Opening extract from

That Burning Summer

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Published by

Hot Key Books

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Hot Key Books
Northburgh House, 10 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0AT

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

ISBN: 978-1-4714-0053-7

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This book is typeset in 10.5pt Berling LT Std

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc

Hot Key Books supports the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation, and is committed to printing only on Greenpeace-approved FSC-certified paper.

www.hotkeybooks.com

Hot Key Books is part of the Bonnier Publishing Group
www.bonnierpublishing.com

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'Just *do* something, can't you?' Peggy yelled at Ernest, starting to run herself. 'Now you're finally here.'

The last ewe braked and swerved again, yellow eyes hunting for an exit, away from the huddle of farmers standing on the platform near the ticket office. Her head dodged from side to side, neck wrinkling. Naked and deciding, her clipped body swung left then right on thick stick legs. Then she made a bolt for it.

'Quick!'

Ernest's face twisted in panic as he lunged for the sheep, arms flapping. Peggy was sure her brother's eyes were shut. But so were hers, almost, screwed up against the whipping coastal wind that flicked her tears away. It whirled the bleating up and around and away, and Peggy's head ached with the confusion of noise. She didn't feel much more use than Ernest.

Then another animal darted away from the flock, charging headlong towards the fence in that stupid sheep way. Peggy roared and swerved too, all instinct herself.

The looker's collie was quicker than either of them. Even before Ernest could pick himself up, the dog had rounded up both contrary creatures. The two sheep thundered up the ramp

and into the wagon, broad arrows stark on their bare backs, tails and back legs filthy with fear.

There was a muted shuffle of hooves on wood as the animals made room for the last few tegs. A railwayman slid the door shut with a dull clang and the bleating inside became instantly more muffled and anxious. The animals kept on calling to each other, checking from wagon to wagon, eyes and wool pressed at the iron bars.

Then the whistle shrieked, and flags waved. Peggy and Ernest backed away from a warm cloud of black coal smoke and damp steam. The engine gathered its strength for the journey, and the train began to move. Nobody waved. They all just stood and watched it go, wordlessly. Before long, the rhythm of the track had drowned out the cries of the sheep. Just the wind was left, and a few wheeling gulls.

The figures on the platform slowly shook themselves into life again. Sheep droppings and straw littered the station and the smell of lanolin hung in the air. A few odd clumps of wool fluttered on the hurdles of the empty pens. Not much. The shearing gangs had got to work early this year. No point in the Enemy getting their wool.

The railwayman removed his cap with a sigh, wiped his gleaming brow and went to look for a yardbroom. A couple of farmers clapped each other on the back. They exchanged a swigging kind of mime and marched off in the direction of the pub.

The looker stared after the disappearing train. Peggy busied herself with an inspection of Ernest's knees. She must stop treating him as if he were six, instead of nearly twelve, but she

couldn't bear to see the old man's face, so stricken.

'Not too bad,' she said to Ernest. 'And your specs are all in one piece, so that's good.'

'I know. I didn't say it was bad,' he snapped, backing away from her. 'I'm fine. I'm perfectly fine. And I *was* trying to help, you know.'

'Sorry. Shouldn't have shouted at you.' It was so hard not to sometimes. Habit, mostly. And the older he got the more aggravating his awkward aspects seemed to her. It wasn't surprising he was finding it difficult to settle. They all were, really. So very near, and yet so far from home. Even their mum didn't seem specially comfortable at the farmhouse. You'd never think she'd grown up there. Of the three of them, Peggy felt she was definitely making the best of things. But it was funny how staying was so very different from visiting.

'I'll tell Auntie Myra . . .'

'It's all right. You don't have to tell her anything. It won't make any difference anyway.'

A mild explosion made them both turn. The looker was blowing his nose.

'Bless you,' said Peggy.

The old man looked at them curiously, as if they'd just appeared from nowhere. He had the kind of eyes that didn't seem used to looking at anything or anybody quite so close to him.

'Hrramph.' He gave his nose a firm and final wipe.

'Do you know where the sheep are going?' asked Peggy. *Do you know if they're coming back?* She shuffled her feet, wondering how long she should wait for an answer.

'Happen it be West Country, they say. Or Midlands. Don't rightly know.'

'Somewhere they can't end up as German dinner,' offered Ernest.

Peggy rolled her eyes. 'It's not that, Ernest. Uncle Fred says it's all about the breed. Romney Marsh sheep are special. They need to preserve the purity of the breed.'

'Oh.' Ernest looked doubtful. 'Really?'

It didn't make much sense to Peggy either, now she came to think about it.

The looker's gaze shifted.

'Fred Nokes your uncle?' he said.

'Yes. My mum's big brother. We live with him now.'

'Over by Snargate?'

'That's right.'

It was Ernest's turn to shift from foot to foot as he felt the looker's eyes moving over him, up and down, up and down, and then away. The deep furrows between his eyebrows turned into ditches. So how does a hefty figure of a farmer like Fred Nokes end up with a puny runt of a nephew like Ernest? That was what he was thinking, Peggy could tell. And she knew Ernie knew too.

'The army took our house,' she added quietly. 'Last month.'

The looker slowly put away his handkerchief and with equal deliberation brought out a tin of tobacco from the bib of his dungarees. He rummaged for just the right strands, stuck a wad into his cheek, and his jaws began to move. Ruminating. Peggy and Ernest continued to stand there, not sure if the conversation was over, letting the sadness settle. And then

Ernest went and put the question Peggy had been forming in her head, but hadn't liked to ask.

'So what will you look for now, with the sheep gone?'

Did lookers look *for* sheep, or look after them, Peggy wondered. Both, probably. Their huts dotted the Marsh, miles from everywhere, little one-room brick houses surrounded by pens. Many were in ruins these days. Waking in the night in lambing season, when they often went to help their uncle with the orphans, Peggy had sometimes seen a light twinkling, way out across Walland Marsh. Looking was a lonely old life.

'The Enemy, I dare say.' The looker screwed up his eyes and scanned the huge sky.

'We've all got to look out for the Enemy now,' said Ernest, suddenly more talkative. 'Do our bit. *You must not be taken by surprise.* That's –'

'That what your uncle says, is it?' The looker made it sound like 'runckle'.

'Yes, I mean, no. I mean, it's in the leaflet. I expect you've read it.'

Oh, shut up about that wretched leaflet. Peggy came close to bursting the words out loud. *Just shut up.*

'I don't read.' Brown-coloured spit suddenly streamed from the corner of the old man's mouth. 'But yes, I do know what it say.'

An uncertain look crossed Ernest's face. Peggy watched a blush begin to creep up from under his collar to colour the tips of his ears.

'Come on, Ern. Get your bike. Auntie Myra said to come back as soon as the sheep were gone. Remember? You go

ahead. I've got to take something to the post office for Mum.'

'Oh yes. I'm coming. Bye then.'

The looker just nodded. As Ernest turned, he muttered something under his breath.

Abyssinia, Peggy repeated to herself. It was what Dad always said, and neither of them could quite break the habit. It was the last thing he said before he left, when Ernest was asleep but she had woken up and come downstairs when she heard the crying. *I'll be seeing ya*.

Then Ernest started up all over again.

'The leaflet says –'

'Ernest.' Peggy stopped. She turned to face her brother, put a hand on each shoulder, and fixed him with glaring eyes. 'Listen to me. And please, please, *please* remember what I tell you this time. I. Don't. Want. To hear. Another word. About. The. Bloody. Leaflet.' She stared a bit harder. He looked suitably shocked at her language. 'Got that?'

Ernest twisted away from her grip.

'But, Peggy, you can't just pretend –'

'Pretend what?' she demanded cruelly.

'You know. Pretend it's not happening. We've got to be ready.'

She inhaled noisily, ready to let out a deep and sarcastic sigh. Then she thought better of it. Instead she released her caught-up breath in a calm and orderly fashion, and counted to ten. It was no good getting angry with Ernest. He didn't start the war. None of this was his fault.

But she just wished he'd never got his hands on that leaflet. They were managing fine till then. Ever since Ernest had come in and found Auntie Myra and Uncle Fred and Cousin June

leaning over the government's instructions together, the kitchen suddenly as silent as death, he had been obsessed. Absolutely fixated on the wretched rules. So Peggy repeated now what Uncle Fred had said then.

'Ernest, just remember. It says "*If* the invader comes." Not "*When* the invader comes."' Uncle Fred had tried to make a joke of it, of course. 'If,' he'd roared, with a burst of laughter. 'Bloody big if, if you ask me, pardon my French.' (And for once, Aunt Myra did.)

Ernest wasn't laughing.

Still unable to find words of her own, Peggy resorted to mimicking the annoying little phrase the soldiers used to call out at her when they caught sight of her serious face as she walked past the Camp on her way home from school, when Lydd was just a normal town, and you never had to think about the men going away to fight on actual battlefields. Before they requisitioned their house. Before they started using Dad's studio for target practice. 'Cheer up, love, it might never happen.'

Such a stupid thing to say.

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A second earlier he would have sworn the skies were clear. Sworn on his mother's life. Henryk didn't get a glimpse of the pilot that hit him.

The instruction to scramble had come very late in the day, just before anticipation had turned to dismay. At 20,000 feet the squadron was told to look out for a formation of two hundred enemy fighters. They found them. Henryk survived that engagement, disconnected his radio and set off in pursuit of a single bandit heading for France. That one had got away.

Returning to base through a clear sky, anticipating the usual reprimand, Henryk heard an icy crash.

A jagged hole the size of his fist gaped in the canopy behind his head. Almost at once the cockpit filled with the sweet chemical tang of glycol. It came gushing from the coolant tank like a geyser, spraying Henryk in the face and chest, covering his goggles. His joystick went slack.

This engine's finished, he thought. *This plane is finished. I'm finished.* A chilling calm briefly froze all reaction. Did he care? He didn't know. Maybe not. But nobody wants to burn to death. He'd already pulled the pin of his harness in an automatic gesture. That freed him from his seat.

In a single movement he shoved back the hood, wiped his goggles, and tipped into noise.

He fell. Not straight down as he had always imagined. Headfirst, he rolled, forwards and forwards, turning and turning in an endless downward somersault, with no idea how to stop himself.

Whoomp. Whoomp. Whoomp. Whoomp.

One after another, there was a wrench on each leg – rip, rip – and his flying boots, pulled off by the force of his fall, flew past his ears. He didn't even feel his gauntlets go.

Rip cord. Find the rip cord. The other side, remember. Tucked up into himself, still hurtling and spinning, Henryk edged his hand across his chest and pulled. Nothing. The drogue chute had failed. Must have been shot through with the coolant tank. He felt the weight of the main parachute like an attacker on his back, pushing him round ever faster in his spin, clinging onto him, wrapping itself like a parasite round his shoulders, blinding him. And Henryk fought it off like an attacker. Kicking and struggling he forced his body to open. Fought to uncurl. The shriek of rushing air was agonising, a roar like he had never heard before.

Suddenly there came a jolt, then a second one, followed by an uncrumpling, and silence. Time slowed to a standstill. Henryk drooped painfully from his harness, unable to take in what had happened. The wind. It must have crept into a loose fold. It had unwrapped him. It had undone him. Now he would not die. And he could not work out how he felt about that.

His limp body hung in space like a discarded garment. Blue above and green below. Almost nothing there at all. Flat

green, intersected with glinting lines of water. A few scattered buildings. Not much to worry about. No sign of his Hurricane at all. A lark passed him, singing furiously. Henryk wondered if there was any chance he could stay suspended, floating like a soap bubble.

Pop. He could just disappear, couldn't he?

No. He had to stop thinking that way. It was too dangerous. Henryk pressed his forehead against the webbing of his harness, digging it into his skin. Shame engulfed him with a physical force. For the thousandth time, his thoughts returned to the note he had found in his jacket when he reached Rumania. He had it with him still. Ten months on, it was filthy and wearing away at the folds. Gizela must have hidden it in his uniform when they came to say goodbye. Her spiky writing, hard and determined, had pressed with such force that the lined paper was holed at the full stop.

Below, he saw the roof of a church, like an ark, encircled by water.

Until we have our freedom again, your only purpose must be to fight for it.

He could see leaves on stunted trees. A pair of swans.

Was he released from Gizela's order? Perhaps nothing could release him now . . . perhaps he was tied more firmly still.

The ground hit him, and he doubled up.