Inside the Whale

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Extract

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Stevie

My mum was in her element during that hot September of 1939.

Over the years, she had developed a nervous streak. We became accustomed to hearing her mutter about the dangers of the motor car as she chopped onions. She fretted about untied shoelaces and ribbons on cardigan sleeves. She baulked at ponytails that could be yanked by any passing madman, and wrote letters to *The Times* about the perils of air travel, citing the misfortunes of a distant cousin who had been blown off course at the opening of the Greenwich Railway in a hot-air balloon and had crash-landed on the railway arches at London Bridge. She believed that any child who had the misfortune to place so much as a slice of cucumber in its mouth after having retrieved it from the floor would face an imminent and almost certain death.

Birthdays were particularly dangerous occasions as far as my mum, Vivien, was concerned. The very idea of carrying a cake bursting with naked flames into a darkened room made her left eye twitch. Vivien would lay a small bowl of water next to each person's plate which we all had to clasp as the cake entered the room, our

knees bent in readiness to extinguish the flames at the first sign of unruliness among the candles.

We woke up early on the first Sunday of September that year, and it felt like Christmas Day. My brothers put on their school uniforms for church, and left them on all day because everybody knew that if there was going to be a war, it was going to start then, and they wanted to be ready for it. I was wearing a pair of scrubbed white gloves that were reserved for special occasions and a navy blue pinafore that was getting rather too tight around the bust to be altogether seemly.

The war was announced at eleven o'clock. We were all in Mrs Bartram's yard at Number 10, listening to Chamberlain on the wireless that she had balanced precariously next to a dead bee on the kitchen windowsill. Number 7 were there too. I picked up Mrs Bartram's cat and ran my hand up its back towards its head. It growled at me as Chamberlain announced that we were at war and I noticed that the inside of its mouth was a surprisingly fierce shade of red.

I spent the afternoon with my younger brothers, Eddy and George, filling bags with government sand that had been left at the end of our road. At first we tried to be solemn, but the sand stayed between our toes and settled into the cracks of our hands and the bags ended up bulging with turreted sandcastles and small sculptures of domestic animals.

Meanwhile, our house was slowly filling up with water. Vivien was gleefully hiding brimming bowls under the settee and balancing full glass bottles next to our beds. She left heavy long-handled pans to ripple excitedly on the sideboard in the front room and hung

rugs over the doors to allow for the quick smothering of fires. She lined the edges of the windows with putty and stuffed the chimney with newspaper. She placed a pile of neatly folded damp flannels on the mantelpiece in case of a sudden gas attack on the front room.

It was generally assumed, although never openly admitted, that if any part of the house were going to be invaded, it would undoubtedly be the front room. It had the nice curtains, after all. We lined the sandbags along the front wall in keeping with this accepted proposition and piled tins of condensed milk under the table in case of a siege. We planted cress in old cigarette tins and placed them on the windowsill, to prevent scurvy.

Vivien sighed happily as she looked around at all the precautions she was now allowed, if not obliged, to take. She slept more deeply that night than I had ever known, her hair splayed dramatically over the pillow and her arms hanging carelessly from the sides of the bed, snoring softly.

So that is how I remember the beginning of the war. Wet flannels and sand, and cress growing from damp cotton wool folded flatly in tins. There were no maps spread across the kitchen table, no series of small swastikas marking Hitler's progress through the smaller countries of Europe, like in the history books that came after. There was no talk in our yard of concentration camps or of the rise of European dictatorship or of German economic stagnation. I know all that now, but it has been added later, laid gently over the bits I remember, like tracing paper.

And that is the problem with the beginnings of things.

Michael

It is a strange thing, sleeping with morphine. It rocks you, gathers you into its dark arms, and slithers with you over the surface of sleep. It softens nightmares like bath-water, and dulls the crashing, skidding pain in my throat. In the mornings I feel it pricking the edges of my skin, nestling in the cracks of my elbows and along my spine. It leaves my mind empty, alert. In the mornings, I remember everything.

I remember sequences of kings and queens, and the order of stations on the Northern Line, both branches. I remember Darwin's lists of sub-races of pigeons, and how to tell a gurney from a logan. And I remember the long stories that Brendan Hardcastle used to tell me after school when we sat with swinging legs on the high wall that ran along the back of our yards, for Brendan always knew everything before I did.

It was Brendan who first told me about Mr Samuel Finley Breese Morse. He told me that, in 1844, Sam Morse attended the first public exhibition of his newly invented code. The display was held in the chamber of the Supreme Court of the United States of America in Washington. A young lady came forward and selected the words that Sam Morse was to send to his associate

in Baltimore. She laid a piece of paper on the table in front of him, and the first message ever to be transmitted via an insulated electromagnetic wire was tapped out in full view of the US Commissioner of Patents, the young lady's father.

The message arrived in Baltimore and was sent back over the same wire, and both times it asked the same question: *What hath God wrought?*

Twice transmitted, twice greeted with gasps, and twice left hanging, unanswered and ignorant of its own magnitude. After all, the twentieth century was not yet so much as a glint in the eye of the 1800s and that young lady could not possibly have known what the twentieth century would bring for two small boys swinging their legs over a back wall in 1931.

But what Brendan could not yet tell me was that ninety-seven years after that first message was sent, at the age of twenty and with a dent of forty-one years already blown into the sides of the new century, we would be wedging our knees into the dusty cracks of the Abyssinian desert and flattening our Royal Signals hats against our chests as Alf's body was lowered into the ground. He could not tell me that when he turned his burnt neck to look at me that day I would not be able to hold his eyes, and that as I lay awake in bed that night I would remember the young lady in the chamber of the Supreme Court and I would think to myself, *What indeed*?

In the mornings, mostly, I remember that.

Stevie

I'll try again.

I was born in 1924. I gave birth in 1941. I married in 1945. A thin discrepancy, but an obvious one, like the gap between a pair of front teeth.

After I left school, I spent four years chopping root vegetables in the canteen of the Sun Pat peanut factory on the Old Kent Road. I had wanted to be a teacher with a high collar and a bag for my books with a clasp that snapped shut, but instead I found myself arranging pale cabbages on trays and chopping carrots into perfect cubes. They made me stand on a wooden box so that my elbows didn't disturb the other women.

But already I am skipping things. That is not the absolute beginning. I need to be more thorough.

I was originally named as a question, my first two names being scratched drippily onto my birth certificate in reverse. May Stephanie Ponder? The nurse tutted at Vivien, plunging me in cold water as she warned that no child with a question mark at the end of its name would ever be able to sleep. Night or day. Vivien took me home and I lay wide-eyed in my cot, wrapped in blue cotton with white edges, unable even to blink. She had to dab my eyes with spittle on a

ball of cotton wool to stop them from drying out completely.

Five months later I was crossed out and re-entered into the parish register, this time as a permission, and a possibility. Stephanie May Ponder. The vicar nodded his head sagely and pressed his thumb into the dip above my nose for a second time and I slept for two days.

Vivien was employed by a local property solicitor to copy out deeds in immaculate copperplate onto thick yellow paper. She did this at the kitchen table, lining her pen nibs up in front of the salt and pepper and spreading her fingers defensively when we came too close to the inkpot. In the evenings, she sat in the chair next to the fire and sewed box pleats into pastel-coloured skirts and realigned the hems of flat-fronted trousers. She hung the finished garments along the curtain rail in her bedroom where they flapped against the glass like prisoners until they were collected.

My dad worked as a tube driver for London Transport, leaving the house noisily before dawn and returning in the afternoon with dry eyes and swept-back hair. A soft breeze would rattle the window in its pane as he approached, and Vivien would purse her lips and dutifully remove the net from her hair. When the government announced its plan to turn the Metropolitan Line into a circle, the thought of it was too much for my dad to bear. He lay down in the front room with a loud sigh and announced that enough was enough.

After that, he spent a lot of time lying in the crack between the crumb-coloured cushions on the settee. He smelt of old books with crackly pages. Sometimes we didn't see him for weeks. We lived around the settee but

not on it. He would come back to us by blinking loudly without warning, gasping for air, and we would look at him in surprise, wrinkling our noses as if he were a forgotten sandwich with dry curling corners and brown lettuce.

He didn't seem to notice the others. His arm would reach out, beckoning me closer, ignoring my sister and my brothers who were busily pattering sideways out of the door, trying to avoid the creaky floorboard. His hand would clamp around my wrist and he would ask me questions, small and round questions that shone like lost pennies as he held them out to me. It was our only form of communication.

The questions became more specialised as the months went on. At first, they took general, primary themes. Capital cities of Europe, prime number sequences, spellings with silent Gs lurking at the edges. I graduated to the capital cities of Asia on the day my teacher called me to the front of the class to announce that I was going to Houghton Hall in North Dulwich because I had won a scholarship and that everyone had to clap and call me Stephanie from now on because Stevie was no name for a girl in a boater hat.

My dad questioned me on the inner workings of electro-magnetic induction rings on the day my first period came and I cried because I didn't know the answer. I didn't usually cry. And then there were conjugations in Latin that I practised at school and carried home carefully in mauve exercise books to show him.

I had to learn poems and recite them to him with feeling. My dad did not like to be looked at during poems. So instead I would stand at the window and

shout 'Sea Fever' at passers-by with my scholarship-white gloves clasped in front of me, and my dad would shut his eyes and smile and then roll back into the crack between the settee and the cushions and I would be dismissed.

The day before he died, he asked me if I knew the square root of minus two.

I told him that there wasn't one.

It became the last thing I ever said to him, and it was only as the coffin was lowered into the ground and I heard Vivien breathe out completely for the first time in ten years that I realised I had questions of my own I had never dared to ask.

It was arranged that I was to leave Houghton Hall after that. On 21 October 1937, which was a Thursday, I exchanged my white cotton gloves with satin buttons for blue factory ones, packed my newly-found vowel sounds into my pencil case along with my Latin verbs, and zipped it tightly shut as I walked from the gates.

I met Michael a week later. I can picture his face as if it were right there in front of me. Not as he was when I last saw him. When I think of Michael, it is as he was when he was a boy, at the beginning of everything.

Before he disappeared.

But I must try harder to remember the other things. After all, *his* is not the face I want to remember.