

Things Begin to Change

Now, every child loves Christmas and Timothy was no exception, especially because it was also his birthday. So, while most children were opening their presents from Santa, Timothy had *two* sets of gifts to enjoy – his Christmas and his birthday ones.

And while most families in Rowanstown were having turkey and ham, potatoes and Brussels sprouts for dinner, Timothy was allowed have whatever he wanted to eat on his birthday.

On his eighth birthday Julia cooked Timothy's favourite for that year: Bats' Wings followed by Beautiful Butterflies. Julia always made up great names for the food she made in the kitchen, which she called the Cooking Cabin. Chicken wings were turned over in a baking

tray and cooked in soy sauce, molasses and ginger, then served dripping in the dark sauce. Timothy loved them. For dessert, Julia cut thin pastry into butterfly shapes and covered them in colourful little chocolate sweets, so that they looked exactly like the delicate butterflies Timothy always admired in the fields around Boat Cottage.

Well and truly stuffed and happy, Timothy and Julia went downstairs to the studio. There, beside the roaring fire, Timothy opened his presents. He was having a great birthday.

The vases on the tables and the mantelpiece were filled with holly branches with red berries, mistletoe and green leaves. A fresh smell filled the room. Julia's face glowed in the firelight and Timothy thought he had never felt so happy.

'Happy birthday, Timothy!' his mum half-sang, and she handed him a parcel. 'Eight today!'

It was a beautiful fountain pen, engraved with a tiny heart and the words *Love, Julia* along its silver lid.

Nobody else he knew called their mother by her first

name as Timothy sometimes did, and he was glad to see her name there now. He would treasure this present forever. And there were other gifts too.

Santa must have known they had a studio in Boat Cottage because he gave Timothy a new set of paints and paper and an easel all for himself, and just the right size too.

‘We can have an exhibition together,’ Julia laughed. ‘Come on! Let’s start some new paintings now.’

But then she turned back, her face going pale, her fingers pulling at her hair distractedly. Timothy saw how her hands were shaking.

‘Oh, I forgot something. This came for you a few days ago. I’m not sure who it’s from ... although the handwriting ... I’m sure it’s someone I know. It’s so familiar ...’ She looked vague, unhappy.

Julia handed Timothy a small, thick package. ‘Open it,’ she said, pushing the bulky envelope into Timothy’s hand and turning her back to him as he began to tear the paper apart.

Why were Julia's shoulders shuddering and why was she sniffing? Or was it that she knew something more about this present, but for some reason she just wasn't saying?

When the gift fell on the floor with a thud, Julia turned around with a start and cried out, 'What is it? What is it?'

Timothy had never seen her so upset. Something strange was happening.

'Julia! Mum! Don't worry, it's only a notebook. But a beautiful one.'

Timothy ran his fingers along its smooth cover. It was covered in a silver material and was smooth to touch. Inside, the paper was thick, yellow and unlined.

It was then he saw the writing.

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

The lines were scrawled in thick black print across the first page with a big 'X' and 'From Dad' below it.

'What does it mean?' Timothy heard himself speak, his voice sounding pinched and worried. When he looked up, his mum's face was white and frightened-looking.

'It's ... it's a poem. I've seen it before.' Julia's voice was quiet now.

'Where did you see it?' Timothy wanted to know.

'Well, it's a poem ... It was your father's favourite ... he loved to read it and write it down. Those lines are from a poem by a man who wrote a long time ago, a man called Eliot ...'

But the last thing Timothy wanted to hear about was a poet, especially when *his father* had just sent him something – *his father*, who had never sent him anything. The father he never knew.

'No, I mean, my *dad*? My dad sent me this? But I've never met him. Where is he? Mum, what does it all mean?' Great tears were filling his eyes and

Timothy couldn't stop them falling.

It was then that Julia, cuddling her son close to her, told the story she had kept a secret from him until he was old enough to really understand. That day in the blue-bells, he was too young. But Julia knew that now the time was right.