

1. A family portrait

In The Rain Before It Falls, the narrator describes a series of old photos to a member of her family, who is blind.

In this extract, she is talking about a photo that was taken during WWII, when she was sent away from London to escape the Blitz bombings.

A family group. Aunt Ivy, and Uncle Owen, in the background. In the foreground, three children – including me. But I will come to the children later. Let me tell you about Ivy and Owen first of all.

I don't remember this picnic, and I can't identify the landscape in which the picture was taken. But it is recognizably Shropshire – I can feel that, just by looking at it. And probably not far from Warden, the house in which they – we – were all living at the time.

[...] I suspect it was one of those sunny but bitterly cold autumn days, because Ivy is wearing sunglasses and yet her hair is being blown out of shape by the wind.

What can I remember about her, from looking at her face in the photograph?

Ivy, you should know first of all, was my mother's sister. There was not much family resemblance, however. She is smiling here, a good open-mouthed smile: everybody is doing this, in fact, so I would imagine that the picture was taken by Raymond, her elder son, and that he must have been clowning around while he was taking it. Even I seem to be smiling a little bit. But what Ivy's smile makes me think of is her laugh: a real smoker's laugh; rough and throaty. [...]

I did not like Uncle Owen. He was a man who made no effort to communicate with children or put them at their ease. [...]

So much for the adults. Now apart from myself, the two children at the front of the photograph are Ivy and Owen's younger son, Digby, and their daughter Beatrix. They were my first cousins of course. I should also mention something else about Beatrix in case you are not aware of it: she was your grand-mother.

When this photograph was taken, she would have been twelve. She is sitting upright, almost as though she has just sat on something uncom-



fortable. Her back is rigid. Bea's posture was always good: she always carried herself well. She is wearing a cardigan which, if my memory serves me well, was pale green. Beatrix came alive when there were a lot of people around: with friends, at parties... Whenever she was alone with me, she was a different person: insecure, ill-at-ease, afraid of the world. [...]

Sitting next to her is her brother Digby. It is not important that you know very much about Digby. Like Raymond, her older brother, he took little notice of me. This was upsetting first, but later on, when Beatrix and I became close, it suited us quite well. He looks younger than his thirteen years. Perhaps because he is wearing shorts. [...]

The only person left to describe, now, is myself. My eight-year-old self. No need to look closely at what I am wearing: I can remember exactly. I think I only had three changes of clothes with me the whole time I stayed at Warden Farm. Here I am wearing my faithful old thick brown woollen jumper, knitted for me by my mother. She was an enthusiastic – one might say almost obsessive – knitter.