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The Last Pier

Written by Roma Tearne

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The Last Pier

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Barrie

Nothing sorts out memories from ordinary moments.
Later on they claim remembrance when they show their scars.

La Jetée, by Chris Marker

'I have torn off the whole of May and June,' said Susan, 'and twenty days of July. I have torn them off and screwed them up so that they no longer exist, save as a weight in my side.'

The Waves, by Virginia Woolf

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.'

Her sister's eyes were ablaze with lies as she prised Cecily's fingers off the lid and closed the box firmly.

'But I don't want to spend my life in this ghastly place, either.'

Selwyn was too old to go to war and would help the Government in other ways.

'What sort of ways?' asked Cecily.

Selwyn shook his head, smiling.

'Careless questions cause trouble,' he said closing his face like a cupboard door.

And then he disappeared up to London for an interview. When he returned he told his family he would be setting up the Air Raid Precautions in the town and their mother would have to take care of the milking as well as everything else she already did. Soon he was going to the ARP meetings twice a week, returning grim-faced and smelling of beer.

It was as if a secret game had started. Going To War, Cecily realised was like Going To School or Going To The Doctor. Something that was better done without too much fuss. The news on the wireless was boring. And rationing meant that everyone would have to write down everything they ate in a book. Which was also boring.

Except when her mother cried, Cecily was determined to close her ears to war-talk.

'Don't worry,' said bubbly Aunty Kitty with a giggle in her voice. 'Everything can wait, at least until after the harvest, when all is safely gathered in.'

Aunty Kitty lived most of the time in London in the smart flat she bought after her heart had been broken. But every so often, overcome by restlessness, she would take up residence at Palmyra House, bringing her stylish alligator purse that had a mirror and a red lipstick inside it. Cecily knew that Rose

would have liked just such an object so, to annoy her, she would sing the old nursery rhyme.

'Dead said the doctor, dead said the nurse!' sang Cecily, making Rose scowl and annoying their mother at the same time.

Selwyn wouldn't take sides.

Meanwhile the land lay under a hazy golden silence. The river Ore with its lovely old pollarded willows still threaded its way behind the farm. The great elder bush still dropped its broad creamy flowers in profusion on the path between the farm and the fields. And beyond the deep-hedged footpaths, hidden behind a dip, there remained the faint blue mark that was the sea. Talk of war was just silly when you saw how wonderful the countryside looked.

Yes, that summer, when their world began shrinking the days were beautiful like Cecily's absurdly beautiful sister. Death watched them from amongst the froth of cow parsley, a panther with a saucy, sleepy look. While on a moonless night Bellamy stood on the soft grass of the roadside and waited, too. When he moved, his footsteps were so quiet that at times they eluded even the small animals waiting, listening tensely for any secret noise.

Bellamy walked like a black ghost through the shadows of the uncut fields, past the outhouses of Palmyra Farm until he reached the oak trees. Moving instinctively and rapidly into the deepest point of the darkness, soundlessly unrolling the nets, pegging them down by the mere pressure of his thumbs, he would, with one swift movement, set the ferrets free.

A vague whitish blur appeared and their bodies vanished into the earth. There followed a curious silence during which Bellamy crouched like a sprinter. A moment later there was a sudden madness of scuttling in the net as the first rabbit struggled wildly to escape.

He silenced it by seizing it in his hands, breaking its neck and striking the skull lightly. The rabbit gave a single great convulsion of pain and was dead.

It was as easy as throwing a ball. As always Bellamy felt a curious wave of lust and triumph as another rabbit began a wild struggle in the net.

Twenty minutes later he was unhooking the net pegs and folding it up across his shoulder, listening, his nerves taut, his hands sticky with rabbit blood. He walked on, following the distant surge of wind coming off the river. Then turning, slipping the ferrets into the tail pocket of his coat, he headed for the local public house, his work finished for the night. His father, the man they called Tinker, would get him a good price for his catch.

School of course had closed its doors for the long holiday in July. When they were opened again it would all be over.

'You only have one year left,' Cecily reminded Rose. 'Lucky!'

But Rose did nothing to avoid a confrontation.

'I want to leave *now*,' she told their mother. 'Why can't I? Indian girls get married at thirteen and have babies.'

'Perish the thought,' their mother said.

Cecily knew, she just *knew*, there was a connection between babies and sex.

'Every day the war is postponed,' Selwyn told them at supper, 'is good for building our defences.'

He helped himself to more rabbit pie.

The army let Joe come home for Rose's funeral that September. The war had not got going and Compassionate Leave were words Cecily would hear on several occasions without knowing their meaning. She heard other words too, used over and over again, but Compassionate Leave was what she remembered. There were officials in the church. Looking very sinister, they sat with the reporters in the congregation. There were lots of beautiful things in the church that day too. A jackdaw had dropped a piece of tin on a pew and a man stood holding a bunch of seven flowers.

‘All Things Bright And Beautiful,’ sang the man, trilby hat in hand. ‘All creatures great and small.’

It was Rose’s favourite hymn. Next, Cecily, getting the words muddled, sang ‘Breath of Heaven’. And after that the vicar called Rose a ‘Breath of Beauty’, a young bud that hadn’t opened. Not-yet-seventeen was on everyone’s lips.

‘Not given a chance to live, was she?’ someone had cried, angrily.

Rose’s coffin had already been slammed shut, closed, locked up. There was no point in keeping it open, no one would have recognised her.

‘They had to fetch the dentist to identify her,’ Cecily overheard Aunt Kitty telling someone.

Perhaps Rose had had a toothache when she died.

The undertaker’s lilies were heavy with pollen.

‘Tiger lilies are like turmeric,’ an uncle she didn’t know told Cecily, trying to sound friendly. ‘They use it a lot in the East. Lovely colour!’

The uncle knew about the East, having served with the British army out there. Cecily ignored him.

‘If you touch the stamens your fingers will stain,’ the uncle added. ‘And you’ll look like the girls in India who draw patterns on their hands at weddings.’

‘Horace!’ said a great-aunt. ‘This is *not* a wedding, in case you haven’t noticed.’

The uncle tried to look repentant. He was going back out to India, shortly.

There were hundreds of candles in the church.

‘Because,’ the vicar said, ‘this is the first sorrow that has come to our neighbourhood.’

Afterwards a man who came to the house, said, ‘Never mind the neighbourhood, what about the Jews?’

‘They are the cause of it all.’

‘The Germans are the cause,’ someone else said in a raised voice.

Someone said 'shush' and the guests turned like cattle all together and seemed to be staring in Cecily's direction. She stared back. This is my house, she thought. Rose is *my* sister.

But at the church everyone was still behaving well and Joe sang the loudest. He was very tall and important in his uniform, in amongst the crying women. He was the only one that Agnes would allow to put an arm around her, to comfort her. Selwyn, head bowed, jaw trembling with the effort of not crying, couldn't look at anyone. But then, suddenly, he did cry and Cecily found this a worse sight.

The two policemen sat close by, their eyes hard as marbles, their lips pinched.

Aunt Kitty pulled on Cecily's hand as though she was a pony trying to bolt. Agnes screamed once and the voices swelled like a flock of swallows trying and failing to hide her scream. The vicar closed his eyes while he sang, as if it were all too much for God. And the altar boys opened their throats like the swallows and sang, too. You could see the fillings inside their mouths. At that, everyone from the surrounding countryside and the other farms, everyone who knew the Maudsley family, held up their hymn books to shield their faces and sang with all their might. Cecily was certain they were thinking of something else entirely.

Overhead planes were scrambling from Minerhall. 'Work Is The Answer' was a phrase already being written deep inside Europe.

Rose's coffin was carried out by an uncle and her brother Joe, together with Partridge and the man called Robert Wilson. A neighbour held Agnes, helping her to walk down the aisle behind it. Bellamy had wanted to help carry the coffin but no one would let him. Which wasn't fair because he was Rose's true friend. So now Bellamy stood outside beating his head on a yew tree, ignored by everyone. The pallbearers held the coffin high above their shoulders and walked solemnly past him as if he didn't exist.

The word 'dead' tolled like a bell in Cecily's head. She looked around for her friends, Carlo and Franca and Anna Molinello.

She tried to see if Lucio or Mario were present in the church but they were nowhere in sight. And Tom, where was Tom? It was difficult to concentrate with Aunt Kitty holding her in a vice-like grip. Outside in the sunlight everything was still and watchful while in the distance and out of sight, the sea lay sedated.

Because she hadn't slept much, Cecily felt brittle-boned and unreal. She was wide awake and scratchy eyed. It wasn't often that she couldn't sleep. It wasn't often that her parents forgot to give her a goodnight kiss. It wasn't often that her father went off with the police to a government meeting and didn't come back for several nights. It wasn't often that Rose lay in a coffin. Wasn't Often was happening a lot lately.

Someone had placed sixteen red roses and a strand of honeysuckle on the coffin lid. The roses lay like a clot of blood from a wound. Someone else had put two cobra-headed, funeral lilies next to the puddle and the uncle from India was *staring* glazed-eyed at them.

When Aunt Kitty let go of her hand for a moment Cecily asked the man called Robert Wilson if they were his flowers but he started to shake and looked as if he might cry.

Cecily tried to imagine Rose-in-her-coffin dressed in the ivory dress covered in little pearls that looked like fishes' tears.

'I don't want to die a virgin,' she had told Franca, only a week before.

Cecily had overheard her. But *had* she died a virgin?

Rose-in-her-coffin laughing her head off at Cecily's questions as she always did, no longer cared. Staring hard, Cecily became aware of an area of darkness blacker than the hole in the ground.

'Ashes of Roses,' the vicar said, anointing the coffin with soil.

Covering up Rose, crushing her with the weight of his loud, too-solemn voice. Suddenly, Cecily hated the vicar.

'When my sister chose her engagement ring I told her opals would bring her bad luck one day,' Kitty said, moving her head in the direction of Agnes. 'But she didn't listen.'

But-she-didn't-listen whispered the breeze while overhead in the too-bright light, planes continued to mark the sky. Cecily wished she could close her eyes but they refused to shut.

Look, Rose whispered, pointing at the planes and making Cecily jump. Probably Robert Wilson is in one of them!

'No, Rose!' Cecily told her loudly, so that everyone, even her devastated mother, turned and looked at her. 'He's *here* in the churchyard!'

'It's too late for tears now,' Aunt Kitty said, pulling at her hand as though it were a bridle.

Cecily turned back into a pony.

Obedient for once.

Obedient too late.

Late, in the mysterious way Rose had now become.

The Late Rose Maudsley who had never been late for anything in her life.

Late, even though she was right here with everyone.

Cecily wanted to shout at them all.

'Shutting the door after the horse has bolted,' Aunt Kitty sniffed.

Inside her coffin Rose laughed and laughed and ate an ice-cream cone with the teeth the dentist had identified. The ice cream came from Mario's ice-cream parlour in the town, which now doubled as a funeral parlour because its owner, Mario, had vanished.

Too much ice cream killed her. Too much of a good thing killed her. On Rose's tombstone it would soon say, *To Our Darling Honeysuckle Rose*. Rest In Peace.

(No mention of ice cream, then.)

'Let us pray for peacetime,' the vicar murmured in a low voice.

He made peacetime sound like teatime. There would of course be strawberry scones after the funeral. Aunt Kitty had been making them since the early morning.