

The Book of

Findings

BY JANE TASKER

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A Preface

Among my parents' friends, Mr. Heine and Mr. Jury were my favourites. As a child I discovered they shared one oddity: they always had a notebook and a pen tucked in a pocket.

Mr. Heine was the editor of *The London Free Press* and it wasn't uncommon to see him in a private corner at my parents' cocktail parties leaning over an available surface jotting down notes in shorthand. At seven I thought these scratchings were a kind of Morse Code but when I asked Mr. Heine about them, he replied that they

were new things he had found out, things he wanted to think about a little more. New findings.

Mr. Jury was about 20 years older than Mr. Heine; he was a self-taught archaeologist with only a grade ten education. His notebook was in his weathered beige duffle coat that he hung in the front hall during my parent's parties. He was shy and would sometimes leave the crowd and stand outside and sketch or write. I, too, would slip away and when I found him, Mr. Jury would show me the small diagrams he was making of the digs which would later become the reconstructed village of Ste. Marie among the Hurons. These sketches, he said, were his findings.

It was about this time I fell in love with the explorer Mungo Park, mostly because of his name. My imagination easily converted the two and a half acres of marshes and woods behind our house into an African landscape. And like Mungo, I would carry a knapsack with a compass, a thermos, a peanut butter sandwich, and a notebook and pen. I tried to record everything, staring until the smallest detail of a bulrush or a dragonfly or a red-winged blackbird came into focus.

On rainy days I would continue my explorations indoors where my findings—the photograph of a child, the small clothes in the attic, a hatbox of photos, and a news clipping—elicited strange reactions from the people around me. I soon learned that a brother had died before my birth but the details of his death were kept from me. In my Book of Findings I started to write down every clue that might

uncover this secret. This book is a memoir to John.

Chapter I: Haunts

I can't remember when the haunts started. It might have been after James threatened me about John or it might have had something to do with Dr. McCrimmon moving in. They seem all mixed-up. And I can't remember when the whispers in my room started. Or if they've always been there and I'm just starting to hear what they say. They float up out of the heating grate in my room after my parents go to bed. I'm afraid to go to sleep because the voices might come out and get me. I only hear bits like "McCrimmon ... reminder ... drowning," and louder and angrier "Your fault ... your fault ... Your fault."

Sometimes I try to block out the whispers by making my ears listen far away to the frogs in the pond. But the frogs' voices agree with the whispers because they know about me and Dr. McCrimmon. That it's all my fault. Just like the whispers in the grate had known it was my fault even before it happened.

You see, Dr. McCrimmon moved in up the hill but he also bought the land with the pond he uses to train his black Lab dogs. Every afternoon about four o'clock, he comes down with his Labs, a whistle around his neck and a bunch of canvas logs in a sack over his shoulder. I lie really still in the bulrushes and watch the pheasants flush up as Dr. McCrimmon throws the dummies into the water. He doesn't say anything, just blows his whistle and points till his dogs find the dummies and bring them to him. After he pats them and makes them sit, really stern. Then the dogs trot home beside him, turning their heads toward him with their tongues hanging out with kind of a goofy smile. At night I hear them yapping in their kennels like they're bragging about who's best, who's the best retriever.

One day Dr. McCrimmon comes down to the pond with just the sack over his shoulder. I can't see the dogs and I'm afraid to move because I can't be caught trespassing. He's put "No Trespassing" signs all around. So I watch really quiet from the bulrushes on the other side of the pond. He takes a burlap sack out of the big sack and the sides of the burlap start to bulge like something is squirming inside. Dr. McCrimmon swings the sack really hard and heaves it into the middle of the pond. For a minute, I think it will float like the canvas logs but Dr. McCrimmon

turns his back and walks away, letting it sink. As it sinks I hear a chorus of whimperings.

Chapter II: Scratches

I'm the kid who's always scratching away at the thing that hurts. Like the way I scratch away at the clay in the garden upsetting roots and snails and worms. It's not that I want to hurt things but because I need to know: things like whether China really is on the other side of the world or whether Tecumseh and his tribe left arrowheads here like my parents' friend Mr. Jury said they did. Mr. Jury says I could be an explorer, or an archaeologist like he is. You have to dig for the facts, he says.

I'm not a problem as long as I'm outside. It's when I notice things in the house and ask questions that I get in trouble. "Jane the pain," my brother James calls me. My brother who's alive. I'm not supposed to know about the other brother even though his picture's right on the wall above the bookcases in the bedroom hallway. The kid in it doesn't look like James or my sister Cath or me. And it doesn't have that faded long ago look like the photos of my parents when they were young.

The kid's head is way in front of his body so it looks too big for him. His eyes look huge and round like the eyes of baby seals before they get whacked. Everything around him is white space like he's drifting off somewhere.

James caught me once, climbing the bookcase to get the picture down. I wanted to have a closer look to see if anything was written on the back of it. "Don't touch it," he growled. "If Mom and Dad saw you, they'd kill you."

I tried to act tough pushing my fists into the pockets of my corduroys. "What's the big deal?" But he had me scared.

"That's John," he said, "and he's dead and that's all you need to know. Ever. And if you ask any more questions he'll come back and haunt you."

Then he just left me there, and walked to the end of the hall and closed his bedroom door.

James really pisses me off. Just because he's three years older, he figures he can keep secrets from me.

Chapter III: Boxes

On bad weather days, I explore inside. I pitch a tent like Mungo Park stretching a blanket over the space between

my twin beds. In the tent, I go through junk that my dad keeps in Planter's Peanuts tins, the ones with the peanut guy wearing a top hat. In with the screws and hinges, there are meccano pieces, cat's eye marbles, and coloured wooden spools. I use them to map out where villages are buried the way Mr. Jury does. Then I dress my stuffed animals in vests cut out of Kleenex and add bits of meccano on string for archaeological tools. Everyone has to report to me so that I can record in my Book of Findings. Sigh, the rabbit with the x-crossed mouth, grumbles that there's nothing left to explore.

I look out of the tent and see that my closet's open. That's when I think of the trapdoor leading up to the attic.

I've tried to get into the attic before but I've always been too short to boost myself onto the ledge above the clothes rod. This time I place a chair inside the closet and with Sigh and a flashlight tied to the back of my explorer's belt I make it onto the ledge. I push hard and the door falls back with a whump, and I lift Sigh in with me.

The attic's dusty but feels warm. Sigh and I flash the light around and see boxes under the eaves. Most of them have writing: "Christmas Decorations," "Albums"—and the one that most excites Sigh and me—"Clothes." We look at each other and think the same thing: we need clothes for our expeditions. I pull open the flaps of the cardboard box and there's a layer of newspapers dated 1945 with pictures of warplanes and battleships and soldiers. Mr. Jury would be proud of me for noticing the date. I lift the papers carefully. Underneath are folded clothes, looking just about the right size for Sigh. I help him try some on.

The undershirts fit and he really likes a pair of black shorts with buttoned straps. He gets cross when a cloth hat shaped like an explorer's helmet won't fit over his ears: "Humph," he says, "Just like people not to think that rabbits can be adventurers. Just like them to think that everyone has flat and almost useless ears," and he frowns looking at mine. The hat will probably fit one of the bears. Together we drop clothes through the trap

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door onto the closet floor.

We're almost finished when the flashlight picks up an odd-shaped box with painted flowers on it, the kind my Gram uses to keep her hats. When Sigh and I lift the lid we find it filled with photographs, mostly of my parents with Cath and a little boy who must be James. In a lot of them, Dad's got James riding on his shoulders. I'm not in any of the pictures so I probably wasn't born yet. I tie Sigh to my belt and we lift the box onto the closet ledge before we get down.

The other stuffed animals complain because we were gone so long but they're pretty delighted when they find out they all got new clothes, shouting, "Let's see" and "Me first!" as Sigh and I put the pile in front of them. The panda pulls the safari hat way down over his eyes. Becky Rabbit kicks her legs out so everyone will notice her white leather shoes. When everyone's dressed, Sigh and I line them up on the window sill to tell about our adventures in Antattica.

When I hear my Dad yell "I'm home!", I'm dying to show him the photographs. I wait until he settles down with his newspaper and rye. Then I carry the hatbox into the recreation room and say "Hey, Dad, look what I found!"

He looks at the box and turns his head away fast: "Take it away. I don't want to look at them," he says. At dinner, he doesn't talk. He glances at me as if he's really worried and I know I've done something awful.

When he and my Mom come to kiss me goodnight, my Mom's tucking me in when she sees the animals on the windowsill. Her hand goes up to her mouth and she leaves the room. Dad leaves too. In the hall I hear her say, "Oh God, will I never have any peace?"

The next day Julianna our cleaning lady comes. When I go into my room the clothes are off my animals. Later when I sit on the stool beside Julie while she irons she says, "You shouldn't go into things without asking, Janie."

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ROSITA GEORGIEVA

On Mother's Day

I remember that noon—I was turning 12
and I believe that 12 is a magical number—
we gathered in the dining room without any
noise,
the table was silently set—the silk and silver,
scented candles, grapes,
the heavy decoration over the mahogany
was ready for years for my mother's return,
the crystal was taken out but no one dared to
touch a glass,
my little brother forgot about his bottle of milk,
there was thirst in the dried, scented air
but no one asked for water, no one complained,
my older sister was not in a mood to tease, the
twins were simply
a mirror reflection, without his chronic cough
my father was a wax weird figure leaning over
the table
when the clock struck and everyone's heart
counted
the miraculous 12, and I saw the two
"imaginary" cats
under the big mahogany chair arching their
backs
and running down the stairs one second before
the doorbell rang,
and the stairs creaked and her figure—exacting
and fast
shook the house, shot the everyday irreality,
and her voice came from my throat
so dry that I pictured her as a thirsty explorer
coming from a desert,
I couldn't see the face—only her rusty-orange
hair
flaming the stairs, flaming the air, flaming years
of waiting.
In the fire of my mother's return
no one cried out for water.

Rosita Georgieva's poetry appears earlier in this volume.