

Thyme Island



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For a little island, this island was a big island. There were plenty of places to hide in amongst its thick trees and untidy rocks. It nestled in one of the curves of the Stour, close to the north bank and followed the bend in the river for three hundred yards, tapering at each end so that, from the other side, it was effectively hidden from view, blending with the landscape behind but far enough from the bank so it could only be reached by boat.. or by getting wet.

Benny lay face down, fingertips dipped into the water that flowed faster along the rooted banks of the river. The grass was warm and this place, away from everyone else, was private and the ideal spot for a bit of feeling sorry for yourself. Benny, like many slightly spoiled children, was convinced that none of the other Austin children were as badly treated.. none of them, after all, were grounded.

'Benny, will you *please* come and pick up your clothes, this room looks like a bomb's hit it.' Mrs. Austin, constantly busy with laundry, mealtimes and the activities of her five children, said this regularly to all of them but to Benny it felt like a personal moan. The wounds from last weekend's trouble were still sore. Going to the cinema with Daisy, without asking anyone, probably was a bit silly but, it had felt again as if Benny was being singled out for special deprivation. James went out on his own. He may be eighteen but Benny was old enough to be trusted surely? God, why was it all so unfair? The indignance started to bubble up again and threatened the resignation that asking permission was probably the best way to earn trust.. a lesson that Dad made a real big deal out of. Again.

'Benedict, if you behave like a child.. you'll be treated like a child. It was just plain irresponsible'.

She hated being called Benedict too. No-one else had such a lame name. James, William and Tim, Alex, the only other girl, normal names. And Benedict.. yuk. Which was why she preferred being called Benny and one of the reasons she preferred being here on her island, the Bridgegate as it was known locally.



Letty's face was streaked with tears. She huddled the little basket of rags to her chest and made her way towards the village gate. The heat of the day still radiated from the ground even though the sun had passed behind the trees. This summer of 1665 had been so fierce that even the river, the unchanging, lifegiving

river had dwindled to a stream. The banks were dry and crumbling, the river bed no more than gravel and sandy mud for ten paces on either side and the stream could be forded at several places, giving easy access to the island and this was where Letty headed. Even in the warm evening she could feel the heat coming from the bundle she carried and it made the motherly task of comforting the sick baby even harder. The cold was welcome as she paddled gingerly over the stream's sharp stones. It felt strange to be standing where normally she would have been submerged by water. Looking upriver, she half wished the torrent would return and wrap her in its coolness, carrying her away from this into the great wide ocean. Planting her wet feet on the dusty slope of the island's bank she climbed up and disappeared from sight.

The sickness had come on two days ago. Letty had been desperately searching for herbs and roots at the edge of the clearing in which the village stood. Normally green and lush, the land stood barren and dry. The busy river, its boats and barges plying their trade between the big towns, had grown gradually quieter until only a few could navigate as far up as Marford. And then came the day that the river folk stopped coming altogether. The last visitors had spoken of the "great sickness" and had told of the thousands dead in London and of King Charles' flight to Salisbury. The tale thrilled the villagers with its horror and dread but it was a story of other folk and, not for the first time, they felt glad to be who and where they were. But this had changed all too quickly. Stooping to pull a meagre stalk of arrowroot which would at least give the twins something to eat, she heard Oswald shout. Looking up, Letty saw her son running across the yellow ground. 'Baby's sick..' he panted, his shirt sticking to his chest in the heat.



Beyond the park and past the river's wide turns, Bridgegate was out of view but only a few minutes bike ride from the georgian houses on the 'old' side of town. In truth, the town wasn't actually that old. At least, not the town where it was today. Upstream by the little island and away from the new roads that were laid in the eighteenth century, the old village had simply faded away. Wooden houses slowly rotted or were taken for firewood. The villagers were either rehoused or just ended their days there so that, by 1810, Marford had shifted two miles downstream and gained a letter 'l'. Marford's new stone bridge, joined shops, inns and workhouses on the north side with the grander residences on the south. The town had flourished, and as well as providing homes and jobs for families from the village, attracted workers from further afield. Within a generation or two Marford had disappeared from memory too.

Benny's bike lay abandoned on the tiny beach opposite Bridgegate, her little raft, no more than a few planks and a giant inner tube, tucked into the trees at the end of the island. The sun heated her back as she splashed her hands in the water. Pushing the 'shuffle' button on her iPod, she stared deeper into the river still moody and embarrassed by the atmosphere at home since last weekend. Benny was a brooder and she brooded her hardest now. The island was the place she felt most at home. It always had been. It was as if there was something that held her there, a cradle where she could curl up and be safe. Her place. The water was crystal clear and she could see the minnows which whizzed to and fro, staying motionless against the bottom and then suddenly scooting for cover as Benny's fingers scrambled the water into turmoil. Benny giggled and waited for them to reappear, her mood lifting. It was then that she saw a more regular shape beneath the water. The object was sunk into the riverbed and she wriggled forward on her stomach so that she might reach it. The tips of her fingers found it and she pushed and probed trying to release it from its anchorage. She ran her fingers around its edge and started to rake away the sharp sand which caught under her fingernails. It felt harder than plastic but softer than metal and rough, like a flower pot, she thought. As she uncovered more, the shape began to remind her of her mother's vase. That was something else they'd been really unfair about. It wasn't expensive and Dad had replaced it the next day and the puddle had dried leaving a tiny watermark that you could hardly see. As more emerged she could see that it was a pot, grey-red in colour and full of sand and mud. Thoroughly soaking her shirt, she cupped both hands around its belly and lifted it gently onto the bank. About the size of a pint of milk it had three rings around its narrow neck and a looped handle on one side, not particularly pretty, it was at least, intact. Benny lowered it back into the water to tip out the mud and sand and using a young branch from a willow to poke it, loosened the contents which made progress faster. At last it was empty and placed in front of her on the grass. Benny wondered what it was and how old it would be.. Roman perhaps, she guessed, accurately as it happened.



Letty made her way towards a small clearing shaded by trees which, because of the steepness of the banks and the deep pools worn into the riverbed, still had water around its shore. The grass here was green too, shaded as it was from the worst of the sun. Around the edge of the clearing grew the wild thyme that

covered so much of the island. The softness of the grass beneath her feet reminded her of the way things were before the terrible summer and the plague had come. Her resolve began to crumble and she almost turned back towards the village but she knew that keeping the child would endanger the whole village. A sob caught in her throat and she fell to her knees clasping the bundle closer to her.



The sun's warmth had gone and that damp smell that precedes a clear night near any inland water was strong. A light mist had settled on the surface of the water and it was strangely quiet. Even the usual faint roar of aeroplane engines had disappeared. Benny knew she must hurry. She didn't want her righteous indignation to be displaced by guilt and she knew that she'd be in trouble if she wasn't home very soon. She scabbled to her feet and gathered up her mysterious pot.

Pushing through the trees, Benny began to worry a little. The light was fading fast and it must have been later than she'd realised. She ran down the little slope towards the raft, anxious to get home before she started another row about irresponsibility. Pushing the branches aside, Benny looked at the empty river where her raft should have been.

Beginning to feel more than a little panicky now, Benny stamped back up the bank towards the higher ground again, looking for a suitable hiding place for the pot which was now hampering her progress. The space between two large roots at the bottom of a tall beech tree offered a perfect hideyhole. It was dark now, the air, damp and cold, clung to her skin and sent a small shiver down her spine. Placing the vase inside the crook of the roots, the blood in Benny's head fizzed as a voice from behind her said, quite calmly, 'What're you doing with that?'



Kneeling in front of her tiny, still daughter, Letty busied herself making a comfortable nest from the reed basket, some dry leaves and long grasses, more casualties of the intensely hot months of June, July and August. She murmured comforts as she arranged things around the baby, her face still streaked with tears.

The tincture of herbs, its ancient stone bottle stoppered with wax was the last she had. What she would do now if, May or Oswald fell ill? But she couldn't think of this and lay the bulbous bottle on the grass next to the child. Then she placed a tiny square of embroidered cloth on the baby's chest. The little girl's mouth moved a little as if trying to speak. 'Hush,' Letty whispered. 'hush.. soon it will stop.' And, as she felt the swelling around the girl's throat, she began to sob once more.



With a startled gasp, Benny spun around and stared up at the grubby face of a girl of about her own age dressed in a muddy brown dress and pinny which may once have been white. The girl wore no shoes and her feet and ankles had a dirty ring around them which matched the darker lines of dirt under her toe nails. Her shoulder length hair was covered by a close fitting grey bonnet and her dirty face wore a look of indignance as she looked down at Benny.

'That's mine that is.'

'I, I,.. ' stammered Benny, unsure whether to be scared or her more normal belligerent. '..I found it in the river.'

'Did y' now?' said the girl with the heavy lift of sarcasm in her voice. 'I've "found" a few things in the river meself. Ma.. has always been very pleased with what I've found in the river.. 'twas a cockerel last week.. and some turnips and yesterday, I found some nice dry firewood. All chopped up too, lovely. Now, give it back!' she finished with an edge of menace in her voice.

Benny, with less fight in her than would have been usual, stooped to recover the pot and held it out towards the girl.

'How did it get into the river?' she asked a little hesitantly, 'Did you drop it?'

'Oh, that's funny, you're a funny one for certain.' said the girl.

'I've got to go.. I'm late' said Benny, suddenly, trying to break the tension and chase off her fear. She began to gather herself together and, stepping towards the higher ground, suddenly remembered that she didn't know how she would get off the island.

Benny looked at the girl, the tide mark around the bottom of her dress and asked; 'Did you.. er, wade over?'

'Wade over? Wade over where?'

'Over to the island..' Benny was surprised by the question. '..where do you live?'

'Marford' said the girl quickly, 'nowhere else to live.. and no..' she said, indignant again, 'I did not wade over.'

'I live in Marford too.. how are you getting back?' Benny's fear hadn't quite subsided but she began to feel a little calmer. The girl was obviously rough, probably a gypsy, but she was sparky and bright and Benny, like all strong personalities enjoyed being with people who could fight back. Besides the girl had her pot and, more importantly, she must have a boat and that, was Benny's way back home. She still might be able to sneak in quietly before anyone noticed.

'I'm walking..' answered the girl looking puzzled.

'Walking?'

'Yes, walking. What's your name then?'

'Benny'

'Benny?.. Oh' said the girl as if she found this hard to believe. 'I'm May.. May Elizabeth Augustine.'

The bridge that crossed the river from the island was rickety. Held up by thick tree trunks sunk into the riverbed, it was shaped like two open staircases which joined in the middle, high enough for a large boat to pass underneath.

Benny stumbled twice in the darkness, open mouthed at the appearance of the bridge and of the village which had appeared on the shore where she had left her bike. A few fires flickered in the night air and picked out the shapes of the wooden houses. Candlelight flickered in shuttered windows and Benny heard a plaintive bleat from the goatpens that sat alongside the fence.

'How, how long has the bridge been here?' she asked quietly.

'Ten year..' answered May. '..twas built a year after the great plague, when I was a babe. We used to charge half-groat crossing toll then.' she added wistfully.

Inside May's tiny cottage it was dark, but cosy and warm. A large scrub topped table dominated the room and a wooden armchair sat facing the big fireplace. The flames licked around the bottom of a large blackened cauldron hanging from a metal pole which disappeared up the chimney.

'Ma..' called May. 'We got a visitor.. I found this one over Bridgegate.'

She put Benny's pot firmly down onto the table and the woman in the armchair turned to look at it and stared. Her soft eyes flickered from the table to the strangely clothed figure shivering in the doorway. Letty got up and stood facing Benny and as they looked into each others eyes a flicker of recognition passed across her face.

'She's frozen cold and don't know how to get 'ome.' said May breaking the silence and pulling Benny over to the fire. Benny felt suddenly hungry, tired, scared and yet oddly safe all at the same time and a tear rolled down her cheek. Letty rushed across the room and pulled Benny warmly into her arms.

'There, it's alright my girl.' she whispered, her quiet voice trembling. She held her tightly to her and Benny thought she caught the words '.. she *is* 'ome.'

Still holding Benny to her, Letty steered the girl to the armchair and sat her down. Reaching for a three-legged milking stool she sat at Benny's side, May, on the floor in front of her. And by the light of flames, she began to tell the girls the story of how, when they were babies, she had set out on that awful night with her sick daughter.

'..the jar was given to me by my grandmother,' she said. 'it always stood up on the mantle. She wouldn't let no-one else touch it.' Letty turned the old object over in her hands.

'..said it was magic see. It was given 'er by her grandmother and her grandmother before that going back goodness only knows how far.' Letty paused, fished into her apron pocket and withdrew a folded yellow sheet of what looked like paper. She unfolded it carefully and laying it flat on the table she read aloud, her fingers tracing the strange markings.

'Hare's bile, hemlock, charcoal of aspen, buckbean and saxifrage, comfrey and rue, mixed in mare's milk when sunne and moone are in the hot signs. So shall you prepare the elixir of life which uncomplete be before dashed with thyme from the flow.'

The fire was warm and the chair more comfortable than probable for a hard wooden seat. Benny's heavy eyelids closed slowly on the cottage, the pot and the two oddly familiar strangers.



Letty didn't know how long she'd slept.. the grass was damp and she felt the chill of the night. The arm which had been draped over baby Benedict's body now lay limply on the ground. She jumped up and stared around the clearing.. the baby, the cradle, the bottle, everything had disappeared. She searched in the undergrowth and the trees, she stared into the little stream and downriver. She covered every inch of the island but there was no sign, no sign at all that the baby had ever been there.

The sun was up already by the time she pushed open the front door of the cottage. Oswald was sitting in the chair, holding baby May in his arms.

'Where you been Ma?' Oswald asked. Letty shuffled to the chair and Oswald knelt beside her cradling his remaining sister in one arm whilst holding his mother with the other.

Outside, slowly at first and then faster and harder the rain began to fall. Big droplets slapped onto the hardened earth and ran away in rivulets towards the river.



Benny opened her eyes slowly and squinted. Her bedside lamp had been left on and she was slightly worried to find that she still wore her school shirt. She pulled the duvet up to her neck in case anyone was to look in and tried to think of a good excuse. And then she remembered. It all came back like a flood, filling her head with the excitement, fear and relief of the previous night. Had it really happened? It didn't feel like the memory of a dream. The island, the bridge, the village and, of course, the girl. The girl.. who was she? Benny knew, of course. She knew exactly who she was but somehow admitting it, even to herself, would be accepting it and she wasn't quite ready to do that yet. She alone would choose that moment.

With all her senses alive with the memories of the adventure, Benny jumped as the door handle clicked. Mr. and Mrs. Austin peered in smiling.

'How're you feeling, sweetie?' asked her Dad.

Her mother pushed into the room and sat on the end of the bed.

'Do you need to sleep some more, darling? The boys are still downstairs but Alex has gone out for a walk.'

'I'll get up now thanks.. I'm fine. Honestly.'

As she looked at her mother, noisy breakfast sounds drifted up the stairs and into her room. Inside her head, a final thought fell into place and she felt a wonderful sense of security and happiness. Her mother rose and walked to the door.

'Mum..' Benny called. Her mother looked back. '..I love you.' Benny smiled and swung her legs on to the floor.

'Careful' said her mother, pulling a frown, 'don't overdo it. You've had a bit of a shock.'

'I'm fine Mum. Really. But I'll take it easy I promise.'

The door closed gently and Benny was left to her thoughts once more.

They had found her on the towpath a few yards from her bike which lay on the bank of the river, Unconscious, Benny had revived quickly and the doctor who examined her could find nothing wrong. 'No cuts, no bruises, no concussion. If she did fall off,' he had said with a smile '..she must have done it very gently. It's more like she's just been asleep.'

Her bike showed no signs of damage either.

Walking back home along the footpath Benny had seemed anything but concussed and couldn't stop talking, full of questions about the family and its history.

'We've always been from Marlford, as far as I know.' answered her Father who was pushing her bike. 'There's been Austins here for centuries.' He stopped and straightened up. 'Why are you so interested all of a sudden?' He exchanged a look with his wife and Benny knew there was something else.

'What?' she asked. 'What is it?.. tell me.'

The news hadn't upset her at all, for which her parents had seemed relieved and surprised. Benny guessed correctly that they had been wondering when to tell her and thought that at thirteen, perhaps they had left it a little too long. Benny had refused to go to bed before they had told her everything so, rather hesitantly, they had shown her the newspaper cuttings, the pictures and the little hanky. Slowly, as the extraordinary story unfolded and Benny listened entranced, they had relaxed and told her everything from beginning to end. So, she was adopted. Well, that was OK. She had always felt that there was something different about her but a foundling.. that was the wonderful part. A foundling, floating in the river.. a tiny sick baby, named for the single word embroidered on the handkerchief they had found with her. She had had a nasty infection which, after a little stay in the local hospital and a treatment of antibiotics, had cleared up completely. The healthy baby girl had been taken in by the Austins, the couple who had found the little cradle drifting down towards the bridge. After a few months, as no parents had come forward, the authorities had agreed to let them adopt her and Benedict had become a member of the family. Later that night, snuggling her face into her pillow, the last thing she saw as she closed her eyes was the stone pot which stood on her bedside table. It still sounded like a fairy story but now she really knew who she was and where she belonged.

Benny trotted down the stairs towards the hubbub of the kitchen. She felt warm towards her family as she pushed open the kitchen door and smiled at her brothers. Benny pulled a chair out from the table and sat, joining in with the boys' excited chatter. She tipped an avalanche of Coco-Pops into the bowl in front of her and started to eat, giggling at the antics of the boys. The whole weekend lay ahead. The whole weekend and the rest of her life which would never be the same again. And later, after breakfast, she would walk along the river. Benny wondered if she would see her sister today.

