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Noonday

Written by Pat Barker

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Noonday

PAT BARKER



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For Finn, Niamh, Gabe and Jessie

One

Elinor was halfway up the drive when she sensed she was being watched. She stopped and scanned the upstairs windows – wide open in the heat as if the house were gasping for breath – but there was nobody looking down. Then, from the sycamore tree at the end of the garden, came a rustling of leaves. Oh, of course: *Kenny*. She was tempted to ignore him, but that seemed unkind, so she went across the lawn and peered up into the branches.

'Kenny?'

No reply. There was often no reply.

Kenny had arrived almost a year ago now, among the first batch of evacuees, and, although this area had since been reclassified – 'neutral' rather than 'safe' – here he remained. She felt his gaze heavy on the top of her head, like a hand, as she stood squinting up into the late-afternoon sunlight.

Kenny spent hours up there, not reading his comics, not building a tree house, not dropping conkers on people's heads – no, just watching. He had a red notebook in which he wrote down car numbers, the time people arrived, the time they left . . . Of course, you forgot what it was like to be his age: probably every visitor was a German spy. Oh, and he ate himself, that was the other thing. He was forever nibbling his fingernails, tearing at his cuticles, picking scabs off his knees and licking up the blood. Even pulling hair out of his head and sucking it. And, despite being a year at the village school, he hadn't made friends. But then, he was the sort of child who attracts bullying, she thought, guiltily conscious of her own failure to like him.

'Kenny? Isn't it time for tea?'

Then, with a great crash of leaves and branches, he dropped at her feet and stood looking up at her, scowling, for all the world like a small, sour, angry crab apple. 'Where's Paul?'

'I'm afraid he couldn't come, he's busy.'

'He's always busy.'

'Well, yes, he's got a lot to do. Are you coming in now?'

Evidently that didn't deserve a reply. He turned his back on her and ran off through the arch into the kitchen garden.

Two

Closing the front door quietly behind her, Elinor took a moment to absorb the silence.

Facing her, directly opposite the front door, where nobody could possibly miss it, was a portrait of her brother, Toby, in uniform. It had been painted, from photographs, several years after his death and was frankly not very good. Everybody else seemed to like it, or at least tolerate it, but Elinor thought it was a complete travesty. *Item: one standard-issue gallant young officer, Grim Reaper for the use of*. There was nothing of Toby there at all. Nigel Featherstone was the artist: and he was very well regarded; you saw his portraits of judges, masters of colleges, politicians and generals everywhere, but she'd never liked his work. Her own portrait of Toby was stronger – not good, she didn't claim that – but certainly better than this.

She resented not having been asked to paint this family portrait: his own sister, after all. And every visit to her sister's house began with her standing in front of it. When he was alive, Toby's presence had been the only thing that made weekends with the rest of her family bearable. Now, this portrait – that blank, lifeless face – was a reminder that she was going to have to face them alone.

She caught the creak of a leather armchair from the open door on her left. *Oh, well, better get it over with*. She went into the room and found Tim, her brother-in-law, sitting by the open window. As soon as he saw her he stood up and let his newspaper slide, sighing, to the floor.

'Elinor.' He pecked her proffered cheek. 'Too early for a whisky?' Evidently it wasn't: there was a half-empty glass by his side. She opened her mouth to refuse but he'd already started to pour. 'How was the train?'

'Crowded. Late.'

'Aren't they all?'

When she'd first met Tim he might've been a neutered tomcat for all the interest he aroused in her. She'd thought him a nonentity, perhaps influenced in that – as in so much else – by Toby, who hadn't liked Tim, or perhaps hadn't found much in him to either like or dislike. And yet Tim had gone on to be a successful man; powerful, even. Something in Whitehall, in the War Office. Which was strange, because he'd never actually seen active service. It had never been clear to her what precisely Tim did, though when she expressed her bewilderment to Paul he'd laughed and said: 'Do you really not know?'

She took a sip of whisky. 'I saw some soldiers in the lane.'

'Yes, they're building gun emplacements on the river.'

'Just over there?'

He shrugged. 'It's the obvious place.'

How easily they'd all come to accept it: searchlights over the church at night, blacked-out houses, the never-ending *pop-pop* of guns on the marshes . . . Such an inconsequential sound: almost like a child's toy. The whisky was starting to fizz along her veins. Perhaps it hadn't been such a bad idea after all. 'Where's Rachel?'

'Upstairs with your mother. Who's asleep, I think.'

'I don't suppose Mrs Murchison's around?'

'Why, do you particularly want to speak to her?'

'More thinking of avoiding her, actually.'

He looked at his watch. 'She generally takes a break about now. I expect she's in her room.'

But she wasn't. She was crossing the hall with a firm, flat-footed step, her shoes making minuscule squeaks on the tiles. 'Ah, Miss Brooke, I thought it must be you.'

Always that barely perceptible emphasis on the 'Miss'. To be fair, she had some reason to be confused. Elinor and Paul had lived together for almost six years before they finally married, very quietly, in Madrid. None of Elinor's family had been invited to the wedding and she'd continued to use her own name professionally – and also, to some extent, socially – ever since. Clearly, Mrs Murchison suspected she was not, in any proper sense, married at all.

'Will you be wanting tea?'

'I'll see what my sister says.'

Elinor picked up her case and carried it upstairs to the spare room. This should have been Mrs Murchison's job, but really the less she had to do with that woman the better. Queuing in the post office once, she'd heard Mrs Murchison whisper to the woman beside her: 'She's a Miss, you know.' Elinor knew exactly what she meant. *Miss*-take. *Miss*ed out. Even, perhaps, *miss*-carriage? No, she was being paranoid: Mrs Murchison couldn't possibly have known about that. Of course there'd always be people like her, people who regarded childless women as hardly women at all. 'Fibroids' – Mr O'Brien had announced a few years ago when Elinor's periods had gone haywire – 'are the tears of a disappointed womb.' Obnoxious little Irish leprechaun, twinkling at her over his steepled fingertips. She'd just gaped at him and then, unable to control herself, burst out laughing.

In the spare room she dumped her suitcase on the bed; she'd unpack later. Quickly, she splashed her face and hands, examined herself in the glass, noting pallor, noting tiredness, but not minding too much, not today at any rate. Through the open window she heard Mrs Murchison calling Kenny in to get washed in time for dinner.

Kenny had a lot to do with Elinor's dislike of Mrs Murchison. Given the task of dealing with his nits, she'd simply shaved his head, without apparently finding it necessary to consult anybody else first. Elinor had gone into the kitchen the morning after he arrived and found him standing there, orange hair lying in coils around his feet. Thin, hollow-eyed, the strange, white, subtle egg shape of his head – he'd looked like a child in the ruins of Guernica or Wieluń. She'd completely lost her temper; she was angrier than she'd been for years. Rachel came running, then Mother, who was still, only a year ago, well enough to come downstairs. 'Elinor.' Mother laid a cool hand on her arm. 'This isn't your house. And that isn't your child.' Which was, undeniably, true. Not her house, not her child, not her responsibility.

Outside, in the garden, Mrs Murchison was still calling: 'Kenny? Kenny?'

Well, she could call till she was blue in the face; he wouldn't come in for her.

A murmur of voices drifted across the landing from her mother's room: so she must be awake. It couldn't be put off any longer, though even now Elinor stood outside the door for a full minute, taking slow, deliberate, deep breaths, before she pushed it open and went in.

A fug of illness rose to meet her: aging flesh in hot sheets, camphor poultices that did no good at all, a smell of faeces and disinfectant from the commode in the far corner. Rachel was sitting on the other side of the bed, her back to the window, her face in shadow. Mother's nightdress was open at the front: you could see her collarbone jutting out and the hollows in her throat. Her chest moved, not merely with every breath, but with every heartbeat. Looking at her, Elinor could almost believe she saw the dark, struggling muscle labouring away inside its cage of bone. Mother's eyes were closed, but as Elinor approached the bed, the lids flickered open, though not completely. They stopped halfway, as if already weighted down by pennies. 'Oh, Elinor.' Her voice was slurred. 'It's you.'

Wrong person. 'Hello, Mother.' She bent and kissed the hollow cheek.

She was about to sit down, but then she saw Rachel mouthing at her. 'Outside.'

Elinor slipped quietly out on to the landing and a few seconds later Rachel joined her. The sisters kissed, Rachel's dry lips barely making contact with Elinor's cheek. They'd never been close. Toby, the middle child, had come between them in every sense. Looking back on her early childhood, Elinor realized that even then she and Rachel had been rivals for Toby; and Elinor had won. An empty victory, it seemed, so many years after his death.

'Has the doctor been?' she asked.

'This morning, yes. He comes every morning.'

'What does he say?'

'You mean how long has she got? No, of course he didn't say. They never do, do they? I don't think they know. She'll

hang on till Alex gets back – and then I think it might be very quick.'

'When's he coming?'

'He's hoping they'll let him out tomorrow. But it depends on the consultant, of course.'

Mother had always used her grandson, Alex, as a substitute for Toby. Was 'used' a bit harsh? No, she didn't think so.

'I expect you'd like some tea?' Rachel said.

'Well, yes, but hadn't one of us better sit with her?'

'No, it's all right, I'll get Nurse Wiggins. Oh, you don't know about her, do you? She's our new addition.' A fractional hesitation. 'Very competent.'

'You don't like her.'

'We-ell, you know . . .' Rachel gave a theatrical shudder. 'She *hovers*.'

'You need the help, you're worn out.'

'Wasn't my idea, it was Tim's.'

'Well, good for him.'

Rachel glanced back into their mother's bedroom. 'Ah, she's nodded off again; I thought she might. I'll just nip up and get the Wiggins.'

Tim had retreated to his study, so Elinor went into the drawing room to wait for Rachel. The farmhouse, which had been shabby, even dilapidated, when Rachel first fell in love with it, was now beautifully furnished. Oriental rugs, antique furniture – good paintings too. Nothing of hers, though. She had three in the Tate; none here.

Rachel came in carrying a tray, which she put down on a small table near the window. Out of the corner of her eye, Elinor noticed Kenny scaling along the wall, trying to avoid being seen from the kitchen window. 'I see Kenny's still here?'

'Oh, don't talk to me about Kenny; I'm beginning to think he's a fixture. His mother was supposed to come and get him last Saturday. Poor little devil was sitting at the end of the drive all day. Suitcase packed, everything – and she didn't show up. And he never says anything, you know, never cries.' She pulled a face. 'Just wets the bed.'

'He's still doing that?'

'Every night. I mean, I know you don't like Mrs Murchison, but really, the extra work . . .' She hesitated. 'I don't suppose you could go and see her, could you? His mother?'

Not your house. Not your child.

'I'm actually quite busy at the moment.'

'Busy?'

'Painting.'

'Oh, yes. Painting.'

That was only just not a sneer. The silence gathered. Elinor reminded herself of how tired Rachel must be, how disproportionately the burden of their mother's illness fell on her. 'You know, if you liked, you could have an early night; I'll sit with her.'

'No, there's no need. Nurse Wiggins does the nights.'

So why am I here?

'Would you mind if I phoned Paul tonight?'

'Phone him now if you like.'

'No, he'll be working, I'll leave it till after dinner.'

'How is he?'

'A bit up and down. Kenny was disappointed he hadn't come. I think I'm a very poor substitute.'

'Now that is something you could do. Make sure he turns up for dinner washed and reasonably tidy. He won't do anything for Mrs Murchison and I just don't have the time.'

Kenny. Somehow, whenever she was here, the responsibility for making Kenny behave got passed on to her. Still, it was the least she could do. So after Rachel had gone back upstairs, Elinor went into the garden, first to the sycamore tree and then into the kitchen garden where he'd built himself a den behind the shed. No luck there either. The night nursery was the next most likely place.

As she climbed the stairs, Elinor was remembering her first sight of Kenny, almost a year ago, the day the children arrived. A busload of them, carrying suitcases, paper parcels and gas masks, with luggage labels fastened to their clothes.

She and Rachel had arrived late at the church hall. It was rather like a jumble sale, all the good stuff disappearing fast, except that

here the stuff was children. Pretty little blonde-haired girls were popular and not always with the obvious people. You could see why the Misses Richards might want one, but Michael Ryan, who'd lived alone at Church Farm ever since his parents died and seemed barely able to look after himself, let alone a child, why was he so keen? Big, strapping lads, strong enough for farm work, they were snapped up. Older girls went quickly too. A twelve-year-old, provided she was clean and tidy – and not too slow on the uptake – was virtually a free housemaid. And then there were the children nobody wanted: families of four or five brothers and sisters. They'd have to be split up, of course. In fact, it was happening already. Some of the smaller children were wide-eyed with shock and grief.

Then she saw him. Pale, thin, his face slum-white, disfigured by freckles, orange hair, coppery-brown eyes. His trousers were too short, his sleeves too: he had unusually knobbly wrist bones. And a rather long, thin neck. For some reason, that made him seem vulnerable, like an unfledged bird, though closer to – she'd begun to walk towards him now – she revised her impression. Yes, he looked like a chick, but the chick of some predatory bird: an eagle or a falcon. Not an attractive child, but even so, he should've been picked by now – he was the right age for farm work.

And then she saw the lice. She'd never seen anybody with a head that lousy. His hair was moving. Made desperate by their overcrowded conditions, lice had started taking short cuts across his forehead. She was about to speak to him – though she had no idea what to say – when Rachel came up behind her.

'They want me to take three. *Three*. How on earth am I supposed to manage three?'

'What about him?'

Rachel peered at the boy. She was short-sighted and too vain to wear glasses. 'Well, at least there's only one of him . . . Yes, all right, I'll see what she says.'

Rachel went off to speak to the billeting officer, Miss Beatrice Marsh, who regularly made a mess of the church flower-arranging roster. They seemed to be having an extremely animated discussion. The boy showed no interest in the outcome. His gas-mask case

was on a long string: Elinor noticed a sore patch on the side of his knee where the case had chafed against the skin. He had placed a battered brown suitcase between his legs and was gripping it tight, so at least he'd have something, a change of clothes, a favourite toy. But he'd lost his luggage label.

'Which school are you with?'

He shook his head.

You did it on purpose, she thought. *You threw it away*. Not that there was anything sinister in that. There were many reasons why a child might choose to slip off the end of one school crocodile and attach himself to a different one entirely. A teacher he didn't like, a gang of bigger boys bullying in the playground . . . Whatever the reason, he'd arrived in the village with no name, no history. Something about that appealed to Elinor. Bundled up, parcelled off . . . and in the middle of it all, the chaos, the confusion, he'd taken off his label and thrown it away.

Only of course it couldn't go on like that. He had to give Rachel his name, his address, because he wanted his mother to be able to find him. He wanted her a good deal more than she appeared to want him.

Elinor tapped on the nursery door. Kenny was playing with his toy soldiers – Alex's, originally, now his – hundreds of tiny grey and khaki figures spread across a vast battlefield, many of them lying on their backs, already wounded or killed. He looked up from the game, but didn't smile or speak.

'It's dinner time. Have you washed your hands?'

He shook his head.

'Well, will you go and do it now, please?'

Still silent, he got up and left. Now and then it was brought home to her that Kenny hardly spoke – except, oddly enough, to Paul. And in the past year he'd scarcely grown at all. She looked round the chaotic room, decided to leave the toy soldiers undisturbed, but knelt to close the dolls' house.

Officially, Kenny despised the house and the dolls – wouldn't have been seen dead playing with them – and yet whenever she came into the room the dolls were in different positions and the

furniture had been rearranged. She both loved and hated this house, which had once been hers. Her eighth-birthday present. She could still remember the mixture of delight and uneasiness she'd felt when the wrapping paper fell away and she saw that the dolls weren't just ordinary dolls: they were Father and Mother and Rachel and Toby and her. And the toy house was an exact copy of the house they lived in, right down to the piano in the drawing room and the pattern of wallpaper on the bedroom walls. It had always had pride of place in her bedroom, but she hadn't played with it much. She picked up the Toby doll, held it between her thumb and forefinger, and felt a pang of grief so intense it squeezed her heart. She remained kneeling there, on the cold lino, waiting for the pain to pass, then laid the little figure on its bed.

Rachel came in. 'Ken—' She stopped when she saw Elinor. 'Still playing with dolls?'

'I never did, if you remember.'

'No, you didn't, did you? You were always out with Toby. I think I played with that more than you did.'

Elinor went on putting the dolls to bed. One moment, she was looking through a tiny window, the next, she saw her own face peering in: huge, piggy nostrils, open-pored, grotesque. Then, immediately, she was back in the nursery, looking down at the last doll in her hand: Mother.

'Are you all right?' Rachel asked.

'Fine.'

'Only you've gone quite pale.'

'No, I'm fine.' She fastened the front of the house and stood up. 'Kenny's getting washed; at least I think he is. What about Mother, is she awake?'

'No, and anyway the Wiggins is there. Come on, I need a drink.'

As they were going downstairs the telephone in the hall started to ring, and Rachel went to answer it. When she came into the drawing room a few minutes later, she was glowing with excitement. 'That was Alex; he's coming home tomorrow. I'll go and tell Tim.'

Left alone, Elinor thought: *Yes, good news*. But she couldn't stop thinking about her mother lying upstairs, dying, but clinging on to life so she could see Alex again, one last time. This was what they'd all been waiting for: Alex's arrival; the end.

Three

Alex arrived the following afternoon, straight out of hospital with the smell of it still on his skin. Elinor witnessed his meeting with his father. Tim stuck out his hand and then, realizing too late that Alex was unable to take it, blushed from the neck up and let the hand drop. She sensed a great tension in Alex: something coiled up hard and tight. His face softened when Rachel came into the room, but otherwise he seemed merely impatient, anxious to get this visit over and move on.

Thinking he would like time alone with his parents, Elinor fetched a drawing pad from her room and went into the garden. She sat under the birch tree, her back pressed hard against its scaly bark, staring up through the branches at yet another flawlessly blue sky. The aeroplanes were active today, little, glinting, silver minnows darting here and there. Earlier, she'd started trying to draw a cabbage and it was sitting on a low stone wall, waiting for her, yellower and flabbier than she remembered. She gazed at it without enthusiasm, then forced herself to begin. *Draw something every single day*, Professor Tonks used to say. *Doesn't matter what it is: just draw*.

All the upstairs windows were open. Behind that one on the far left her mother lay dying, attended, at the moment, by Nurse Wiggins, a great, galumphing, raw-boned creature with a jolly, professional laugh and downy, peach-perfect skin. Her laugh, so obviously designed to keep fear and pain at bay, grated on Elinor. And yes, she did *hover*. But she was good at her job, you had to give her that, though her presence added to the tension in the house. Rachel, in particular, seemed to find it difficult to relax.

Elinor held the drawing at arm's length. Not good. Cabbages are shocking if you get them right, especially those thick-veined outer leaves: positively scrotal. Only she couldn't draw them like that, not here, surrounded by her family. She was unconsciously censoring

herself, and it wasn't just what she drew, either. It was what she let herself see. This was one of the reasons she'd left home early, and refused, even after Toby's death, to go back. Her mother needed care and company: it had been obvious to everybody that Elinor, the then unmarried daughter, should stay at home and provide it.

Obvious to everybody except Elinor, who'd refused, and gone on refusing. It was Rachel, in the end, who'd found their mother a cottage within walking distance of her own home.

The caterpillar on the leaf
Repeats to thee thy mother's grief.

What the hell was that about? It was true, though. She'd have liked to do the drawing that would be the equivalent of those lines.

Voices from an upstairs window: Rachel and Alex. She'd be taking him up to his room. Elinor looked at the brown lawn, the wilting shrubs and flowers; everything seemed to be suspended. Was that the war? Possibly. Even the roses, this summer, looked as if they were expecting to be bombed. But no, it was more than that: closer. *She* was waiting: for something to happen or, more likely, for something to be said; but though Mother's thick, white tongue came out at intervals to moisten her cracked lips she stayed silent, drifting in and out of sleep.

Elinor glanced up, caught by some movement other than the ceaseless circling of aeroplanes in the sky, and there was Alex, in a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, coming towards her over the lawn. 'Aunt Elinor, I thought I'd find you here.'

Flattering as always, implying he'd been looking especially for her. Alex was a devil with women, though his affairs never lasted long. It was the chase that interested Alex; the girls, once caught, quickly bored him. He bent down to kiss her, briefly cutting off the light.

Elinor was extremely fond of Alex, but wary of him too. He was tall, broad-shouldered and, despite his convalescent state, exuded virility. Beside him, she felt like a spindle-shanked elderly virgin, while knowing of course that she was nothing of the sort, but perhaps

that's what middle age does to you? Makes you – women, perhaps, particularly – vulnerable to the perceptions other people have of you? She thought Alex might see her like that. He flirted with her rather as he might have done with a schoolgirl too young to be considered a possible conquest.

He sat cross-legged on the grass beside her, squinting through his spread fingers at the sky. More and more planes, great clusters of them, like midges over a stagnant pond.

'Been busy all day,' she said.

'Yes, it's certainly hotting up. No raids though?'

'Not here. There was one near the coast, Rachel says, a few days ago. Thirteen people killed.'

He was looking at the window of his grandmother's room. 'Strange, isn't it, how private life just goes on? People get married, have babies. *Die*. And all the time . . .'

'I find I alternate,' she said. 'You know, I'll have days when I think about nothing except the war and how terrible it is and are we going to be invaded . . . and then suddenly, for no reason – nothing's changed – it all disappears. And I think: Well, we're still here. We're still the same people we've always been.'

'Oh, I don't know about that.'

Something in his voice made her turn to look at him. She saw lines around his eyes and mouth that hadn't been there before. Suddenly, he did actually look like Toby; Toby as he'd been when he'd first come home on leave. So much had been made of Alex's resemblance to Toby, especially by her mother, but also by Rachel, that Elinor had always resisted seeing it. Alex was different, she told herself: brash, coarser. But now she saw how alike they really were, and it stopped her breath.

'How's the, er . . .?' *Wound*, she meant.

He held out his arm. Suntanned skin, the tan fading a little now, after the long weeks in hospital. A dusting of blond hairs. 'Not a lot to see, really. I got it in the elbow. The funny bone. Oh my God it was hilarious – and apparently there's some damage to the nerves.' His fingers were curled over, the tips almost touching the palm. 'I haven't got a lot of sensation here. Or here.'

'So you're out of it, then?'

'Not if I can help it.' He was flexing his hand as he spoke. 'Though I don't know what I can do.'

'Is it painful?'

'Can be.'

Voices floated over the lawn towards them. Somewhere in the house a door opened and closed.

'Have you been in to see her?'

'Not yet. The nurse is in there doing something so I thought I'd leave it a bit. God, it's hot.'

'I think I know where there's some lemonade.'

And that, Elinor thought, crossing the lawn, was an appropriately maiden-auntish thing to say.

Outside the kitchen door, she paused to listen, but Mrs Murchison was having her post-lunch break, so she opened the door and walked in. A porcelain sink, with two buckets underneath, a range that had to be black-leaded every morning, and a long table, scarred with overlapping rings where hot plates and saucepans had been put down. Above the table, a rack with bunches of dried herbs, ready for the winter, though at the moment there were still masses of thyme, parsley, sage, rosemary and bay in the kitchen garden – and hundreds of bees feasting on them.

The pantry opened off the kitchen. The lemonade jug sat on the top shelf underneath the one tiny window, its muslin cover weighed down by blue beads. She picked up the jug and two glasses and returned to Alex.

'Auntie Elinor, you're an angel.'

This was going from bad to worse: aunt*ie*, now. He got up and dragged a small iron table closer. They were in deep shade: the shadow of a branch fell across Elinor's bare ankle so sharply it suggested amputation. The lemonade was cloudy, but relatively cold and sweet. Almost immediately wasps started hovering, drawn away from the easy pickings of windfall apples in the long grass of the orchard.

Elinor didn't feel like talking and evidently Alex felt the same, but there was no awkwardness in their silence. It was born of heat and

exhaustion, and, on his side, recent illness and possibly pain. He kept batting wasps away. 'Don't,' she said. 'It only makes them worse.' *Why couldn't men leave things alone?* After a while she left him to it, leaned back against the tree and closed her eyes.

There were so many insect sounds – the hum of bees, the whirring of gnats, the petulant buzz of wasps – that at first she didn't notice one particular drone growing louder. A shadow swept across her closed lids. Opening her eyes, she saw a huge plane above the house, black, or at least it looked black against the sun. 'Is it one of ours?' she asked. She knew it wasn't – the German crosses on its wings were very clear – only her brain refused to accept what her eyes saw. The plane banked steeply; at first she thought it was going away, but it circled and came back again, this time much lower. She got up to run to the house, but Alex caught her arm. '*No*.' He pulled her back into the shadow of the tree. 'Better not cross the lawn.' She felt sick. There was a popping sound, curiously unimpressive, like a child bursting paper bags or balloons. Alex dragged her to the ground, face down, and lay on top of her. 'Don't clench your teeth.' *What?* Pale faces appeared at the kitchen door. 'Stay there!' Alex shouted, waving them back. He knew about this, they didn't, so automatically they obeyed. The plane veered away in the direction of the coast, falling, always falling, until it dipped below the level of a hill. The pressure on the back of her neck eased. She saw a ladybird, an inch away from her eyes, on the top of a grass stalk, waving its front legs, as if it didn't understand why the stalk had come to an end and there was only air. Now more planes were circling overhead – two? Three? She was afraid to look. 'Ours,' Alex said, letting go of her arm. She saw red marks where his fingers had been. *That'll bruise*. Slowly, she began to breathe more deeply, to direct weak, foolish smiles at the faces in the kitchen doorway: Rachel, Tim, Mrs Murchison, Joan Wiggins. Everybody must've rushed down when they heard the engine directly overhead. Beyond the hill, a column of black smoke was rising. The British planes circled, then banked steeply and headed towards London. Alex helped her to her feet and she wobbled on boneless legs into the house.

'Jerry right enough.' Tim gave a little cough, reclaiming status

from his son. Then, abruptly, he turned on Rachel, his face contorted with anger. 'What on earth possessed you?'

Elinor realized Rachel must've tried to run across the lawn to get to her son. Tim sounded so angry, but Alex was angry too: both of them, angry with the women because they hadn't been able to protect them. But then, gradually, everybody started to calm down. Mrs Murchison put the kettle on for tea. 'Oh, I think we can do better than that,' Tim said, and went to fetch the whisky.

Mrs Murchison turned to Nurse Wiggins. 'You'll have a cup, Joan?'

'No, I'll be getting back.'

In the turmoil of the last few minutes, the dying woman had been completely forgotten. Only now, conscience-stricken, Rachel remembered and ran upstairs.