Chapter 1 - Peggy Sue

I disappeared on the night before my twelfth birthday. July 28 1988. Only now can I at last tell the whole extraordinary story, the true story. Kensuke made me promise that I would say nothing, nothing at all, until at least ten years had passed It was almost the last thing he said to me. I promised, and because of that I have had to live out a lie. I could let sleeping lies sleep on, but more than ten years have passed now. I have done school, done college, and had time to think. I owe it to my family and to my friends, all of whom I have deceived for so long, to tell the truth about my long disappearance, about how I lived to come back from the dead.

But there is another reason for speaking out now, a far, far better reason. Kensuke was a great man, a good man, and he was my friend. I want the world to know him as I knew him.

Until I was nearly eleven, until the letter came, life was just normal. There were the four of us in the house: my mother, my father, me and Stella - Stella Artois, that is, my-one-ear up and one-ear-down black and white sheepdog, who always seemed to know what was about to happen before it did. But even she could not have foreseen how that letter was going to change our lives for ever.

Thinking back, there was a regularity, a sameness about my early childhood. It was down the road each morning to 'the monkey school'. My father called it that because he said the children gibbered and screeched and hung upside down on the climbing frame in the playground. And, anyway, I was always 'monkey face' to him - when he was in a playful mood, that is, which he often was. The school was really called St Joseph's, and I was happy there, for most of the time, anyway. After school everyday, whatever the weather, I'd be off down to the recreation ground for football with Eddie Dodds, my best friend in all the world, and Matt and Bobby and the others. It was muddy down there. Cross the ball and it would just land and stick. We had our own team, the Mudlarks we called ourselves, and we were good, too. Visiting teams seemed to expect the ball to bounce for some reason, and by the time they realised it didn't, we were often two or three goals up. We weren't so good away from home.

Every weekend I did a paper round from Mr Patel's shop on the corner. I was saving up for a mountain bike. I wanted to go mountain biking up on the moors with Eddie. The trouble was, I would keep spending what I'd saved. I'm still the same that way.

Sundays were always special, I remember. We'd go dinghy sailing, all of us, on the reservoir, Stella Artois barking her head off at the other boats as if they'd no right to be there. My father loved it, he said, because the air was clear and clear, no brick dust – he worked down at the brickworks. He was a great do-it-yourself fanatic. There was nothing he couldn’t fix even if it didn't need fixing. So he was in his element on a boat. My mother, who worked part time in the office at the same brickworks, revelled in it, too. I remember her once, throwing back her head in the wind and breathing in deep as she sat at the tiller. 'This is it,' she cried. 'This is how life is supposed to be. Wonderful, just wonderful.' She always wore the blue cap. She was the undisputed skipper. If there was a breeze out there, she'd find it and catch it. She had a real nose for it.

We had some great days on the water. We'd go out when it was rough, when no one else would, and we'd go skimming over the waves, exhilarating in the speed of it, in the sheer joy of it. And if there wasn't a breath of wind, we didn't mind that either. Sometimes we'd be the only boat on the whole reservoir. We'd just sit and fish instead - by the way, I was better at fishing than either of them - and Stella Artois would be curled up behind us in the boat, bored with the whole thing, because there was no one to bark at.

Then the letter arrived.