

The Hidden Legacy

G.J Minett

PROLOGUE

NOVEMBER 1966: John Michael Adams

It's a quarter to nine when he reaches the school gates. *Ten minutes*, he thinks, *ten minutes*.

He'd have been here earlier, but he had to wait until his dad was safely out of the way. The last thing he needed was awkward questions. *What's with the duffel bag, son? What's wrong with your satchel? What have you got in there anyway?* So he'd waited, kicking his heels in the hallway, counting off the seconds until at long last his dad oh so slowly closed the bonnet of the Austin A40, climbed in and drove off. As soon as he'd watched him turn the corner at the end of the road, he slammed the front door and ran the mile and a half to school, barely pausing for breath – not easy with a heavy bag strapped across your shoulders. He'd lost his footing several times, skidding on the icy pavement.

He takes several deep breaths. His shirt is clammy against his back and the chill of the air is starting to bite through his clothing now that he's no longer on the move. But at least he's here.

It's fourteen minutes to nine. He has nine minutes.

The Hidden Legacy by G.J Minett is out in ebook on 5th November 2015 (Twenty7, £4.99)

At five-to precisely, Miss Cattermole will emerge from the staff room and stride confidently out to the centre of the playground. She'll ring the bell seven times with extravagant sweeps of her right arm. Always seven times. Always her right arm. The left dangles limply at her side. Permanently useless. Some say it was a war injury, but he doesn't believe it. People just love to make up stories . . . and what would someone like Miss Cattermole have been doing in the war anyway? One thing's for certain, she'll never say what really caused it. Waves away questions with the words '*gross impertinence*'. Favourite phrase of hers. Everything's '*gross impertinence*'. He knows what it means – it means don't ask.

When she rings the bell, everyone will appear from nowhere, as if by magic. They'll gather like ants around a jam jar. In the summer you have to drag them out of their hidey-holes, but when it's this cold they come pouring out, can't get inside quickly enough. The fourth and fifth years will emerge from the walled area by the boiler room. It's their territory because they're the oldest. He hasn't been at secondary school for long, but he knows this much. If you've got any sense, you keep away from there.

The third years will be sheltering in the bike sheds, making the most of their last chance until break for a quick smoke. As for the first and second years, they'll be dotted around what's left of the playground, huddled into groups to protect themselves against whatever the weather and the older pupils might decide to throw at them. They'll be first in the line which will form at the main entrance, waiting for Mr Copeland to unbolt the doors from the inside – first, that is, until the older pupils push their way in ahead of them.

Once Miss Cattermole has rung the bell, it will be too late.

He looks again at his Timex wristwatch. *TickatickaTimex*. He has eight minutes.

The Hidden Legacy by G.J Minett is out in ebook on 5th November 2015 (Twenty7, £4.99)

The playground is a mass of bodies. Seems like everyone's taller than he is. This isn't going to be easy. It's one thing to stand at the gate and spot her as she arrives. Now that he's late, how's he supposed to find her in this forest of arms and legs? He hurries from group to group, trying not to draw attention to himself.

Just another first year, going about his business.

Insignificant.

He heads for the bike sheds, then stops. The duffel bag is cutting into his shoulders and he needs to slide it off his back, just for a few seconds. He catches it by the straps and lets it dangle from his wrist, moving stiff neck muscles from side to side. As the bag swings backwards and forwards, he can hear the liquid sloshing around inside the container. He finds the sound reassuring. Then he hears a laugh that works on his senses like a road drill.

Carol Bingham is not the sort of girl his mother would have wanted him to bring home. *Never in a month of Sundays!* She's been in trouble more than once for wearing a miniskirt and make-up to school. She's very common, swears a lot. Calls him 'half inch' and wags her little finger at him. That's very unkind. Her laugh's easy to pick out . . . and once he's tracked down Carol, finding Julie is easy. She never seems to stray more than a few feet from Carol's side. Unfortunately.

Until yesterday he thought Julie was the nicest girl he'd ever met. Now he knows better. Maybe she's nice when Carol's not there. Maybe she changes because she's embarrassed in front of an audience. But that's no excuse. And nor is being pretty. *Good manners cost nothing.*

Carol's already spotted him and she's making sure everyone within range knows about yesterday. And the others are all laughing now. Taking their cue from Carol, they're wiggling their little fingers and chanting 'half inch' in high, squeaky voices, clouds of warm

The Hidden Legacy by G.J Minett is out in ebook on 5th November 2015 (Twenty7, £4.99)

breath clinging to them like speech bubbles in a cartoon. He ignores them and stands in front of Julie. *Sticks and stones*. He knows what he has to do.

Things could still change, even now. Julie could turn to Carol and tell her to grow up. She could be nice to him if she wanted. It's her choice. But he suspects deep down that she doesn't have it in her. And sure enough, she rounds on him before he can even get a word in: *Jesus, don't you ever learn?* Tells him to *piss off*. She's picked up that sort of language from Carol, of course. Then, in case she's not made herself clear, she turns her back on him with a toss of her hair and returns to the conversation he's interrupted.

So, he thinks to himself, *that's that, then*.

He rests the duffel bag on the floor, takes off his gloves and loosens the toggle. Julie may have finished with him, but Carol clearly hasn't. She wants to know what he's got in there. Flowers? Chocolates? *Look, Julie – Romeo's brought you a present, ha, ha!* He doesn't answer. He manoeuvres the container out of the bag. It's a tight fit and keeps catching on the strings, just as it did going in. Everyone's intrigued now, pressing forward for a closer look. He finally yanks it free and rests it on the ground. Unscrews the cap of the can he took from his father's garage. Takes the can in both hands, straightens up and swings it in Julie's direction, sending its contents flying out in an arc, backlit by the sun, colours sparkling. The can is heavy and the momentum nearly drags it out of his hands.

Carol and Julie leap back with a squeal. Carol swears – of course, she would do. The two girls hunch their shoulders and glance at each other as if they can't quite believe what's happened. Then they start shrieking. Their clothes. Their hair. And the smell – it's disgusting.

All around him there's silence, followed by nervous giggles as the hangers-on wonder what will happen next. This should be good. Carol is not someone you mess with. She's got a seventeen-year-old boyfriend with a Vespa. No way will she let him get away

The Hidden Legacy by G.J Minett is out in ebook on 5th November 2015 (Twenty7, £4.99)

with this – she'll kill him. So everyone's watching the two girls to see what their next move will be . . . which is why he has time to take the matches from his pocket, light one and throw it into the pool of liquid gathering at their feet. It's over before anyone realises what's happening. And that brings them to life alright, scattering in all directions.

He throws down the box containing the rest of the matches, turns on his heels and walks through the playground, heading for the school gates. Walks, not runs. Walks away, as if nothing at all has happened. He's calm, in control. 'Unflustered' is the word they'll use at the trial. It's what everyone will remember.

No one moves to stop him. He walks on, hears nothing. He's vaguely aware of Miss Cattermole barrelling out of the school building, heading for the two girls, one arm flapping uselessly like a wounded penguin. But that's all.

Which is odd, really. Should have heard something, they will tell him. You could hear the screams in Rennison Park, several streets away.

***The Hidden Legacy* by G.J Minett is out in ebook on 5th November 2015 (Twenty7, £4.99)**