

First Chapter

Gerald

It wasn't the first time I'd come across a hand. I remember thinking at the time, what a coincidence it was. Two hands. Mind you, it was wartime, so I should think that must have shortened the odds a bit. I'd been with Eric on the first occasion – one of the few times I can recall when he'd let me play with him. We were in the woods when we heard the plane explode. Flames everywhere – whoever was in there didn't stand a chance. We went to have a look, and I remember running – neither of us had seen a plane go down at close quarters before and I was excited, we both were. We were hoping it was German, because German souvenirs were better for swaps than British ones, and in 1943 there wasn't much American stuff around, at least not where I lived. They were still building the new airfields – lorries full of sand and stone rattled through our village all day, every day.

I must have been about three hundred yards away from the blaze when I saw the glove. Worn brown leather, lying on the grass, palm upwards. The fingers were curled over like a violinist's and the moment I touched them I felt the solidness inside. The glove was still... well, *occupied*. I dropped it, wiped my hands on my shorts, and carried on running towards the plane. I can't say I thought anything more about it until I found the second one, a year later.

It was autumn and I was in the wood again, but by myself. I think I must have been playing soldiers, because I remember lying on my stomach behind a thick tree root, pretending I was shooting from behind a parapet. I wriggled forward to look over the top, and there it was, a couple of feet from my face. No glove, just pinkish-grey flesh, sticking out of a pile of leaves. Wrist bent, palm downwards and fingers spread out as if it was about to crawl towards me.

I didn't try to pick it up, but pulled myself a bit nearer and stuck out my hand in imitation of its shape. I think I mustn't have quite made the mental switch from my game of soldiers, because I remember thinking that the two sets of fingers, opposite each other in a sort of confrontation, were like armies on a battlefield. Then I saw

how delicate the hand was. Pretty, almost, even with the dirt on the skin and the soil that was wedged underneath the long fingernails. I inched my own hand a little closer, and I think I would have touched it, but I suddenly saw that not all of the nails were the same length. The one on the little finger was bitten off short. The instant I saw that, a picture came into my mind of my sister Vera at Christmas, the cheerful, bright sitting room and her with a sketch-pad in front of the fire, drawing, and Dad leaning over her, picking up the hand with the pencil in it. ‘If you go on chewing your nails, you’ll grow up to look like George Formby.’

She’d giggled. ‘Then I’ll only bite the little ones, so I’ll only look a *tiny* bit like him.’

They told me afterwards that I ran into the house covered in mud and earth and shouting Vera’s name.

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