opening extract from

the amazing story of adolphus tips

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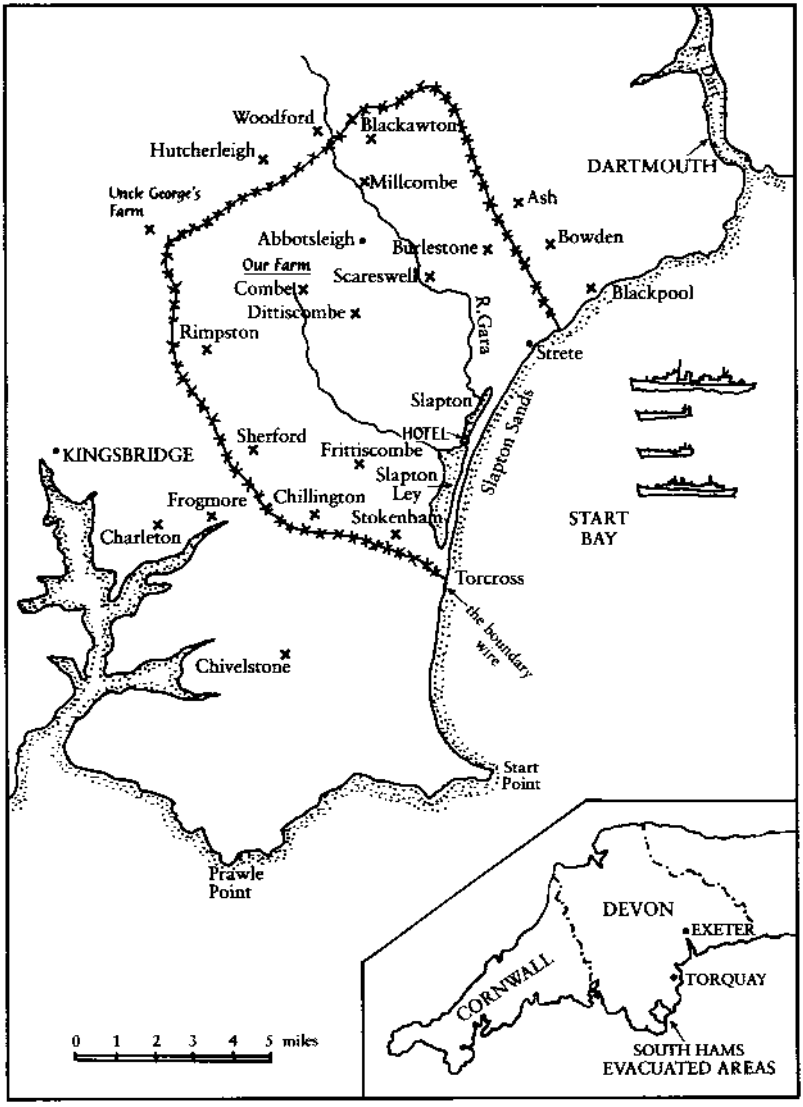

R. Dart
DARTMOUTH
Woodford
Blackawton
Hutcherleigh
Millcombe
Ash
Uncle George's Farm
Abbotsleigh
Burlestone
Bowden
Our Farm
Combe
Scareswell
Blackpool
Dittiscombe
R. Gara
Rimpston
Strete
Slapton
HOTEL
Slapton Sands
Sherford
KINGSBRIDGE
Frittiscombe
Slapton Ley
Frogmore
Chillington
Stokenham
START BAY
Charleton
Torcross
the boundary wire
Chivelstone
Start Point
Prawle Point
0 1 2 3 4 5 miles
DEVON
EXETER
CORNWALL
TORQUAY
SOUTH HAMS
EVACUATED AREAS

I first read Grandma's letter over ten years ago, when I was twelve. It was the kind of letter you don't forget. I remember I read it over and over again to be sure I'd understood it right. Soon everyone else at home had read it too.

"Well, I'm gobsmacked," my father said.

"She's unbelievable," said my mother.

Grandma rang up later that evening. "Boowie? Is that you, dear? It's Grandma here."

It was Grandma who had first called me Boowie. Apparently Boowie was the first "word" she ever heard me speak. My real name is Michael, but she's never called me that.

"You've read it then?" she went on.

"Yes, Grandma. Is it true – all of it?"

"Of course it is," she said, with a distant echoing chuckle. "Blame it on the cat if you like, Boowie. But remember one thing, dear: only dead fish swim with the flow, and I'm not a dead fish yet, not by a long chalk."

So it was true, all of it. She'd really gone and done it. I

felt like whooping and cheering, like jumping up and down for joy. But everyone else still looked as if they were in a state of shock. All day, aunties and uncles and cousins had been turning up and there'd been lots of tutting and shaking of heads and mutterings.

"What does she think she's doing?"

"And at her age!"

"Grandpa's only been dead a few months."

"Barely cold in his grave."

And, to be fair, Grandpa *had* only been dead a few months: five months and two weeks to be precise.

It had rained cats and dogs all through the funeral service, so loud you could hardly hear the organ sometimes. I remember some baby began crying and had to be taken out. I sat next to Grandma in the front pew, right beside the coffin. Grandma's hand was trembling, and when I looked up at her she smiled and squeezed my arm to tell me she was all right. But I knew she wasn't, so I held her hand. Afterwards we walked down the aisle together behind the coffin, holding on tightly to one another.

Then we were standing under her umbrella by the

graveside and watching them lower the coffin, the vicar's words whipped away by the wind before they could ever be heard. I remember I tried hard to feel sad, but I couldn't, and not because I didn't love Grandpa. I did. But he had been ill with multiple sclerosis for ten years or more, and that was most of my life. So I'd never felt I'd known him that well. When I was little he'd sit by my bed and read stories to me. Later I did the same for him. Sometimes it was all he could do to smile. In the end, when he was really bad, Grandma had to do almost everything for him. She even had to interpret what he was trying to say to me because I couldn't understand any more. In the last few holidays I spent down at Slapton I could see the suffering in his eyes. He hated being the way he was, and he hated me seeing the way he was too. So when I heard he'd died I was sad for Grandma, of course – they'd been married for over forty years. But in a way I was glad it was finished, for her and for him.

After the burial was over we walked back together along the lane to the pub for the wake, Grandma still clutching my hand. I didn't feel I should say anything to her in case I disturbed her thoughts. So I left her alone.

We were walking under the bridge, the pub already in sight, when she spoke at last. "He's out of it now, Boowie," she said, "and out of that wheelchair too. God, how he hated that wheelchair. He'll be happy again now. You should've seen him before, Boowie. You should have known him like I knew him. Strapping great fellow he was, and gentle too, always kind. He tried to stay kind, right to the end. We used to laugh in the early days – how we used to laugh. That was the worst of it in a way; he just stopped laughing a long time ago, when he first got ill. That's why I always loved having you to stay, Boowie. You reminded me of how he had been when he was young. You were always laughing, just like he used to in the old days, and that made me feel good. It made Grandpa feel good too. I know it did."

This wasn't like Grandma at all. Normally with Grandma I was the one who did the talking. She never said much, she just listened. I'd confided in her all my life. I don't know why, but I found I could always talk to her easily, much more easily than with anyone at home. Back home, people were always busy. Whenever I talked to them I'd feel I was interrupting something. With Grandma

I knew I had her total attention. She made me feel I was the only person in the world who mattered to her.

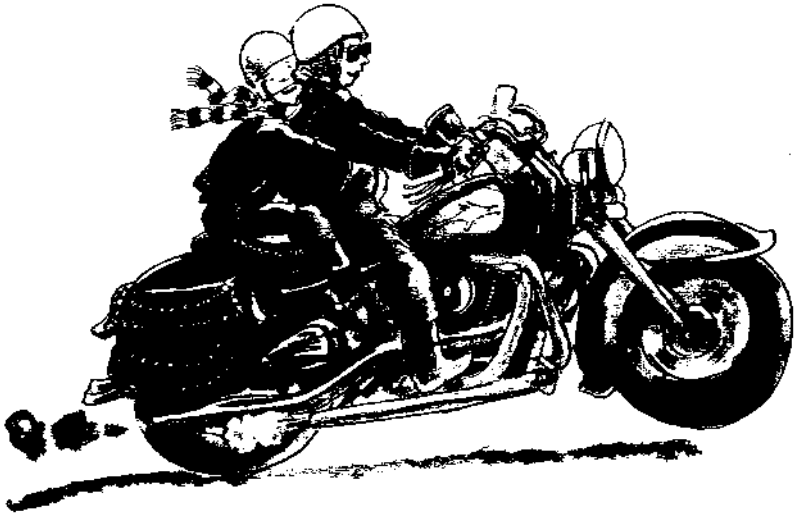
Ever since I could remember I'd been coming down to Slapton for my holidays, mostly on my own. Grandma's bungalow was more of a home to me than anywhere, because we'd moved house often – too often for my liking. I'd just get used to things, settle down, make a new set of friends and then we'd be off, on the move again. Slapton summers with Grandma were regular and reliable and I loved the sameness of them, and Harley in particular.

Grandma used to take me out in secret on Grandpa's beloved motorbike, his pride and joy, an old Harley-Davidson. We called it Harley. Before Grandpa became ill they would go out on Harley whenever they could, which wasn't often. She told me once those were the happiest times they'd had together. Now that he was too ill to take her out on Harley, she'd take me instead. We'd tell Grandpa all about it, of course, and he liked to hear exactly where we'd been, what field we'd stopped in for our picnic and how fast we'd gone. I'd relive it for him and he loved that. But we never told my family. It was to be our secret, Grandma said, because if anyone back home ever got to

know she took me out on Harley they'd never let me come to stay again. She was right too. I had the impression that neither my father (her own son) nor my mother really saw eye to eye with Grandma. They always thought she was a bit stubborn, eccentric, irresponsible even. They'd be sure to think that my going out on Harley with her was far too dangerous. But it wasn't. I never felt unsafe on Harley, no matter how fast we went. The faster the better. When we got back, breathless with excitement, our faces numb from the wind, she'd always say the same thing: "Supreme, Boowie! Wasn't that just supreme?"

When we weren't out on Harley, we'd go on long walks down to the beach and fly kites, and on the way back we'd watch the moorhens and coots and herons on Slapton Ley. We saw a bittern once. "Isn't that supreme?" Grandma whispered in my ear. Supreme was always her favourite word for anything she loved: for motorbikes or birds or lavender. The house always smelt of lavender. Grandma adored the smell of it, the colour of it. Her soap was always lavender, and there was a sachet in every wardrobe and chest of drawers – to keep moths away, she said.

Best of all, even better than clinging on to Grandma as



we whizzed down the deep lanes on Harley, were the wild and windy days when the two of us would stomp noisily along the pebble beach of Slapton Sands, clutching on to one another so we didn't get blown away. We could never be gone for long though, because of Grandpa. He was happy enough to be left on his own for a while, but only if there was sport on the television. So we would generally go off for our ride on Harley or on one of our walks when there was a cricket match on, or rugby. He liked rugby best. He had been good at it himself when he was younger,

very good, Grandma said proudly. He'd even played for Devon from time to time – whenever he could get away from the farm, that is.

Grandma had told me a little about the busy life they'd had before I was born, up on the farm – she'd taken me up there to show me. So I knew how they'd milked a herd of sixty South Devon cows and that Grandpa had gone on working as long as he could. In the end, as his illness took hold and he couldn't go up and down stairs any more, they'd had to sell up the farm and the animals and move into the bungalow down in Slapton village. Mostly, though, she'd want to talk about me, ask about me, and she really wanted to know, too. Maybe it was because I was her only grandson. She never seemed to judge me either. So there was nothing I didn't tell her about my life at home or my friends or my worries. She never gave advice, she just listened.

Once, I remember, she told me that whenever I came to stay it made her feel younger. "The older I get," she said, "the more I want to be young. That's why I love going out on Harley. And I'm going to go on being young till I drop, no matter what."

I understood well enough what she meant by "no matter what". Each time I'd gone down in the last couple of years before Grandpa died she had looked more grey and weary. I would often hear my father pleading with her to have Grandpa put into a nursing home, that she couldn't go on looking after him on her own any longer. Sometimes the pleading sounded more like bullying to me, and I wished he'd stop. Anyway, Grandma wouldn't hear of it. She did have a nurse who came in to bath Grandpa each day now, but Grandma had to do the rest all by herself, and she was becoming exhausted. More and more of my walks along the beach were alone nowadays. We couldn't go out on Harley at all. She couldn't leave Grandpa even for ten minutes without him fretting, without her worrying about him. But after Grandpa was in bed we would either play Scrabble, which she would let me win sometimes, or we'd talk on late into the night – or rather I would talk and she would listen. Over the years I reckon I must have given Grandma a running commentary on just about my entire life, from the first moment I could speak, all the way through my childhood.

But now, after Grandpa's funeral, as we walked

together down the road to the pub with everyone following behind us, it was her turn to do the talking, and she was talking about herself, talking nineteen to the dozen, as she'd never talked before. Suddenly I was the listener.

The wake in the pub was crowded, and of course everyone wanted to speak to Grandma, so we didn't get a chance to talk again that day, not alone. I was playing waiter with the tea and coffee, and plates of quiches and cakes. When we left for home that evening Grandma hugged me especially tight, and afterwards she touched my cheek as she'd always done when she was saying good night to me before she switched off the light. She wasn't crying, not quite. She whispered to me as she held me. "Don't you worry about me, Boowie dear," she said. "There's times it's good to be on your own. I'll go for rides on Harley – Harley will help me feel better. I'll be fine." So we drove away and left her with the silence of her empty house all around her.

A few weeks later she came to us for Christmas, but she seemed very distant, almost as if she were lost inside herself: there, but not there somehow. I thought she must

still be grieving and I knew that was private, so I left her alone and we didn't talk much. Yet, strangely, she didn't seem too sad. In fact she looked serene, very calm and still, a dreamy smile on her face, as if she was happy enough to be there, just so long as she didn't have to join in too much. I'd often find her sitting and gazing into space, remembering a Christmas with Grandpa perhaps, I thought, or maybe a Christmas down on the farm when she was growing up.

On Christmas Day itself, after lunch, she said she wanted to go for a walk. So we went off to the park, just the two of us. We were sitting watching the ducks on the pond when she told me. "I'm going away, Boowie," she said. "It'll be in the New Year, just for a while."

"Where to?" I asked her.

"I'll tell you when I get there," she replied. "Promise. I'll send you a letter."

She wouldn't tell me any more no matter how much I badgered her. We took her to the station a couple of days later and waved her off. Then there was silence. No letter, no postcard, no phone call. A week went by. A fortnight. No one else seemed to be that concerned about her, but I

was. We all knew she'd gone travelling, she'd made no secret of it, although she'd told no one where she was going. But she had promised to write to me and nothing had come. Grandma never broke her promises. Never. Something had gone wrong, I was sure of it.

Then one Saturday morning I picked up the post from the front door mat. There was one for me. I recognised her handwriting at once. The envelope was quite heavy too. Everyone else was soon busy reading their own post, but I wanted to open Grandma's envelope in private. So I ran upstairs to my room, sat on the bed and opened it. I pulled out what looked more like a manuscript than a letter, about thirty or forty pages long at least, closely typed. On the cover page she had sellotaped a black and white photograph (more brown and white really) of a small girl who looked a lot like me, smiling toothily into the camera and cradling a large black and white cat in her arms. There was a title: *The Amazing Story of Adolphus Tips*, with her name underneath, Lily Tregenza. Attached to the manuscript by a large multicoloured paperclip was this letter.

Dearest Boowie,

This is the only way I could think of to explain to you properly why I've done what I've done. I'll have told you some of this already over the years, but now I want you to know the whole story. Some people will think I'm mad, perhaps most people – I don't mind that. But you won't think I'm mad, not when you've read this. You'll understand, I know you will. That's why I particularly wanted you to read it first. You can show it to everyone else afterwards. I'll phone soon... when you're over the surprise.

When I was about your age – and by the way that's me on the front cover with Tips – I used to keep a diary. I was an only child, so I'd talk to myself in my diary. It was company for me, almost like a friend. So what you'll be reading is the story of my life as it happened, beginning in the autumn of 1943, during the Second World War, when I was growing up on the family farm. I'll be honest with you, I've done quite a lot of editing. I've left bits out here and there because some of it was too private or too boring or too long. I used to write pages and

pages sometimes, just talking to myself, rambling on.

The surprise comes right at the very end. So don't cheat, Boowie. Don't look at the end. Let it be a surprise for you – as it still is for me.

Lots of love,

Grandma

PS Harley must be feeling very lonely all on his own in the garage. We'll go for a ride as soon as I get back; as soon as you come to visit. Promise.