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Opening extract from

Life: An Exploded Diagram

Written by

Mal Peet

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LIFE: AN EXPLODED DIAGRAM

Mal Peet

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For Bernard and Hilary

PART ONE:
PUTTING THINGS TOGETHER

London, Published by Thomas Kelly, 17, Paternoster Row. 1830

1.
NORFOLK, EARLY MARCH, 1945

RUTH ACKROYD WAS in the garden checking the rhubarb when the RAF Spitfire accidentally shot her chimney-pot to bits. The shock of it brought the baby on three weeks early.

"I was expectun," she'd often say, over the years. "But I wunt expectun *that*."

She'd had cravings throughout her pregnancy, ambitious ones: tinned ham, chocolate, potted shrimps, her husband's touch, rhubarb. Rhubarb was possible though. Ruth and her mother, Win, grew it in the cottage garden. They forced it; which is to say they covered the plants with upended buckets so that when new tendrils poked through the soil, they found themselves in the dark and grew like mad, groping for light. Stalks of forced rhubarb were soft, blushed and stringless. You could eat them without sugar, which was rationed, and Ruth wanted to. So she'd waddled out into the garden

on a rare day of early-spring sunshine to lift the buckets and see how things were doing. See if there was any chance of a nibble.

Win had said, "You put that ole coat on, if yer gorn out. There's a wind'd cut yer jacksy in half."

Ruth hadn't seen George since his last leave, when, silently (because Win was sleeping, or listening, a thin wall away) he'd got her pregnant. Now he was in Africa. Or Italy, or somewhere. There was no way she could imagine his life. He might even be dead. The last letter had come in January:

"*The last push, or so they say… Cold as hell here in the nights… Hope you and the little passenger are well. Love, George*."

Probably not dead, because there'd have been a telegram. Like Brenda Cushion had got, six months ago.

Ruth had gone down the garden path with her huge belly in front of her. She was frightened of it. She had little idea what giving birth might involve. Win had told her almost nothing; she was against the whole thing. Knocked up by a soldier: history repeating itself. Nothing good could come of it. The baby had grown in Ruth, struggling and undiscussed. An unspeakable thing. A wartime mishap. The two women had sat the winter out in front of dying fires of scrounged fuel, listening to the wireless, grimly knitting, not talking about it.

* * *

Washing blew on the line: tea towels, Ruth's yellowish vests, her mother's bloomers ballooned by the wind, their elasticated leg-holes pouting.

There were two rhubarb clumps, a rusty-lipped bucket inverted over each. Ruth had leaned, grunting, to lift the first one when all hell broke loose above her head.

The air-raid siren had not gone off. The air-raid siren was a big grey thing the shape of a surprised mouth mounted on a wooden tower behind the Black Cat garage, over a mile away. It made a moan that turned hysterical, then stopped, then started over again, rising in pitch, driving the local dogs mad. Throughout the summer of 1940 it had wailed day and night as the German planes came over, and Ruth and Win had spent terrible long hours in the darkness under the stairs waiting for it to stop. Or for the riot in the skies to fall upon them and kill them. (Sometimes Ruth couldn't stand it and had gone outside, despite her mother's prayerful begging, to watch and listen to the dogfights in the sky, the white vapour-trails scratched against the blue, the black trails of planes falling, the awful hesitations of engine-noise that meant one of ours or one of theirs was falling, a man in a machine was burning down.) But on this occasion the siren remained silent. There had been no German air-raids for eighteen months, after all. The war was over, bar the shouting.

So Ruth was terribly surprised when the chimney-pot exploded and the German plane came from behind the elms and filled the garden with savage noise. The machine

was so low that she was certain it would plunge into the cottage. She fell backwards with her knees in the air and saw, with absolute clarity, the rivets that held the bomber together and its vulnerable glass nose and the black cross on its fuselage and the banner of fire that trailed from its wing. One of the Spitfires in pursuit was pulling out of a dive. Its underbelly was the same blue as the heavy old pram that Chrissie Slender had lent her. The sound of the planes was so all-consuming that the fragments of the chimney tumbled silently into the yard. Inside their wire run, the hens frenzied.