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1.

MONDAY AUGUST 14th 1939. It began in silence.

‘Cecily!’

By midday the fields were stalked by a ferocious heat.

‘Cecily!’

Silence.

‘Oh for goodness’ sake, C. Hurry up!’

Cecily Maudsley, rising with a start, threw off her bedclothes and flung open the bedroom door. Her mother Agnes stood waiting at the foot of the stairs with a box of strawberries and an exasperated expression on her upturned face as if she had been calling for an eternity. Behind her through the open door was the tunnelling green light of high summer.

How deep the summer had bitten into the land that last August, how cruelly it had burnt into earth and grass and air. What had started out as a pastel and water-faded spring became unexpectedly a splintering, shimmering thing. All it took was a spark to cause the fire. Why had no one noticed?

Their clothes became thinner and more transparent, their legs browner. Their mother Agnes, long hair swept up, slender neck in view, was worked off her feet. There was always so much work to be done in the orchard for everything seemed to ripen at once. Blackcurrants, raspberries, damsons and plums, all needing picking, not forgetting the season’s first eating apples, the Scarlet Pimpernel. Their father Selwyn was kept busy in the top field or in the cowshed or mending the tractor. While Rose washed her dazzling blonde hair again and again or listened all day to the wireless playing jazz.

‘Dancing’s what’s done it,’ Aunt Kitty had declared, referring to a tear in Rose’s stockings.

Disapproval was the constant ball Aunt Kitty used to bounce,

hoping someone would bounce it back to her. But Agnes was far too busy getting ready for the tennis party and the harvest to bother.

And besides, Rose was *born* to dance.

Cecily and Rose were *still* sharing a bedroom because it was a good thing for sisters to do. But how cross it made Rose – and Cecily too, for that matter.

The white dust-heat, thick with the scent of hay, hung in the air. And the flute-like sound of the kingfisher rushed across the land day after day with the regularity of a train.

Cecily hadn't been quite fourteen. Her sister Rose, not quite seventeen.

A band had played on the bandstand in Bly, its brass instruments flashing in the sunlight and what breeze there was sent the music all the way across the fields.

But although the war appeared stunted, it was growing like a beanstalk somewhere out of sight.

It had been the summer when Cecily discovered she had grown two small hard bumps on her chest like mosquito bites.

'Titties,' Rose informed her. 'Bet they itch!'

When Cecily asked her if they would become breasts Rose's reply was unsatisfactory.

'You'll just have to wait and see,' was all she said.

'How long?'

There was no answer.

Rose had nipples coloured like the inside of a bird's mouth, soft-pink and secret. Cecily couldn't help staring at them every time Rose stepped out of her nightdress.

So perhaps because of her own disappointing anatomy, Cecily began daily to search for other things. Pubic hair, for instance. She hoped to grow blonde tufts like Rose. But this too proved unsatisfactory. None appeared. Maybe I'm going to be like the freak-show lady, she decided.

'Please God,' she heard her sister whisper at night, 'let me get married and have sex.'

It's all right for her, Cecily thought, angrily watching her sister stroke the red pelt collar of an old coat with the same rhythm as a cat licking itself.

Meanwhile Selwyn could not stop the farmhands from singing,

*And when you get back to Old Blighty
And the war is over and done,
Remember the poor Green Howard
Who was shot by an Eyetalian gun.*

One by one those working on the land began signing up. But it only really hit them when Joe, their brother, came home one evening with his own announcement.

'Signing up before he needs to,' Agnes cried.

'He'll be fine,' Selwyn told her. 'You'll see.'

'He's just a boy. How can we let him go?'

'Thousands will be going,' Selwyn said. 'If it happens.'

He sounded odd, both sad and triumphant at the same time. Joe began to get ready for that day, just in case.

'He'll turn strange,' Rose said, with satisfaction.

'What d'you mean?'

Startled out of other preoccupations, Cecily waited. Her sister didn't often talk to her. The three years' difference in their ages was the difference of foreign countries. Rose seemed to live in France, or wanted to. Cecily's life was in Palmyra Farm. Although it never stopped her trying, she doubted she would ever get to France. Not at the same time as Rose. Maybe never.

'He thinks he's special,' Rose said.

There was a hint of envy in her voice. A small box of invisible desire stood on Rose's bedside table. Cecily saw all sorts of unidentified jewels inside.

'Do you want to go, too?' she asked, feeling like a magpie, lifting the invisible lid with one finger.

'Of course not! I don't want to fight the Germans.'