

Blue Plastic Cow by Barbara Attwood

Chapter One

New Baby

Pale winter sunlight revealed the bareness of the room. Florrie wrapped the baby in an enormous shawl, and walked with her husband Jim out of the red-bricked orphanage and down slippery steps, through ice and snow to the bus stop. Huddled in a wooden shelter, surrounded by freezing fog, they waited for an hour until the bus arrived.

Black icy patches covered the roads, and through the mist, the weary driver, guided only by a faint headlight, carefully manoeuvred the bus. Snowflakes settled on the windows, obscuring their view.

Seated in the back of the chilly bus, Florrie touched the baby's face. Jim looked down and smiled. 'She's ours now.'

'Not until *she* signs.' Florrie frowned. She didn't use the words *her mother* because she was the baby's mother now. Bending to kiss the baby's forehead, she whispered, 'But I'll keep the name she gave you ... Barbara ... it suits you.'

It was two hours before the driver shouted, 'Widnes bus station!' The exhausted couple stepped down from the bus in time to catch a connection to West Bank.

The fog had lifted from Parsonage Road, where their seven-year-old daughter, Lily, was jumping up and down with her friends in the crisp, crunchy snow. As they got closer, Lily ran towards them, her cheeks glowing red. 'My Christmas present's arrived. It's a baby sister!' she shouted.

As soon as they entered the warmth of the house, Lily sat on the sofa, her arms outstretched. 'I want to feed her, please, Mam!'

Florrie placed the baby carefully into Lily's arms. Lily grinned as Barbara grasped the bottle in her tiny hands and sucked hungrily at the teat.

The front door burst open and banged shut. Joseph, a dark, handsome lad of fourteen, bounced in. 'The Scouts Christmas party was great.' Abruptly, he stopped in front of the sofa and stared. 'Oh, she's here, is she?' he said, wrinkling his nose as he watched Lily holding the baby.

'It's Barbara and she's mine!' Lily shielded the baby from his gaze.

'It's your new sister,' Jim told him sternly. 'She's a gift from God.'

'OK.' He shrugged. 'I'm off snowballing.'

That evening, Jimmy, their eldest child, returned from national service on Christmas leave from the Air Force. 'It's Barbara, your new sister. She's six months old,' Florrie told him, pointing to the cradle in the corner of the living room.

Jimmy raised his eyebrows and elbowed his father in the ribs. 'You randy old sod! Is this the seven-year itch?' Jim didn't smile.

'Shush!' Florrie shook her head and raised her finger to her mouth. 'We're going to adopt her. I'll explain later.'

Jimmy's eyes darted from Florrie to Jim. 'Oh! ... All right! But you could have warned me.' He smiled down at the baby and held her chubby hand. 'Hello, little sister.'

During Mass in St Patrick's Church on Christmas morning, Florrie heard Jim whisper, 'If the adoption goes ahead, I'll provide for her and I'll love her like she's my own.'

Sat on the hard wooden bench, with Barbara on her knee, she stared at Jim as he kneeled in prayer. *What a kind, unselfish man I married*, she thought. She'd longed for another child, and there was no objection from Jim when she told him that she wanted to adopt.

As the eldest girl in a family of eight, Florrie's mother had relied on her to keep order. When *her* father got drunk, he'd hit her mother and she had to protect the younger children from his anger, hiding them wherever she could. She'd resolved to make a better life for herself and her own children.

Turning her head towards the nativity scene on the side altar beneath a Gothic stone arch, she offered up a grateful prayer, 'Thank you, Jesus, for making my family complete.' She looked down at Barbara, who opened her eyes and let out a cry, struggling to sit up. 'There, there,' Florrie said soothingly, and as she held the baby close, and kissed her smooth pink cheeks, she couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so content.

Walking home through the crisp snow, they exchanged greetings with all of the passers-by near or far. 'Merry Christmas!'

'All the best!'

'The same to you!'

Florrie beamed with pride whenever a neighbour stopped to peep inside the pram and congratulate the family on their new arrival.

Jimmy lit a cigarette and trailed behind with Joseph, laughing loudly at each other's jokes, their breath a cloud of mist in the cold air.

Holding onto the pram, Lily slid over patches of ice. 'This is the best Christmas we've ever had,' Florrie said aloud to herself.