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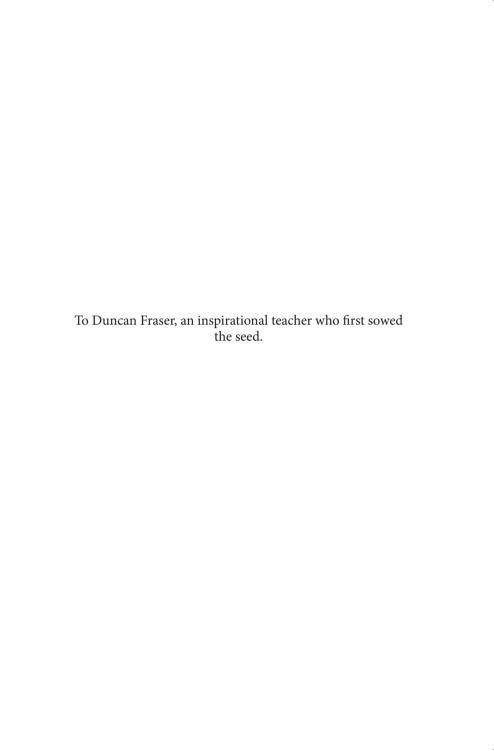
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A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library. ISBN 9781915444110

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



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

seek.

and

Wing over

the village

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

(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

Ι

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 -

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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.
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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.

```
middle of my windowsill.
             the
Rising from its polished wooden base,
 the round metal drum looks
                                  almost
  lamp – like, but
                   upside – down
                                  with
  slits
                 round
                           the
                                  side.
          cut
    I
                      really
         spin
                 it
                               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:
     takes off
          and soars
                  time and
                        time again,
                             leaving the chicken
                        always
                  scratching
             pathetically
     at the ground
As I carry
  the boxes and trunks
     down to their new home
       in the cold, cobwebbed cellar,
```

the eagle

below.

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.

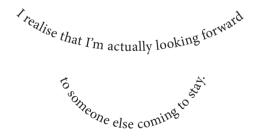
Mr Brown

(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,



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.