

Digging FOR *Victory*

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First published in 2023 by Firefly Press
25 Gabalfa Road, Llandaff North, Cardiff, CF14 2JJ

www.fireflypress.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record of this book is available
from the British Library.
ISBN 9781915444110

This book has been published with the support of
the Books Council of Wales.

Typeset by Elaine Sharples

Printed and bound in Great Britain by 4Edge

To Duncan Fraser, an inspirational teacher who first sowed
the seed.

Wednesday 3rd December 1940

Ralph's going off to be a hero.

It's official.

He got his papers this morning –

Two-Six-Six squadron are expecting him.

Ralph's my brother, just in case you didn't know.

Ralph,

who, until not so long ago,

would sometimes play hide

and

seek.

Not that it would ever take me long to find him

(and then he'd pretend he wasn't even playing
and that made me feel daft).

Ralph,

who told me the difference

between Spitfires and Hurricanes,

Wellingtons and Halifaxes,

but missed the very first actual Spitfire

flying over

the village

(and then claimed he was the first to see it).

Ralph,

who's won the heart

of practically every girl in the village

(apart from Mary Smith

who will always hate him),

but who's never once won a school prize.

(The ones *I've* won for coming first in tests
don't count, he says,
since he gave me all the answers –
which isn't true anyway.)

Ralph,
who's always made me look second best,
even though I'm not.

Ralph, Mother says
(whilst brushing away a tear),
wouldn't want us to be sad –
we're to learn to be strong,
keep our chins up
and most of all,
FEEL PROUD.

The thing is,
 if I'm honest,
I don't actually feel sad and,
 even though I'm just his little sister,
I'm already strong.

And there's no way I'm
ever
EVER
putting my chin up
and feeling proud
until

I

am the hero.

Wednesday 17th December 1940

Can you help me carry Ralph's things down to the cellar,

Mother says,

in her that's-what-you're-going-to-do-anyway kind of way.

Why? I ask. *He'll be back before long –*

he said he'll visit us as soon as he's got leave,

didn't he?

Mother sighs.

We don't know when that'll be,

and now that he's really flown the nest

for the good of the country,

it's time that we play our part too.

I wrinkle my face up.

What do you mean?

I mean, Bonnie,

that Father and I

have applied to have someone billeted here,

so now we can all look forward to someone else coming to stay.

So Ralph gets to fly away on an adventure

and we have a stranger coming to stay

(not that I was ever asked about it).

How exactly is that us playing a part in the war effort?

Boxing up Ralph's childhood –

his hard-won marbles
 (that he never let me play with),
the prize conker
 (which I know *I* found),
and badly-painted tin soldiers
 (in all the wrong colours) –
is the only part I get to play.

I dig out Grandfather's old zoetrope from under Ralph's bed –
so that's where it's been!
It's been years since we've played with it –
Ralph told Mother I'd lost it
(and as usual, I took the blame).
I'm taking this to *my* room.

I place it in the middle of my windowsill.
Rising from its polished wooden base,
the round metal drum looks almost
lamp – like, but upside – down with
slits cut round the side.
I spin it really hard,
looking
through
one
of
the
gaps

and wonder (as I've always done) exactly how the drawings on
the inside seem to merge into one moving picture.

I watch them as they chase each other
round
and
round
and
round.

They're faded now and covered in dust,
but they're just as I remember them:

the eagle
takes off
and soars
time and
time again,
leaving the chicken
always
scratching
pathetically
at the ground
below.

As I carry
the boxes and trunks
down to their new home
in the cold, cobwebbed cellar,
I wonder who might soon be moving their things in.

I hope it's someone nice
like Barbara Robinson
who arrived from Bristol
with her gas mask and trunk
and was billeted with Carol
(my best friend in the whole world)
last September.

Another Nancy Edwards
(who arrived on the same train
in her pigtails and pinafore)
would be all right too
(although I still don't believe
what she said about
never having seen a cow before.
I'm sure she's lying).

Even a Betty Sanders
(who talks for all three of them)
wouldn't be too bad,
just as long as
she doesn't EVER say
that things are backward here.
I've heard that far too much already.

Or perhaps –
now here's an idea –
it might be one of those land girls
who helps out on farms.

Mr Brown

(that's our closest neighbour)

has requested some, you know,

now that his farmhands have gone off to fight

(he's got a lot on his plate at the moment,

what with being in the Home Guard and all).

I bet their trunks would be full of lipstick and pretty dresses,

stockings and high heels.

A land girl might curl my hair

and give me lovely things

just like a kind big sister.

How jealous the girls at school would be!

Yes, by the time Ralph's room is empty,

the memories boxed up

and the dust swept away,

I realise that I'm actually looking forward

to someone else coming to stay.

Just so long as that someone

isn't a boy.

Thursday 2nd January 1941

No, it's not a boy,
Mother says
as I fix the newspaper paper chain
that's given up decorating our sitting room.

Thank goodness for that.
I don't want someone who'll tease me
and call me names
and snigger like they do at school.
I want someone like Carol:
 a girl I can talk to at midnight
who'll understand me,
who'll share secrets
 (and lemon sherbets),
be like the sister I never had
and who won't ever go off and join in the action,
leaving me feeling
second best.

No, it's not a boy,
Mother repeats.
 It's a Mr Fisher.

The chain comes apart in my hands.
That can't be right! I cry.
*Why on earth would a Mr Fisher
need to stay on a dairy farm
in the middle of nowhere?*

He can't be a farm hand –

they've already left to fight, and only land girls are sent to help now.

And if he were a farmer and allowed to stay,

why, he'd have his own farm and wouldn't be billeted here.

We don't need another doctor –

Dr Bovingdon's busy but I'm sure he can manage now that half the village have gone.

A teacher perhaps?

But the evacuees brought their own Miss Jones with them when they came on the train from Bristol.

Someone from the Home Guard?

Mr Brown has that all covered what with his whole team of grandfathers who watch out for invaders (and they've hardly been run off their feet).

Maybe a new warden?

But Mr Collins, our vicar, loves that job, and although he's almost as ancient as the church itself, I don't think anything will stop him shouting, *Put that light out!*

And if he were in the military—

he'd either be fighting abroad or based at RAF Oakmoor just ten miles from here.

What I hope more than anything

is that he isn't another conchie like Mr Howard,

sent here to do the jobs that no one else wants to do all because he has some strange belief and refuses to help our boys fight.

Having one of those in the house just doesn't bear

thinking about –
the boys at school would actually have a reason to call me
names then.

I scrunch the remains of the paper chain
tightly into a ball
and throw it into the wastepaper basket.

But Mr Howard wasn't billeted with anyone
even though he's working for Mr Brown.
He lives in his own caravan.
Thank goodness.
Maybe all conchies do.

Mother turns the letter
over
and
over
in her hands
as if looking for the answer to my question.

It must be a mistake.