

Two

If I had been given the choice, I would have taken my chances and stayed. I didn't want to go. I didn't want to leave her and I said so. But it made no difference. I was going; Ma said I must. We sat at the table eating bread and dripping. I liked bread and dripping but I wasn't hungry. I stared at the floor as she said it again.

'Nora love, there's going to be a war. I want you to be safe. It won't be forever. When it's all over you'll come back and it'll be as if you were never away.'

Two woodlice were hurrying towards one of the table legs. I fixed my eyes on them instead of Ma.

'It'll do you good to live in the country. You'll have lots of fresh air and space.'

The woodlice had almost got to the table, little grey shapes

running one after the other. I didn't care about fresh air and space. I wanted us to stick together, like them.

'I don't want to go,' I said. I pushed my plate away and looked up at her. Ma's face was my favourite thing to look at in the world, the first and last thing I saw each day, but she wasn't pretty now. She had two dark patches under her eyes like smudges of coal dust and she was frowning. It was early still, but the room was made dim by the paper we had stuck up over the windows the week before. I had cut it into squares with the scissors that Ma used for bacon, leaving smears of grease along the edges. If I went she would be left in the dark. The thought of her sitting alone at the table every night made my stomach twist and churn.

'Please don't make me go,' I said. 'You won't have anyone left.'

'You can't stay here,' she said. 'You mustn't worry. I'll be all right.'

'I won't go.'

'You're going, and that's that. God's already taken your father from me. I'm not about to lose you too.'

The anger in her voice made me angry too and I stamped on the woodlice, crushing them under my shoe. If I was to be sent away from her, I thought, why should they be allowed to stay? But as soon as I had done it I was sorry.

'What if the bombs come, Ma, like they say they will? What if one of them hits our house? You'll be killed.' I pictured myself standing by a coffin and my eyes began to prickle with tears.

'I'm not going to die,' she said. 'Come here.'

I ran to her and she held me, stroking my hair like she had when I was a little girl. We stayed together like that until the room was dark, then we prayed to the Virgin, kneeling side by side at the foot of our bed.

'Look after Nora,' Ma said, in a small, cracked voice. 'Keep her safe for me. Help her to be good.'

She held me all through the night and in the morning the back of my nightdress was damp from her tears.

The next day was the first of September. It should have been my first day at my new school. I woke feeling sick. I lay in bed, listening to the whistle of the kettle, waiting for Ma to come and tell me that it had all been a bad dream, that there was no war and that I could stay. But when she came it was to tell me to hurry.

I put my hands on my stomach. 'I've got a pain, Ma. It hurts, here.'

She patted my shoulder. 'Nora love, you've got to go. Get dressed now. I've made tea.'

I knew she didn't believe in my stomach ache. Slowly, I put on the uniform that she had sat up late so many nights to stitch and went downstairs to the kitchen. As we walked through the streets to the schoolyard, I was angry and afraid. When Ma held out her hand, I shook my head. I wanted to stamp my foot and tell her that my stomach really did hurt. But I knew it wouldn't make any difference. I had never seen Ma so determined, so I said nothing.

When we got there it was crowded but strangely quiet. Some of the little ones were crying, clinging to their mothers, and a few of the bigger boys ran about, pretending to shoot at each other like soldiers. But most of us were silent and still, waiting to see what was going to happen. I knew that nothing I said or did would change anything. I couldn't stop the war. I couldn't even make Ma change her mind about sending me away. I didn't know where I was going, where I would sleep that night or where I would wake up in the morning. All I knew was that Ma wouldn't be there with me. I swallowed hard, trying to force back the panic that was rising in my throat. When a whistle screeched and a teacher clapped her hands to make us listen, I thought I was going to be sick. A hush fell over the schoolyard.

'Say goodbye to your mothers and line up in pairs,' the teacher shouted. 'Quickly, now. We've no time to lose.'

Suddenly everything was movement and noise.

I tried one last time. 'I want to stay here and be killed with you.'

Ma shook her head sadly. 'Don't say things like that. It's not right.'

She pressed something into my hand. It was the little picture of the Virgin and Child that hung from a hook on the wall next to our bed. I saw it every night before I went to sleep. I liked how they were together, the two of them, just like me and Ma.

She put her arms around me and held me tight, pressing her cheek against mine.

'Remember, Nora, I'll always be with you,' she said quietly. 'We'll always be together.'

I closed my eyes and breathed in her smell, carbolic soap and sweat, filling my nose with it to take with me to wherever I'd end up. The next thing I knew, she was gone and I was holding the hand of a boy who was smaller than me, aged five or maybe six. Two lines of snot trickled towards his mouth, making me feel even sicker. I couldn't bear to look at him. I stared instead at the label that hung from a piece of string around my neck.

Nora Lynch, it said, in tidy teachers' handwriting. *Aged 12 years.*

It reminded me of the words on Pa's gravestone. *James Lynch. Died 1929, aged 25 years.* It made leaving Ma even worse and I hated her for making me go. I wouldn't turn my head to look at her as we marched out of the schoolyard in a crocodile. We shuffled like prisoners, our heads down, staring at the ground, and even the birds were quiet as we went.

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As the train jerked out of the station, the boy sitting next to me began to whimper. One of the older girls tried to put her arm around his shoulders but he pushed her away.

'You're not my mother,' he shouted. 'Get off me.'

Hearing him say *mother* did for us and soon we were all in tears. I pressed myself into the corner and stared through the dirty window, wishing that I was back at home, curled up in bed with Ma. It was the first time she hadn't been around to put things right. I looked down at the palm of my right hand, marked with a silvery scar from when I had lifted the kettle off the fire without a cloth. Ma had picked me up and carried me to the back yard, where she held my hand in hers under the tap until our fingers were red with cold. I touched the patch in my eyebrow where no hair had grown since the day I had tripped on the doorstep and hit my head. That time Ma had taken me to the doctor. I remembered his sour breath as he leaned close to examine me.

'She'll live,' he had said. 'She'll live.'

If anything happened to me now she wouldn't be around to make it better. I would have new scars that she wouldn't know anything about. I pressed my face against the window like she had pressed her cheek against mine in the schoolyard, trying to pretend that she was with me.

One by one, the others fell asleep. My eyes were heavy but I was determined to stay awake. I wanted to know where I was going. As the train pulled further away from London and from Ma, I leaned back in the leather seat and stared out of the window at fields that stretched on endlessly, further than I could see, a hundred shades of green. The train passed through empty stations, each like the one before it; a platform with a bench, a white fence and flowers planted in tubs, all so different to the crowds and soot at Waterloo that it was hard to believe we were in the same country.

After a while I felt the pain in my stomach, worse than before, stabbing at my insides. The potted meat in the sandwich that Ma had given me was beginning to smell, making me gulp. I got to my feet, suddenly wanting to be alone and out of sight. I remembered

that when we had boarded the train there had been a rush for the lavatory. I would hide myself away in there.

I picked my way past the sleeping bodies and over gas masks and suitcases, then crept along the corridor, holding my stomach as I went, swallowing back the sour taste of sick. Eventually, I arrived at a small door marked W.C. When I opened it, the smell made my stomach heave and I stood at the threshold, trying to decide if I could bear to go in. I made up my mind when a group of boys came charging along the corridor. Pinching my nose with my fingers, I slipped inside, locked the door, pulled down my old school knickers and sat on the lavatory. I slumped on the seat, trying to lift up my feet away from the sticky floor and keep my balance as the train rocked from side to side.

I was trapped in the lavatory with nowhere else to go. Leaving Ma had been the end of everything good. Since then, every minute had brought something new and worse, as if it were a test of how much I could stand. But the next thing to happen was the worst of all. The train lurched suddenly and I threw out my hands to steady myself against the walls, losing hold of my knickers, which fell to my knees. I glanced down at them and what I saw made me blink in horror. There was a mark on them, a strange smear against the grey cotton. It looked like rust, or blood.

I turned hot and then cold. My heart was beating so hard I felt as if I would choke on it. When I dared to look again, my thighs were trembling. It was still there, a brownish smudge, evidence of something that I knew at once was very bad. Slowly, I brought my hand down from the wall and touched my thigh. I rested it there, frightened of moving it further, then, as if they belonged to someone else, I watched my fingers creep between my legs and then I felt them touch that part of myself that I had never seen, never mentioned and touched only when I was washing, as quickly as I could.

I brought my hand back up to my face and touched my fingers to

my nose. An odd smell, of iron and darkness, filled my nostrils. It was like an animal, or meat that had been left out somewhere warm. I lowered my hand and made myself look at it. My fingertips had blood on them, not red like the sort that spilled from a scraped knee or a cut finger, but a dark, dirty brown, something shameful. I was bleeding between my legs.

I shivered with fear as I realized what it meant. God was punishing me. I had hated Ma for sending me away. I had stamped on the woodlice, refused to hold her hand on the way to the schoolyard and not looked back when I left.

‘Honour your mother and father,’ the Sunday School teacher always said. It was one of the Ten Commandments. I didn’t have a father but I had Ma. I hadn’t honoured her. I had despised her instead. I had said I would rather die than leave her behind, but now that I was gone it was happening all the same.

The only hope I had, I decided, was to pray. I would confess my sins and ask for forgiveness like I did in the little booth each week before Mass. Perhaps God would listen to me then. I closed my eyes.

‘Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.’

I told him all of it, from the woodlice onwards, leaving nothing out, and just as I came to the end of it, the train stopped moving. For a moment, everything was peaceful and still. I opened my eyes and looked down at my knickers, hoping for a miracle, but it was no good. The blood was still there. My confession hadn’t changed anything. I began to cry, hot tears that dropped onto my thighs as if they were trying to wash them clean.

A knock came at the door, and then a woman’s voice.

‘Is anyone in there? Open up, please. We’ve arrived. Everybody must get off the train. Come along.’

I had no more choice about it than I’d had about anything else that day. I pulled my knickers up and wiped my fingers on my skirt,

stepped out of the stinking lavatory and went back to the compartment. It was empty apart from my gasmask and the pillowcase that held my things. I picked them up, made my way along the corridor to the end of the carriage and climbed down the steps to the platform.

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We were taken to a place that smelled of animals, and was divided by wooden fences into pens. I sat on the ground in the dust, feeling numb, watching the teachers try to calm the little ones. Women dressed in hats and suits like the ladies that Ma cleaned for were giving out glasses of lemonade and cups of tea. I had never seen a lady make a cup of tea. It was as if everything I knew to be true had changed in the time that it had taken to leave London. I drew my knees up to my chest and rested my head on them, closing my eyes and wishing that Ma was there to tell me what to do. I stayed like that for a while, shutting everything out, drifting in and out of sleep, until I heard a girl's voice, high-pitched and clear.

'Mummy, look! Look at that girl, there, in the corner. Don't you think she looks like me?'

All I wanted was to keep my eyes closed and pretend I was back with Ma, but the voice went on calling.

'Please, Mummy. Can't we have her? We could be friends, I know we could. Please.'

I tried to melt into the fencepost that I was leaning against, to make myself invisible, but her voice grew closer and louder until at last I could feel her standing in front of me and I had no choice but to open my eyes.

I didn't think I looked like her at all. She was a girl out of a picture book. Her eyes were blue and her cheeks pink, as if someone had coloured them in with a pencil, and her pale hair hung to her shoulders. She wore a flowered dress and brown leather sandals that