast and not let you in again until tea, whatever the weather.

She pinned the ends of her hair into whorl-like curls and covered them with a fine-mesh hairnet, then, exhausted, she squeezed between the tightly made sheets of the narrow bunk. Although her body craved sleep, her mind flicked from vignette to vignette, refusing to let go. Eventually, though, even her worst anxieties could not resist the rocking of the racing train as it sang its metallic lullaby, and she spent her last short time on English soil sleeping as peacefully as a baby.