

# Sea of Memories

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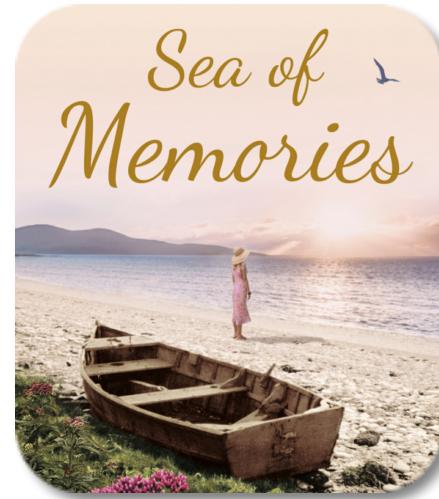
(a summary by Pat Evert)

## • 2014, Edinburgh

My mother isn't close to Granny Ella—some complicated, never-spoken-of mother–daughter strife—and so there wasn't much contact when I was growing up. It makes visiting all the more complicated. Her mind seems to be discarding memories in the same way that she's discarded so many of her possessions, paring back her life to just the bare essentials. Downsizing as her days draw to a close.

As for me and my family, we're worried sick about our current financial predicament and even more so about the future. Whatever lies out there for our beautiful, unreachable son? Finn, has autism. There'll be that awful chasm again later tonight, when we lie in bed, miles apart. **It feels like each of us is drowning in our own sea of worries, unable to reach across and pull the other to safety.** We're drifting further and further apart, unable to summon up the strength, any more, to fight the undercurrents that are dragging us both down.

On the cabinet at her bedside sits a delicate, deep-blue bowl, shot through with a vein of pure gold like a bolt of lightning, containing a handful of seashells. And so I want to ask you a favor - to tell my story. But, of course, Granny Ella. I'd be happy to write down your memories. Exactly what did happen to create the distance between my mother and my grandmother. It sits there like an ice-field, chilly and uncrossable, riven with the unfathomable crevasses that life has driven between them. 'My time is running out. **Before it's too late**, before I forget it all and there's no one left to tell it, **please would you write my story?**'



## Part I

### • 1938, Île de Ré

At age of seventeen, Ella was invited by an old friend of her mother to spend the whole summer with them at their holiday house on the Île de Ré. Sailing on their beautiful boat, Bijou, she had a sensation of expansion, just under her ribcage this time, and was overwhelmed with a sudden urge to unbutton her jacket and loosen her dress **to make room for whatever it was that was happening to her heart.** An altogether new experience all combined to heighten her new-found sensation of freedom; the liberty **to be someone entirely other** than her Edinburgh self. Like the ocean, the eyes of

Christophe seemed to have hidden depths, sparkling with inner light one moment, suddenly stormy the next.

• **2014, Edinburgh**

I can't remember the last time Dan and I held hands or touched each other with anything more than a perfunctory peck on the cheek in passing. Her touch reminds me, too, of how I long to be able to hold Finn's hand in mine. When you've lost so much, feeling that pain just might be better than feeling nothing at all. Her words—and her look of profound sadness as she utters them—make me think again of her estrangement from my mother. Does Ella still hope for a reconciliation? Before it's too late? Writing her story seems to be linked to that somehow.

• **1938, Île de Ré**

Christophe, Caroline and Ella were inseparable, spending every waking moment together. And whilst the powerful bond between Ella and Christophe continued to draw them together, Caroline was always there too, a welcome member of the trio with her air of gentle calmness and her steady loyalty to them both. Caroline turned to Ella to explain: 'Maman's cousins from Austria are coming to stay with us for a while. Things in their home country are very difficult now that it is a part of Germany. So they are planning on moving to France.' There seemed to be an unspoken promise between them—that tidal flow pulling them inexorably towards one another. Monsieur Martet had seen enough of the darkness of war to know that moments of light and beauty should be treasured; so now he seemed to be engraving this one on his memory. This summer has made Ella wake up and open her eyes to all the possibility that there is in this world. Made her realize that she wanted to live a bigger life than the one she'd imagined up until now . . .

• **2014, Edinburgh**

It's been a good day today: a day without tantrums and screaming; a day without Finn's terrified withdrawal from a world that makes no sense to him, which leaves him tearing at his hair and clawing at his face in a panic, drawing blood sometimes. A normal day, almost, for most other people, but for us, days like this are so few and far between that they become the remarkable ones. Dan's found a community project, which he heard about from someone at the allotments one day when he and Finn were working there. It's council-funded, based on a patch of derelict land just outside the city, building a garden for children with special needs.

I remember when Mum came up on the train straight away when she heard my frustrated, exhausted sobs after I'd called her to admit defeat with my attempts at breast-feeding Finn as a baby. And, as usual, her calm presence reassured me as she made up bottles of formula and gently helped me to find ways to soothe my baby boy. I find it hard to reconcile the two facets of Mum's character: how can someone who is so warm and loving have shut her own mother out of her life? As I look at the framed photograph, I realize that she must have been hurt very badly indeed to have resorted to protecting herself in such a drastic way. And Finn, he can't relax for a second in his

fear of whatever incomprehensible terror the next moment might bring. I treasure a rare opportunity of him sleeping to express my love for him as I never can do when he's awake. **Yes, this has been a good day; we'll settle for that.**

Christophe writes, It's my first day at the bank and I feel I have been put in prison! These walls can never confine our hearts, and mine beats a little faster when I remember that night in the dunes and I think how wonderful it will be to kiss you again. Christine writes that Christophe is more pessimistic, but then he is constantly in a bad mood these days, as he detests his job at the bank and misses being with the girl he loves.

#### • 1939, Paris

Monsieur Martet says Germany makes him nervous. Over dinner, the conversation turned, inevitably, to the latest rumors from Germany. 'Paris is still being flooded with refugees,' Marianne explained to Ella. 'People are so worried that Germany will not respect her new boundaries, even with the latest expansion, and there are rumors of persecution of the Jews in the eastern countries. Marianne had Jewish roots. Paris was preoccupied; its citizens were going about their daily lives as they'd always done, but with an air of vague distraction, keeping one ear open for the latest news of German maneuvering. Christine who worked at the Louvre had been working on a special project—top-secret. They were sending some of the artworks from the museum to other locations in France, places where they'll be safe in case the Germans start trouble. The three of them, with a museum guard, had been transporting the Mona Lisa when they were stranded for a night with car trouble... in the attic of a hotel. There they sat, side by side, leaning against the over-stuffed bolster, and gazed at the most famous painting in the world, lit by moonshine so that its colours glowed with mysterious depths. Ella turned and smiled at him, at the wonder of it all, at the sight of such beauty in the poorest and plainest of rooms... **finding beauty in the most unlikely places.** Later, over the radio the announcement came, 'This morning, with our ally Great Britain, France issued an ultimatum to the German leader, demanding the withdrawal of his troops from Poland. The deadline has passed and therefore, with deep regret, both France and Britain are now at war with Germany . . .'

#### • 1940, Edinburgh

Letters from France were few and far between now that they were at war. France never wanted this, with memories of the last Great War still fresh in the minds of our fathers. We lost so many men then, the country has scarcely had a chance to recover. There was no news directly from Christophe, no word from Caroline either, no note, no letter. Weeks later, there came another bulletin that made her heart stand still. Paris had fallen: France was now in German hands. This war was a random, casually cruel lucky dip. Young lives curtailed so abruptly: 'Assumed missing' written on the reports. Families left in a harrowing limbo of loss and grief, without the closure of a body to bury, a coffin to mourn over; husbands, sons and brothers disappearing into thin air.

Then a letter from Christine - He was killed on one of the first days of the Battle of France, in May last year. But now, dear Ella, I must write of our further tragedy. In May,

they came and took Maman away. We have been frantic, trying to find out where she has been sent. They are deporting anyone of Jewish descent, and we fear she is now in a deportation camp in Drancy. Papa and I have fled to the island: we cannot stay in Paris any longer in these dreadful times, so filled with fear and the terrible, terrible pain of loss. We are still in the occupied part of France. Maybe that is the only comfort we can find now, in the knowledge that we are not alone in our pain and suffering, along **with so many others who have lost so much** in this terrible war.

• 2014, Edinburgh

The war changed everything, in ways we could never have imagined. From the most mundane aspects of our daily lives to the broadest principles of the world as a whole—everything we had once known, everything we'd taken for granted, was altered by that terrible war. You can either let the pain overwhelm you, defining your life from that point on—perhaps even ending it or, at best, consigning you to a living death—**or you can find a way to bear it, to carry it with you and still go on living**. As you well know yourself, you can't always choose what life throws at you. But you always have a choice in how you deal with it.

**Part II**

• 1942, Scotland

She had been working in secret operations on the S-Phone with a man named Angus. His eyes met hers and she felt something stir deep in her heart. It was a sensation she'd thought she'd never feel again.

The French drop into the Loire valley will have to be postponed. There's been an incident. We've lost our key agent there and she was the one who was going to receive the first transceiver and pass it on to her contacts in a Resistance cell in that area.' But Ella volunteered to deliver the first wireless S-Phone to French troops in enemy occupied territory. Would she have what it takes to destroy the kit and take a suicide pill if she were caught? She missed the return plane, but Angus had gone to find her and bring her back.

• 1945, Edinburgh

Angus and Ella were married on a bright Saturday morning in late May, just a couple of weeks after VE Day. It still felt as if the whole country were celebrating, as if their wedding were part of the joy that continued to resonate around the world at Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender. In a letter Christine writes, 'Marianne is dead. She was sent to one of the camps. She never came back. But there's more news too. Christophe is alive. He wasn't killed, but injured and kept as a prisoner-of-war in a German camp. He's coming home to them.' Marianne was taken to Auschwitz in one of the first convoys that summer, not long after she arrived in Drancy, as were Agnès, Albert and Béatrice. None of them survived. My father is a broken man and it is truly awful to see. I look at him and I wonder how much longer he will be able to carry on, **bearing the unbearable for the days he has left in this world.**

• 2014, Edinburgh

In a letter from Christophe, 'After the noise of the tanks crashing their way through the undergrowth, I don't remember much. The captain of my battalion came to find me where I lay in the crater left by the shell. My legs were badly shattered and he knew I would stand more of a chance of survival if the Germans captured me. But he also knew I would be treated far better if I were taken prisoner as an officer and so he exchanged my jacket for his and swapped our overcoats and our identity papers. And so I became Captain Fabien Dumas for the remainder of the war, held in prisoner-of-war camp Stalag Luft VIII-A with other captured officers, once it was decided that I would survive and my injuries had been patched up in a German field hospital. And all that we have been through has brought me much closer to my father. Losing my mother has destroyed him, Ella—your heart would break to see him. But he has his two children beside him again now and so I pray that he can grow stronger too.'

• 1955, Edinburgh

Ever since that day when Caroline's letter had arrived, things had been different. It was hard to pinpoint exactly how their relationship had changed—although the reason why it had done so was crystal clear. **Christophe, alive in France, was a phantom whose presence haunted them both.** The foundations of their relationship had been rocked and they had cracked. There had been a subtle, seismic shift that day when she'd read Caroline's letter and, although on the surface her husband appeared as strong and capable as ever, Ella sensed an almost imperceptible hesitation when he put his arms around her and, every now and then, she caught a glimpse of the doubt in his candid blue eyes. Caroline was alone now in the white house with the pale blue shutters, having decided to stay on the island rather than return to the house in Paris. She wrote that she'd opened a small art gallery in Sainte Marie. Christophe had moved back to Paris where he was painting. And his work was beginning to gain recognition in the city and beyond.

Ella's son had come down with polio. After what felt like several eternities, Robbie was finally pronounced out of danger by the doctor and moved out of the iron lung. Both her children needed her—Rhona as well as Robbie. And so did Angus. **She'd felt they were drifting apart, the polio infecting their marriage and paralyzing the entire family as it devoured their energy and demanded all of their attention.** She was determined to devote every available moment of each day to trying to help him to walk again.

• 2014, Edinburgh

But perhaps you do have the choice of acceptance. That's a choice that's always available to us. I think the biggest mistake I made was not realizing that **there are so many different kinds of love. And that there is room for them all. No one excludes the others.** The love that you have for your children, that is the only pure and simple kind. It's overwhelming, instinctive, absolute. But it sits alongside the love that you have for your partner, which is another kind of love entirely. That's anything but simple; it's far more complicated; and yet it's the love that we choose, so it should really be the easiest one of all. You can go on forever, adding one more. That's how love is. You can keep adding to it. For infinity. It's never too late to try to mend what's been broken.

• 1957, Edinburgh

Having missed an entire year, Finn had been kept back, so his friends were now one class ahead of him. And so Ella continued to try everything she could think of to find ways of helping him to rebuild his strength, to minimize his limp, to regain his confidence and his sense of who, she knew, he truly was: a clever, talented, loving and courageous boy who should not be defined by the legacy of his illness.

Then one evening caught her husband in an affair. Her home, her marriage, her family: they were all a sham. She took the children and spent the summer on Île de Ré

• 2014, Edinburgh

How close I came to leaving Angus. But, leaving the island at the end of the summer felt like an impossibility. I knew what I had to do and I got on and did it. 'No, my darling, never give up your dreams. But just make sure they **don't distract you too much from the good things that there are in your day-to-day life**, even if that life is by no means perfect. Because there always are good things, but sometimes you have to concentrate to be able to see them.'

### **Part III**

• 1970, Edinburgh

Ella had come to see that she had two choices: **she could let her feelings of bitterness and loss define her marriage from here on in, allowing resentment and self-pity to corrode her heart and reduce her to a sad shadow; or she could accept the situation with grace and equanimity, whole-heartedly immersing herself in the life that she'd chosen, fighting to stay in the light instead of allowing the darkness of despair to drag her under.** She knew it would take all her strength and determination to make her marriage work after everything she and Angus had been through. Perhaps, despite all the challenges she had faced, this would be her greatest test yet. She only hoped she had it in her to face the prospect of **trying to love again with a heart that felt like it had been shattered into a thousand pieces.** what would happen when they no longer had either of their children at home? What would life be like when it was just the two of them left. And if their marriage was lacking in some ways, **there was still friendship in it** and a mutual respect for one another. The explanations, the blame and counter-blame, all seemed hopeless now; they could only cause more destruction.

Christophe was dying of cancer. When she went to see him her eye was caught by a blue bowl. The delicate ceramic looked as if it had been broken into several pieces and then fixed back together with a vein of purest gold, which shot through the piece like a lightning strike against a sky of midnight blue. She reached out a finger and touched the rim. The join was perfect: her fingertip sensed only the very slightest catch where the gold met the clay, invisible to the eye. 'Beautiful! It's a technique called *kintsukuroi*. Japanese in style, although this piece was made by a local potter. I love the philosophy behind it: that **something which is so unique and irreplaceable is worth mending with pure gold, so that the cracks and flaws themselves become part of the**

**beauty of the piece.** 'When I was in the prison camp, I kept a drawing I'd done of you under my pillow. It was the same principle. You were my Mona Lisa, my reminder that truth and beauty existed even in that dismal place. 'It has been perfect, hasn't it, my Ella? You and me. Our love. It has only been able to be **perfect because it was never corrupted by reality**. Imagine if we had got married, if you had come to live with me in Paris or here on the island. It would have been altered then, by the thousand daily demands of real life, by financial worries and worries about our children. Maybe even by loving our children more than we loved each other. All those things that you and Angus have weathered in your relationship.' She sensed him slipping away from her a little further, along a path that only he could travel. You gave me **the gift of seeing beauty in the ordinary**. The miracles that are all around us in the everyday and the mundane, if we only open our eyes to them.'

#### • 2015, Edinburgh

So now I know. Now I understand why my mother has refused to see my grandmother, unable to forgive her. But I also understand why the full story needs to be told, so that Ella can, at last, **let her daughter know how much she has loved her**; how she has protected her all these years; so that she can be forgiven in the end.

These hands that clasped and held and carried, a whole history of work and motherhood: an extraordinary life. But they are hands that had to learn to let go too. When Angus went to retrieve her from Île de Ré he saw the painting, Neptune's Locket, he looked at it for a good long spell. Then he nodded, and said, "He loved you the way I love you—body and soul." It felt as if he was laying to rest the spectre of Christophe that had haunted him throughout our marriage. A bit of closure, I suppose.

The art of *kintsukuroi* - "**That something which is unique has its own beauty that can never be destroyed; that it's always worth mending, even when it's broken; and that the fractures and the scars become part of the beauty too, making the piece even more remarkable, even more precious.**" And then she said, "Heal your heart, Ella. Let Angus help you. Mend your marriage with veins of the purest gold and remake it, better and stronger than before." And we did. Because, you see, Kendra, I fell in love with your grandfather all over again. Caroline was right: our love was worth mending. In the end, **we made the scars part of the beauty of our marriage**. And Christophe was right too. He was my first love, but Angus was my lasting love. I'd always thought I wanted a second chance with Christophe, that life had cheated me of it. But, in fact, the second chance I got was with Angus. How lucky I am, to have loved and been loved by two such good men. **Find the beauty in your life, even in the most difficult times.**

#### • 2015, Île de Ré

I know what a toll all of this has taken on Dan and me. But the Île de Ré seems to be weaving its subtle magic around us, just as it did around Ella and Christophe all those years ago, binding us to one another again, reminding me how much **I love this man who has shared the struggle** to understand our son and to try to get him the care he needs. But he pulls himself together, as he always does, protecting me from his

by Fiona Valpy

sadness and his frustration, his sense of failure. And I realize in this moment that he is my first love and my lasting love. Together, we are Finn's parents. Together, we will make it work, whatever life sends our way. In this moment, **I see my grandmother for who she truly was—a pure force of beauty, love, joy and compassion.** And I see, too, that that is all that matters: it is everything. If I can try to live my life with this in mind, then I know that I will be happy, wherever I may be and no matter what challenges surround me. In Christophe's best painting she looks very peaceful, perfectly contented being who she really is. As we all should be. In the clear summer light that dazzles as it dances on the water, casting sunbeams on to Finn's face, suddenly I dare to dream of a future stretching ahead of us that is filled with hope and joy instead of darkness and worry. I see a little house in the country, where we can grow vegetables and raise chickens; where Finn can find peace and feel safe; where I can write and Dan can know the dignity of being his own master again. And I see holidays, when we will travel as a family to a wild, low-lying island moored in a sea of light. And then I turn to my husband, my eyes brimming with an overwhelming sense of amazement at the miracle of this life. **The everyday miracle that is love.**