

The Room of Lost Things

by Stella Duffy

Chapter One

Winter. Monday morning. A sofa is placed at right angles to the road, it blocks a third of the footpath and people make their way around it in both directions, one way hurrying for the bus, the other for the train. For the most part they do not complain - for the most part, a sofa in the middle of the street is the least of their worries. It is raining, it is cold, it is January and another year has begun, with gritty sleep still to be rubbed from the eyes of the last. The sofa is exactly 3.15 miles from the statue of Eros, as the crow flies. The crow that sits in the bare branches of the buddleia, picking at ants, screaming at small children. The sofa is slightly closer to the Houses of Parliament, the Savoy, the Royal Festival Hall, the river. This sofa also sits exactly halfway between Brixton and Camberwell, on a road that runs parallel to the bulging Thames, below the tube map's blue water line, signalling a destination black cab drivers rarely appreciate.

Robert Sutton gets up at six thirty, every working day. Winter mornings harder than most, no sunlight to help him out of bed, arthritic knee and aching back and that burn on the back of his hand from the shirt press still not healed and a fortnight since he did it. He walks from the front room where he sleeps, to the bathroom to the kitchen, same routine six mornings a week. Same on the seventh too, but an hour later. Robert has tried sleeping in on Sundays but it doesn't work, fifty-odd years starting at six thirty have taken their toll.

Dan has been sitting on the sofa for almost an hour before Charlie comes to join him, shambling across the road, not waiting for the traffic lights, not waiting for the cars either. Charlie takes the other end of the sofa, carefully settling his bony behind on the thin cushion, wary of inner-sprung surprises and the damp from last night's rain. He runs a bloodied hand over the fabric, seeing the dried blood now, for the first time, caught in the crevices of his skin, wondering what it was in the night that caused him these cuts, the potential of pain. The sofa covering reminds him of the thick curtains in his grandmother's front room, they hung there for years, vertical threads of yellow and green running through the dark red, fading to a dirty puce in their twenty year effort to keep sun from the carpet, block out the draft, hold the room always in a late afternoon gloom. Charlie's Nana Fisher said she'd been given the curtains when she was stationed at Windsor in the war, said she saw Princess Elizabeth in Aladdin one Christmas, that the soldiers on sentry duty had to put up with that Margaret Rose, no better than she should be, dropping gravel stones on their tin hats from two floors up, said the curtains had been hanging in the castle itself until the old Queen, the one who was the Queen Mum, thought better of it. Charlie couldn't see the Queen dancing round some wartime stage in tights, reckoned there was more than a pinch of Nana Fisher's salt to that one, but he quite liked

the idea that the winter curtains blocking out the dangerous sun in the old woman's Bermondsey flat had held in a more treacherous light during the war.

Robert makes a cup of tea and very lightly burns two slices of toast, Anchor butter, Robinson's raspberry jam. At seven he turns on the radio. He is not interested in the news, that he gets from his paper, later in the day. The radio is on because half an hour is too long in this flat with no sounds other than his own.

Charlie nods to his mate, opens the can he has lifted from his pocket, takes a long pull on the body-warmed beer, before holding it out to raise aluminium good health to his friend. He follows Dan's eyeline to the halal meat and veg shop on the corner opposite their stop. An hour ago the new owner began the process of opening for the day, setting up the display stalls, half-filling the pavement with a supermarket-challenging variety of vegetables and fruit, the whole a precarious mountain of old crates and a fake grass of exhausted green.

By seven forty-five, Robert is shaved, washed and dressed, making his way through the back alley to the front of his shop, key in the lock, heavy metal blind rolling up for the day. He smiles at the young woman clicking past in tight heels, nods to the men behind the counter of the kebab shop over the road, chip fat heating already for the pre-school rush. At seven fifty-five Robert turns his sign from Closed to Open, takes his place behind his own counter. Ready.

The halal shop-owner has nearly completed his display.

'Doing all right.' Dan offers, his voice quiet, beaten down by the morning noise, the idling bus, the overhead train, the screaming baby in the traffic-jammed car. Charlie looks up, across the road, unsure. Dan tries again, shaking his head to clear a path for his own words, his mind a pea-souper of stolen beer and old voices, long since separated from the mouths of their original speakers. He blinks twice and his head drops a little further forward, hanging off his strained, stubbled neck. Eventually he turns back to Charlie, accepts another can of Special Brew, the thin and dirty thumb of his free hand marking a line to the corner shop. 'Doing all right. The new bloke. Nice display. Bright. What that corner needs.' And here he halts his staccato, takes in the view again, the late winter morning, the grey sky, old grey brick, dirty grey road and the vibrant red peppers, repeating with a confirming nod, 'Bright.' Dan opens the can, puts the pull tab in his pocket where it sits with the others from the past few days, they clink lightly when he moves, as if they were keys, as if he had a door to lock. He takes a long suck on the contents made frothy by Charlie's loping walk, waits for the liquid to travel down his throat and then, as if it gives permission to speak, he launches in, holding the can and holding forth, 'Fumes. I told them, bloody fumes, get in to the potatoes. Have to cover them up. Green potatoes, going to kill you, kill them too. Red peppers next to green potatoes. All wrong. But did they listen? Did they hell, bloody fools. Meat yes, meat fine, wouldn't tell them what to do with that, wouldn't dream of it, their meat, halal, kosher, whatever, not my meat, none of that, don't care. Do what they like with their own meat.'

Charlie nods, listening hard.

Dan continues, beer can arcing the force of his argument, his other hand batting away the words and ideas and images that sit beside him, getting in his way when he'd rather not see them, pictures that elude him altogether when it might be nice to have some company, when the night is longer than it should be and it's too hard to wait until Charlie arrives. 'Their meat, they know what to do, no argument. But I grew potatoes. My allotment, Streatham, by the line, the track, the railway line track ...' Dan's words back on track, he takes a moment to smile at the bright blue bird to his left, the blue that is clear to him, invisible to anyone else, pauses in gratitude and then continues, 'That was back – you know, back – before she, back ... and ...' Deep breath, another mouthful, makes it, finds the end of his phrase. 'I grew potatoes. Bloody good at it, bloody good. Grower. Growing. I know, the fumes ... you can't put them out on the street. Look at that bus, look at it!'

And Charlie turns his head to the halted 345, disgorging half a dozen schoolchildren, kids crossing the road in front, diesel fumes pumping behind.

'Potatoes soak that up. Starch. Chemical thing it is, chemical. Soak it up. Kill us all they will, all of us.' Dan ends triumphantly, his point made, a sentence finished more or less where he wanted it to end. Sinking back into the damp pile of the worn and rotting sofa, 'Stone cold dead.' Offering it as an observation to the young Asian man who now walks past, pushing on to the dry cleaners' at the corner beyond the train station, ten past eight already, and this meeting too important for a hurried arrival, flustered and late.

The two men sit back, cans to mouths, beer to gullet, breakfast in hand, day begun.

Chapter Two

Robert placed his advertisement in the South London Press in December, not expecting expect a deluge of replies. In truth, he wasn't hoping for a deluge of replies. He placed the advertisement knowing it was a beginning. The beginning of a leave-taking, the beginning of his going, he didn't expect to be ready for a while yet, placing the ad was a start. Robert has always been thoughtful and painstaking, some have seen it as slow, others as committed, determined. He has never yet promised to turn over a suit in two hours flat. It can't be done, not well. Other cleaners might promise the world – or a morning suit before midday - Robert Sutton only ever promises what he can deliver. No more, but definitely never any less. A careful man who makes sure to think long and hard before his actions, he knows only too well that actions have consequences. So he doesn't expect many replies to the advertisement, and – because he wants to take his time taking his leave – doesn't much want them either. The advertisement has precisely one reply.

Akeel Khan walks flustered into the shop. He's fifteen minutes late. Someone pulled the emergency cord at Embankment, someone else tripped a security camera at

Stockwell, then – because he was taking out his annoyance on the pixilated, and brutally decimated, images of goodies and rather more baddies on his mobile’s latest download - he missed the bus stop and had to walk half a mile back. He waits just five minutes after shaking hands before putting in his offer. Seems he has it all worked out.

‘OK, listen, I’ll come and work for you – work with you – for a few months? Learn your way, what it’s like round here, and then I’ll take it off your hands.’

Akeel makes the offer as if it’s a generous one, and Robert can see why the young man believes he’s doing him a favour, Loughborough Junction is hardly the finest example of South London’s regenerative skills. There is a pause and to fill the silence, Akeel asks, ‘Have you been here long?’

‘All my life.’

Then. Alice Sutton gave birth to her only child in a blacked-out room in the house of the MacDougall flour people. Great big house, gardens dug over, a courtyard with a fountain the girls could see but not visit, water that waited but did not flow, and a double dormitory arrangement for a dozen South London girls moved out to the country, the old house made into a place of safety for pregnant women nearing their time. Alice never found out if it had been commandeered or given willingly, but the lady of the manor was nice enough in a stick-up-her-backside kind of way, and anyway, God knew they’d enough of the bombs, of the dirt and the dust of town, most of the girls would have agreed to be moved out even if all London – what was left of it – had stood at the gate trying to stop them. Alice’s parents’ home, just off Kennington Park, was no place to have a baby. Twice in a row they’d been hit, one bitter week, lucky not to have been caught in the worst of it when the shelter in the park took a direct hit. Alice knew one RAF bloke who swore blind it wasn’t an accident on the Luftwaffe’s part, they’d been fed wrong information on purpose, the fat man on the other side of the river thought the rubble of Walworth and St Olave and Kennington a fair trade-off for the Houses of Parliament and Whitehall. That lot had never had any respect for south of the river. Looking at the looted remains of her parents’ home, searching plundered wardrobes in vain for her dancing dresses, she wondered if the politicians didn’t have it right. Only that night though, Alice had never been one to bear a grudge. But she did mind losing her dresses. And then, her bloke back on his one weekend’s leave, she lost her figure as well.

So there they were, all in together, this frosty weather - six women to a bedroom originally intended for one child, others in the nanny’s room next door. A gaggle of factory girls, a few WAFs, another who’d been on the Ack-Ack guns, wouldn’t shut up about it, so sure she’d done more than the rest of them. Which might be right in terms of night shifts, but everyone knew the Ack-Acks weren’t much cop anyway, and if that mouthy army girl didn’t give over, Alice was going to have to let her know. She had no qualms about speaking her mind, no qualms about much really, though this having a baby lark wasn’t quite what she’d planned on. Peter Sutton had been away the better part of the past two years, which had, as it turned out, suited Alice fine. But then, on the single weekend’s leave he’d managed, she travelled halfway up the country to see him, all the way to Darlington Station when the southbound trains were stopped and the only thing to do was head north from the other end. They had not quite five hours together, and now Peter was a prisoner of war and Alice a prisoner of their kid.

Alice's baby was born in the middle of the night, just before four o'clock, and all through the dark the woman in the next bed had kept time with her, contraction for contraction, groan for groan. Come the morning Alice wrenched herself out of bed and walked the slow, uncomfortable stretch to the cold bathroom, sick of lying there in her own sweat and ache, the urge to wash, to comb her hair, only just overcoming her passion to sleep. Besides, it was nearly seven thirty, there was no way that hard-faced bitch of a nurse was going to let them sleep the morning away, she might give them a day in bed after a hard night, but the curtains would be open any minute, cold light and her baby's birthday let in. Her baby. Alice shook herself, that was going to take a while to get used to.

She made it to the end of her bed and took a breath, harder than it looked, this walking malarkey. The woman in the bed beside her did not have a baby in a cot. The woman in the bed beside her lay cold and quiet and alone without the silent blue-black baby that had been taken from her in the night. And Alice, who always wanted to say something rather than nothing, always thought it better to acknowledge than to hide, looked down as she hobbled past and said, 'Strange int't? There you are, wanting your baby – I mean, you really wanted him, didn't you? And you didn't get him. Here I am, never much fancied a kid, God knows when I'll get my old man back, and still the little bugger's screaming blue murder anyway, mouth like the Mersey Tunnel. Funny how things work out, eh love?'

The woman in the next bed turned away, wondering if the tears would ever come. She never forgot Alice.

Robert Sutton never forgot the woman either, or her stillborn son. Alice had already picked out the names for her baby if it turned out to be a boy - Anthony John. One for each grandfather, keep 'em both happy. Later that day she asked the silent woman what she'd been planning to call her child. The woman whispered out the names, choking with the effort of naming her dead newborn. Elizabeth Rebecca or Jake Robert. There were a few raised eyebrows in the room at the Jake and the Rebecca, but Alice had asked and anyway, there was a war on, all sorts rubbing along together, no point making a fuss. And so, because Alice wanted to do something nice for the woman she never met again, her own baby was given both that poor little mite's names as well. Down at Holy Trinity in Eltham they christened him Jake Robert Anthony John Sutton. The child was always called Robert. He wasn't a Jake.

Alice had no problem telling that story to Robert. She told him when she took him home and tucked him up in the bottom drawer in her parents' back bedroom. She told him when Peter Sutton finally came home, demobbed and so thin, tired and too angry to tell Alice about Germany and Poland and Czechoslovakia, holding tight to the pictures in his head and letting the lost years seep out in watered whiskey and occasional swipes at the Yanks, the time it took them to wake up, to do the right bloody thing. Those swipes made contact with Alice's head on more than a few occasions too. She told Robert again when, a fortnight after Peter Sutton had thrown himself under a train at London Bridge, she packed up the pair of them, and left her parent's home, the one they'd been moved to after the last bomb had really done for their own place, and came back to South London. Of course Eltham was officially South London, sort of, but it was more like Kent really,

not proper town. Alice wanted to be within reach of the river's dirty dip, a walk down East Lane market, or Bon Marché in Brixton, on a good day, when she had money to burn. There never was money to burn, but Alice toasted it anyway, a pair of shoes for the boy, a dress for herself, a glossy French lipstick, kiss-me red.

In June 1946, the not-so-young mother with a two-year-old child rented a room just off Coldharbour Lane, the slow curving stretch between Camberwell and Brixton. She claimed a space in a house of cracks and crevices, directly across from a half-gutted terrace, the front facade gone, the inside walls and their striped fleur-de-lyse wallpapers exposed to the street. They had a room on the top floor, with a shared kitchen and bathroom one flight down. Alice didn't bother to cart the pram all the way up, left it in the hall for the neighbours to complain, they'd moan whatever she did, no point making it easier for them, she scooped up her baby like an old bag of shopping and made the climb. Lot of exercise, good for the figure. The old lady who owned the house told her it was a wee way from the house Dan Leno used to live, Charlie Chaplin rehearsed up the road with the Eight Lancashire Lads, round the back was where Fred Karno had his Fun Factory. She was dead proud of the place. Alice didn't care so much about the music hall, or the aspirin factory, or John bloody Ruskin, but she did like that Annie kept the rents low and the front door unlocked, and the people and the noise below were much more like home than Eltham's open fields.

Alice started Robert off in the cleaning trade, she was at the steam laundry down the road for a few years, dirty sheets for clean, soiled towels for white, nice bunch of people to work with, long as she worked hard and kept at it. After all, people were always going to need clean clothes. Then when the shop came up at the junction, she begged and borrowed from all sorts to get together a deposit, made a dozen different promises, and took it on. Even with everything they could scrape together as well as her great aunt's money, things were very tight for the first few years. Alice quickly learned to get Robert behind the counter, as soon as he was able. People liked the kid, liked that Robert could keep his mouth shut.

Now. Jake Robert Anthony John Sutton is a cleaner. Dry cleaner. He takes the stains and the tears and the messy secrets and makes them go away. But Robert remembers who brings them in, the soiled articles, the broken zips, ripped dresses, old suits, he checks the pockets for lost lists and letters, and he knows what his customers are trying to hide, cover up, make good, make do and mend. Alice could never have done his job for long, wouldn't have been able to keep her mouth shut. Wouldn't have wanted to either. He did, he does. Look and listen, listen and learn, keep it all in. All his life.