

AN EDUCATION

CHAPTER 1

A meeting in the rain

Twickenham, south-west London, 1961

Jenny Mellor was sixteen years old and she had a dream. One day, she would go to Oxford University and study English literature. If she worked hard enough, she would get there. And Jenny intended to work really hard. Right now, she was sitting in a classroom on Friday afternoon. Friday afternoon meant two hours of English literature. She loved her English classes and Miss Stubbs was her favourite teacher. Jenny was good at English. She was good at French too. In fact, Jenny was good at almost everything, except Latin. But English was her favourite. She loved reading. Books allowed her to escape into other worlds where people travelled and fell in love and had exciting lives.

Nothing exciting ever happened to Jenny. She lived with her parents in a nice house in a nice suburb of London and she went to a nice girls' school. Everyone and everything around her was nice ... and polite and dull. They said on the radio that London was a fun city, full of life and colour, a centre for music and fashion and parties. But Jenny didn't see any of those things. Her life was pale and grey. She didn't feel very alive at all. She didn't have anyone she could really talk to either. Not a *real* friend who could share her interest in France and French culture. Jenny loved French books, French music ... anything

French. She loved the sound of the language, and she loved speaking it too. No one in Twickenham understood French – or no one that Jenny knew.

Jenny looked around the classroom. The class was studying *Jane Eyre**. Miss Stubbs had asked a question and, as usual, no one had answered. Amanda Staple was studying her hands. Celia Smith was staring out of the window and Susie Salt seemed to be asleep. Poor Miss Stubbs, thought Jenny. It must be awful to teach people who just weren't interested. She put up her hand.

'Yes, Jenny?' said Miss Stubbs with a smile.

'Is it because Mr Rochester's blind?' suggested Jenny. She knew her answer was right. Her answers were always right.

'Yes, thank you, Jenny!' Miss Stubbs looked at the rest of the class and sighed. 'Now please turn to Chapter 6 ...'

Jenny sat back in her chair. Just one more year, she thought, and I'll be away from all of this. I'll be at Oxford University. I'll be a new person ... with a new life.

* * *

Sunday lunch at Jenny's house was always the same. Her mother spent the morning peeling vegetables in the kitchen, while the smell of meat cooking in the oven filled the house. They always ate at half-past twelve and finished by half-past one so that they could listen to the news on the radio. The food was always brown and grey – it matched their dining room, Jenny thought. The conversation was always dull too. Her father did most of the talking and he always talked about school and her

* *Jane Eyre* is a famous book written by Charlotte Brontë in 1847. It tells the story of Jane Eyre, who falls in love with and eventually marries Mr Rochester. Mr Rochester, who is blind, is also much older than her.

WOMEN IN THE 1960s

It's easy to forget what life was like for women in Britain in the 1950s and early 1960s. Equal pay, birth control and divorce are seen as normal today, but at that time, women did not have so much control over their lives. But things were about to change ...

WOMEN AND WORK



Staying
at home

In the 1950s, women usually had to make a choice between getting married and having a career. Jenny's mother doesn't go to work, she stays at home. Miss Stubbs and Miss Walters have good jobs, but they are unmarried.

Jenny's father obviously thinks a good marriage is more important than a university education. Despite spending



Going out
to work

a lot of money on Jenny's education, he is happy for her to give it all up to marry David.

Women who did go out to work often earned less money than men, even if they were doing exactly the same job. They also had less control over how they spent that money. It was very difficult for a woman to buy a house, for example, or borrow money from a bank.

WOMEN AND MARRIAGE

Miss Stubbs and Jenny's mother are both worried that Jenny could get pregnant. The pill for birth control went on sale for the first time in 1961, but it was not widely available.

It was generally unacceptable for couples to live together before they got married. Society could be very unkind to a young girl who got pregnant before she was married.



THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

By the late 1960s, society was changing. People were angry about a lot of things: the war in Vietnam, rights for black people, equal pay for women ... It was a time of strikes and protests both in Europe and the States. The Women's Liberation Movement was part of this general mood of anger and need for change. The movement fought for equal rights for women, equal opportunities in education, birth control and easier divorce.

In 1968, 850 women machine operators at the Ford factory in Dagenham, near London went on strike for equal pay. Their action helped lead to the Equal Pay Act in 1970.

FIRST WOMEN

1963 Valentina Tereshkova was the first woman in space. She went around the earth 48 times!



1966 Indira Gandhi became the first woman Prime Minister of India.



1966 Sheila Scott was the first British woman to fly around the world.

1969 The Women's Football Association was formed.

In what ways is life for women in your country today different from how it was in the past?

What do these words mean?

You can use a dictionary.

control protest strike opportunity