

'Incredibly moving beautifully funny, luminous with wisdom. It is a book that restores one's faith in life even as it deepens it's mystery. Wonderful!'

Chris Cleave



Etta and Otto and Russell and James

EMMA HOOPER



FIG TREE
an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS

FIG TREE

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London wc2r orl, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada м4Р 2Ұ3

(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park, 181 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London wc2r orl, England

www.penguin.com

First published 2015 001

Copyright © Emma Hooper, 2015

The moral right of the author has been asserted

All rights reserved

Without limiting the rights under copyright
reserved above, no part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system,
or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior
written permission of both the copyright owner and
the above publisher of this book

Set in 12/14.75 pt Dante MT Std Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-24I-00332-9

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Books is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council™ certified paper.

For C & T always and always on and on

Otto,

the letter began, in blue ink.

I've gone. I've never seen the water, so I've gone there. Don't worry, I've left you the truck. I can walk. I will try to remember to come back.

```
Yours (always),
Etta.
```

Underneath the letter she had left a pile of recipe cards. All the things she had always made. Also in blue ink. So he would know what and how to eat while she was away. Otto sat down at the table and arranged them so no two were overlapping. Columns and rows. He thought about putting on his coat and shoes and going out to try and find her, maybe asking neighbours if they had seen which way she went, but he didn't. He just sat at the table with the letter and the cards. His hands trembled. He laid one on top of the other to calm them.

After a while Otto stood and went to get their globe. It had a light in the middle, on the inside, that shone through the latitude and longitude lines. He turned it on and turned off the regular kitchen lights. He put it on the far side of the table, away from the letter and cards, and traced a path with his finger. Halifax. If she went east, Etta would have 3,232 kilometres to cross. If west, to Vancouver, 1,201 kilometres. But she would go east, Otto knew. He could feel the tightness in the skin across his chest pulling that way. He noticed his rifle was missing from the front closet. It would still be an hour or so until the sun rose.

Growing up, Otto had fourteen brothers and sisters. Fifteen altogether, including him. This was when the flu came and wouldn't go, and the soil was even drier than usual, and the banks had all turned inside out and all the farmers' wives were losing more children than they were keeping. So families were trying and trying, for every five pregnancies, three babies, and for every three babies, one child. Most of the farmers' wives were pregnant most of the time. The silhouette of a beautiful woman, then, was a silhouette rounded with potential. Otto's mother was no different. Beautiful. Always round.

Still, the other farmers and their wives were wary of her. She was cursed, or blessed; *supernatural*, they said to one another across mailboxes. Because Otto's mother, Grace, lost none of her children. Not one. Every robust pregnancy running smoothly into a ruddy infant and every infant to a barrel-eared child, lined up between siblings in grey and off-grey nightclothes, some holding babies, some holding hands, leaning into the door to their parents' room, listening fixedly to the moaning from within.

Etta, on the other hand, had only one sister. Alma with the pitch-black hair. They lived in town.

Let's play nuns, said Etta, once, after school but before dinner.

Why nuns? said Alma. She was braiding Etta's hair. Etta's just-normal like a cowpat hair.

Etta thought about the nuns they saw, sometimes, on the edges of town, moving ghostly-holy between the shops and church. Sometimes by the hospital. Always clean in black and white. She looked down at her own red shoes. Blue buckles. Undone. Because they're beautiful, she said.

No, Etta, said Alma, nuns don't get to be beautiful. Or have adventures. Everybody forgets nuns.

I don't, said Etta.

Anyway, said Alma, I might get married. And you might too.

No, said Etta.

Maybe, said Alma. She leaned down and did up her sister's shoe. And, she said, what about adventures?

You have those before you become a nun.

And then you have to stop? asked Alma.

And then you get to stop.

The first field Etta walked across the morning she left was theirs. Hers and Otto's. If there was ever dew here, there would still have been dew on the wheat stalks. But only dust brushed off on to her legs. Warm, dry dust. It took no time at all to cross their fields, her feet not even at home in the boots yet. Two kilometres down already. Russell Palmer's field was next.

Etta didn't want Otto to see her leaving, which is why she left so early, so quietly. But she didn't mind about Russell. She knew he couldn't keep up with her even if he wanted to.

His land was 500 acres bigger than theirs, and his house was taller, even though he lived alone, and even though he was almost never in it. This morning he was standing halfway between his house and the end of his land, in the middle of the early grain. Standing, looking. It took fifteen minutes of walking before Etta reached him.

A good morning for looking, Russell?

Just normal. Nothing yet.

Nothing?

Nothing worth noting.

Russell was looking for deer. He was too old, now, to work his own land, the hired crew did that, so instead he looked for deer, from right before sunrise until an hour or so after and then again from an hour or so before sunset until right after. Sometimes he saw one. Mostly he didn't.

Well, nothing except you, I suppose. Maybe you scared them away. Maybe. I'm sorry.

Russell had been looking all over while he spoke, at Etta, around her, above her, at her again. But now he stopped. He just looked at her.

Are you sorry?

About the deer, Russell, only about the deer.

You're sure?

I'm sure.

Oh, OK.

I'm going to walk on now, Russell, good luck with the deer.

OK, have a good walk. Hello and love to Otto. And to any deer if you see them.

Of course. Have a good day, Russell.

You too, Etta. He took her hand, veined, old, lifted it and kissed it. Holding it to his lips for one, two seconds. I'll be here if you need me, he said.

I know, said Etta.

OK. Goodbye then.

He didn't ask, where are you going, or why are you going. He turned back around to face where the deer might be. She walked on, east. In her bag, pockets and hands were:

Four pairs of underwear

One warm sweater

Some money

Some paper, mostly blank, but one page with addresses on it and one page with names

One pencil and one pen

Four pairs of socks

Stamps

Cookies

A small loaf of bread

Six apples

Ten carrots

Some chocolate

Some water

A map, in a plastic bag

Otto's rifle, with bullets

One small fish skull

Six-year-old Otto was checking the chicken wire for fox-sized holes. A fox could fit through anything bigger than his balled fist, even underground, even up quite high. He would find an opening and press his hand gently against it, pretending to be a fox. The chickens would run away. Unless Wiley, whose job it was to throw grain at the birds, was with him. But this time Wiley wasn't there and, so, the chickens were afraid of Otto's fist. I am a fox. Otto wrapped his thumb around the front of his balled fingers and moved it like a mouth. I am a fox, let me in, pressing gently, but as hard as a fox, as a fox's mouth. I am hungry, I will eat you. Otto was hungry. He almost always was. Sometimes he ate little bits of the chicken grain. Good to chew on. If Wiley wasn't there.

He had checked three and a half sides of the wiring when three-and-a-half-year-old Winnie walked up in dungarees with no shirt. Otto had put a shirt on her that morning, but it was hot, so she had taken it off. Dinner, she said. Close enough that he could hear, but not too close; chickens scared her. Otto, she said. Dinner-Time. Then she left to find Gus and tell him the same. This was her job.

As well as a name, each child in Otto's family had a number, so they were easier to keep track of. Marie-1, Clara-2, Amos-3, Harriet-4, Walter-5, Wiley-6, Otto-7 and so on.Marie-1 was the eldest. The numeration was her idea.

Yes.
 Yes.
 Yes.
 Hello.
 4?

```
Yes, hello.
5?
Yes, yes, hello, hello.
6?
Present.
7?
Yes, please.
8?
Present.
9?
Hello!
```

Everyone was always present. Nobody ever missed dinner, or supper.

So, said Otto's mother, everyone is here. Everyone is clean?

Otto nodded vehemently. He was clean. He was starving. Everyone else nodded too. Winnie's hands were filthy and everyone knew it, but everyone nodded, including Winnie.

OK then, said their mother, ladle propped against her round belly, soup!

Everyone rushed to the table, each to their own chair. Except today there was no chair for Otto. Or, rather, there was, but there was someone else in it. A boy. Not a brother. Otto looked at him, then reached across, in front, and took the spoon from him.

That's mine, he said.

OK, said the boy.

Otto grabbed the knife. That's mine too, he said. And this, he said, grabbing the still-empty bowl.

OK, said the boy.

The boy said nothing else and Otto didn't know what else to say, or do. He stood behind his chair, trying not to drop all his things, trying not to cry. He knew the rules. You didn't bother parents with child-problems unless there was blood or it involved an animal. Otto's mother was coming around, child by child, with the pot and ladle, so

Otto, standing with his things, crying quietly, would have to wait for her to get to them. The other boy just looked straight ahead.

Otto's mother was spooning exactly one ladle of soup into each child's bowl. One for each, exactly, until, a pause, and,

I don't think you're Otto.

No, neither do I.

I'm Otto, right here.

Then who is this?

I don't know.

I'm from next door. I'm starving. I'm Russell.

But the Palmers don't have any children.

They have a nephew. One nephew. Me.

Otto's mother paused. Clara-2, she said, get another bowl from the cupboard, please.

Until recently, Russell's parents had lived in the city, in Saskatoon, and, until recently, Russell had lived there too, with them. But five weeks ago the banks announced that everything was absolutely broken, right there in the paper, for anyone who hadn't noticed yet for themselves, and three weeks ago, Russell's father, who owned a shop right in the middle of downtown, an everything shop with wrenches and lemon candy and bolts of printed cotton in rows, had turned a bit white, then a bit dizzy, then had to sit down, then had to lie down, and then, after sweating and sweating and Russell getting so much cold water from the kitchen, carried in the biggest bronze pitcher, hefting it up the stairs, hugging it to himself, so cold with the water inside, and bringing it to the bedroom where his father was lying, at first alone, and then, soon, with the doctor standing by, and then, not too long after, with the doctor and the priest standing by, while Russell's mother cooked for everyone and dealt with all this goddamn paperwork until, two weeks ago, while Russell was carrying a twelfth bronze pitcher from the kitchen, so cold against his stomach and chest, almost burning cold, Russell's father gave up and died. His mother sighed and put on her black dress, the one with the stiff lace collar, before closing up the shop for good and going to work as a typist in Regina.

Russell rode part of the way with her on the train. He'd never been on a train before. The skinny-skinny cows zipped past so quickly. Russell wanted to lean out of the window and open his eyes as wide as he could so that all the air hit them and dried them out, forever. But the windows didn't open. So, instead, Russell traced his finger up and down his mother's collar, following the twisting path of the lace, and let his eyes be wet. Almost exactly halfway between Saskatoon and Regina, the train stopped and Russell got off and his mother did not. You'll like the farm, she said. Farms are better.

OK, said Russell.

They're better, she said.

OK, said Russell.

And I'll see you soon, you know, she said.

Yes, said Russell. OK.

Russell's aunt and uncle were waiting on the platform. They had made a small sign from the side of a milk crate. *WELLCOME HOME RUSSEL!* it said. Despite trying, they had had no children of their own.

That same year, the year Etta was six, it did not rain, not once. This was odd, this was bad, but what was worse was that it did not snow either. In January she could walk out of town through the tall grass and everything would look like summer, no frost, no powder, but, if you touched them, or a bird tried to land on them, the grass stalks would crumble, frozen and brittle. Alma had taken Etta out for a walk, to where the creek was, when there was a creek. They were looking at fish skeletons, all of them strung out along the dry bed, the whitest things. If a beetle or worm had bored through any of the bones they would take them home and use them to make necklaces. The skulls, of course, already had holes in them, but Etta's sister didn't like to use these for jewellery.

They can come back alive when they touch your skin, she said. And start talking. Leave those.

OK, said Etta. But when Alma wasn't looking she stuffed smaller skulls into her mittens, on the top sides of her hands so she could still bend her fingers.

Are your ears cold? said Alma.

A bit, said Etta. Even though they weren't cold at all. She was holding her mittened-hands to her ears to see if she could hear them, the fish skulls. To see if being against the skin of her fingers was enough to wake them up, to make them talk. The wind was loud that day, but if Etta pressed her skin against the wool against the bone hard enough, there was something. There were whispers.

What language do fish speak?

Alma was brushing dust from a beautiful rib, almost transparent; she did not look up. Probably French, she said. Like Grandma.

Etta pressed her mittens to her ears and whispered, Should I be a nun?

The wind blew and the insides of her mittens said, Non, non, non.

Etta sang as she walked. She never forgot the words.

We sit and gaze across the plains and wonder why it never rains and Gabriel blows his trumpet sound he says, 'The rain she's gone around.'

She walked away from the roads, through the early fields. She knew the farmers wouldn't like it, but on the road every truck would want to stop and say hello and where are you off to and what are you up to, so she walked through the fields, trying not to crush any growth too badly. It was broad and mostly empty here, save occasional cattle, so she sang as loud as she liked.

She stopped for food in the rest-stop café in Holdfast. They had changed the tables and chairs since she was last there, with Alma. Less colour, cleaner. Nobody noticed her come into town and nobody noticed her leave, except for the waitress and the boy at the till.

After eating three cabbage rolls, two pieces of white bread with butter and one slice of rhubarb pie, and paying for them, Etta left with ten sachets of ketchup and eight of green relish tucked into her coat pocket. Relish was vegetable and sugar and ketchup was fruit and sugar and either could see you through if you needed them to.

It was just starting to get dark when, little by little, the crops began to thin and the ground began to turn sandy and then to sand completely. And then, just as the sun sat down below the stretching orange of the horizon, Etta stopped walking; having made her way right up to a lake, right up to the water, just far enough away from the push of the waves to stay dry. She knew, of course, that she would encounter obstacles of smaller water before she was through to Halifax. She'd heard Ontario was full of them. But she didn't expect anything quite so soon. She sat down on the sand, a few metres from the wet edge. It felt good to sit. She wondered about swimming. How much energy it took; how far a person could go without needing to stop. She leaned back on to the beach and listened to the waves, a new kind of sound. Etta closed her eyes.

Oh my God I bet it's somebody dead.

No!

Maybe.

Well, are you going to check?

Come with me.

Of course.

I love you.

I love you. And, look, not dead. Breathing.

I hear sometimes they do that, after death.

What, bodies? Breathe?

Yeah.

No.

Maybe.

No.

Etta woke at their footsteps, shuddering through the sand towards her, but she kept her eyes closed to listen as the couple approached. She breathed shallow. In sleep, her legs had burrowed down in the sand, and much of her torso too. The weight against her was comforting. She could feel it cracking and then coming back together as she breathed in and out. If I open my eyes they will ask me who I am, she thought. But if I don't open my eyes, they'll think I'm dead. Probably call the police. She pulled at her thoughts, tried to stretch open her mind, still with her eyes closed. Sand. The feeling of sand. Tiredness

in her hips. Night. Voices. Light wind. A sister with black hair. A house in the city. Writing paper. Paper.

The couple were still talking, distracted. Keeping her eyes closed, Etta reached through to her coat pocket to get to the paper, fumbling through restaurant packets, triggering sand cascades. Not subtle, not unnoticeable. And there it was. Folded. She took it out. Unfolded it. They must have realized, now, that I'm not dead. They must be waiting. Or afraid. She opened her eyes. As it was dark, she had to hold the paper quite close to her face.

You:

it said.

Etta Gloria Kinnick of Deerdale Farm. 83 years old in August.

Etta Gloria Kinnick, she whispered, to herself. OK. Right, OK.

I'm not dead, she said, to the two young people standing beside her, staring. I'm Etta Gloria Kinnick. A person can't keep breathing after death.

Oh God! I mean, good! I mean, hello, said the boy.

See? Told you, said the girl.

Are you OK? said the boy.

Yes, yes, I'm fine.

Oh, OK, good.

. . .

. . .

Do you need help getting home?

I'm not going home. So, no. No, thank you.

Are you homeless?

George!

Well, she just doesn't look homeless, is all.

I'm not homeless. I'm just not going home.

Where are you going?

East.

But that means across Last Mountain Lake.

Or around it.

But it's really long, right?

I don't know. Maybe.

It is. We have a map in our cabin. It is.

. . .

. . .

Hey, can we help you up?

Molly and George, the kids who found Etta, had come from a party; they had excused themselves quietly, separately, seven minutes apart, and then had met, 100 metres further down the beach, behind the Lamberts' fishing shed. They were on their way back to the party, half an hour or so later, when they found Etta. And now that they had found her, and established she was not dead, and helped her to stand up and brush the sand off her legs and shoulders, they were heading back there, to the party, both smelling of dry yellow perch nets, with indentations of gill lines across their backs and stomachs.

Hey, you know what? said Molly.

What? said George.

What? said Etta.

You should come with us. Back to the party. Come with us.

Yeah? said George.

Yeah? said Etta.

Yeah! said Molly, already taking Etta's hands, already moving forward down the beach towards the noise and the light.

Dear Otto,

I am on a boat. Just a small one, a cheap inflatable one, which is good, because I'm not sure how or if I'll be able to get it back to its owners, the younger twin sisters of a boy I met last night around a fire on the west beach of Last Mountain Lake. We were at a party. One girl said I was like her grandmother, now dead. I told her I'm nobody's grandmother and I'm not dead, and she said that made it perfect.

I am using a paddle we found on the beach. We don't know whose it is. I guess the twins never wanted to go far enough to need a paddle.

When I'm across I'll put the paddle in the dinghy and push them back on to the lake, with a note that says, Boat: property of the McFarlan twins. Paddle: owner unknown. I have already written it, on a napkin. I have other, real paper (like this), but I don't want to use it up too fast.

As well as the boat and paddle, the kids also gave me two beers and half a forty of rye. Good in case I get cold, they said. They really were nice kids. Some of them were in love.

Remember to wear a hat and eat the spinach when it comes up.

Your, Etta.

Otto got the letter five days after Etta had dated it. He was cleaning the oven, following handwritten instructions on a yellowed recipe card –

Needed:

Baking soda and water.

Instructions:

Apply, wait, remove.

– when the letter arrived with the morning mail. Etta had been gone for one week. The first day he had tried going out into his fields, as usual, but couldn't stop looking back, towards the house. Like Russell, with his deer.

The rest of the week Otto worked in the close garden plot or in the house. His stomach hurt whenever he got further away than that. He turned the garden soil and raked it out, then did the same the next day. Lining up the indents of the rake exactly, row to row. He would not plant anything, spinach or carrots or radishes, in the rows until Etta had reached Manitoba.