

**Novelists and Women in WW1: Challenging Traditional Binarisms – A Critical
Essay**

and

The Half-Painted War – An Original Novel

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Abstract

Academic study of women and WW1 literature has taken place since the 1970s, with a focus on female novelists published pre-1939. Despite the variety of studies, questions remain as to whether the breadth of women's roles in WW1 is accurately represented in fiction.

The purpose of this study was to examine female characters in WW1 novels (published in Britain) who challenge traditional war binarisms i.e. war (male)/peace (female), by taking on war work. It specifically compared novels published pre-1939 and historical (post-1939) novels written by both female and male novelists. The methods employed were the critical reading of forty novels, as well as data collection related to the roles of female characters and the language used to describe them.

The study found that there is little representation of women's war work in the forty novels. A key factor is that they are by middle class authors and written from a middle class point of view. Although historical novels are often used to re-imagine the role of women, WW1 is an exception. Key factors here include the perpetuation of stereotype and nervousness around detracting from the horrific experiences of the male soldier. Challenges to binarisms in subsequent wars (e.g. women in the armed services) have not stimulated a re-visioning of women's roles in WW1.

Society will continue to accept and endorse traditional binarisms, if they are not challenged by cultural representations of war. There is no novel based on the female military experience of WW1. In response, I was inspired to write a historical novel: *The Half-Painted War*. The protagonist is a female artist who enrolls in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC). It is intended as an act of remembrance but also allows the reader to consider the role of women in the military, both in WW1 and today.

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1. Introduction

Throughout history and across the world, war has been and continues to be portrayed as a primarily male experience. In 2014, the centenary of the outbreak of WW1, Britain will embark on a four year journey of remembrance and memorialisation. It is important that this takes cognisance of the impact of the war on society in its entirety.

During WW1, British women moved from the private to the public sphere in unprecedented numbers. The subsequent effect on the status of women after the war has been the subject of much debate. For the duration of the war, however, many women challenged their gendered role both in society and in war. They took on jobs vacated by men (substitution), worked in war industries and joined the armed services in an auxiliary capacity. At the same time, thousands of men were invalided home with physical and mental illnesses which complicated the notion of the masculine soldier. It was also the first war in which men could apply to be registered as conscientious objectors.

This significant change in British society during WW1 can be analysed in terms of binary opposition: the system defined by the linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure in a series of lectures given in 1907-1911.¹ Binary opposition is “the principle of contrast between two mutually exclusive terms: on/off, up/down, left/right etc.”² These terms are also referred to by the derivative ‘binarisms’. Binary opposition has been applied within non-linguistic fields, for example philosophy, psychology and literary theory. Freeman refers to Cixous’ observation that:

Thought has always worked through...dual, hierarchical oppositions...[e]verywhere (where) ordering intervenes, where a law organises what is thinkable by oppositions...And all these pairs of oppositions are *couples*. Does that mean something? Is the fact that Logocentrism subjects thought – all concepts, codes, and values – to a binary system, related to “the” couple, man/woman?³

Cohn builds on this, stating that:

¹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1990), 119.

² Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 24.

³ Barbara Freeman, “Epitaphs and Epigraphs: ‘The End(s) of Man,’” in *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender and Literary Representation*, eds. Helen M. Cooper, Adrienne Auslander Munich and Susan Squier (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 305.

...human characteristics are dichotomised, divided into pairs of polar opposites that are supposedly mutually exclusive: mind is opposed to body; culture to nature; thought to feeling; logic to intuition; objectivity to subjectivity; aggression to passivity; confrontation to accommodation; abstraction to particularity; public to private; political to personal, ad nauseam. In each case, the first term of the 'opposites' is associated with male, and the second with female. And in each case, our society values the first over the second.⁴

Binary opposition equally applies to war. Firstly, war itself can be seen in terms of a couple. Freeman notes that "...the couple is the precondition for war in the sense that a war cannot take place without at least two sides."⁵

Secondly, there is the culturally endorsed assumption that war is male and peace is female. During WW1, and in subsequent twentieth and twenty first century wars, this assumption or traditional binarism has been challenged.

This thesis comprises two sections: the first is a critical essay and the second an original full length novel. The aim of the critical essay is to examine female characters in WW1 novels (published in Britain) who challenge traditional war binarisms: specifically a comparison between novels published pre-1939 and historical (post-1939) novels.

I chose the year 1939 as the dividing line between period and historical novels for a number of reasons. Firstly, the wave of British WW1 literature published in the 1920s and 1930s, although not contemporaneous, was written by men and women who had lived as adults through the war. Hynes comments that:

By the time the decade of the Thirties began, the Myth of the War had been constructed in its essential and persisting form, and that construction may be regarded as an act of closure, both for the war and for the decade that followed it.⁶

There were no WW1 novels published in Britain in the 1940s and with the exception of Henry Williamson and Stuart Cloete, subsequent WW1 novels were written by people who had not experienced it firsthand.

⁴ Carol Cohn, "Wars, Wimps, and Women: Talking Gender and Thinking War," in *Gendering War Talk*, eds. Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 228.

⁵ Freeman, "Epitaphs and Epigraphs: 'The End(s) of Man,'" 304.

⁶ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Pimlico, 1990), 459.

Secondly, WW2 heralded the birth of a new canon of war literature. The war was not only fought on foreign soil but civilians, women and children were also under attack on the Home Front and more so than in the previous war. This and the fact that a greater number of women in comparison to WW1 entered the armed services, had an impact on the way that women were viewed in relation to war. This thesis acknowledges that a number of WW1 novels published in the 1930s were influenced by events leading up to WW2, particularly in terms of using the experiences of WW1 to promote peace and try to prevent a second world war.

Finally, there is the question of when a novel on a recent period in history becomes a historical novel. De Groot defines the historical novel as "...imaginary work which strives to explain something that is other than one's contemporary knowledge and experience: the past."⁷ He also refers to Sarah Johnson's rather more prescriptive definition written in 2005 which states that historical novels are "...set before the middle of the last century...in which the author is writing from research rather than personal experience."⁸ These definitions, in conjunction with the reasons stated above for the 1939 watershed, mean that WW1 novels published post-1939 are referred to throughout this thesis as historical novels.

I commenced the research with five objectives. The first was to complete a survey of female characters in WW1 novels who are employed in roles viewed as traditionally male. I was intrigued by Joyce Marlow's observation that "[i]f women are mentioned...they tend to figure as sweetly uncomprehending aunts, flighty flappers or bloodthirsty xenophobes, and to merit a few, not always complimentary, lines about their war work."⁹ I was keen to find out if the latter was the case and to see whether there were any differences dependent on the novelist's gender or when the novel was published. The survey was intended to provide a foundation for the subsequent analysis.

The second objective was to understand how these female characters were placed in relation to the male characters, for example were they considered as equals? This led directly into the third objective which was to explore how these women were viewed by other characters, male and female, as well as the alignment with the prevailing opinions of the time.

⁷ Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2010), 4.

⁸ *ibid.*, 50.

⁹ Joyce Marlow, ed., *The Virago Book of Women and the Great War* (London: Virago Press, 2005), 1.

The fourth objective was to examine the social context, both in terms of the characters and the novelists, in order to understand whether this affected the portrayal of women in traditionally male roles. The fifth objective was to identify any contributory factors which were specific to the writing of either pre-1939 novels or historical novels, for example the novelist's inspiration and motivation. What did pre-1939 novelists want to achieve: social commentary, propaganda or disguised memoir? What was the focus of the historical novel: remembrance or the exploration of contemporary issues within a historical setting? This objective included consideration of the academic and cultural debate relating to war and gender that has taken place since WW1 and during subsequent periods of conflict, for example the Gulf War and Afghanistan.

The second part of this thesis is a historical novel of WW1 titled *The Half-Painted War*. The protagonist is a female artist who enrolls in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC). There is no novel, published pre-1939 or historical, that is based on the female military experience during WW1. *The Half-Painted War* is intended as an act of remembrance but also allows the reader to consider the role of women in the military, both in WW1 and today.

The critical essay provides the context for the novel. It also sets out a number of considerations for the historical novelist of WW1, specifically in terms of writing about women who challenged traditional binarisms.

I consider that there are two benefits to this study. The first is to contribute to the growing body of academic work that seeks to remember and re-vision the role of women in WW1, including their portrayal in literature. The second is to address the fact that a society's culture not only reflects a consensus of opinion and thereby can create and perpetuate myths, it can also be used to challenge those myths. In *The World Wars through the Female Gaze*, Gallagher refers to Huston's observation that "[w]ar imitates war narrative imitating war."¹⁰ If cultural representations of war, including novels, do not represent women who challenge traditional binarisms, I believe that society will continue to accept and endorse those binarisms. This has become problematic in recent years as women have fulfilled an increasingly active role in the military.

¹⁰ Jean Gallagher, *The World Wars through the Female Gaze* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), 15.

2. Critical Literature Review

In 1966, David Mitchell published *Women on the Warpath: The Story of the Women of the First World War*¹¹. It was the culmination of two years of interviews and correspondence with women who were active participants of the war. This was followed in 1967 by John Laffin's *Women in Battle*¹². Both studies accompanied the burgeoning Women's Movement of the late 1960s.

It was not until 1978 that the first study of women in WW1 literature was published. Cadogan and Craig's *Women and Children First: The Fiction of Two World Wars*¹³ was, however, a superficial study. This was the same year in which Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*¹⁴ was republished by Virago Press.

Sandra Gilbert's article in the journal *Signs*, titled "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War"¹⁵, marked the commencement of academic study in this area. Raitt and Tait state that "[m]uch recent work on gender and the writing of the Great War is responding, in one way or another, to [this] essay...first published in 1983 and reprinted several times since."¹⁶ Gilbert "reads the Great War as a form of sex warfare; a 'climatic episode in a battle of the sexes'; a 'war between the front and the home front'."¹⁷

Cooke and Woollacott observe that "...although gender and war have been subjects of prescription and representation in Western culture since antiquity, academic inquiry has only recently come to focus on the intersection of these topics."¹⁸ The volume of essays *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender and Literary Representation* (1989) edited by Helen Cooper et al, was the first to consider this intersection: combining literary theory with feminist war theory. It included reference to WW1, as well as more recent conflict and the nuclear age. Their key conclusion was that women's role in war is complex and that war is not solely a male experience.

¹¹ David Mitchell, *Women on the Warpath: The Story of the Women in the First World War* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1966).

¹² John Laffin, *Women in Battle* (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1967).

¹³ Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig, *Women and Children First: The Fiction of Two World Wars* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1978).

¹⁴ Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (London: Virago, 1978). (First published 1933).

¹⁵ Sandra Gilbert, "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 8, no. 3 (spring 1983).

¹⁶ Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tait, eds., *Women's Fiction and the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott, eds., *Gendering War Talk* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), vii.

In the subsequent decades, scholars have re-discovered women's writing of WW1 (fiction, memoir and diary) and examined it in the context of feminist war theory. These scholars include Claire Tylee, Dorothy Goldman, Sharon Ouditt, Jane Gledhill, Judith Hattaway, Agnes Cardinal, Margaret Higonnet, Angela Smith, Deborah Cohen, Suzanne Raitt, Trudi Tate and Jane Potter. This period has also witnessed an increase in the study of women and war (including WW1) by scholars in the political and social sciences, for example Jean Bethke Elshtain, Jean Gallagher and Susan Grayzel. These studies continue to highlight the diversity of women's relationship with, responses to and experiences of war.

Cohen states that:

While much groundbreaking work has been done in the past two decades to establish a basis for analysing women's war writing in general and Great War writing in particular, much of it has necessarily emphasized self-justification and correction, seeking to legitimise women's war writing as war writing by interrogating conventional definitions and boundaries of war experience.¹⁹

The consequential focus of study in this period has been limited to female novelists writing between 1916 and 1939, as well as the experience of British women.

Smith comments that "[d]espite the fact that there has been significant interest in women's writing of the First World War in recent years, it is still an under-researched area in comparison with the literary representation of men's war experience."²⁰ In this thesis I seek to broaden the area of research by considering female characters (British/French/Belgian) written by both male and female novelists. The emphasis is on the comparison between novels published prior to 1939 and historical (post-1939) novels.

Despite my desire to broaden the area of research, there remain potential limitations in analysing fiction solely in terms of female characters. Raitt and Tait have observed that:

...some feminists are becoming slightly uneasy about writing separately about women as if women were a unified group, requiring special pleading; or as if

¹⁹ Debra Rae Cohen, *Remapping the Home Front: Locating Citizenship in British Women's Great War Fiction* (New Hampshire: Northeastern University Press, 2002), 1.

²⁰ Angela K. Smith, *The Second Battlefield: Women, Modernism and the First World War* (Manchester, New York, Vancouver: Manchester University Press, 2000), 3.

'woman' were an unproblematic category for organizing knowledge. For, as Diane Elam argues, 'what it means to be a 'woman' is hardly self evident'; this is particularly true of the period surrounding the Great War.²¹

An underlying assumption of this thesis is that there was no singular experience of WW1 for women. In addition, it considers the attitude of male characters towards female characters thereby drawing out a facet of the male experience of WW1 hitherto overlooked. This is augmented by the inclusion of fiction by male as well as female novelists.

3. The Established Canon

Hanley observes that "...our war literature is obsessed with the experience of a very small proportion of the large populations implicated in modern warfare."²² The majority of WW1 literature study has been based on a limited canon of work: notably male combat novels published in the inter-war years.

3.1 Reasons for the Limited Established Canon

The assumption, challenged by gender studies since the 1980s, is that WW1 was predominantly a male experience. Significant value has been placed on work by male novelists who had firsthand knowledge of battle thus creating a division between soldier and civilian, as well as the Home Front and Front. Hynes considers the subsequent impact on war writers and painters to be "...not a matter of the artist's vision, but the soldier's."²³

During WW1, the majority of British fiction was written by women. WW1 fiction by male novelists was mainly published in the 1920s and 1930s and was accompanied by a boom in war memoir publication. Indeed, the majority of the male novelists had seen active service and their fiction is thinly disguised autobiography. It is these novels that have formed the canon for the majority of subsequent academic studies. Women's fiction of the period 1916 to 1920 was not re-printed. On the subject of post war women's fiction, Barlow states that:

²¹ Raitt and Tait, *Women's Fiction and the Great War*, 2.

²² Hanley, *Writing War: Fiction, Gender and Memory* (Massachusetts: Massachusetts University Press, 1991), 6.

²³ Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, 116.

The token woman allowed in the canon was Vera Brittain, both because *Testament of Youth* fitted the prevailing mood of opposition to war and because she had at least been a nurse if she couldn't be a soldier. Other writing by women (for instance, *We That Were Young*, by Irene Rathbone, 1932) enjoyed a certain popularity but did not survive in print.²⁴

Women's WW1 fiction must also be considered beyond the context of the war itself. In the inter-war years, women's role in society was problematic as they sought to establish their position in a post-war world. Tylee comments that "Whether consciously or unconsciously, women's writing about the War was inextricably bound into these cultural conflicts."²⁵

Finally, there is the question of who decides the canon. Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), is widely regarded as the most influential definition of the WW1 literary canon. Women and civilians are noticeable by their absence. In the early 1990s Lynne Hanley and Claire Tylee were critical of Fussell, the former stating that:

...for the most part Fussell's premise that war literature is by and about men at the front remains the operative premise in our identification of what poems, memoirs, and fictions constitute our literature on war. And since soldiers write our story of war, theirs is the perspective that prevails.²⁶

3.2 Impact of the Limited Established Canon and the Response

I believe that the limited canon results in the misrepresentation of the experience of WW1 across gender, as well as class lines. It suggests that women's experience of WW1 has no value and no part to play in the development of the national culture. In the 1990s, Tylee was concerned that:

...although in Western culture the First World War is imaginatively seen to mark a shift as decisive as the loss of Eden, the flood, or the birth of Christ, one matter has remained unchanged since the time of the Ancient Greeks: the access of

²⁴ Adrian Barlow, *The Great War in British Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 70.

²⁵ Claire M. Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1990), 46.

²⁶ Hanley, *Writing War: Fiction, Gender and Memory*, 6.

women to the crucial sphere of culturally significant experience. For an understanding of 'modern understanding' we remain dependent on men.²⁷

The definition of war is key. The Oxford English Dictionary describes it as "a state of armed conflict between different countries or different groups within a country."²⁸ This definition encompasses society as a whole rather than specifically referring to armed combat between males.

Women experienced the full spectrum of WW1. At the one extreme, a handful of female novelists visited or worked at the Front, including Cicely Hamilton, Irene Rathbone, May Sinclair and Mrs Humphrey Ward. Further, thousands of British women served overseas in a wide variety of roles. Trotter states that he is:

...very much in sympathy with critics who believe that, whether or not we regard them as combatants, the women who served as nurses or ambulance-drivers during the war made a significant contribution to its literature. How better to grasp the nature of the physical and mental damage done by a particular form of combat than through the eyes of the women whose task was to help repair it?²⁹

At the other extreme, women lived and worked on the Home Front. They took on the majority of traditional male roles, raised children, grieved for lost husbands and brothers, manufactured the machinery of war and nursed convalescing soldiers. I believe that the literature that draws on these experiences is of no less value than that of men who fought at the Front.

Following Hanley and Tylee's criticism in the early 1990s of Fussell and in conjunction with the growth of war and gender studies, academics have re-discovered the novels of the Home Front, as well as women's autobiographies and diaries. Campbell refers to this as "a feminist archaeological project of the rediscovery of civilian texts about the war."³⁰ In 2000, Sharon Ouditt published an annotated bibliography of women writers of WW1 which lists one hundred and seventy novels, one hundred and sixty contemporary accounts and ninety five autobiographies and collections of diaries and letters³¹.

²⁷ Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness*, 8.

²⁸ *Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁹ David Trotter, "The British Novel and the War," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War*, ed. Vincent Sherry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 35.

³⁰ James Campbell, "Interpreting the War," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War*, ed. Vincent Sherry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 270.

³¹ Sharon Ouditt, *Women Writers of the First World War: An Annotated Bibliography* (Oxford: Routledge, 1999).

The rediscovery of WW1 novels written by women has been facilitated by Virago, the Feminist Press and latterly Persephone Books. De Groot observes that “Virago’s work is about reclaiming a marginalised literary history through the use of textual signifiers, in this case books.”³² With the advent of the internet, Project Gutenberg and archive.org have also provided access to forgotten novels.

3.3 The Broader Canon

The established canon may have been challenged since the 1990s but consequent study of female characters has been limited to those novels written by women. In this thesis I attempt to broaden the study of female characters by using a combination of the established limited canon and those novels by women that have subsequently been re-discovered.

A number of WW1 novels have been published in Britain since the 1950s. The first of these were the continuation of Henry Williamson’s *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*. Henry Williamson served in the army throughout the war and his series of books are semi-autobiographical. Stuart Cloete’s *How Young They Died* followed in 1969. Cloete also served in the war. It was not until 1971, that a historical novel of WW1 written by a woman was published – Susan Hill’s *Strange Meeting*. Since the 1990s there has been a resurgence of WW1 novels, led by Pat Barker and Sebastian Faulks. Although there have been individual academic studies of these novels and writers, there has not been a collective study which uses them as an extended canon of WW1 literature. Again, this thesis seeks to address this by including within its scope those WW1 novels published post-1939 and up to (and including) 2012.

My desire to study a broad canon needed to be balanced with manageability. For the purposes of this thesis it was not practicable to study every published WW1 novel. I therefore employed the following selection criteria: literary novels (rather than romance or adventure) published in Britain, focussing on the British Home Front and/or the experience of the British armed services on the Western Front.

³² de Groot, *The Historical Novel*, 156.

4. Methodology

The thesis aim and objectives have been set out in section 1. The key challenges were the size of the canon (forty novels by twenty eight novelists) and the ability to compare novels.

I established frameworks in order to facilitate information collection and collation. The first framework enabled detailed information to be gathered on each individual female character: the percentage of the book in which they appear; relation to main character; role/employment; age; class; nationality; key characteristics; and depiction (e.g. interacting with other characters, letter, dream etc). The second framework used a geographical continuum from the Home Front to the trenches to record the nouns used to describe women.

The information gathered via the frameworks does not take account of the significance of a character within a novel. Further, the female characters are removed and recorded in isolation. Higonnet states that "...gender is not an extractable feature of literary texts but an aspect of the relationships among characters and in turn therefore of plot...To study gender is to see how patterns of characterisation and of narration merge."³³ I used the information frameworks to identify trends and patterns which provided clear direction for subsequent in-depth critical reading. This critical reading and comparison across forty novels results in the use of many quotes within this thesis.

5. Findings

This section of the thesis sets out the findings relating to the first four objectives referred to in section 1.

I identified one thousand two hundred and forty nine female characters within the forty novels. Some appear for only a few lines and others for considerable portions of the novel. A number of these characters appear more than once within novels by the same authors. As highlighted within section 4, the categorisation and statistical analysis of this information is meant to direct subsequent critical reading rather than being an accurate scientific approach.

³³ Margaret Higonnet, "Civil Wars and Sexual Territories," in *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender and Literary Representation*, eds. Helen M. Cooper, Adrienne Auslander Munich and Susan Squier (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 81.

5.1 Survey

This section explores the extent of the portrayal of female characters in WW1 novels who took on roles viewed as traditionally male. For ease, this will be referred to as war work. Although women took on roles vacated by men that were not directly war-related this did contribute to the wider war effort.

Ruddick states that “[w]omanly’ militarists acknowledge the exclusionary male bonding of battle. They take up *distinctive* war work that is either feminine, such as nursing the wounded, or is seen as only a temporary substitute for the work that men will return to when they come home from war.”³⁴

It is important to remember that prior to the war nearly six million women were employed, mainly in textile and clothing industries and as domestic servants. At the outbreak of war, thousands of women were put out of work. By 1918, nearly seven and a half million women were in work.³⁵ The key difference during WW1 was the transference of women already employed, into munitions and jobs that were vacated by men, many of which were visible and therefore provide a false impression of a female workforce that only came into being as a result of the war. In 1917, the *Labour Gazette* estimated that one in three working women was ‘replacing’ a male worker in industry.³⁶ The increase in female workers can, for the most part, be attributed to the return of married women to paid employment. Women also joined the auxiliary armed services and served both at home and overseas.

At the end of the war, the Women’s Work Sub-Committee of the Imperial War Museum collected material that represented women’s broad range of war work (including photographs, uniforms, art, documents etc) and considered that women would never be engaged in such work again. By 1920, two thirds of the women who had been employed during the war had left their jobs.³⁷

Figure 1 illustrates how the female characters in the selected forty novels are employed, where this information is known. This includes French and Belgian, as

³⁴ Sara Ruddick, “Notes Towards a Feminist Peace Politics,” in *Gendering War Talk*, eds. Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 112.

³⁵ Arthur Marwick, *Women at War, 1914-1918* (London: Fontana, 1977), 166.

³⁶ Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War: the British Experience* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), 46.

³⁷ Dorothy Goldman, Jane Gledhill and Judith Hattaway, eds., *Women Writers and the Great War* (Michigan: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 17.

well as British women. For the purposes of this thesis, war work and nursing have been separated as the latter can be seen as a traditional wartime role for a woman.

Figure 1: Bar chart to show the number of female characters by role in WW1 novels.



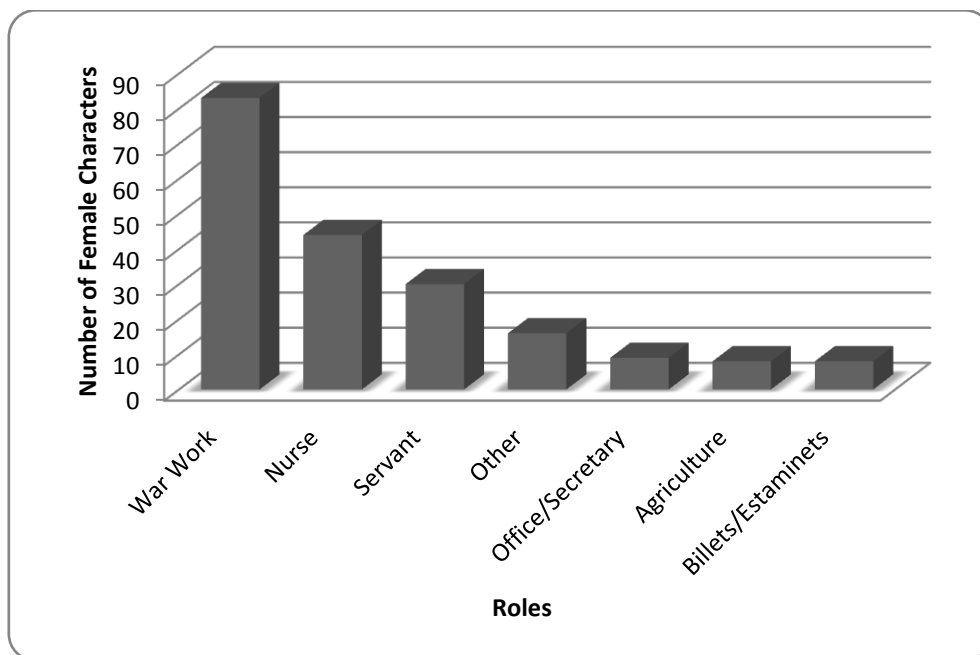
This suggests that war work is the predominant category in pre-1939 novels and that there is a marked difference with historical novels, where it is out ranked by the categories of nurses, servants and women working in billets and estaminets.

The next stage is to further analyse the information in terms of the male and female novelist split.

5.1.1 Female Novelists Pre-1939

Figure 2 shows that war work is the employment category with the highest number of female characters in novels written by women during this period.

Figure 2: Bar chart to show the number of female characters by role in WW1 novels by female novelists published pre-1939



The categories of war work are as follows:

Category of War Work	No of Female Characters
Ambulance Driver	19
Canteen Worker (France)	11
Misc (e.g. canteens)	16
Supply Depot	7
Women's Army Aux. Corps	7
Factory Worker	7
Red Cross (Home Front)	5
Land Girl	4
Forestry Corps	3
Women's Volunteer Reserve	2
Women's Service Corps	1
Lorry Driver (France)	1

I have found that the novels by women published during the war did not accurately reflect the significant number of women employed in war work. The earliest of these, *Non-Combatants and Others* by Rose Macaulay (1916), contains two minor characters that are directly involved in war work (in the Women's Voluntary Reserve and as an ambulance driver) but they are used to illustrate the weak nature of Alix Sandomir, the main protagonist. Another minor character, Miss Simon, remarks that "[w]omen's work in war time is every bit as important as men's, that's what I say;

only they don't get the glory."³⁸ However, the subsequent dialogue is concerned with women's social work in peace time.

E.M. Delafield's *The War Workers* (1918), is set in a military supply depot. It focuses on the women's lives at the depot and the hostel in which they live together but questions the extent to which women should carry out war work to the detriment of their family responsibilities. This is summed up in dialogue between the protagonist, Charmian Vivian and Staff Officer John Trevelyan as follows:

'Do you mean that all the women who have been giving time and trouble to serious work, all the munition-makers, the nurses, the Government workers, ought to go home again because of the old plea that home is a woman's sphere?'

'No, I don't, and you know I don't. But I think that the question of degree enters into it, and that where some women can very well afford to give their whole time and strength, others can't.'

'I see. Then it's simply a matter of counting the cost, and if it comes too dear, hide behind the fact of being a woman!' said Char mockingly.³⁹

The conflict that women felt between fulfilling a meaningful role in the public sphere in support of the war and maintaining their traditional home life is explored more fully in section 5.4.1.

In *The War and Elizabeth* by Mrs Humphrey Ward (1918), Elizabeth is a secretary who persuades her employer to turn over his land to the war effort. Much is made of her intelligence, business acumen and organisational skills. The novel is a piece of propaganda which encourages both men and women to do what they can at home to support the war. Mrs Humphrey Ward worked for Charles Masterman in the War Propoganda Bureau which later became the Department and finally, Ministry of Information. Reference is made in general terms to the expected role of women "as the practical helpers of men."⁴⁰ There is no specific reference to women who take on employment usually carried out by men other than a somewhat patronising moment when Elizabeth meets a number of the land girls that she has employed: "Elizabeth decked the task with honour, so that the girls in their khaki stood round her at last

³⁸ Rose Macaulay, *Non-combatants and Others* (London: Methuen, 1986), 55.

³⁹ E.M. Delafield, *The War Workers* (London: William Heinemann, 1918), 105.

⁴⁰ Mrs Humphrey Ward, *The War and Elizabeth* (London: W. Collins and Sons, 1918), 193.

glowing, though dumb! and felt themselves – as she bade them feel – the comrades-in-arms of their sweethearts and their brothers.”⁴¹

Mrs Humphrey Ward and May Sinclair were amongst the few female novelists to sign Charles Masterman’s ‘Authors’ Manifesto,’ in which they pledged to use their writing to support the war. May Sinclair also worked for a couple of weeks as a publicist with a Motor Ambulance Unit in France. It is she who writes the only novel during the war, other than E.M. Delafields *The War Workers*, which provides significant detail of women’s war work – *The Tree of Heaven* (1917). Indeed, one of the main characters – Dorothy (or Dorothea) – is keen to go to the Front:

And as Dorothea drove her car-loads of refugees day after day in perfect safety, she sickened with impatience and disgust. Safety was hard and bitter to her. Her hidden self was unsatisfied; it had a monstrous longing. It wanted to go where the guns sounded and the shells burst, and the villages flamed and smoked; to go along the straight, flat roads between the poplars where the refugees had gone, so that her nerves and flesh should know and feel their suffering and their danger. She was not feeling anything now except the shame of her immunity.⁴²

Mumford observes that “Sinclair hints that women are, or can be, capable of the heroism of warriors, and challenges the conventional assumption – including her own assessment of history – that war represents men’s unique contribution to civilisation.”⁴³

It was not until the 1930s that women’s work overseas was represented in fiction with the publication of Helen Zenna Smith’s (Evadne Price) *Not so Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* (1930) and Irene Rathbone’s *We That Were Young* (1932). These two novels skew the statistics in figures 1 and 2 by accounting for fifty five of the eighty four female characters engaged in war work.

The anti-war novel *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* portrays the experience of female ambulance drivers and is based on contemporary diaries. The protagonist, Smithy, latterly joins the WAAC. This and the fact that many of the ancillary female characters fulfil a wide range of roles from lorry driver to canteen worker means that

⁴¹ Ward, *The War and Elizabeth*, 272.

⁴² May Sinclair, *The Tree of Heaven* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1918), 301.

⁴³ Laura Stempel Mumford, “May Sinclair’s *The Tree of Heaven*: The Vortex of Feminism, the Community of War,” in *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender and Literary Representation*, eds. Helen M. Cooper, Adrienne Auslander Munich and Susan Squier (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 178.

women's contribution to the war is remembered. One of the key characters, Tosh, states in a leaving speech that:

'...judging by a rumour that a certain hotel is proposing to erect a memorial tablet to the brave Englishwomen who have fallen there during these early days of the War, one feels she will do her bit not once, but many times. Of such stuff are the women of England made. The pioneer spirit that populates our colonies.'⁴⁴

It is interesting to note that the novelist herself worked in munitions and at the Air Ministry. Smith, like Sinclair, challenges the culturally endorsed gendering of war. The language used is incredibly powerful and illustrates that there were women that experienced some of the same horrors as the men. The portrayal of the female experience as being similar to that of the male is considered in section 5.2.2.

Irene Rathbone worked at YMCA camps in France and as a VAD in London. Her semi-autobiographical novel *We That Were Young* was published two years after *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* and also sets out the wide variety of women's war work, as well as emphasising the inevitability of their involvement. The main character, Joan Seddon, encourages her friend Betty Paley to join her in the French YMCA camp:

'...I feel that the time has passed for pottering at those various jobs – office-work, Belgians, bandage-rolling, etc. – which can quite well be done by older women; just as the time has passed for cursing the war for interrupting our peace-time pursuits. Already it has boshed the careers of most of the girls we know. Soon it will begin to take the lives of the men. Either we must stand aside and do nothing about it all – which doesn't seem possible – or else we must be used right up by it. So you see, darling, you must follow me out to Boulogne as soon as ever you can...'⁴⁵

Later in the novel, Joan states that she "...felt herself a cog in a huge machine, and it was a satisfactory feeling. You were part of something over which you had no control, which used you as it would, paid you, bound you, and divested you of all responsibility for your own actions, your own life..."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Helen Zenna Smith, *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1989), 107.

⁴⁵ Irene Rathbone, *We That Were Young* (London: Virago, 1988), 19.

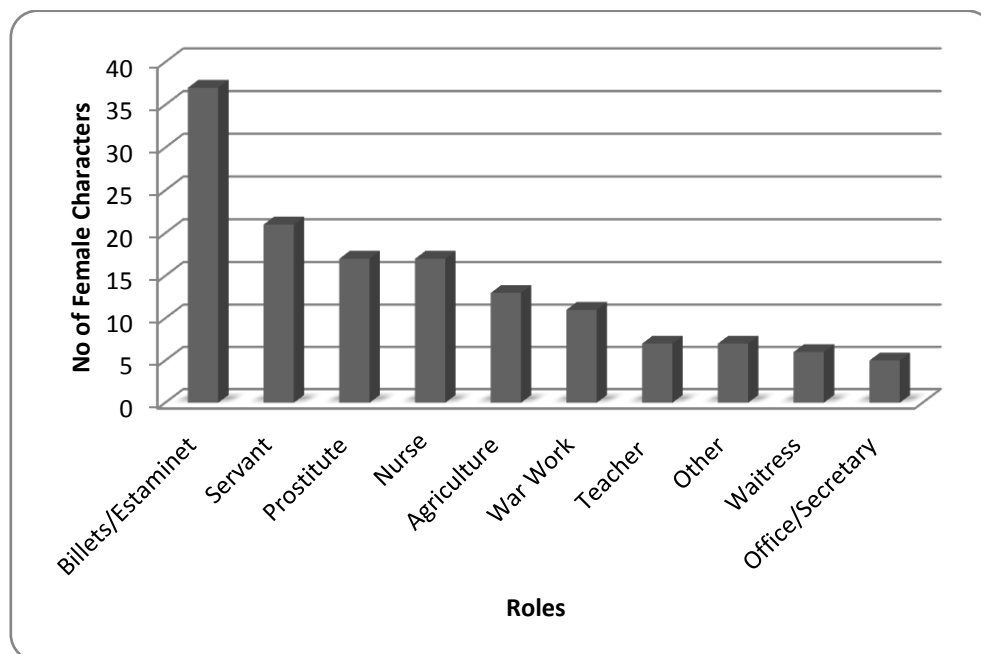
⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 211.

Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War and *We That Were Young* are the two key texts in terms of telling the story of women who not only took on war work on the Home Front but also overseas. Unlike their male counterparts, Smith and Rathbone would not see their work re-printed within their lifetimes. Both novels were not re-printed until 1988 by Virago. *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* was then re-printed in 1989 by the Feminist Press.

5.1.2 Male Novelists Pre-1939

Figure 3 shows that a minority of female characters in novels written by men during this period are engaged in war work.

Figure 3: Bar chart to show the number of female characters by role in WW1 novels by male novelists published pre-1939



The categories of war work are as follows:

Category of War Work	No of Female Characters
Misc (e.g. canteens)	3
Women's Army Aux Corps	2
Red Cross (Home Front)	1
Red Cross (France)	1
Ambulance Driver	1
Factory Worker	1
Telegram Girl	1
Volunteer Driver (Home Front)	1

Four of the novels analysed were published during the war: H.G. Wells' *Mr Britling Sees It Through* (1916), Arnold Bennett's *The Pretty Lady* (1918) and Ian Hay's *The First Hundred Thousand* (1916) and *Carrying on after the First Hundred Thousand* (1917).

Those by Ian Hay are combat novels. The novelist worked as an army recruiter and subsequently in the War Propoganda Bureau. The absence of any female characters challenging traditional roles is not unexpected. In the first of the novels, the men discuss women while waiting in the trenches before an attack. One of them is critical of those who have taken up nursing as VADs, stating that "...these girls will play the angel-of-mercy game for a week or two, and then jack up and confine their efforts to getting hold of a wounded officer and taking him to the theatre."⁴⁷ By the end of the second book, however, two of the key characters reflect on the war so far and reach a positive conclusion about the women at home:

'...I'm afraid I had hardly realised what our women were doing for us. Being on service all the time, one rather overlooks what is going on at home. But stopping a bullet puts one in the way of a good deal of inside information on that score...I love them all – the bus-conductors, the ticket-punchers, the lift-girls...and the window-cleaners, and the page-girls, and the railway portresses!⁴⁸

Mr Britling Sees It Through and *The Pretty Lady* are set on the Home Front. Although they account for only five female characters engaged in war work, both

⁴⁷ Ian Hay, *The First Hundred Thousand* (London, Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1916), 123.

⁴⁸ Ian Hay, *Carrying on after the First Hundred Thousand* (London, Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1917), 310.

novelists consider the changing gender roles precipitated by the war. In 1916, H.G. Wells uses the character of Mr Britling to raise the issue, stating:

'...The key, the heart, the nucleus and essence of every culture is its conception of the relations of men and women; and this new culture tends to diminish the specialisation of women as women, to let them out from the cell of the home into common citizenship with men. It's a new culture, still in process of development, which will make men more social and co-operative and women bolder, swifter, more responsible and less cloistered...This war...is killing young men by the million, altering the proportion of the sexes for a generation, bringing women into business and office and industry...flooding the world with strange doubts and novel ideas...'⁴⁹

Writing later in 1918, Arnold Bennett uses the character of Lady Queenie Paulle to illustrate the wide variety of philanthropic war work undertaken by women from the upper classes. The male protagonist, G.J., observes with sarcasm that she "had done practically everything that a patriotic girl could do for the war, except, perhaps, join a Voluntary Aid Detachment and wash dishes and scrub floors for fifteen hours a day and thirteen and a half days a fortnight."⁵⁰ However, it is pointed out that early on in the war she had travelled to France with two vehicles and staff to assist the Red Cross but had been shipped back by an RAMC colonel. Lady Queenie is an unusual character in that she is killed in an air raid on London after refusing to leave the roof from which she is watching a Zeppelin. Bennett also refers to the thousands of working class women who worked in the munitions factories and reminds readers of the dangers that they face:

'...Fancy a girl chained up for twelve hours every day to a thundering, whizzing, iron machine that never gets tired. The machine's just as fresh at six o'clock at night as it was at six o'clock in the morning, and just as anxious to maim her if she doesn't look out for herself—more anxious. The whole thing's still going on; they're at it now, this very minute...'⁵¹

The impact of class on the portrayal of women in WW1 novels is considered in section 5.4.4.

⁴⁹ H.G. Wells, *Mr Britling Sees it Through* (London: Cassell and Company, 1917), 257.

⁵⁰ Arnold E. Bennett, *The Pretty Lady* (Project Gutenberg, 2004), 86.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 192.

Four out of the eleven novels published after the war included female characters that carried out war work: Gilbert Frankau's *Peter Jackson, Cigar Merchant* (1919); Wilfrid Ewart's *Way of Revelation* (1921); V.M. Yeates' *Winged Victory* (1934) and C.S. Forester's *The General* (1936). Other than *Winged Victory*, they are set both at the Home Front and the Front. Three of the novelists saw active service but C.S. Forester was too young to serve.

One of the characters in Frankau's *Peter Jackson, Cigar Merchant* – Patricia – is a volunteer driver taking men on leave around London. Frankau, like Wells and Bennett, makes positive reference to women's war work. While on leave, the protagonist observes of a woman in his office that "[t]his type of managing woman, bred by the war, was new and very refreshing."⁵²

However, reference in the other three novels to women employed in war work is fleeting and any mention of women is generally critical. Yeates has his protagonist refer to a woman in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps as "...his blonde after-dinner WAAC..."⁵³

The remaining seven novels, all written by men who had seen active service, contain no female characters engaged in war work and nurses are rarely mentioned. Further, they either make no general reference to such women or do so in a critical way. In *Death of a Hero* (1929), Aldington's protagonist concludes that women felt that "...they [were] immortals; wherefore they tried to behave like houris with all available sheiks – hence the lure of 'war work' with its unbounded opportunities."⁵⁴

It would appear that as the decades after Armistice passed, male novelists forgot the war work carried out by women or deliberately chose not to make reference to it. This is in contrast to the 're-remembering' of such women by Irene Rathbone and Helen Smith in their 1930s novels. Cadogan and Craig comment that:

Vera Brittain...(in *Lady to Woman*, 1953), has referred to the failure of reputable authors to give adequate acknowledgement to the extent of women's involvement in the war effort. Of course writers like Edmund Blunden, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and David Jones were recording their personal

⁵² Gilbert Frankau, *Peter Jackson, Cigar Merchant* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1920), 238.

⁵³ V.M. Yeates, *Winged Victory* (St. Albans: Mayflower Books Ltd, 1975), 373.

⁵⁴ Richard Aldington, *Death of a Hero* (London: Sphere Books, 1968), 18.

experiences of combat; apart from the ubiquitous prostitutes, women hardly came into the picture.⁵⁵

It may be true that male novelists were writing semi-autobiographical novels but there are two considerations. Firstly, not all of the novels by male authors published pre-1939 analysed here are combat novels. Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero* and Ford Madox Ford's *No More Parades* (1925) and *A Man Could Stand Up* (1926) are also set on the Home Front as well as the Front. Secondly, men at the Front would have encountered women in the auxiliary services and at the camps.

However, the analysis must be balanced. Nowhere in the novels by women published pre-1939 is there a single reference to prostitutes, either on the Home Front or, in the case of Rathbone and Smith, in France. It would seem that women and men wrote of their own experiences of the war and from a gendered perspective. In Ford Madox Ford's *A Man Could Stand Up*, Mrs Wannop "...was writing two books at once...A novel...and a woman's history of the War. A history by a woman for women."⁵⁶ This suggests that Ford Madox Ford believed that women did have a role in the war but it was for them to write about it.

The next question to consider is whether a balanced history of both the male and female experience of WW1 has been written of within historical novels.

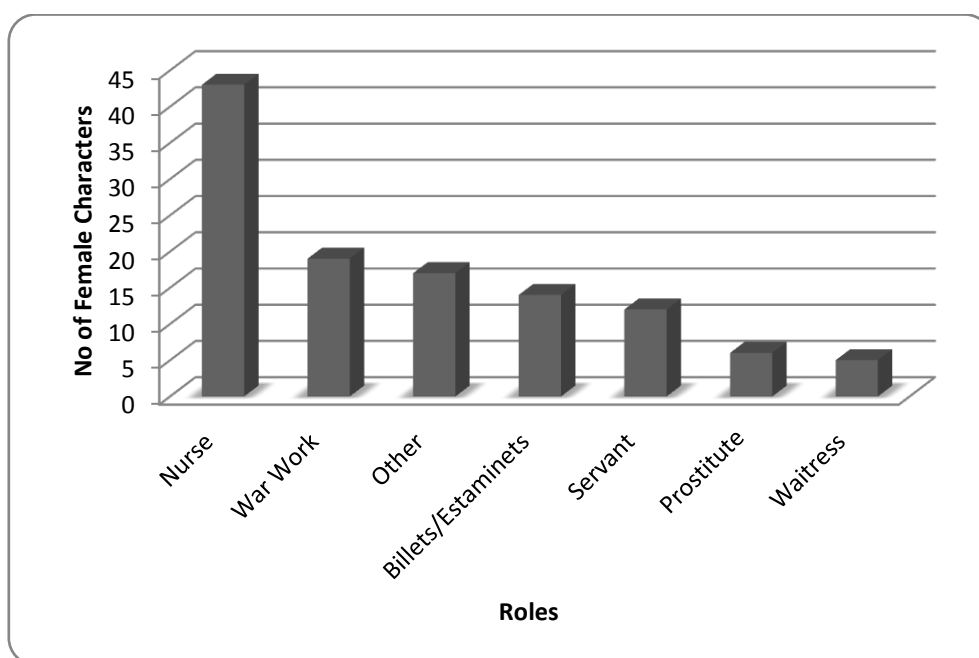
5.1.3 Female Novelists Post-1939

Figure 4 shows that more than a third of female characters in novels by women post-1939 are nurses. Very few of the characters are engaged in war work.

⁵⁵ Cadogan and Craig, *Women and Children First: The Fiction of Two World Wars*, 104.

⁵⁶ Ford Madox Ford, *Parade's End: Some Do Not...; No More Parades; A Man Could Stand Up; The Last Post*. (London: Penguin, 2002), 648.

Figure 4: Bar chart to show the number of female characters by role in WW1 novels by female novelists published post-1939



The categories of war work are as follows:

Category of War Work	No of Female Characters
Factory Worker	8
Misc (voluntary)	6
Ambulance Driver	2
Prison Wardress	2
Policewoman	1

This section refers to the analysis of seven novels by three novelists. Susan Hill's *Strange Meeting* was published forty years after *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* and *We That Were Young*. However, it focuses on the male experience of WW1 and there is no mention of women and their war work.

In the 1990s, Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy (1991 – 1995) also concerned the male experience. However, these novels account for the majority of the female characters in figure 4. One of the key female characters, Sarah, is a munitionette. In *Regeneration* (1991), the first of the trilogy, there are evocative descriptions of Sarah and her colleagues, for example:

The women sat at small tables, each table forming a pool of light under a low-hanging bulb. Apart from the work surfaces, the room was badly lit and so vast that its far end disappeared into shadow. All the women were yellow-skinned, and all, whatever their

colouring, had a frizz of ginger hair peeping out from under the green cap. We don't look human, Sarah thought, not knowing whether to be dismayed or amused. They looked like machines, whose sole function was to make other machines.⁵⁷

Barker acknowledges the temporary change that the war had on women. In the *Eye in the Door* (1993), the pacifist ex-suffragist Hetty tells the male protagonist – Prior – about one of her friends: “[s]hort hair, breeches, driving an ambulance, all things she'd never've been allowed to do in a million years. And suddenly she grabbed hold of me and she said, 'Hettie, for women, this is the first day in the history of the world.'”⁵⁸ Barker does consider women's experience of the war but the trilogy is about and therefore through the eyes of men. Barker's later WW1 novels, *Life Class* (2007) and *Toby's Room* (2012), are even less concerned with women and their war work, other than a brief mention of nurses in France. Unlike the *Regeneration* trilogy, these novels focus on the lives of the middle classes and this has had an impact on what story is told.

Louisa Young's *My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You* (2011) tells its story from both the male and female point of view but the key female characters are middle class. One of these, Julia Locke, had:

...tried more public-spirited ways of helping out... [but] She couldn't stick it. 'The girls are terribly coarse and vulgar, and they don't like me, and Peter wouldn't want me all chemical and yellow.' She couldn't be a VAD because 'Well, my hands...'⁵⁹

It is her sister, Rose, who becomes a nurse. Nursing on the Home Front is the dominant mode of female employment in this novel and in the other novels in this category.

There are no historical novels by women that focus solely on women and war work. For that, we remain reliant on *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* and *We That Were Young*.

⁵⁷ Pat Barker, *Regeneration* (London: Penguin, 2008), 201.

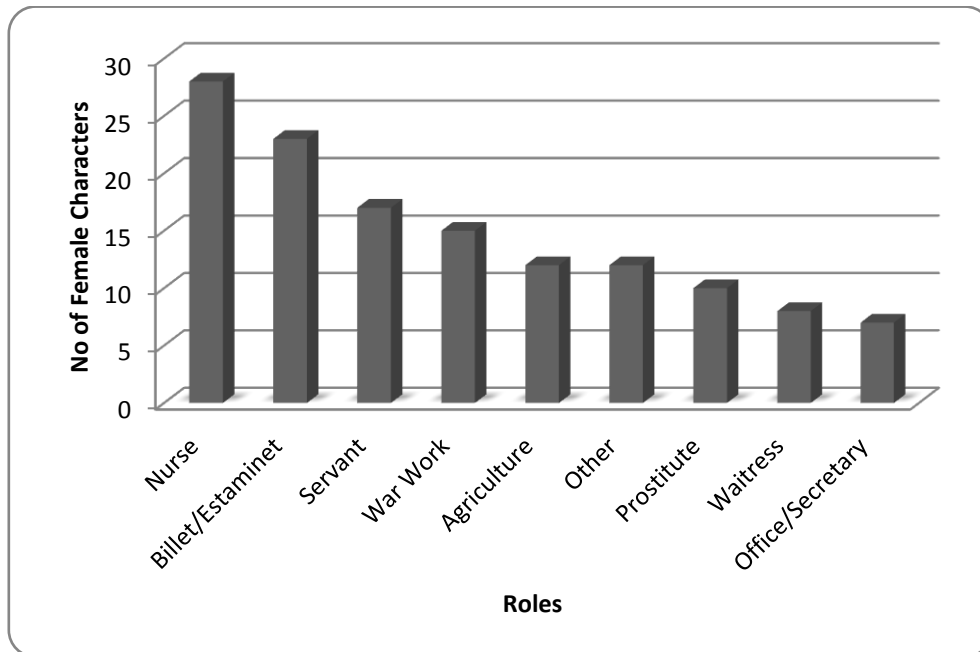
⁵⁸ Pat Barker, *The Eye in the Door* (London: Penguin, 2008), 101.

⁵⁹ Louisa Young, *My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You* (London: Harper, 2012), 83.

5.1.4 Male Novelists Post-1939

Figure 5 shows that the majority of the female characters in novels by men during this period are nurses or work in billets and estaminets.

Figure 5: Bar chart to show the number of female characters by role in WW1 novels by male novelists published post-1939



The categories of war work are as follows:

Category of War Work	No of Female Characters
Misc (voluntary)	7
Canteen Worker (France)	2
Bus conductress	2
Women's Legion	1
Policewoman	1
Barge Worker	1
Factory Worker	1

During the 1950s, four of Henry Williamson's *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* novels set in WW1 were published: *How Dear is Life* (1954); *A Fox Under My Cloak* (1955); *The Golden Virgin* (1957); and *Love and the Loveless* (1958). Williamson served throughout WW1 and his novels are set both at the Front and the Home Front. Although the majority of the female characters in figure 5 are attributable to him, they each receive a brief mention: often one line. However Williamson, in the

same way as the male and female novelists pre-1939, often reflects on the role of women in war. On the subject of munitionettes, his male protagonist observes that:

...but for the war they would now be white-faced girls, subdued, probably raped before adolescence, driven to inner hopelessness, or the streets; lost to love in unawakened homes. Now the war had brought, under its sacrifices, some kind of freedom, and hope for the future.⁶⁰

This optimism stretches to women in the armed services, when the male protagonist encourages his friend to join the WAAC:

'I think you're wise to join up. The war won't last forever, and it's a tremendous chance to widen one's ideas of things. You might go to India, or France, or Gibraltar – anywhere! The friends you might make! Yes, Nina, you get out of the rut! That's my advice.'⁶¹

Two of the novels analysed here were published in the 1960s: John Harris's *Covenant with Death* (1961) and Stuart Cloete's *How Young They Died* (1969). Stuart Cloete served in the war but in his novel set at both the Front and Home Front, there is no reference to women and their war work. Harris goes a little further, in that the male protagonist's landlady takes up work in a factory. Again, this warrants only a few lines.

Derek Robinson's engaging combat novel *Goshawk Squadron* (1971) details the experiences of men in the Royal Flying Corps. There are few women in the novel: two canteen workers and two nurses. Robinson does much to highlight the important role that these women played in the area not far from the frontline. Unlike the brief mention received by other characters in novels by men post-1939, these women lift from the page as rounded, fictional characters. The result is a combat novel that balances the experiences of both men and women. Indeed, the male protagonist wonders of his partner Margery, a nurse in France, whether "he could do her dreadful job; or rather, how long he could stand it if he ever tried it."⁶² I believe that *Goshawk Squadron* is the closest any WW1 historical novel gets to the portrayal of women war workers behind the frontlines.

⁶⁰ Henry Williamson, *Love and the Loveless* (Bath: Cedric Chivers, 1974), 176.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, 184.

⁶² Derek Robinson, *Goshawk Squadron* (London: Constable and Robinson, 2005), 125.

In contrast, Sebastian Faulks's *Birdsong* (1994) set on and behind the lines in France, makes no reference to women engaged in war work. Further, there is no reflection by any character on the issue.

5.1.5 French and Belgian Women

French and Belgian women feature little in novels by women published in Britain pre-1939 other than as refugees. This is expected as the majority of the novels are set on the Home Front. In *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War*, however, no reference is made to the indigenous population and in *We That Were Young* a handful of French women warrant a line each. Cicely Hamilton's *William - An Englishman* (1919) follows William and Griselda Tully before and after the outbreak of war. They are in Belgium on honeymoon when war is declared. After Griselda is raped and dies, William flees to Paris and joins up. Even in this novel, there is very little reference to the women of France and Belgium.

There are an equal number of French and Belgian women in the novels by female novelists post-1939 as in those pre-1939. The difference is that the majority of these novels have an element set overseas. *Strange Meeting*, which focuses on the male experience of WW1, makes reference in just one line to a woman working in an estaminet. In *Life Class*, Elinor Brooke goes to Belgium to visit her lover (which is not historically accurate) and encounters a handful of women of whom very little is made.

The greatest incidence of French and Belgian women is in the novels by men published pre-1939. This is expected as the majority of these novels are set at the Front. The women, mainly billet owners, prostitutes, servants and farm workers, are mentioned briefly and rarely merit a name. The exception is the unique *The Spanish Farm Trilogy* (1927) by R.H. Mottram. It comprises three novels: *The Spanish Farm* (1924), *Sixty-Four, Ninety-Four* (1925) and *The Crime at Vanderlydens* (1926) which were subsequently published in one volume. Each novel tells the same story but through the eyes of a different character. One of these is the French farmer Madeline Vanderlynden. I consider that no other WW1 novel in the English language, either of the period or historical, has represented a French woman in her country so comprehensively or with such respect. As part of his duties during the war, Mottram had a significant involvement with administration just behind the line

and often worked as a translator during disputes with civilians.⁶³ His experiences clearly influenced his subsequent semi-autobiographical novels.

Post-1939, male novelists include a significant number of French and Belgian female characters, particularly within combat novels. Cloete describes a world fringed by women on its outer edges and that:

... men, going up the line, passed through these strange zones of grandmothers, widows and husbandless wives waiting for news, at once eager and fearful, of virgins and children and old broken men into the zone of *vin rouge*, omelettes, whores and harpies, and on towards the world of young men and guns.⁶⁴

Faulks's *Birdsong* focuses in detail on the impact of WW1 on two French women: Isabelle and Jeanne Fourmentier. Similarly to *The Spanish Farm Trilogy*, this is an exception to the rule.

By 1918, women held more than forty percent of manufacturing jobs in France.⁶⁵ However, outside of the towns and cities, women continued to work the land as they had before the war. Further, the French government awarded generous separation allowances to wives of serving soldiers. This was a disincentive to leave their farms and work in the factories. None of the French and Belgian women in the forty novels analysed were engaged in employment traditionally viewed as male. The exception is a handful of women who took on the running of farms just behind the frontlines, one of which is Madeline Vanderlynden. The following section considers the way in which the British soldiers viewed such women, as well as their British counterparts.

5.2 A Woman's Place

Section 5.1 is a survey of female characters in WW1 novels who are engaged in war work. But how are these women portrayed? It is acknowledged that this is dependent on the story, plot and narrative of each novel but this section considers whether any categories are evident across the canon.

⁶³ Michael Garrety, "Love and War: R.H. Mottram, *The Spanish Farm* and Ernest Hemingway *A Farewell to Arms*," in *The First World War in Fiction*, ed. Holger Klein, (London, Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1978), 12.

⁶⁴ Stuart Cloete, *How Young They Died* (London: The Book Society, 1969), 92.

⁶⁵ Karen Zeinert, *Those Extraordinary Women of World War 1* (Connecticut: Twenty-First Century Books, 2002), 75.

5.2.1 Gender Reversal

Fuchs refers to “the radical transition that wars in patriarchal societies tend to bring about in the status of women, changing them overnight from passive dependents to active participants in the economy and in leadership roles on both the civilian and military fronts.”⁶⁶ WW1 was the first war in the Western world in which women moved from the private to the public sphere in such significant numbers. In addition, Fuchs notes that “[w]hile wars are likely to empower the ‘weak’ sex, they also tend to emasculate the ‘strong’ sex.”⁶⁷ At the beginning of WW1, British society remained wedded to the ideals of chivalry, espoused by their Victorian forbears. However, these ideals were soon challenged by the industrial nature of WW1. Maslen has echoed Fuchs, observing that “masculinities were also inevitably under debate after the traumas of first one and then two world wars; the old idea of a man as warrior had proved hollow...”⁶⁸

I have found that the concept of gender reversal is barely evident in novels of WW1 published pre-1939 and unsurprisingly is only referred to in novels by women. In Rose Macaulay’s *Non-Combatants and Others*, Alix Sandomir’s desire to support the war effort is contrasted by two male characters – Sidney Vinney and Nicholas Sandomir – who do not. However, at the end of the novel, Alix Sandomir puts her energies into the peace movement. As the novel was published after the introduction of conscription, the characters of Sidney and Nicholas are not used to shame men of the time.

In May Sinclair’s *The Tree of Heaven*, Dorothy Harrison’s desire to go to the Front is contrasted by her brother Michael. Smith observes that “[t]he feminine aspects of Michael’s character move to the forefront to reject the ‘masculine’ militarism which threatens to engulf him at the cost of his art, creating what he perceives to be a new kind of heroism, the heroism of the non-combatant...”⁶⁹ However, on the death of his brother, Michael joins up and admits to himself that it had been fear that had prevented him from doing so earlier.

⁶⁶ Esther Fuchs, “Contemporary Israeli Fiction,” in *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender and Literary Representation*, eds. Helen M. Cooper, Adrienne Auslander Munich and Susan Squier (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 270.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Elizabeth Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women’s Fiction, 1928 - 1968* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 18.

⁶⁹ Smith, *The Second Battlefield: Women, Modernism and the First World War*, 139.

Novels published during the war did not shy away from presenting strong female characters. However, I consider that it would have been a step too far to explore gender reversal thereby undermining social morale and causing offence. It is the historical novel that overtly explores the concept. In *How Young They Died*, Stuart Cloete considers how the maternal role of female nurse could reduce a man to a childlike state. The protagonist, Jim Hilton, describes being washed by a nurse as "...[i]mpersonal, like changing a baby. A woman washing his privates. No one had done that since he was three years old. It didn't embarrass him because she wasn't a woman. Not in that sense. Not nubile."⁷⁰ The character tries to distance himself from the nurse in order to make the situation more acceptable. Jim visits Mona, a prostitute with whom he has a relationship, when he returns to London. After he rapes her, Mona treats him as a baby and excuses his actions as the result of a breakdown. She constantly refers to him as her baby and washes him in a way that is reminiscent of the nurse: "[s]he wiped under his arms, his loins, and dried him. A baby, helpless. There was something in women that made them like men being helpless. A kind of revenge for the way they dominated them."⁷¹

Derek Robinson in *Goshawk Squadron* also uses a nurse in order to highlight gender reversal, describing Margery as a slaughterhouse attendant who "...no longer saw them as men but as damaged stock..."⁷².

It is Pat Barker, in her *Regeneration* trilogy, published in the 1990s, who extensively examines the concept. She widens the context beyond nursing to include women's war work. When Billy Prior meets Sarah Lumb, the munitionette, he doesn't:

...know what to make of her, but then he was out of touch with women. They seemed to have changed so much during the war, to have expanded in all kinds of ways, whereas men over the same period had shrunk into a smaller and smaller space."⁷³

In *The Eye in the Door*, Prior's mother tells him that his father believes that in the future "[t]he missus'll be going to work, and the man'll be sat at home minding the bairn."⁷⁴ The reversal of gender is not referred to on occasion but is a key theme of

⁷⁰ Cloete, *How Young They Died*, 190.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 221.

⁷² Robinson, *Goshawk Squadron*, 65.

⁷³ Barker, *Regeneration*, 90.

⁷⁴ Barker, *The Eye in the Door*, 93.

the trilogy. Barker not only considers it in relation to the response to women's war work but also in terms of wars' effect on male behaviour. The Front is described as a place of domesticity where officers have maternal feelings towards their men. Dr Rivers, a character based on the actual neurologist, observes that "[t]he war that had promised so much in the way of 'manly' activity had actually delivered 'feminine' passivity, and on a scale that their mothers and sisters had scarcely known."⁷⁵ Barker considers the emasculating effects of war, particularly the resulting physical and mental illnesses that are seen to weaken men. When Prior first meets the munitionette Sarah Lumb, he reflects on the fact that she is making the bombs that will eventually cause harm to men.⁷⁶

The historical novelist is in a position to examine social change at a safe distance from events but there remains a need to be sensitive to memory. Brannigan observes that:

...the [*Regeneration*] trilogy represents the war as functioning as a kind of ideological chiasmus, at least in terms of gender ideologies, in which the masculine is feminised, and the feminine masculinised, but Barker's novels are too canny politically to allow this transformation to appear in any sense emancipator or ideal. The transgression of gender and sexual codes is usually shown to be debilitating rather than emancipator.⁷⁷

The role of the historical novelist is considered in more detail in section 6.3.

5.2.2 Equals

In 1916, Rebecca West wrote a journal article for the *Daily Chronicle* entitled "The Cordite Makers", in which she stated "[su]rely, never before in modern history can women have lived a life so completely parallel to that of the regular Army. The girls who take up this work sacrifice almost as much as men who enlist."⁷⁸ She goes on to highlight the dangers involved and that they are at greater risk than soldiers on home defence. Indeed, approximately two hundred women died in munitions factories but their deaths went unreported because of the impact on morale.

⁷⁵ Barker, *Regeneration*, 107.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁷⁷ John Brannigan, *Pat Barker* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 99.

⁷⁸ Margaret R. Higonnet, ed., *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War 1* (London: Plume, 1999), 125.

There was strong opposition in Britain to women actually joining the military. Goldman et al describe a consensus at this time whereby women who took on war work were acceptable but not those who engaged in the 'real' work or role of men. They go on to state that this was accepted by women on the Home Front but those working near the frontline, for example ambulance drivers, WAAC and nurses did not consider themselves substitutes for men.⁷⁹ In France, nine WAAC and several nurses died in service as a result of enemy attack.

I have found that all of the novels by women published pre-1939 promote women's equality with men in terms of asserting the fact that women were one half of a society that was at war. Exploring equality was clearly more palatable than gender reversal. The novels published during the war and in the 1920s do not suggest that women's experience is equal to that of men in combat but express their desire to do what they can to assist the war effort. The examples are too numerous to include here.

The female characters also express frustration at not being able to go to the Front. In *The War Workers*, Charmion's parents agree that "[i]f she'd been a boy she would be in the trenches now..."⁸⁰ This sentiment is echoed in *The Tree of Heaven*, where Dorothy's parents believe that "...she'd be in the trenches now if she had her way."⁸¹ Support of the war and the frustration of being non-combatants are explored further in section 5.4.2.

These female novelists created a wartime identity for women that recognised their valuable contribution to the war effort, as well as their patriotism. They did not, however, consider equality beyond the context of the war.

In 1930, Helen Smith's *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* went a great deal further and portrayed a female experience of the war that was equal to that of men at the Front. She shows that although women were not in the combat zone, female ambulance drivers were exposed to the immediate aftermath. The language used to describe the male casualties is extremely graphic and leaves little to the imagination. It is more than comparable to the language used by her male counterparts in their combat novels. Smith's ambulance drivers are also subject to the privations of military living conditions and to air raids. The latter is described in detail when the

⁷⁹ Goldman et al., *Women Writers and the Great War*, 16.

⁸⁰ Delafield, *The War Workers*, 12.

⁸¹ Sinclair, *The Tree of Heaven*, 324.

protagonist, Smithy, is part of a convoy taking casualties from the railway station to the hospital. Her friend, Tosh, is hit by a bomb and dies in front of her: "Tosh lies in my arms dead, killed by a splinter of a bomb. Tosh the brave, the splendid, the great-hearted. Tosh is dead."⁸² Smith states that *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* "...shows how the physical activity of the war enforced the destruction of conventional gender roles despite the attempts to maintain them in the public eye."⁸³ In the context of this as an anti-war novel, Smith further argues that "Women's service is not as heroic, but as *unheroic* as men's. Both are victims of a militarist culture."⁸⁴

Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War is also different to its predecessors in that the future of these women after the war is considered. Smithy asks herself "[w]hat is to happen to women like me when this war ends...if it ever ends. I am twenty-one years of age, yet I know nothing of life but death, fear, blood, and the sentimentality that glorifies these things in the name of patriotism."⁸⁵ The paradox of woman as war worker and traditional home maker both during and after the war is explored in section 5.4.1.

In *We That Were Young*, Joan Seddon directly compares herself to a soldier in death, as well as in life, and believes that it would be "[q]uite a thing really to pop off – equal up the sexes a bit."⁸⁶

Male novelists writing prior to 1939 are less keen to explore women's equal exposure to the war. Indeed, they perpetuate an image of a subservient woman that is waiting at home for them. Most men believed that they were fighting for the women and children at home and any idea of those women challenging the status quo was anathema. In *Peter Jackson, Cigar Merchant*, the protagonist's wife views *Sunflowers*, their home in England, as "...the little house she, Patricia, would make 'home' for her man against his return from the wars."⁸⁷ Later, she tells him "...I'm your wife, your slave, your mistress..."⁸⁸

⁸² Smith, *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War*, 160.

⁸³ Smith, *The Second Battlefield: Women, Modernism and the First World War*, 114.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 109.

⁸⁵ Smith, *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War*, 164.

⁸⁶ Rathbone, *We That Were Young*, 239.

⁸⁷ Frankau, *Peter Jackson, Cigar Merchant*, 320.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 349.

It is only H.G. Wells in *Mr Britling Sees It Through*, who considers the potential for equality as a result of WW1 (please refer to section 5.1.2). This is symptomatic of Wells's interest in socialism, feminism and sexual politics.

In terms of historical novels by women, Pat Barker – as already discussed - has focussed on gender reversal. Louisa Young in *My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You*, makes overt reference to the changes in women's standing resulting from WW1:

Rose kept a mental list of the tiny changes the war was making, which no one was bothering to record because of the hugeness of everything:

- 1) That the shame of her not being married was dissolving and disappearing as if it had never existed.
- 2) That she was no longer required to make herself available as a potential wife, and she was liberated from the discomforts, hypocrisies and embarrassments which that caused.
- 3) *Ambition*. The fact that she could have it all. Just that.⁸⁹

This differs from novels pre-1939 in that Rose is considering her role not just in relation to the war but in the wider social context. Young also draws a comparison between Julia's 'suffering' and that of men at the frontline. She wakes every morning and misses her husband "with a hunger for things to be right just as strong, desperate and justified as that of any scared soldier, any exhausted ambulance driver, any battle-weary medic."⁹⁰ She also compares her body during childbirth by stating it was "ripped like a soldier's."⁹¹ I believe that these are only acceptable comparisons if considered from Julia's rather self-centred point of view.

Male historical novelists, like their forbears, do not write characters that consider women as equals. The exception is Derek Robinson's *Goshawk Squadron*. Section 5.1.4 has already referred to the way in which the male and female characters in his novel share equally in the experience of life just behind the frontline. The only other reference to equality, although fleeting, is in John Harris's *Covenant with Death* when Helen Haddo states that:

'This is a time of emancipation, and flat caps are a symbol of it. Perhaps I can learn shorthand or typing. They'll be plenty of jobs flying about. I think I'll go and make screws or battleships or something...How wonderful it'll be! When you're earning a bob a day, and I'm

⁸⁹ Young, *My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You*, 112.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 85.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, 175.

driving a bus, I'll be able to ask if I can take *you* out. If anything leads to equality, that ought.'⁹²

Interestingly, male historical novelists do not emphasise the subservient role of the women at home for whom the men are fighting.

In a number of novels both pre and post-1939, equality is taken further to show that it is not so much a case of men versus women but of those who are willing to contribute to the war effort versus those who are not. Tate observes that “[t]he crucial difference between subjects in an industrial war is located less in sexual difference than in the distinction between combatants and civilians...”⁹³ Although British women in WW1 were not combatants, they were actively engaged in war work, including in the armed services.

I consider that *Non-Combatants and Others* is an example of this concept. The novel is complex in that there are both strong female characters and weak male characters. The protagonist, Alix Sandomir, is initially ambivalent towards the war but then wants to actively contribute to it. It is not only her gender which prevents her but her lameness. Parallels are drawn between both her lameness and anxiety and the characters of John and Paul: soldiers who suffer both physical and mental injuries. Cohen states that “...Macaulay uses Alix’s lameness to unsettle the distinctions between soldier and civilian, wounded and unwounded, male and female war experience, and ultimately to deconstruct the very notion of noncombatancy itself.”⁹⁴

In a number of novels by female authors, both pre and post-1939, female characters judge each other’s commitment to the war effort. In *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War*, when considering the WAAC, Smithy observes that “[w]e’re each releasing men to fight, don’t forget...each of us doing his bit for the country...The slackers at home ought to see us...Good job they’ve started tribunals for the men hanging back...pity they haven’t got them for women too...”⁹⁵

Louisa Young’s protagonist in *My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You*, is equally judgemental of herself:

⁹² John Harris, *Covenant with Death* (London: Arrow Books, 1980), 59.

⁹³ Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 138.

⁹⁴ Cohen, *Remapping the Home Front: Locating Citizenship in British Women’s Great War Fiction*, 31.

⁹⁵ Smith, *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War*, 220.

Julia was beginning to see, intellectually, that her own role – pretty, useless, adorable – had been rendered valueless by the war. She half knew it. She half knew that other women found her pathetic, banal...She had felt the ground she was bred for slipping from beneath her feet during the course of the war, and she had seen other women finding new kinds of women to be – women who had not, before the war, been so totally bred for the altar of adorability and marriage.⁹⁶

5.2.3 Homosexuality, Androgeny and Asexuality

Buck states that “[t]he suffrage movement and artistic movements such as aestheticism, with their associated images of overly masculine women and effete men, were alike blamed for the degeneration of pre-war society.”⁹⁷ WW1 offered an opportunity to re-evaluate gender roles and sexual orientation but it was not until the 1920s that lesbianism began to form part of a public discourse.

Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) has not been included in the analytical process for this thesis, as WW1 is a small part of its wider story. However, it did use WW1 to explore both the private and public role of lesbians. The female protagonist, Stephen Gordon, an ambulance driver behind the frontline, comments:

‘Well, here I am, will you take me or leave me?’ And England had taken her, asking no questions – she was strong and efficient, she could fill a man’s place, she could organise too, given the scope for her talent. England had said: ‘Thank you very much. You’re just what we happen to want...at the moment.’⁹⁸

The Well of Loneliness was published in 1928 but was banned in the United Kingdom after it was the subject of an obscenity trial. It was not until 1949 that it was finally published in the United Kingdom without legal challenge.

Interestingly, *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War*, published in 1928, includes reference to lesbianism. However, the women in question - Skinny and Frost - are vilified by their colleagues and forced to leave France. Ironically, the main culprit is Tosh: a masculine woman who is described as Amazonian and unsexed and cuts off her hair in the first chapter. The protagonist, Smithy, thinks briefly about cutting her own hair but decides “[n]o, I had better not emulate Tosh. It would definitely put the

⁹⁶ Young, *My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You*, 320.

⁹⁷ Claire Buck, “British Women’s Writing of the Great War,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War*, ed. Vincent Sherry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 102.

⁹⁸ Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (London: Virago, 1994), 274.

tin lid on the womanliness.”⁹⁹ Tosh’s character was presumably acceptable in 1928 because not only does she distance herself from the lesbian characters of Frost and Skinny, she stands for “an acceptable cross-dressing still anchored in conventions specific to her class and to the genre of the girl’s school story.”¹⁰⁰

I have found that lesbianism or overtly masculine women are not included within novels by male authors either pre or post-1939. As raised in section 5.2.2, many men were concerned with fighting for their wives and families at home. The possibility that women may encroach into male roles on the Home Front was problematic but the prospect of women joining the armed services or working overseas was considerably worse. These women were often associated with masculinity and lesbianism. However, this does not mean that all lesbians were pro-war and took on male roles. It was not only men who disliked and feared them but also women. Lesbianism has also been overlooked in the historical novels of WW1 by women. Pat Barker, however, considers homosexual men in the *Regeneration* trilogy.

Androgyny and asexuality are evident in novels or novel sections that are set at and just behind the frontline. Mary Borden used the term the Forbidden Zone to describe this geographical area when, in 1929, she published an account of her experiences as a nurse in France.¹⁰¹ The women in these zones were French and Belgian farm workers and allied nurses and ambulance drivers. In the novels analysed here, the allied women are not seen as sexual beings. In *How Young They Died*, the male protagonist refers to the nurses as “[i]ron women, inured to suffering and death.”¹⁰² He describes the matron as:

...a regular army nurse, bemedalled from other wars: South Africa, Egypt, North-West Frontier. An expert on death. She knew the sound of his wings. A big, raw-boned woman, stayed with steel, girdled, her milkless breasts flat with efficiency; no mother’s milk had ever swelled them, no milk of human kindness. Dry, flat dugs. The big bitch.¹⁰³

It is this matron who tells one of her nurses to “...[f]orget you’re a woman until you take off your uniform. That’s when you’re a woman.”¹⁰⁴ In terms of women in the

⁹⁹ Smith, *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War*, 16.

¹⁰⁰ Buck, “British Women’s Writing of the Great War,” 106.

¹⁰¹ Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone: A Nurse’s Impressions of the First World War* (London: Heineman, 1929).

¹⁰² Cloete, *How Young They Died*, 190.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, 191.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

male role of ambulance drivers, Smithy in *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* also considers sexual attraction from a woman's point of view:

She saw herself in a depot, the cynosure of innumerable admiring male eyes. It seems such a waste of a well-cut uniform to be in a place where the men are too wounded or too harassed to regard women other than cogs in the great machinery, and the women are too worn out to care whether they do or not.¹⁰⁵

In an interesting twist, Henry Williamson in both *The Golden Virgin* and *Love and the Loveless*, uses female impersonators at concert parties to stir sexual feelings within the male soldiers rather than employing nurses or female ambulance drivers: “[e]ach man in the audience dwelt upon the plaits, golden curls and rouged faces...Each herded man in the audience was fascinated, filled with longing, stirred by lust...”¹⁰⁶

5.3 Through the Eyes Of...

During WW1, there was a varied response to women in war work, the majority of whom were from the working classes. Braybon includes the following: positive stories in newspapers used as propaganda; trade union view of them as competitors; feminists using them as an example to push for the vote; and criticism based on their roles of mothers and perceived responsibility for the health of the country.¹⁰⁷

The previous sections have set out the scope and scale of women's war work in WW1 novels and considered the variety of ways in which women who challenge traditional binarisms are placed within narrative in relation to men. This section looks at how these women are viewed by male and female characters.

Annexes A to F set out, along a geographical continuum from the Home Front to the Front, the positive and negative nouns used to describe women. This provides for a comparison between male and female novelists published pre and post-1939. Annex A reveals that male novelists pre-1939 employed a considerable range of negative nouns for women on the Home Front. The majority are contained within novels published after the war. This is balanced by an equally long list of positive

¹⁰⁵ Smith, *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War*, 25.

¹⁰⁶ Henry Williamson, *The Golden Virgin* (London: Macdonald and Co., 1966), 217.

¹⁰⁷ Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War: the British Experience*, 65-154.

terms. Annex B also shows that women overseas are seen in a positive light, even those in estaminets and brothels. Annex C shows that female novelists of the same period are much kinder towards their fellow women. The negative language regarding women overseas is attributable to one novel – *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War*. Annexes D and E reveal that for male historical novelists, the pattern of distribution is broadly the same as for their male counterparts pre-1939 but the range of language is not as broad and there is less negativity towards women overseas. The female historical novelists in Annex F have a very limited range of language, both positive and negative.

It is accepted that there are many variables here, not the least of which is style. However, it is intended to provide an overview and the next section explores the attitudes towards women and their war work in more detail.

5.3.1 Through the Eyes of Men

Historians and critics have noted that during WW1, many men despised civilians on the Home Front because of the relative safety in which they lived and their lack of exposure to the horrors of combat. Fussell quotes Phillip Gibbs, an official British war reporter, as follows: “[t]hey hated the smiling women in the streets. They loathed the old men...They desired that profiteers should die by poison-gas. They prayed God to get the Germans to send Zeppelins to England – to make the people know what war meant.”¹⁰⁸

Gilbert¹⁰⁹ and Logenbach¹¹⁰ argue that the move of women from the private to the public sphere to take on roles considered as male, added to this feeling of resentment. Men were concerned that the substitution of women in men’s roles would result in de-skilling and lower wages and that their jobs would not be there for them when they returned home.

The male view of women behind the lines was more positive. In terms of the French and Belgian women, Tylee refers to Winter’s observation that “...[t]hey [soldiers] yearned for their old life, where they could be their real selves. This was the precious experience which French civilian life offered...what estaminet and

¹⁰⁸ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, New York, London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 86.

¹⁰⁹ James Longenbach, “The Women and Men of 1914,” in *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender and Literary Representation*, eds. Helen M. Cooper, Adrienne Auslander Munich and Susan Squier (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 101.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, 114.

cottage offered men was beyond price.”¹¹¹ As set out in section 5.2.3, nurses and ambulance drivers within this zone were not seen as sexual beings. They were providers of care and compassion and Tylee argues that this, in addition to the existence of local women, provided a regular domestic existence for the soldiers when they left the trenches.

This section considers how the male view of women, particularly those challenging traditional binarisms, are portrayed in WW1 novels. This has already been touched on to an extent in the previous sections on gender reversal and equals.

It is apparent that female novelists pre-1939 were very aware of how men viewed women during WW1. In some cases, their male characters make reference to changes in their behaviour, for example drunkenness or draw unfavourable attention to the luxury in which they live in comparison to their own lives in the trenches. The majority of the negativity is around female characters who have taken on war work. Criticism from male characters extends to those women who have taken on roles overseas. In *The Tree of Heaven*, Frank Drayton asks Dorothy to give up her ambulance driving because it would affect his ability to fight. In *We That Were Young*, the head of the YMCA in Boulogne – Mr Goodge – observes that many of the men resent the intrusion of women into the camps.

Mrs Humphrey Ward makes a concerted effort to provide a balance by making many of her male characters express their admiration for women who took on the roles of men. This occurs in *Missing* (1916), *The War and Elizabeth* and *Harvest* (1920) and the examples are too numerous to detail here. In using her novels to encourage women to contribute to the war effort, she would not have wanted her female readers to have any doubts as to the validity of taking on war work. Mrs Humphrey Ward also praises French women via a male character: “[h]ow these French women work! Our men are always helping them...”¹¹²

Irene Rathbone uses male characters in *We That Were Young* to emphasise the valuable contribution of women in the French camps. This is aligned with Tylee’s “regular domestic existence.” Rathbone’s soldiers state “how much the soldiers loved to hear the voice of an English lady again after months of trench-life...”¹¹³ and that

¹¹¹ Tylee, *The Great War and Women’s Consciousness*, 234.

¹¹² Mrs Humphrey Ward, *Missing* (Cirencester: The Echo Library, 2005), 60.

¹¹³ Rathbone, *We That Were Young*, 67.

they “...shouldn’t for a moment imagine that [Mr Roscoe] underrates your value to the men – it’s probably greater than you have any idea of.”¹¹⁴

I have found that in the novels by men published during the war, there is little consideration of women and war work. Where it does exist, however, there is a very low level of negativity. In *The First Hundred Thousand*, a soldier states with reference to nurses that “[w]omen in war-time are best left at home.”¹¹⁵ At the end of *Carrying on after the First Hundred Thousand*, when sitting in the Britannia Club, a returning soldier observes that “...those idyllic days are gone. So is the waiter. You may ring, but all that will materialise is a self-righteous little girl, in brass buttons, who will shake her head reprovably...”¹¹⁶ However, as noted in sections 6.1.2 and 6.2.2, all four of the novels by men published during the war (H.G. Wells, Ian Hay and Arnold Bennett) also express admiration for such women.

Of those novels published after the war, a number are very antagonistic towards women: *No More Parades*, *A Man Could Stand Up*, *Death of a Hero*, *Winged Victory* and *The General*. This negativity is not aimed specifically at women and their war work but rather women in general. Aldington’s *Death of a Hero* is the most extreme, in which George Winterbourne comments that “[h]e said the War had induced in me a peculiar resentment against women – which was probably true.”¹¹⁷ Aldington vilifies those women who “were at a safe distance” who “did not quite realise the strain under which he was living.”¹¹⁸

As discussed, the novels by men published during the war did express a level of positivity towards women and their war work. Ian Hay also praises the women of France:

...we arrive at the keystone of the whole fabric – Madame herself. She is one of the most wonderful women in the world. Consider. Her husband and her eldest son are away – fighting...During their absence she has to manage a considerable farm, with the help of her children and one or two hired labourers of more than doubtful use or reliability...In addition, she finds herself called upon...to maintain her premises as a combination of barracks and

¹¹⁴ Rathbone, *We That Were Young*, 101.

¹¹⁵ Hay, *The First Hundred Thousand*, 121.

¹¹⁶ Hay, *Carrying on after the First Hundred*, 297.

¹¹⁷ Aldington, *Death of a Hero*, 225.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, 227.

almshouse...All hail to you, Madame – the finest exponent, in all this War, of the art of Carrying On! We know now why France is such a great country.¹¹⁹

The French farmer may not be working in a munitions factory but she has taken on the running of the farm in the place of her husband.

It is interesting to note that the only positivity towards women of any description in the novels by men after the war and pre-1939 concerns another French woman – Madeline in *The Spanish Farm Trilogy*. This novel has already been discussed in section 5.1.5. Madeline runs the farm which is just behind the frontlines and exhibits considerable strength of character:

‘...A line of reserve trenches was dug through it, and marked the zone from which civilians were evacuated. The labourers were all gone, and the place in such a state that one would have thought she couldn’t live there. But could she be kept away? Not for a day! Every morning at ‘stand-to’ we heard her out and about, issuing orders to the men – telling them ‘Don’t!’ like a pack of children. We arrested her twice, but what could you do?’¹²⁰

Madeline is portrayed as an equal as although she does not fight, she is exposed to the same privations as the men. On the night that the army decide to commandeer her farm, a night of a German bombardment, she is told to sleep well: “Madeline did so. Like all those strong enough to stand it, she felt a kind of exaltation rising above any fear. Many a man felt like her that night.”¹²¹ R.H. Mottram goes further and uses Madeline as a symbol of her country, stating that “[s]he might have been an allegory of indomitable Flanders.”¹²²

I have discovered that female historical novelists are also aware of the negative way in which women could be seen by men but not to the extent of their forbears. There is a brief reference in *Strange Meeting* when John Hilliard expresses his discomfort regarding parties held by women in church halls for returning soldiers. There is also brief mention in *My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You*, where the loose morals of VADs are discussed. It is Pat Barker who picks up on the theme. In *Regeneration*, Sassoon observes that “[n]ow that Robert [Graves] was gone, he hated everybody, giggling girls, portly middle-aged men, women whose eyes settled on his wound

¹¹⁹ Hay, *Carrying on after the First Hundred Thousand*, 126.

¹²⁰ R.H. Mottram, *The Spanish Farm Trilogy 1914-1918* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), 522.

¹²¹ *ibid.*, 205.

¹²² *ibid.*, 95.

stripe like flies. Only the young soldier home on leave, staggering out of a pub dazed and vacant-eyed, escaped his disgust.”¹²³ It is in *The Eye in the Door* that Barker focuses on male dislike of women and their war work. Prior’s mother informs her son that his father is fearful of the impact on society of women entering the world of work, particularly in terms of them earning more money than their men. In 1918, the MP Pemberton Billing believed that the Germans were blackmailing high ranking homosexuals in British society. In his journal, the *Imperialist*, he published details of a book containing 47,000 names held by a German prince. He later claimed that the actress Maud Allan, playing the part of Salome in a private production of Oscar Wilde’s play of the same name, was a lesbian. The result was a high profile court case in which Maud Allan sued for libel. Barker uses this to illustrate men’s view of women during the war. Manning, a homosexual, states that his wife:

‘...says that the...*sentimentality* about the role women are playing – doing their bit and all that – really masks a kind of deep-rooted fear that they’re getting out of line. She thinks pillorying Maud Allan is actually a way of teaching them a lesson. Not just lesbians. *All* women. Just as Salome is presented as a strong woman by Wilde, and yet at the same time she has to be killed. I mean it is quite striking at the end when all the men fall on her and kill her.’¹²⁴

In stark contrast to female novelists published pre-1939, none of the historical novels by women promote a positive male view of women’s war work.

Male historical novelists emulate male novelists published between 1918 and 1939. A number are openly critical of women in general terms, notably Stuart Young in *How Young They Died*. Although there is some reference to women’s work it is ambivalent rather than an expression of admiration or dislike. The one exception is *Goshawk Squadron*, which has been discussed in previous sections 5.1.4 and 5.2.2. Although Robinson includes rounded female characters as nurses and canteen workers, praise is implied rather than specifically referenced. A number of these characters are seen as sexual objects to which they do not respond well, thereby strengthening their characters.

¹²³ Barker, *Regeneration*, 43.

¹²⁴ Barker, *The Eye in the Door*, 156.

5.3.2 Through the Eyes of Women

In those novels by women published during the war, I have found that there is no criticism of women by other women other than in *The Tree of Heaven* where they are accused of being "...safe at home, snuffing and sentimentalizing..."¹²⁵ As discussed in section 5.3.1, female novelists during and after the war were more concerned with the critical view taken by men.

The main criticism of women and war work can be found in *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* where, on numerous occasions, Smithy refers to herself not as "one of England's Splendid Women"¹²⁶ but as a failure and a coward. She states that:

When I read the rubbish praising the indomitable pluck and high spirits of 'our wonderful war girls' I want to throw things at the writers. Our wonderful war girls – how bored we are of hearing it! We are not wonderful...There may be an odd few who enlisted in a patriotic spirit – I haven't met any, personally...¹²⁷

Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War questions the war and details its horrors. As stated previously, Smithy and her colleagues are seen as equally unheroic as the men they care for. In addition, whenever Smithy is critical of herself, she immediately looks back in the direction of the women at home, referring to them as "ever-knitting women safe from the blood and the mud"¹²⁸ and "flag-waggers [who] are comfortably at home and intend to stay there."¹²⁹ This enhances the way in which Smithy and her colleagues are seen as being on equal par with the men.

Further criticism comes in Lily Tobias' *Eunice Fleet* (1933), a pacifist novel unconcerned with women's war work. A female supporter of conscientious objectors who is petitioning for peace does not believe that a woman can expect a man to fight for her and that:

A woman who believes that war is necessary, ought to be prepared to fight herself, or at least take the risks of engaging in war as nurse Cavell did. Women who allow men to kill and

¹²⁵ Sinclair, *The Tree of Heaven*, 341.

¹²⁶ Smith, *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War*, 34.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, 134.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, 34.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*, 135.

be killed for them are the worst cowards, shirkers, and humbugs, unfit to live themselves or carry on the race...¹³⁰

Unsurprisingly, it is Mrs Humphrey Ward who again promotes women and their war work, this time through the eyes of women. In *Missing*, Nelly Sarratt “was being drawn into that world of the new woman—where are women policemen, and women chauffeurs, and militant suffragists, and women in overalls and breeches, and many other strange types. The war has shown us—suddenly and marvellously—the adaptability of women.”¹³¹

In historical novels by women, female characters are less critical of women both in general and in terms of their war work. There are only a couple of examples. In *My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You*, Nadine Waveney categorises women while she nurses:

The other girls – the bored, the sex-mad, the curious, the sentimental, the power-seekers, the thrill-seekers, the poetry writers, the bovine, those who would do anything to get away from home, even the sanest, sweetest, densest, cleverest, best-adjusted girls, long coats and jerseys, cup-of-tea-and-a-fag girls, even the cheerful, who brayed about the Yanks coming in – [she] could see that they were all crazy by now.¹³²

As previously mentioned, not only do these novels pay scant attention to women challenging traditional roles but the majority are written from the male perspective. This explains, to an extent, why there is no positive consideration by female characters of women and their war work in historical novels by women.

I have also found that the landscape of novels by men both pre and post-1939 is equally barren in terms of a positive view of women by women.

Many of the novels published pre-1939, primarily those by women but also those by men published during the war, are written in the style of a social commentary. This is in terms of understanding both women’s place in a society at war and how they are viewed by both genders. In places, the characters step out of the narrative and conduct dialogue and inner monologue which endeavours to analyse the social context of the events in which they are involved. The reader is often jolted out of the story while this takes place. Mrs Humphrey Ward is a particular exponent of the social commentary style. In the narrative of *The War and Elizabeth*, the squire “...it

¹³⁰ Lily Tobias, *Eunice Fleet* (Dinas Powys: Honno Ltd, 2004), 129.

¹³¹ Ward, *Missing*, 185.

¹³² Young, *My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You*, 290.

seemed... had found a friend, in these days when the new independence of women opens a thousand fresh possibilities not only to them, but to men also.”¹³³ In *Harvest*, Rachel and the Captain are “...plunged in a free and exciting discussion of the new place and opportunities of women in the world, the man from the more conservative, the women from the more revolutionary point of view.”¹³⁴ Only in Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy is there a comparable level of overt social analysis.

5.4 Social Context

An understanding of the social context in which the British women of WW1 were living and working is key to understanding the literary portrayal of women who challenged traditional binarisms. This section considers four areas: the paradox of women’s expected involvement in the war; pacifism and support for the war; suffrage; and class.

5.4.1 The Paradox

Prior to WW1, women were already challenging their traditional role in society, not least through the fight for suffrage. In 1914, society’s approach to war was one of chivalry: men went to fight on behalf of their women who remained at home. Indeed, many suffragists ceased their campaign and threw themselves into supporting the war. The government wanted men to be clear what they were fighting for and initially used propaganda that highlighted alleged atrocities against women in France and Belgium. All of this portrayed women as being weak, in the private sphere and requiring protection. As the war developed into an industrial war, it was clear that women would be required to take on less traditional roles. Not only were men’s roles vacated as increasing numbers of them volunteered or were conscripted but also the war machine needed to be fed with manufactured weapons and ammunition. This resulted in a paradox whereby a woman was expected to remain at home as a symbol of civilisation and all that was worth fighting for, as well as go to work in industry. The latter particularly related to the working classes. Cohen notes that “[e]ven women’s work in munitions factories was often in the press configured in

¹³³ Ward, *The War and Elizabeth*, 160.

¹³⁴ Mrs Humphrey Ward, *Harvest* (Project Gutenberg, 2004), no page numbers available.

domestic imagery..."¹³⁵ Raitt and Tate comment on the subject of women war workers that "the cultural connotations of what they did were recuperated for an ideal of woman as subordinate and self-sacrificing."¹³⁶

The female response was varied. Some welcomed the opportunities afforded by the war and others did not. Many were quite rightly confused and unsure of the best course of action. Raitt also draws attention to older women who often felt useless as they had no children and were deemed too old for war work.¹³⁷

The effects of the paradox continued to be felt after the war had ended. Whereas many women who viewed their work as extraordinary to the war were content to return to their traditional roles, others wanted to benefit from continued access to employment and a potentially more equitable standing in society. The impact of WW1 on the subsequent lives of women has been the subject of debate over many decades. The general consensus is that WW1 made little difference to women's social position. Indeed women were encouraged to return to their roles as wives and mothers in order to rebuild the post-war society.

The paradox is expressed in broad terms in WW1 novels, providing the context within which women's place and the view of women and their war work is considered. But to what extent is the paradox itself specifically referred to? As seen in previous sections, novels by women published during the war are used to explore women's new and problematic role and the paradox outlined above is no exception. In *The Tree of Heaven*, Frances:

...was worried, not because Lord Kitchener was practically asking her to give up her son Michael, but because she had found that the race was to the swift and the battle to the strong, and that she was classed with her incompetent sisters as too old to wait on wounded soldiers.¹³⁸

As previously mentioned, in the same novel Frank Drayton asks Dorothy to give up her ambulance driving as he cannot fight effectively if he believes her to be in danger. In the *War Workers*, Delafield refers to the home as a "woman's sphere."¹³⁹ None of these women discusses the paradox in terms of life after the war other than

¹³⁵ Cohen, *Remapping the Home Front: Locating Citizenship in British Women's Great War Fiction*, 4.

¹³⁶ Raitt and Tait, *Women's Fiction and the Great War*, 7.

¹³⁷ *ibid.*, 65.

¹³⁸ Sinclair, *The Tree of Heaven*, 321.

¹³⁹ Delafield, *The War Workers*, 105.

a reference in *The War and Elizabeth*, where the new land agent employed by Elizabeth watches her with admiration: “[h]eavens, women had come on during this war! Through the young man’s mind there ran a vague and whirling sense of change.”¹⁴⁰ Women writing in this period had no concept of how long the war would last and were adjusting to the role that women were required to play. For Mrs Humphrey Ward, there was also the issue of propaganda and using her writing to promote women’s war work but not to the detriment of the established pre-war order. I believe that any consideration, within novels by women, of women’s post-war role would have been virtually impossible.

Smith in *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* openly questions the relationship between women’s wartime paradox and their post-war life. This is done in 1930 during the publishing boom of war autobiography and therefore during a time of contemplation on how WW1 affected the direction of people’s lives. The protagonist, Smithy, is bitter towards the government and her parents, asking:

...What will they expect of us, these elders who have sent us out to fight? We sheltered young women who smilingly stumbled from the chintz-covered drawing-rooms of the suburbs straight into hell? What will they expect of us? We, who once blushed at the public mention of childbirth, now discuss such things as casual as once we discussed the latest play...¹⁴¹

I have found that female historical novelists have not focussed specifically on the tensions to which women were subjected. Barker and Hill primarily view the war through men’s eyes and their negative view of women who challenge traditional roles. As discussed, Rose in *My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You* does list the ways in which the war has changed her life but there is no significant exploration of the paradox in which women found themselves. This is surprising, particularly as parallels can be drawn with the paradox that many modern working women find themselves in: balancing motherhood and a career.

In terms of male novelists, it is H.G. Wells and Ian Hay who consider the paradox. H.G. Wells tackles the subject of future repercussions when Letty asserts:

‘If you think you’re going to get your job back after the war...you’re very much mistaken. I’m going to raise the standard.’

¹⁴⁰ Ward, *The War and Elizabeth*, 187.

¹⁴¹ Smith, *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War*, 165.

'You!' said Teddy, regarding her coldly, and proceeded ostentatiously to talk of other things.¹⁴²

Ian Hay refers to the way in which Britain seeks to protect its women but on the other hand praises their war work. However, it is clear this is only for the duration of the war. Male historical novelists make no specific mention of the paradox other than one line in a Henry Williamson novel that refers to freedom and hope in the future for women.¹⁴³ It is not unexpected as male novelists post-1939, particularly in combat novels, are not likely to ponder the situation from a woman's point of view. Although they are critical of women and their war work, they do not argue that they should remain in the home.

5.4.2 Pro-War/Anti-War

The portrayal in WW1 novels of women challenging traditional binarisms is dependent to an extent on whether the novel has a pro-war, anti-war, or indeed, ambivalent stance.

Elshain states that "...women in overwhelming numbers have supported their state's wars in the modern West."¹⁴⁴ Berkman takes this further, noting that a number of feminist scholars view this support as "helping overthrow the rigidities of role stereotyping: men as protectors, women as protected."¹⁴⁵

The majority of the female novelists published pre-1939 had an active role in the war, including nursing, the civil service, munitions and French YMCA camps. Their novels are pro-war. In those published during the war, there are references to women who bemoan the fact they are women and wish that they could fight. Dorothy, in *The Tree of Heaven*, goes so far as to say that "[i]t's a war that makes it detestable to be a woman."¹⁴⁶ In the absence of an opportunity to fight, these patriotic women search for ways in which they can make a contribution, particularly war work. Dorothy becomes an ambulance driver and Charmian in *The War Workers* works at a supply depot.

¹⁴² Wells, *Mr Britling Sees it Through*, 243.

¹⁴³ Williamson, *The Golden Virgin*, 176.

¹⁴⁴ Jean Elshain, *Women and War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 140.

¹⁴⁵ Joyce Berkman, "Feminism, War and Peace Politics," in *Women, Militarism and War*, eds. Jean Elshain and Sheila Tobias (Maryland: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 1990), 151.

¹⁴⁶ Sinclair, *The Tree of Heaven*, 303.

In *The War and Elizabeth*, Mrs Humphrey Ward calls out to young women through the character of Pamela who has just left school where the headmistress “had kindled a flame of feeling which, when they parted from her and their school life – so she told them – was to take practical effect in work for their country, given with a proud and glad devotion.”¹⁴⁷ Mrs Humphrey Ward goes even further by suggesting that the protagonist, Elizabeth, is more patriotic than her male employer due to her superior capability in managing his land and contributing to the nation’s food production.

There is a noticeable change in the tone of women’s novels post-war and pre-1939. It begins with Mrs Humphrey Ward’s *Harvest*, in which Rachel considers the war as a force for good in terms of her own personal situation:

Owing to the war, farming was booming all over England, and she was in the boom, taking advantage of it. Yet she was ashamed to think of the war only in that way. She tried to tame the strange ferment in her blood, and could only do it by reminding herself of Hastings's wounded son...¹⁴⁸

By the time it gets to Irene Rathbone’s *We That Were Young* in 1932, the female characters provide reasons for engaging in war work which are less to do with patriotism than with their men. After the death of her brother, Barbara wants to “...nurse hard, hard, hard – and, with the top of myself at any rate, forget.”¹⁴⁹ Pamela works in the munitions factory and wants only to avenge the death of her fiancée:

Each time that she heaved one of the shell-cases from the floor on to the fixture in front of her...she sent wishes of death with the shell. ‘Do the same, my beauty, do the same to the enemy who killed *him!*’ Sometimes she felt she was going a little mad.¹⁵⁰

Other novels by women at this time, for example *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* and *Eunice Fleet* are concerned with pacifism. These are considered later in this section.

Male novelists in the same period are not concerned with expressing the pro-war stance of women as their focus is on the male experience of the war. However, H.G.

¹⁴⁷ Ward, *The War and Elizabeth*, 37.

¹⁴⁸ Ward, *Harvest*, no page numbers available.

¹⁴⁹ Rathbone, *We That Were Young*, 125.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 268.

Wells and Arnold Bennett acknowledge women's patriotism, the latter in terms of a refugee living in England who is considerably anti-German. No male novelist pre-1939 looks at the relationship between women's patriotism and their war work.

I have also found that neither male nor female historical novelists focus on women's pro-war stance. There are brief mentions in those novels by women: Barker details a group of nurses who had to do their bit because their brothers and sweethearts had joined up and Young describes Mrs Orris as a "flag-waving, committee-running powerhouse, a mistress of getting other people Over There."¹⁵¹

As shown, not all female novelists pre-1939 were pacifists. Ruddick refers to Adams' view that "[t]he belief that a woman is against war simply and only because she is a woman and not a man, does not, of course, hold."¹⁵² However, apart from Wells' ambiguous *Mr Britling Sees it Through*, it is female novelists that dominate during the war in terms of expressing pacifist views within their novels. May Agnes Hamilton was a member of the anti-war Union of Democratic Control and worked for a negotiated peace. Her pacifist novel *Dead Yesterday* was published in 1916, the same year as another pacifist novel *Non Combatants and Others* in which Alix Sandomir comments that she has "...been wondering lately...if there isn't a third way in war time. Not throwing oneself into it and doing jobs for it, in the way that suits lots of people; I simply can't do that."¹⁵³ Not surprisingly, neither of these novels contains female characters directly engaged in war work.

In Mrs Humphrey Ward's *Missing*, also published in 1916, the character of Bridget Cookson expresses dislike of the war but does not go so far as pacifism. Indeed, Bridget "had entirely declined to join any 'Stop the War,' or pacifist societies. She had no sympathy with 'that sort of people.'"¹⁵⁴ However, the novelist uses Bridget to draw out the patriotism of the other characters, with much of the focus of their dialogue on the need for women to engage in war work.

R.C. Sherriff's play *Journey's End* (1928) precipitated the publication of a number of novels in the late 1920s and 1930s by both men and women, that were either anti-war or encouraged pacifism: Tobias's *Eunice Fleet*, Smith's *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War*, Aldington's *Death of a Hero*; Ford's *Parades End*; Manning's

¹⁵¹ Young, *My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You* (London: Harper, 2012), 109.

¹⁵² Sara Ruddick, "The Rationality of Care," in *Women, Militarism and War*, eds. Jean Elshtain and Sheila Tobias (Maryland: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 1990), 230.

¹⁵³ Macaulay, *Non-combatants and Others*, 141.

¹⁵⁴ Ward, *Missing*, 77.

Her Privates We; and Yeate's *Winged Victory*. Vera Brittain's *A Testament of Youth* was also published at this time. A number of critics have observed that "[p]olitical disillusionment and pacifism, which had their place in contemporary polemics, had to wait until the 1930s for imaginative realisation."¹⁵⁵ *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* is interesting in that it is an anti-war novel which uses female workers to underline the differences between propaganda fed to the civilians on the Home Front and the reality of war in the forbidden zone. Smithy frequently makes bitter reference to those at home:

No Smithy, you're one of England's Splendid Daughters, proud to do their bit for the dear old flag, and one of England's Splendid Daughters you'll stay until you crock up or find some other decent excuse to go home covered in glory. It takes nerve to carry on here, but it takes twice as much to go home to flag-crazy mothers and fathers...¹⁵⁶

Pat Barker continues the theme of pacifism within historical novels and makes the link with women and war work. In *Toby's Room*, Elinor recalls a conversation with her brother in which:

He'd said, then, how much he wished she'd do something for the war effort. They'd wasted hours of their last days arguing about it. Which, as she tried to explain to him, was precisely what the war did; leached time and energy away from the things that really mattered. 'I'm not going to feed it,' she'd said.¹⁵⁷

Barker's novels are concerned, not only with the male experience of war but also of marginalised groups, including pacifists and conscientious objectors.

In terms of male historical novelists, it is Henry Williamson who served in WW1, who writes of the disillusionment with war.

In all the WW1 novels analysed, there is a mixed response to the war amongst French and Belgian women but this is not explored in terms of their challenging of traditional binarisms. Madeline in *The Spanish Farm Trilogy*, the key French woman in all WW1 texts, is surprisingly ambivalent towards the war.

¹⁵⁵ Dorothy Goldman, ed., *Women and World War 1, the Written Response* (London, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), 7.

¹⁵⁶ Smith, *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War*, 13.

¹⁵⁷ Pat Barker, *Toby's Room* (London: Penguin, 2013), 154.

5.4.3 Suffrage

It is not the intention of this section to analyse the representation in WW1 novels of the suffrage movement but it is important to highlight the complexities of its relationship with the war and the effect on women's role in society.

In Britain, the fight for women's suffrage began in the late nineteenth century. WW1 led to divisions amongst feminists as to whether they were pro or anti-war. The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) led by Millicent Fawcett, supported the war but was anti-conscription. The Women's Freedom League (WFL) led by Charlotte Despard was anti-war. The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) led by Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst wanted suffrage only for their own class, were pro-war and sponsored by the government but Sylvia Pankhurst was vehemently against it. Many anti-suffragists believed that women should not have the vote because they did not fight in war. A feminist's individual view of the war would obviously impact on their decision on how actively they became involved in the war effort.

It is also necessary to remember that not all women in Britain were feminists. Many women in the working classes, including those who carried out the roles vacated by men and in munitions factories, were pro-war and anti-suffrage.

This varied response from women equally applied to the post-war period. Some women were keen to maintain their new role in society and others wanted to return to the home. In subsequent decades there has been debate as to the extent to which women's involvement in war work facilitated the passing of the Representation of the People Act 1918. The consensus is that it had little impact and that the Act would have been passed in any case due to the progress made by women's suffrage organisations in the decades before the war. Indeed, as suffrage was only granted to women over thirty years of age, many of the young women who had worked on the Home Front or overseas would not have been eligible to vote.

In terms of WW1 novels, the female novelists pre-1939 represent a wide range of views. Mary Agnes Hamilton was a suffragist and pacifist. Mrs Humphrey Ward was pro-war and anti-feminist. In 1916, Rose Macaulay was a signatory to a reply to the anti-suffrage manifesto. The reply stated that the industrial position of women resulting from the war needed to be considered and Parliament should listen to

women's voices.¹⁵⁸ May Sinclair, who was pro-war, was a member of The Women Writers' Suffrage League which was founded by Cicely Hamilton. Irene Rathbone also supported the suffrage movement.

A handful of named suffragist characters are contained within the novels by women published pre-1939. Maslen observes that:

What is striking about the period is the way in which the issue of war and violence overshadowed so much else; when we contemplate this, it becomes easier to see why feminist issues, while never entirely lost to view, are not the first priority for many writers...¹⁵⁹

Only in Sinclair's *Tree of Heaven* is there an exploration of the relationship between the war, suffrage and women's work. Prior to the war, Dorothy joins a suffrage organisation and ends up in prison. In the first week of war:

...the Suffrage Unions and Leagues and Societies (already organized and disciplined by seven years' methodical resistance) presented their late enemy, the Government, with an instrument of national service made to its hand and none the worse because originally devised for its torture and embarrassment. The little vortex of the Woman's Movement was swept without a sound into the immense vortex of the War. The women rose up all over England and went into uniform. And Dorothea appeared one day wearing the khaki tunic, breeches and puttees of the Women's Service Corps.¹⁶⁰

In Rathbone's *We That Were Young*, there is reference to the supposed alignment between women's war work and the vote when Joan speaks with a soldier at the French camp:

To her delighted surprise he expressed the opinion that after the war, women would certainly get the vote. 'I've been verra much impressed by the conduct of the ladies of England during the war,' said this magnificent creature, 'and I canna see the sense of keeping them fra pawlitics.' [sic]¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), *The Common Cause* (London: The Common Cause Publishing Company, 24 November 1916).

¹⁵⁹ Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction, 1928 - 1968*, 16.

¹⁶⁰ Sinclair, *The Tree of Heaven*, 298.

¹⁶¹ Rathbone, *We That Were Young*, 40.

Two male novelists during the same period include suffragist characters. Lady Queenie Paulle in Bennett's *The Pretty Lady* supports suffrage and also works tirelessly to support the war, although as a member of the upper classes it primarily involves committee work. Bennett was a supporter of feminism. Ford's Valentine Wannop in *No More Parades* is a suffragist but is anti-war.

Suffragists are also included in novels by men published post-1939: those by Henry Williamson and John Harris. Although shown in a positive light, again they are not involved in war work.

Suffragists appear in only one historical novel by a female novelist. In *The Eye in the Door*, Barker addresses the theme of suffrage via the character of Beattie Roper, an ex-suffragist who became a pacifist at the start of the war and before the commencement of the novel.

5.4.4 Class

It is not the intention of this section to analyse class in general terms within WW1 novels but rather its relationship with the war and the effect on women challenging traditional binarisms.

WW1 had a significant impact on British working class women. Thousands of them left domestic service or the home to work in manufacturing and other roles vacated by men. Their employment provided them with a greater income than they had previously had. This, as well as their increasing independence, led to tension between the working and middle classes. In addition, it increased tensions between men and women. There is a fit here with the paradox set out in section 5.4.1 in that working class women were expected to actively support the war effort but without upsetting the class and gender status quo. Indeed, working class women were often viewed in a negative light. Concerns were raised about their new lifestyles which were described in contrast to the life of the men in the trenches who were fighting to protect those very same women. Their morality was also called into question. After the war, as stated previously, many working class women who had been pro-war and anti-suffrage were content to return to their pre-war roles.

The educated women of the upper and middle classes had access to professions before the war, for example teaching. The war offered different experiences and an increase in freedom but these women were not required to work in order to support

themselves or their families. The majority worked as VADs, clerical workers or in agriculture. Braybon observes that “[t]he middle-class women who took up war work were few, and were not necessarily popular with their companions.”¹⁶²

An analysis of the novelists of WW1 novels published pre-1939 reveals that, unsurprisingly, they were of middle or upper middle class backgrounds. Although the majority of the female novelists of this period were engaged in war work, it was not comparable to the average working class woman’s experience. The majority of the novels by these female authors are from a middle and upper class point of view and involve war work ‘appropriate’ to their class.

In *Harvest*, however, Ward’s two key female characters go into business together to run a farm but it feels rather more of a romantic adventure than hard work. Only one female novelist analysed here attempts to write of the experience of working class women: Rathbone in *We That Were Young*. They remain subordinate to the central middle class characters and are viewed through their eyes. Rathbone describes the way in which working and middle class women work alongside each other in the munitions factory:

In work hours the other girls treated them in a friendly, natural manner, neither with suspicion nor jealousy, neither with undue reserve or undue familiarity; in off hours they left them tacitly alone.¹⁶³

In the introduction to the 1988 edition of *We That Were Young*, Knight observes that “[f]rom this sense of writing across a void, as if of another species, here and elsewhere in the novel, Irene Rathbone states the prejudices of her time which she shared, but did not acknowledge as her own.”¹⁶⁴

Smith’s *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* has a different approach in that it is fully immersed in what are regarded as non middle class roles - ambulance driving and the WAAC – but much is made of the fact that they are being carried out by middle class women. The protagonist, Smithy, reflects “[h]ow we dread the morning clean-out of the insides of our cars, we gently-bred, educated women they insist on so rigidly for this work that apparently cannot be done by women incapable of

¹⁶² Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War: the British Experience*, 49.

¹⁶³ Rathbone, *We That Were Young*, 264.

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*, xix.

speaking English with a public-school accent!”¹⁶⁵ Unlike working class women who have little choice in the war work that they are able to carry out and the middle class women at home who do, Smithy and her colleagues are in an unusual position. They are driven by patriotism but are also bitter towards those that have created the war. Angela Smith observes that the mix of roles and classes within *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* allows different kinds of readers to identify with her women.¹⁶⁶

I have found that the majority of novels by male authors pre-1939 are concerned either with the middle classes in Britain or the working classes in France and Belgium. References to women, class and war work focus on a negative appraisal of middle class women on the Home Front. The main exponent of this is Bennett’s *The Pretty Lady*. The protagonist is critical of the key character Lady Queenie Paulle, who is involved in a range of war work ‘appropriate’ to her class but who lacks perspective. Following a fund raising event for a hospital, he comments “Queen, the whole afternoon’s takings wouldn’t buy what you’re wearing now, to say nothing of the five hundred other women here.’ His eye rested on the badge of her half-brother’s regiment which she had had reproduced in diamonds.”¹⁶⁷ Bennett’s socialist leanings are evident in this novel.

In the novels by women post-1939, the focus is on the middle classes. The exception is Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy. Class is a key theme that underpins the three novels and there is a mix of working and middle class characters. The descriptions and dialogue of the working class women are far more realistic than those within pre-1939 novels. A particularly interesting example of class and women’s war work comes in the form of a nursing matron who dislikes VADs, even though they are of a similar class:

She hated the VADs, most of whom were girls of good family ‘doing their bit’ with – it had to be admitted – various degrees of seriousness. She loved her officer patients – my boys, she called them – but the VADs, girls from a similar social background after all, she hated...‘They make me sick, the way they go on. ‘Oooh! Look at me! I’m dusting!’ ‘I’m sweeping a floor.’ Do you know, when I was training we got eight quid a year...’¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Smith, *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War*, 59.

¹⁶⁶ Smith, *The Second Battlefield: Women, Modernism and the First World War*, 111.

¹⁶⁷ Bennett, *The Pretty Lady*, 153.

¹⁶⁸ Barker, *The Eye in the Door*, 165.

There is a broader mix of classes in historical novels by men, partly because there is a greater incidence of French and Belgian working class women. Little is made of the relationship between class, women and war work other than reference by Henry Williamson to the increased wages of munitionettes:

‘...Haven’t you heard of the canaries at Woolwich, Phillip?... They make a lot of money, and the soldiers know this, of course, and go out with them only if the canaries stand treat! They’re doing well, you know, some of the working class, nowadays – especially those on munitions. They’re buying motor-cycles, gramophones, and even grand pianos! That’s respectability, you see, Phillip – a grand piano. Nobody can play them, of course!’¹⁶⁹

I conclude that the class tensions relating to women’s war work have not been a significant feature in WW1 novels. This is certainly the case from the middle class point of view: most of the novels analysed are by middle class authors writing about middle class characters. None of the novels was written specifically from a working class woman point of view. One must rely on testimony – letters, diaries, interviews and factory newspapers – to gain a working class woman’s view of the war.

6. Comparative Analysis of Findings

This section provides a summary of the findings and identifies contributory factors, other than social context, which may have influenced the literary portrayal of women and war work in pre-1939 and historical novels.

6.1 WW1 Novels - An Overview

British women travelled overseas to theatres of war prior to WW1. They were camp followers and nurses in the Napoleonic, Crimean and Boer wars and suffered the same privations as the men that they cared for. The British Women’s Convoy Corps (BWCC), Voluntary Aid Detachments (VAD) and First Aid Nursing Yeomanry Corps (FANY) were all established by 1909. The fight for women’s suffrage was underway in the nineteenth century and in July 1914 three and a quarter million women were in industrial employment.

Barlow observes that a theme of the pre-war novels of E.M. Forster and D.H. Lawrence was the emancipation of women, not only regarding suffrage but also

¹⁶⁹ Williamson, *The Golden Virgin*, 179.

opportunities for their self development.¹⁷⁰ However, Cooper et al note Logenbach's argument that "...rather than face the social reality of the women's movement as an independent force, modernist literature located the Great War as the point of origin for the rising tensions between men and women."¹⁷¹

WW1 has often been viewed as a turning point for British women. It may not have been the original source of the challenge to gender divisions but it facilitated the move of women from the private to the public sphere on an unprecedented scale. Women that joined the auxiliary armed services or worked behind the frontline as ambulance drivers, further tested the traditional binarisms of male/female, war/peace. In addition, the frontline moved closer to the Home Front with the advent of aerial bombing and the dangers inherent in the manufacturing industries.

I consider that WW1 was not necessarily a turning point but rather a limited phase in terms of women's changing position in society. During that short time, they faced the paradox of being expected to symbolise the Victorian and Edwardian ideal of a woman at home who required protection, as well as the requirement to substitute men and feed the war machine. Hamer notes that it has often been argued that the division between men and women was reinforced: although women's war work transgressed boundaries of femininity, they did not dress like warriors and sexual difference as a means to the subordination of women metamorphosed into a stronger form.¹⁷²

Woollacott provides the following apposite summary:

Debate amongst historians and literary critics has, at times, reduced issues of women's experience of the war to a binarism: on the one hand, some argue that liberation was the dominant female experience, while on the other, the critics of that view propose instead a view of devastation or disempowerment. This reduction has polarised debate; worse, it has in its impulse toward simplification obscured the complexity of female experience.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Barlow, *The Great War in British Literature*, 14.

¹⁷¹ Helen M. Cooper, Adrienne Auslander Munich and Susan Squier, eds., *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender and Literary Representation* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), xvii.

¹⁷² Mary Hamer, "Butt, Mothers, and War," in *Women's Fiction and the Great War*, eds. Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tate (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 222.

¹⁷³ Angela Woollacott, "Sisters and Brothers in Arms: Family, Class, and Gendering in World War I Britain," in *Gendering War Talk*, eds. Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 130.

Women's experience was also dependent on their pro or anti-war stance, class, age and view on suffrage.

After the war, many women willingly returned to their traditional peace time roles while others marched on Parliament to demand that they keep their jobs. There has also been debate as to whether women gained suffrage as a result of their war work. Over subsequent decades, the emphasis within literature and other cultural forms has been on the male experience of the war. The result has been a male dominated canon of WW1 war literature and the story of those who were there rather than those who were not.

This complex picture has provided the context for my analysis of forty WW1 novels in terms of female characters challenging traditional binarisms. The majority of the novels begin their stories after the outbreak of war. The exceptions are *Mr Britling Sees it Through*, *Dead Yesterday*, *The Tree of Heaven* and *William – An Englishman*. The two latter novels lay considerable emphasis on the involvement of key female characters in the fight for women's suffrage. It is two officers sitting in a trench in Ian Hay's *The First Hundred Thousand* that observe the impact of the war on pre-war feminism as follows:

'War is hell, and all that, but it has a good deal to recommend it. It wipes out all the small nuisances of peace-time.'

'Such as?'

'Well, suffragettes, and Futurism, and...'¹⁷⁴

I have found that there is surprisingly little representation of women's war work in the forty novels. The majority is to be found in those by female authors published pre-1939 but even then, there is certainly nothing of its broad range. It could be argued that this thesis should have focussed on the key texts in which women's war work is prevalent but its significant absence in so many others tells a story.

Women filled every employment sector vacated by men, as well as industries specifically associated with the war. They are underrepresented in the novels and women in the military are virtually invisible, other than a couple of passing references to WAACs.

¹⁷⁴ Hay, *The First Hundred Thousand*, 120.

I believe that the virtual absence of women's war work in the novels primarily results from the fact that they are by middle class authors and written from a middle class point of view. This is mirrored within academia. Culleton observes that:

...since the 1970s, scholars have written histories from below that place women at the centre of the story of the First World War...But many of these histories from below don't go deep enough: issues of class must enter squarely into the picture and become an extension of the focus on gender. Academic attention to working-class women during the war has been slow in coming.¹⁷⁵

What is evident in the novels is the complexity of women's position during the war and the myriad ways they were viewed by both men and other women. This complexity is not only a result of the character's age, socio economic status and stance on both the war and suffrage (often a reflection of the novelist's own position) but also how the character is located in terms of the story, plot, narrative and other characters.

French and Belgian women are mainly portrayed as agricultural workers, estaminet and billet owners or prostitutes. The majority of women that men would have encountered on the Western Front were employed in these areas. Although by late 1918, half a million French women were employed in the defence industries,¹⁷⁶ these would have been in towns and cities to the south of the country.

Unsurprisingly, there are significant differences in the portrayal of women and war work, dependent on the gender of the novelist and when the novel was published. In terms of the latter, the contributory factors are considered within the following two sections (6.2 and 6.3).

6.2 Pre-1939 Novels

There are two distinct phases relating to the portrayal of women in British pre-1939 WW1 novels. The first relates to those published during and just after the war where men and women were trying to locate women in a modern war society. The second relates to those published in the late 1920s and early 1930s where women's war

¹⁷⁵ Claire Culleton, *Working-Class Culture, Women and Britain, 1914-1921* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 177.

¹⁷⁶ Goldman et al., *Women Writers and the Great War*, 13.

experiences were considered in terms of their implications for post-war society. These phases are explored in the following two sections.

6.2.1 Finding a Place

It is almost impossible to read the pre-1939 WW1 novels, particularly those published during and just after the war, as one who was living through those times. Not only did men and women have to adjust to being at war but also to an unprecedented change, however temporary, in women's roles.

Even with the benefit of hindsight, it is difficult to unpick society's conflicting expectations of women, especially if the complications of age, class etc are added. There was no 'every woman' of the war and this has resulted in a range of literary responses, as men and women tried to locate women's place. On the one hand, Mrs Humphrey Ward promoted women's engagement in war work but only until their men returned. On the other, Rose Macaulay's protagonist ruled against war work in favour of working for a negotiated peace.

Romance and adventure novels were published during this time but the authors of the forty novels analysed here were less concerned with telling a story than with trying to make sense of the world in which they found themselves. This thesis has highlighted the resulting social commentary style. This does not apply only to female novelists but also to male novelists in the form of H.G. Wells and Arnold Bennett who were too old to fight and were concerned with socialism and feminism.

I consider that a balance needed to be struck between exploring women's position and giving primacy to the male experience of the war. Female novelists suggested that women were equal to men in the face of the war but did not go as far as to suggest gender reversal. This was manifest in later novels. In addition, they did not explore the implications of their war work on their post-war role and the granting of women's suffrage.

Barlow states that many women writing of the war focussed on the themes of patience, loss and grief.¹⁷⁷ This is not the case for the novels written by women analysed here. The majority of female characters are pro-active and even though for the most part they are not working in factories etc, they are carrying out war work

¹⁷⁷ Barlow, *The Great War in British Literature*, 29.

'appropriate' to their class. Even those that are anti-war are not sitting at home but are actively working towards achieving a peaceful settlement.

Apart from H.G. Wells and Arnold Bennett, the male novelists of this period do not dwell at length on the way in which women took on men's roles at home or worked behind the lines. They may have wanted to assert their masculinity in a war that had a significant negative impact on both the mental and physical health of men. As previously stated, they would have wanted to portray the women at home as needing protection and something to fight for. In addition, romantic boyhood notions of chivalry may have dimmed shortly after the start of the war but chivalric ideals in terms of gender relations were maintained. Goldman et al describe how chivalry was employed by female novelists in terms of questioning their position while their men suffered the horrors of war:

Chivalry is a generous explanation for women's exclusion – no less than one would expect from women rendered unable to argue their point by the overwhelming pity they felt for what men were suffering at the time. It does not mean, however, that later generations of women should refrain from pointing out the injustice of such attitudes and the dangers inherent in them.¹⁷⁸

The attitudes referred to by Goldman et al relate to men's assertion that war is their domain: women should not be involved, particularly near the line (for example, nurses). These attitudes were first questioned not by later generations but in the 1930s, by women who had lived and worked through the war. Novels of that decade are the subject of the next section.

6.2.2 1930s Retrospection

As has already been stated, the late 1920s and early 1930s saw a boom in the publishing of WW1 novels. These were often semi-autobiographical and although not always overtly pacifist in nature, their realistic descriptions of the horrors of war meant that they could not be accused of promoting or glorifying war. These novels not only questioned the legitimacy of the war and its impact but as Goldman et al note, they also tried to deal with the question of the future.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Goldman et al., *Women Writers and the Great War*, 100.

¹⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 121.

The two key texts by women during this period are Rathbone's *We That Were Young* and Price's *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War*, both of which focus on women and their war work. The latter was a response to Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, published in 1929 in Germany. Rathbone and Price's novels were similar to the men's in a number of ways.

Firstly, they are based on experience. In the case of Rathbone, she worked in the camps in France. The sections on munitions and nursing were based on the experiences of her close friends. Price's novel is based on the diaries of a female ambulance driver.

Secondly, both women question the war. Beauman observes of Joan Seddon in *We That Were Young*, that she is "another of the legion of disillusioned heroines whose life has been virtually ended by the war...Her disillusion could, however, only have been expressed some years after the War..."¹⁸⁰

The third similarity, in the case of *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War*, is that of Modernism. Price used fragmented narrative, war jargon and invented language. Femininity is stripped away and the overall effect is not of women that speak as men but of women finding a new way of communicating their experiences. As for men, the new experiences borne of a mechanised world war required new modes of expression. Higsonnet questions whether women did or even could participate in Modernism as their experience of the war was so different from that of men.¹⁸¹ Price is one novelist who does attempt a Modernist approach. This is made possible by the fact that her female characters are working right behind the line.

The difference with the male novelists at the time arises in the need to locate women in both wartime and post-war society. Unlike their predecessors, Price and Rathbone are confident in placing their women squarely in the war as active participants and pushing gender and geographical boundaries by positioning them behind the lines. These novelists were also able to question women's role in post-war society and linking this to their wartime service.

Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War and *We That Were Young* are key texts relating to women challenging traditional binarisms but they are in the minority during this period. The majority of the novels published in the late 1920s and early 1930s

¹⁸⁰ Nicola Beauman, "It is not the place of women to talk of mud': Some Responses by British Women Novelists to World War 1," in *Women and World War 1, the Written Response*, ed. Dorothy Goldman (London, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), 144.

¹⁸¹ Higsonnet, *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War 1*, 343.

were by men, writing thinly veiled accounts of their own wartime experiences. These novels enforced traditional binarisms by making clear the difference between those who were there and those who were not. The most extreme case is Aldington's *Death of a Hero*, which referred to "the widening gulf which was separating the men of that generation from the women."¹⁸²

6.3 Historical Novels

In the decade after WW2, there was little appetite for novels of WW1. Henry Williamson's *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* was the exception. Williamson was haunted by WW1 and his chronicle of fifteen novels takes his male protagonist from WW1 through to WW2. In 1959, in an article in the *Aylesford Review*, the critic George Painter claimed that "the whole cycle will ultimately be recognised as the great historical novel of our time, its subject is the total experience of twentieth-century *man*" (emphasis added.)¹⁸³ A handful of WW1 novels were published in the 1960s and 1970s but only one of these was written by a woman – Susan Hill.

De Groot notes that "[c]onsiderations of the wars of the twentieth century became common during the 1990s and demonstrated interest in traumatic historical events as a way of exploring memory, loss and horror."¹⁸⁴ He claims that Sebastian Faulks's *Birdsong* (1993) began a vogue for literary historical novels about the trenches during the First World War and the two world wars more generally. This is a little disingenuous as the first two novels in Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy were published in 1991 and 1993 respectively. WW1 novels have continued to be published but overall there have been relatively few in the decades since the end of WW2.

This thesis has shown that women challenging traditional binarisms are less evident in historical novels than those published pre-1939. This section seeks to understand the reasons why this is the case.

¹⁸² Aldington, *Death of a Hero*, 227.

¹⁸³ "Saint Albert's Press," The British Province of Carmelite Friars, <http://www.carmelite.org/index.php?nuc=content&id=23> (accessed: May 15, 2013).

¹⁸⁴ de Groot, *The Historical Novel*, 102.

6.3.1 Memorial

As set out in section 3 on the limited canon, primacy has been given to the male experience of WW1 in terms of pre-1939 WW1 novels. Not only women but also theatres of war in other countries in which the British were involved were also marginalised. In addition, the focus is on the army while the navy and air force are underrepresented. Indeed, Henry Williamson writes in the preface of the 1935 edition of his friend V.M. Yeates's air force novel *Winged Victory* that on his death in 1934 few had heard of his book but it was one of the most important of our time.¹⁸⁵ It was first republished in 1961.

Our collective memory of WW1, perpetuated throughout all art forms, is one of male soldiers in the trenches on the Western Front. Television programmes show us moving images from the documentary film *The Battle of the Somme* (1916)¹⁸⁶, most of which is a reconstruction, as well as Pathé news footage from behind the lines. This is usually contrasted with images of preserved battlefields in France and Belgium and the rows and rows of white gravestones so beautifully maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Recent mainstream WW1 films are dominated by the male experience: *Aces High* (1976)¹⁸⁷, *Gallipoli* (1981)¹⁸⁸, *The Trench* (1999)¹⁸⁹, *Passchendaele* (2008)¹⁹⁰, *Beneath Hill 60* (2010)¹⁹¹ and *War Horse* (2011)¹⁹². These do, however, widen the subject matter to include other theatres of war and the air force.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the male combat experience continues to be given primacy in WW1 historical novels. This thesis does not suggest that women's suffering was equal to that of men who fought in the trenches. It is suggested that there is nervousness around alluding to the experience of others, including women, in case it is viewed as disrespectful to the memory of the men.

¹⁸⁵ Henry Williamson, Tribute to V.M. Yeates in V.M. Yeates, *Winged Victory* (St. Albans: Mayflower Books Ltd, 1975), 7.

¹⁸⁶ *The Somme*, directed by Geoffrey Malins and John McDowell (1916; United Kingdom: British Topical Committee for War Films), film.

¹⁸⁷ *Aces High*, directed by Jack Gold (1976; United Kingdom: EMI Films), film.

¹⁸⁸ *Gallipoli*, directed by Peter Weir (1981; United Kingdom: CIC), film.

¹⁸⁹ *The Trench*, directed by William Boyd (1999; United Kingdom: Arts Council of England), film.

¹⁹⁰ *Passchendaele*, directed by Paul Gross (2008; United Kingdom: Alliance Films), film.

¹⁹¹ *Beneath Hill 60*, directed by Jeremy Hartley Sims (2010; Australia: Paramount Pictures), film.

¹⁹² *War Horse*, directed by Steven Spielberg (2011; United Kingdom: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures), film.

Smith states with reference to Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man* (1928), Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* (1929), Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) and Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero* (1929) that:

...such was the popularity of these books that theirs is the impression of the First World War which remain with us as the century comes to a close. The success of novels such as Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy and Sebastian Faulks's *Birdsong* further reinforce this notion. Although the authors do consider other aspects of war experience in their books, it is the power and horror of the trench sequences which has the greatest impact.¹⁹³

This may be the case in *Birdsong* but there is little reference to the trenches in the *Regeneration* trilogy until the final third of the final volume. I believe that the greatest impact can be attributed to the scenes set in Craiglockart Hospital, as well as to the descriptions of the protagonist, Billy Prior's, mental anguish. However, *Regeneration* is written from a male point of view and it is the experiences of the trenches which are the catalyst for Prior's mental health issues and subsequent disturbed view of the world which permeates the novels.

The latest WW1 novels are by female authors - Barker's *Life Class* and *Toby's Room* and Young's *My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You* - and explore women's experiences. As we approach the centenary of WW1, the scope of our collective memory is being challenged. In 2011, the Imperial War Museum held an exhibition of women war artists, including those from WW1. In 2012, a memorial was unveiled in Leeds to the thirty five women who died in a munitions factory in 1918. In Ypres, the recently refurbished *In Flanders Fields Museum* draws equally on the stories of women and children, as well as men. In 2013, in his address to the Western Front Association AGM, Professor Peter Simkins acknowledged that although the Western Front remains the core of the British experience, the history of WW1 is multi-faceted and we should remember, amongst other elements, the enormous contribution of women.¹⁹⁴ It will be interesting to see if there is a boom in WW1 historical novels during the four years of the centenary and if so, how many focus on women's experience, including those who challenged traditional binarisms. After a century, the

¹⁹³ Smith, *The Second Battlefield: Women, Modernism and the First World War*, 105.

¹⁹⁴ Peter Simkins, "AGM – 27th April 2013 – Presidents Address," *The Western Front Association Bulletin* 96 (July 2013 Number): 3.

memory of the men's anguish and suffering is not diminished but it is time to broaden our understanding of society's experience.

6.3.2 Stereotype

Male soldiers in trenches at the Western Front have become a stereotype: a culturally accepted shorthand with which to refer to WW1. It was born of pre-1939 WW1 novels but exacerbated by the fact that the authors of historical novels of WW1, with the exceptions of Henry Williamson and Stuart Cloete, had no experience of the war. Alison Weir, the author and historian, notes regarding *Birdsong* that some revisionist academics believe it perpetuates a set of received images.¹⁹⁵

The use of stereotypes in historical fiction is problematic as it obscures the full truth by focussing on one story and one history. De Groot states that:

...we might suggest that the cultural forms of history and memory such as film, television or literature are extremely influential in creating and sustaining a particular type of historical imaginary, and one which is probably at odds with or at least a simplified version of the historical reality.¹⁹⁶

My analysis of the categories of women's roles in WW1 novels provides evidence that stereotypes have been used, particularly in historical novels. In pre-1939 novels, war work is the predominant category and within that there is a relatively broad range of employment type. In historical novels, women's role becomes simplified. The dominant category is nursing and the breadth of war work that is represented is considerably lessened. Interestingly, it is female novelists that use the stereotypes of nurse and munitionette to the greatest degree.

I believe that there are a number of reasons why WW1 historical novelists may use stereotypes. Firstly, there is the question of memorial as set out in section 6.3.1. Nursing is an occupation synonymous with women and war and therefore 'acceptable.' Female characters working in munitions factories is equally acceptable as it acknowledges their war work but in an industry that lasted for the duration of the war and no longer. The exploration of women's involvement in the military may be considered a step too far (this is considered in section 6.3.4).

¹⁹⁵ Alison Weir, "Plenary Lecture: Q&A session." (Lecture, *Novel Approaches: from Academic History to Historical Fiction* from the Institute of Historical Research, London, November 17 – 18, 2011).

¹⁹⁶ de Groot, *The Historical Novel*, 49.

Secondly, there is the related issue of what the public may want to read. If there is a perception that readers will be uncomfortable reading a novel which suggests women also suffered during the war or that explores women's roles then such characters will not be included. There is evidence to support this in that it is only since 2007 that WW1 historical novels have been written from a woman's perspective. However, this also relates to the point that women are not generally interested in war novels. This is a cyclical argument as they might be if they could relate to them.

Thirdly, the characters are inseparable from the story, plot and narrative. If a WW1 novel has a male protagonist, he is likely to encounter only a handful of female characters on the Home Front. These women may or may not contribute to the war effort but it is unlikely that much will be made of it as he will not encounter them in their place of work. Nursing is a useful role for a female protagonist or key character as it brings them into close proximity with the men and therefore the direct effect of combat on the body and mind. It is a juxtaposition which allows analysis of a female reaction to combat but also emphasising the gendered differences. It is, therefore, necessary to understand an author's motive for writing the novel. This is examined in section 6.3.3.

Finally, it may simply be a matter of convenience. As there are already many literary references to nurses and munitionettes, a novelist only needs to provide a broad brush description for the reader to effectively imagine such a character.

6.3.3 Re-visioning

Goldman, when writing of Hill's *Strange Meeting* and its focus on the male experience, states that "[a]n imaginative response to women's experience of the War needed re-establishing before women could reclaim the subject for their own."¹⁹⁷ She explains that this reclamation began in the 1970s and was not academic but rather the 1977 Imperial War Museum exhibition on the role of women in WW1 and the television serialisation of Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*. Rediscovery of women's novels of the war began in the late 1980s.

In terms of historical novels, Pat Barker and Louisa Young have begun the reclamation but the broad range of women's roles and experiences of the war remain

¹⁹⁷ Goldman, *Women and World War 1, the Written Response*, 3.

underrepresented in historical fiction. I believe that this will require re-visioning: the concept referred to by Pope whereby one looks back at events through different eyes. He quotes Adrienne Rich's paper "When we dead awaken: writing as re-vision" (1971) as follows: "[r]e-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival."¹⁹⁸

There is a direct relationship between re-visioning and the development of the post-modern historical novel. De Groot argues that the writing of historical novels has been influenced by radical changes in literary and historiography theory that took place in the 1960s and 1970s, which resulted in a crisis of representation. He states that "[t]he decentering of the central master narratives of historical fact has allowed authors to explore a variety of issues, from the problem of unreliable narratives to marginalised and hitherto unwritten histories..."¹⁹⁹ These unwritten histories include the experiences of women. Elsewhere in his study of the historical novel, De Groot refers to the subsequent rise of women's historical fiction in conjunction with revisionist feminist histories whereby writers are "writing back" and "bringing their subjects from darkness to light."²⁰⁰ This thesis suggests that women and war, including WW1, are the exception.

As noted in section 6.3.2, it may be the case that there is not a market for war-based historical fiction written from a woman's point of view. De Groot observes that most readers of historical fiction are women who like to read about women and that as much of history is dominated by men, writers have to look for subjects that include women.²⁰¹ I consider that re-visioning is required to draw out women's experiences of WW1 that appeal to women. This may be stimulated as we move towards the WW1 commemorations as women might ask themselves what they would have experienced if they had lived through that time.

I believe that there are a number of considerations for historical novelists wishing to re-vision and portray women who challenged traditional binarisms. Firstly, whose story do they tell? As this thesis has shown, there was no one experience for women, no 'every woman.' It depended on their age and class, as well as their view of the war and women's suffrage. It is not possible to write a novel for each individual

¹⁹⁸ Robert Pope, *Creativity – Theory, History, Practice* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2005), 86.

¹⁹⁹ de Groot, *The Historical Novel*, 112.

²⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 70.

²⁰¹ *ibid.*

woman's experience but it is not helpful to perpetuate the stereotypes of nurse and munitionette. A midpoint needs to be found whereby a range of experiences is portrayed across a number of novels. There is, of course, a danger in creating a new stereotype if the number of novels is significantly low.

The choice of 'whose story' is related to the second consideration: why a novelist wants to write a particular story about WW1. Is the war a backdrop to the story and potentially interchangeable with another setting? Is the purpose of the novel to entertain? Does the novelist wish to explore certain social issues and WW1 provides an interesting setting or do they want to explore those issues specifically in the context of WW1? In terms of the historical novels analysed for this thesis, there are a range of motivations.

For male authors, those novels by Henry Williamson and Stuart Cloete are semi-autobiographical. John Harris served in WW2 and sought to write a novel that was a tribute to the men of Yorkshire who served in the Battle of the Somme. The novelist is keen to point out in the preface its basis on primary sources, including conversations with veterans. Derek Robinson, who spent his National Service in the RAF, provides a realistic account of the Royal Flying Corps during WW1. Sebastian Faulks was inspired by his reporting of the seventieth anniversary of the Armistice and states that one of the themes of *Birdsong* is redemption whereby his aim was to "in some way to redeem the pity of what these men went through by paying loving attention to it all these years later."²⁰²

In the case of female novelists, Susan Hill wanted to write a WW1 novel but delayed it for years due to apprehension about immersing herself in the experience of the war. The themes of *Strange Meeting* are the fear of emotional intimacy and possession.²⁰³ She does re-vision WW1 through the eyes of a marginalised group - homosexuals. Louisa Young's interest stemmed from the research she carried out for the biography of her grandmother, Kathleen Scott, who worked with the WW1 plastic surgeon Major Harold Gillies.²⁰⁴

Pat Barker has a longstanding interest in WW1. Her grandfather, who brought her up, served in the war and received a bayonet wound which fascinated her as a

²⁰² "FAQs." The Official Website of Sebastian Faulks, <http://www.sebastianfaulks.com/index.php/category/faqs> (accessed June 01, 2013).

²⁰³ Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes, *Susan Hill: The Essential Guide* (London: Vintage, 2003), 8.

²⁰⁴ Young, *My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You*, 412.

child.²⁰⁵ Although the *Regeneration* trilogy is written predominantly through the eyes of male characters, Barker has stated that it is “very much a female view of war.”²⁰⁶ In an interview with Sheryl Stevenson, Barker further explains that:

Although women in the trilogy characteristically play rather small roles, I would say that each of the roles that the women play is absolutely vital, and that actually if you wanted a key to the whole work, you could do a lot worse than just to go through from woman to woman. Essentially what women are doing and talking about is...the underlying moral question of the entire work.²⁰⁷

It is interesting that none of the many critical studies of Pat Barker’s work pick up on this approach: their focus is on the male characters.

As with *Strange Meeting*, the *Regeneration* trilogy considers the viewpoint of homosexuals as a marginalised group, as well as that of pacifists. Barker uses the setting of WW1 to explore a number of social issues that are equally relevant today, including class and gender. Brannigan states that “[w]hen [Barker] has set novels in the past...she has often been exploring the implications of the past for the present.”²⁰⁸

The consideration of issues common to the past and present, including those of gender and the role of women, is related to the third consideration for historical writers: ethics. Fiction is about invention but in terms of historical fiction, the boundaries are blurred. The relationship between historical novels and academic history is the subject of ongoing academic debate, giving rise to a number of recent academic conferences, for example “Novel Approaches: from Academic History to Historical Fiction” (2011)²⁰⁹ and “Other Voices, Other Times” (2012)²¹⁰. The debate at these conferences often referred to questions regarding the levels of accuracy and authenticity in historical fiction.

In some ways it is difficult for anyone, including novelists, to understand the complexities of WW1 society and its impact on an individual’s thoughts, emotions

²⁰⁵ Sheryl Stevenson, “With the Listener in Mind: Talking about the *Regeneration* Trilogy with Pat Barker,” in *Critical Perspectives on Pat Barker*, eds. Sharon Monteith et al (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 175.

²⁰⁶ Ronald Paul, “In Pastoral Fields,” in *Critical Perspectives on Pat Barker*, eds. Sharon Monteith et al (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 147.

²⁰⁷ Stevenson, “With the Listener in Mind: Talking about the *Regeneration* Trilogy with Pat Barker,” 177.

²⁰⁸ Brannigan, *Pat Barker*, 3.

²⁰⁹ *Novel Approaches: from Academic History to Historical Fiction* (Institute of Historical Research, London, November 17 – 18, 2011), conference.

²¹⁰ *Other Voices, Other Times* (Bath Spa University, Bath, June 29, 2012), conference.

and actions. However, research across academic disciplines allows us to view this period in terms of distinct paradigms, as well as providing detailed conclusions based on analysis of quantitative and qualitative evidence. It becomes problematic when a historical novelist, consciously or unconsciously, overlays their writing with knowledge of subsequent events or their own modern day concerns. This applies to consideration of issues specifically from a WW1 perspective and is even more difficult if a novelist uses the war as a setting to safely explore contemporary issues.

The concern, particularly with the latter approach, is misrepresentation. Just as there was no one experience of WW1 for either men or women, there was not a single view of any of the issues of the day. This thesis has set out varying views from pro-war to anti-war and pro-women's suffrage and anti-feminism. It is the context that is most important: a reader needs to be aware of the wider world in which the characters live in order that they can understand why they act and feel as they do. On the subject of women in WW1 it would be easy to believe that all women who undertook war work would want to continue to be independent after the war but half of those who made up the increase in women's labour chose to return to their traditional roles.²¹¹ The post-war world they found themselves in was very different to today. McEwan quotes the historical novelist Mary Renault as follows: "people of the past should not be modernized to make an easier read, nor judged by standards irrelevant to their own day in order to make dishonest propaganda for some modern cause..."²¹²

Of all the historical novels analysed here, it is Pat Barker that is concerned with the exploration of modern day issues within the context of WW1. However, the war is very much at the forefront of the novel, it is not simply a backdrop. Ouditt notes that Blake Morrison "registers some dissatisfaction with the predictability of Barker's concern with the 'very nineteen-nineties' issues of gender and emasculation..."²¹³ Alison Weir also observes that some historians believe Barker's work to be full of twenty first century baggage and that many believe her version is far too modern but this is liked by many readers.²¹⁴ The issues of gender and emasculation, which Morrison refers to, were equally relevant during WW1: they are not exclusively

²¹¹ Culleton, *Working-Class Culture, Women and Britain, 1914-1921*, 179.

²¹² Neil McEwan, *Perspective in British Historical Fiction Today* (London: MacMillan, 1987), 19.

²¹³ Sharon Ouditt, "Myths, Memories, and Monuments: Reimagining the Great War," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War*, ed. Vincent Sherry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 249.

²¹⁴ Alison Weir, "Plenary Lecture: Q&A session."

contemporary issues. Further, the world in which Barker's characters live is extremely well researched and accurate. The character's actions, thoughts and dialogue are within the context of WW1 and at no point do they appear as contemporary people dressed in the clothes of the past. Barker manages to strike a difficult balance in which the narrative and dialogue have a contemporary tone.

6.3.4 Continuation of Traditional Binarisms?

There is a question to be asked as to whether academic discourse on gender, cultural change and post-modern wars have had an impact on WW1 historical novels, specifically regarding women who challenged traditional binarisms.

Cooke and Woollacott's *Gendering War Talk* (1993), is a collection of essays that explores the cultural representation of gendered experiences of war. They conclude that "war is beginning to undo the binary structures that it originally put in place... Women's inclusion as participants in wars of this century has blurred distinctions between gender roles in peace and in war."²¹⁵ The essays make reference to the negotiable nature of gender in post-modern wars.

I believe that there are a number of areas to consider in terms of this negotiation of gender: women's support of war, the female soldier and the change to the definition of the Front. Interestingly, it can be argued that the latter two areas find their origins in WW1.

Elshtain and Tobias note that a number of academics, for example Berkman and Ruddick, have found that most American and European women support a strong national military establishment and organised violence in emergencies.²¹⁶ This includes feminists, indeed Ruddick states that "...many feminists who clearly perceive and heartily resent war's masculinity challenge military practices in the hope of securing for women a citizen's right to fight and to command fighters."²¹⁷

Berkman and Ruddick also refer to female engagement in war, including within the armed services. Ruddick argues that although the impersonal character of military thinking is often thought to alienate women, soldiery suits the temperament of many women.²¹⁸ Women first joined the British armed services in WW1, albeit in an auxiliary capacity, in order to free up men for the Front. Women currently serve

²¹⁵ Cooke and Woollacott, *Gendering War Talk*, xi.

²¹⁶ Berkman, "Feminism, War and Peace Politics," 157.

²¹⁷ Ruddick, "Notes Towards a Feminist Peace Politics," 110.

²¹⁸ Ruddick, "The Rationality of Care," 234.

within armed services across the world but the level of engagement varies dependent on the individual country. Cooke and Woollacott observe that “[s]ince the invasion of Panama in 1989, when women combatants were chosen for special media focus, interest in female soldiers has been high.”²¹⁹

During WW1, the delineation of the frontline was challenged as a result of bombing raids on Britain. This was perpetuated during WW2 and reached the extreme with the advent of the atomic bomb. The binarisms of male/female, home/front are not applicable in the nuclear age or in the ‘war against terror.’

It can also be argued that traditional binarisms have remained intact throughout post-modern wars. There is considerable support amongst women, including feminists, for war but there remain anti-war feminists. Freeman observes that “...it is interesting to note that in many current feminist anti-war critiques the masculine/feminine couple is not only unexamined but positively valorised and reendorsed: man is equated with war and destruction, woman with peace and creativity.”²²⁰ Ruddick also refers to feminists who use psychoanalysis to provide an explanation of gendered behaviours in war that result in “...an ideal of soldierly brotherhood that unites men against women, who cannot share the bond of battle...”²²¹ The potential for nuclear war has provided the backdrop to the development of the women’s peace movement.

Although women have entered the armed services, in many countries they are still denied access to the Front. Cooke and Woollacott refer to Enloe’s belief that “[w]omen as *women* must be denied access to ‘the front,’ to ‘combat’ so that men can claim a uniqueness and superiority that will justify their dominant position in the social order.”²²² British and American women’s military involvement in the Gulf War was the subject of significant debate, as well as played out in the media which showed women in uniform saying goodbye to their children. In January 2013, the American military announced that female soldiers will serve in combat from 2016. The British Ministry of Defence insists that the ban on women in combat will remain.

As with women’s response to WW1, there continues to be a variety of responses to war by women: pro or anti-war, feminist or anti-feminist.

²¹⁹ Cooke and Woollacott, *Gendering War Talk*, 320.

²²⁰ Freeman, “Epitaphs and Epigraphs: ‘The End(s) of Man,’” 305.

²²¹ Ruddick, “Notes Towards a Feminist Peace Politics,” 111.

²²² Cooke and Woollacott, *Gendering War Talk*, 320.

In order to understand whether more recent views of traditional binarisms, particularly those regarding women in the armed services, have influenced WW1 historical novels, it is necessary to consider the impact on wider Western culture. The portrayal of women in traditionally male employment, for example law enforcement, is well established in literature and the media. Their role in the military is now beginning to be represented. On the subject of film, Schubart states that:

Most male film genres are at some point in their development 'feminised'...This almost never happens in the war movie. Women can be nurses, enemies, prostitutes, or soldier's wives but not soldiers. That is, not until the mid-nineties, where the female soldier made her entrance in *Courage Under Fire* (1996), *G.I. Jane* (1997), and *A Soldier's Sweetheart* (1998).²²³

The female marine has also appeared in the computer games *Halo 2* (2004)²²⁴, *Halo 3* (2007)²²⁵ and *Halo Reach* (2010)²²⁶. The novel as a cultural form has yet to make a significant contribution to the portrayal of the modern female soldier. Schubart states that "[t]he *symbolic* weight of gender...seems frozen. Our culture finds it difficult to visualise women as warriors, and in our cultural and mythological imagination women remain where they have always been: at home."²²⁷ A search for novels based on women's frontline experience of Iraq and Afghanistan reveals that, despite a plethora of autobiographical accounts, they are virtually non-existent. There are only two novels based on modern military women: Coye et al's *My Navy Too* (1997) - an epistolary novel written by three authors and McKenna's *Valkyrie* (2000) - a mass market romance novel.

I believe that there are two reasons why we may expect to see recent debate on women and war influence the portrayal of women in the WW1 historical novel. Firstly, there is the element of re-visioning: have modern day challenges to traditional binarisms impacted which women's story to tell? Secondly, and related to re-visioning, there is the use of the distance and 'safety' of historical novels to examine current issues, for example the debate around women's role in the military. In his analysis of the origins of the historical novel, De Groot refers to Sanders observation

²²³ Rikke Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Heroes* (Jefferson, London: McFarland and Company, 2007), 250.

²²⁴ *Halo 2*, developed by Bungie (2004; Washington: Microsoft Game Studios), computer game.

²²⁵ *Halo 3*, developed by Bungie (2007; Washington: Microsoft Game Studios), computer game.

²²⁶ *Halo Reach*, developed by Bungie (2010; Washington: Microsoft Game Studios), computer game.

²²⁷ Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Heroes*, 262.

that “[t]he past could be seen to reflect the present, and, as a consequence, modern problems could be judged more detachedly for being considered within a historical perspective.”²²⁸ With specific reference to WW1, Buck states that “...our preoccupation with past wars is always a response to the war that has not yet happened, tells us something of why later twentieth-century writers, critics, and readers still return to the Great War as a subject. And, thanks to the efforts of feminist critics, women writers are now central to that return.”²²⁹

WW1 was a turning point, albeit with limitations, when women challenged traditional binarisms on an unprecedented scale including joining the armed services for the first time. There is ample opportunity to explore current debate on women in the military from a distance of a hundred years. This thesis has shown that this has not happened. As noted in section 6.3.3, re-visioning WW1 in historical novels through the eyes of women is in its infancy and has not yet tackled the question of women in the military.

It is not only the contribution of women in WW1 that is marginalised in Western culture. Anna Froula, in a study of the portrayal of female American soldiers in WW2 has found that “...in World War II, American popular culture helped perpetuate a cultural amnesia that has buried women's vast contributions to the US Armed Forces, the better to mythologize our ‘boys in uniform.’”²³⁰

7. Conclusion

Since the 1980s, feminist academics have explored gendered war experiences: challenging the traditional binarisms of male/female, war/peace and front/home front. They emphasise the wide range of women’s war experiences which are often dependent on age and class, as well as their stance on feminism and war. Academic debate may be ongoing but traditional binarisms in relation to war are culturally endorsed. To that end, academics have also examined the portrayal of gendered war experiences in, for example, literature and film. Any social change of viewpoint regarding the role of women in past, current and future wars will be heavily influenced by cultural experience. Cooke notes that “[i]n the latter half of the twentieth century, creative writers, war analysts, photographers, and above all, the

²²⁸ de Groot, *The Historical Novel*, 34.

²²⁹ Buck, “British Women’s Writing of the Great War,” 107.

²³⁰ Anna Froula, “Free a man to fight: the figure of the female soldier in World War II popular culture,” *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 2, no. 2 (autumn 2009): 153.

media are increasingly recording war stories at variance with a supposed archetype. A remarkable outcome of this new recording enterprise is to complicate the instinctive erasure of women's presence in war."²³¹

In terms of WW1, this thesis has found that women who challenged traditional binarisms are marginalised in WW1 novels thereby perpetuating those binarisms. The re-publication of *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* and *We That Were Young* in the 1980s were a valuable starting point in terms of remembering women's experiences but there is an opportunity here for historical novelists to 're-vision'. Indeed, Cadogan and Craig in the late 1970s stated that "[f]rom a feminist point of view, in sociological terms, the wars [WW1 and WW2] provide the most obvious contradictions of certain assumptions about women's innate incapacities. There is still room for a great deal of fiction on this subject."²³²

As I have stated within this thesis, there is a cyclical argument pertaining to WW1 historical novels and the role of women. There is an assumption that female readers are not as interested in war literature as men but they may be if war novels were written from a woman's standpoint. I believe that there is a possibility that this cycle may be broken with the 1914 – 18 commemorations. Campbell reminds us that most of those who experienced WW1 first hand have passed away but "yet we live in a world that is still very much a product of those years. These ghosts will not speak for themselves; the process of interpretation continues."²³³ These ghosts are female as well as male and historical novelists have a role to play in ensuring that the significant contribution made by women to WW1 is remembered.

²³¹ Miriam Cooke, "Wo-man, Retelling the War Myth," in *Gendering War Talk*, eds. Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 178.

²³² Cadogan and Craig, *Women and Children First: The Fiction of Two World Wars*, 292.

²³³ Campbell, "Interpreting the War," 277.

Annex A: Table to show the negative nouns used by male novelists to describe women along a geographical continuum from the Home Front to the Front in WW1 novels published pre-1939

Home Front	Hospitals	Camps	Billets	Villages/Towns	Estaminets/Brothels	Farms/Ruined Villages	Frontline	Letters
Baggage	Species	Piece	Birds	Animal	Houri	Prostitutes		
Bit of fluff		Pushers	Cow	Bit	Whores	Witch		
Brat		Skirts		Bitch				
Bugger				Bits of fluff				
Cat/s				Bit of skirt				
Chit				Drabs				
Cocotte				Hag/s				
Devils				Harlot				
Flappers				Painted woman				
Fornicatress				Pushers				
Gerties				Tart				
Harlot				Wench				
Hussy								
Martinet								
Mistress								
Parrots								
Pet dogs								
Piece								
Products								
Prostitutes								
Prudes								
Pushers								
Sirens								
Skirt								
Slattern								
Slave								
Slut								
Tarts								
Thing								
Trollop								
Wanton/s								
Wench								
Whore								

Annex B: Table to show the positive nouns used by male novelists to describe women along a geographical continuum from the Home Front to the Front in WW1 novels published pre-1939

Home Front	Hospitals	Camps	Billets	Villages/Towns	Estaminets/Brothels	Farms/Ruined Villages	Frontline	Letters
Angel	Angel	Girl/s	Dame	Beldame	Girl/s	Female		Auntie
Childbearer	Dantriques	Lady/ies	Gal	Dames	Madame	Girl/s		Mother
Courtesan	Girl	Women	Girl	Daughter of God	Mad'moiselles	Lady		Mrs
Creature	Lady/ies		Lady	Female	Maidens	Madame		Wife
Damsel	Maidens		Madame	Girl/s	Women	Mademoiselle		
Englishwoman	Women		Mademoiselle	Lady		Madonna		
Female/s			Maid	Madame		Missy		
Gal/s			Maman	Mademoiselle		Mistress		
Gentlewomen			Menagere	Maidenhood		Pal		
Girls			Peasant women	Woman/en		Petite		
Girl/s			Woman			Woman		
Goddesses			Woman/en			Woman/en		
Heroine			Womenfolk					
Kid/child								
Lady/ies								
Lassies								
Madame								
Maid								
Maiden								
Martyr								
Mate								
Matrons								
Mistress								
Pal								
Priestess								
Starlet								
Virgin								
Woman								
Woman/en								
Womanhood								
Womenfolk								

Annex C: Table to show the negative and positive nouns used by female novelists to describe women along a geographical continuum from the Home Front to the Front in WW1 novels published pre-1939

Home Front	Hospitals	Camps	Billets	Villages/Towns	Estaminets/Brothels	Farms/Ruined Villages	Frontline	Letters
Cat/s	Bitches	Bitch		Mamselles				
Chattel		Harlot/s						
Chit		Madam						
Minx/es		Slut						
Mistress								
Sorceress								
Vampires								
Angel	Angels	Ancilla Domini		Bonnes		Lady	Womenkind	Mother
Beauties	Bird	Angel		Damsel		Madame		My Darling
Creature		Bird		Madame		Woman/en		
Damsel		Bonnes		Peasant women				
Female/s		Creature		Woman/en				
Gals		Englishwomen						
Girl/s		Females						
Girl/s		Girl/s						
Heroine		Heroines						
Kid/child		Lady						
Lady/ies		Lady/ies						
Lassies		Lady-workers						
Maiden		Lasses-in-khaki						
Mistress		War girls						
New Woman		Womanhood						
Saint		Women						
Sweetheart		Virgin						
Swell								
Woman								
Woman/en								
Womenfolk								
Womanhood								
Womankind								
Virgin								

Annex D: Table to show the negative nouns used by male novelists to describe women along a geographical continuum from the Home Front to the Front in WW1 novels published post-1939

Home Front	Hospitals	Camps	Billets	Villages/Towns	Estaminets/Brothels	Farms/Ruined Villages	Frontline	Letters
Bitch/es				Bitch			Bit of fluff	
Bit of fluff				Bit of skirt				
Bird				Bit of stuff				
Canary				Slut				
Courtesan				Tart				
Fillies				Whore/s				
Flappers								
Hag								
Harlots								
Hussy								
Piece								
Prostitute/s								
Scarlet Woman								
Tart/s								
Thing								
Tom								
Trick								
Whore/s								
Working girls								
Vamp								

Annex E: Table to show the positive nouns used by male novelists to describe women along a geographical continuum from the Home Front to the Front in WW1 novels published post-1939

Home Front	Hospitals	Camps	Billets	Villages/Towns	Estaminets/Brothels	Farms/Ruined Villages	Frontline	Letters
Chatelaine	Girl	Woman/en	Gal	Creature	Females	Girl/s	Girl	
Creature	Lady		Lady	Frenchwoman(en)	Fille	Dames	Woman	
Englishwomen	Woman/en		Madame	Girl/s	Girl/s	Madame		
Female/s			Women	Lady/ies	Ma'mselle	Woman/en		
Filly				Woman/en	Woman			
Gel								
Girl/s								
Heroine								
Lady/ies								
Lass/ies								
Madonna								
Maid								
Mannequin								
Mother Eve								
New Woman								
Sweetheart/s								
Woman								
Woman/en								
Womenfolk								
Vision								

Annex F: Table to show the negative and positive nouns used by female novelists to describe women along a geographical continuum from the Home Front to the Front in WW1 novels published post-1939

Home Front	Hospitals	Camps	Billets	Villages/Towns	Estaminets/Brothels	Farms/Ruined Villages	Frontline	Letters
Bitch/es					Whores			
Pro								
Trollop								
Whore/s								
Creature	Girl			Girl/s	Girl/s	Girl/s		
Englishwoman/en	Woman/en			Lady/ies				
Girl/s				Lady-volunteers				
Girlie				Madame				
Hostess				Woman/en				
Lady/ies								
Lass/ies								
Madame								
Sweetheart/s								
Wench								
Woman/en								

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The Half-Painted War

Part 1

*War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metalization of the human body.
War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of
machine guns...War is beautiful because it creates new architecture, like that of the
big tanks, the geometrical formation flights, the smoke spirals from burning villages.*

F.T. Marinetti

Chapter One

September 1916

“He’s captured a glimpse of the future.”

The comment reached Edith, who was standing alone at the other end of the small gallery in Leicester Square. Intrigued by the hubbub, she walked towards the crowd gathered around an oil painting in a simple frame.

“It’s hardly the future, we’ve used machine guns for years.” The young man, who was not in uniform, shook his head and laughed.

“You miss my point.” The older man peered over his glasses. “I’m referring to the painting itself. I’ve never seen anything like it. If the government had commissioned him they would probably have discouraged his exploration of the avant-garde and demanded pageantry. But this shows us that Futurism does have a legitimate place.”

She excused her way past the voluble critics and stood before the painting: described on a printed card as *La Mitrailleuse* by C.R.W. Nevinson, 1915. Three French soldiers huddled together in a trench with a corpse. One sat hunched over a machine gun, intent on his target. The head and shoulders of his comrades pressed against the frame of the painting. She was drawn to its centre until she was with them in that cramped, dark place. The shared angles of their faces made it difficult to see them as individuals. The gun and the men were painted in the same bold metallic grey and blue: constituent parts of the war machine.

“Nevinson met Marinetti in London.” The two men turned to look at her. “It would have been in 1913. They attended dinners and readings at the Cabaret Club and the Poet’s Club. They wanted to spread the word about Marinetti’s Futurist manifesto.”

“You’re very well informed.” The older man smiled. “But of course the matter was widely reported in the press.”

She stepped forward and raised her chin, unimpressed by his patronising tone and keen to tell him that her knowledge of the matter was deeper than he might expect. “My elder brother is a contemporary of Nevinson’s. They studied at the Slade together. I remember that they were very excited by Marinetti and his manifesto was what made them keen to volunteer for service. War was meant to be the stimulus for greater art. Nevinson went off to drive ambulances and my brother John is in the

Artists Rifles, doing his duty as all young men should.” She glared at the young man in his dapper suit and he turned away.

The crowd pressed forward and the rest of the gallery was hidden from view.

“I agree that this is an innovative piece,” she continued. “Although Nevinson has been discharged from the army, one can appreciate how the war has influenced his style and made a positive impact on his work.”

The older man raised his eyebrows. “You appear to have more than a passing interest in the subject.”

“I too studied at the Slade.”

The crowd murmured and the young man turned back. “Useful for art appreciation, of course but it’s not a profession for a woman.”

“I don’t agree. And you may be interested to know that I was held in high regard by my tutors.”

“What’s your name? Perhaps we’ve heard of you?” He held out his hands and looked at the people around him. “If you’re so talented you must have exhibited by now.”

She lowered her head. “I haven’t exhibited since I left college. I...”

The young man laughed and others joined him. She pushed past the crowd and hurried through the gallery to the door. Nevinson’s paintings were remarkable and she hadn’t seen them all but she didn’t want to stay there for a minute longer.

Outside she breathed deeply and leaned against the wall. The chill seeped through her summer coat. Tides of people flowed across Leicester Square, parting around Shakespeare’s statue and gathering in front of the grand Empire and Alhambra theatres. A handful of portrait artists were anchored to the railings. One sketched a soldier, his face fresh with youth. It seemed that everyone who could sketch or paint was recording the war. Even *The Bystander*, sold by a scruffy boy on the corner, encouraged amateur artists among the soldiers at the Front to send in their work.

Three years training and a desire to push the boundaries: what did she have to show for it? The students had put on an exhibition at the end of their final year at the Slade: the result of months of preparation. She no longer knew where she ended and her paintings began. She woke every morning desperate to replicate on canvas the perfect paintings in her dreams and was frustrated that her fledgling ability did not yet allow her to bridge that gap. But with the help of her tutors she understood

where she needed to concentrate her efforts and was determined to succeed. Her days in the studio were never long enough, though she stopped only briefly to eat.

On opening night, one of the tutors introduced himself to her parents. She sensed that her father was uncomfortable in the presence of such a striking man, with his exotic silk cravat and specks of paint on the backs of his hands. He smiled politely whilst the man praised her abilities. When the subject turned to the future, her father admitted that she had achieved a great deal but that she was unlikely to match the success of her brother and should concentrate on finding a husband. The tutor started to intercede but she stopped him when she saw the distress on her mother's face.

What had happened since that night? The Slade exhibition should have been the first stage of a fulfilling artistic life but it marked its end. Her father made it clear that his backing was for a finite period.

She looked back through the vast single paned window of the gallery and watched the soundless mouths of those inside. It should be her name falling from their lips.

The light faded and ribbons of cold air from the Thames worked their way through the streets. She set off across the Square and brushed away the flakes of white paint from the gallery's façade that clung to her coat.

* * *

"You should have had the decency to tell us that you were going out this afternoon and that you may have been back late."

Her mother pulled the curtains and sat next to her on the brass bed. Her rich auburn hair glowed in the soft lamplight.

"I managed to calm your father down before he went out this evening but you cannot rely on me to make excuses for you."

"I'm sorry." She sighed and rested her head on her mother's shoulder. The subdued light in the bedroom made her want to close her eyes and sleep.

"Where have you been?"

"I went to see Richard's paintings at the Leicester Galleries."

Her mother pulled away. "Please not that again. You promised me that you wouldn't go. Your father will be furious if he finds out."

“He can’t stop me going to an exhibition.” She slammed her hand down on the bed. “Why can’t I do what I want? It’s not as if I went to a public house or dined with an unsuitable man without a chaperone.”

“He can stop you from doing whatever he likes while you live here. And you know how he feels about you and your art.”

“But it means so much to me. When I sketch I don’t feel the passing of time. It satisfies me and makes me feel complete. I can’t stop and I’m tired of hiding it from father.”

“You must. He and I are both worried about your brother and these days I don’t have the energy to cope with your escapades as well.”

She ran her hand back and forth on the cool satin eiderdown. “I love John but he’s a mirror that shows who I’d have been if I was father’s son. It never matters what he wants to do, father encourages him. It frustrates me.”

“I understand but in future, I wish you’d be more thoughtful. You need to be responsible. You’re a grown woman, after all. I want to support you but now isn’t the time for all this.” She stood up and smoothed down her dress against her slim body.

“I don’t mean to be selfish. I won’t give up my dream of being an artist but I’ll try hard not to antagonise father.”

“Thank you. He does care for you, we both do. Perhaps when the war is over and John is back, he may be more understanding.” She walked across the room and out on to the landing. The door clicked shut behind her.

Edith jumped up and went to the dresser. The bottom drawer was filled with small leather bound sketchbooks and was difficult to open. She took one out and turned the pages. The drawings were of models, friends and other students. Each one took her back to that place and time, every pencil stroke remembered as the steps to a dance.

The sketches were competent but it was not a case of ability. Where was the innovation? She threw the book on to the bed and it fell open at a sketch of John made before he left for France. It was full length and showed him in his entire uniform, from the stiff cap to the tightly bound puttees above new leather boots. Merely wearing the uniform he was part of the New Army. Months later he was out at the Front but nothing had changed for her. For once she couldn’t follow him.

If only she could be a part of the next generation of artists, exploring new forms and techniques required to express the world that they all found themselves in.

Richard's exhibition proved that the war was the greatest influence on modern art and to achieve success meant being a part of it.

Chapter Two

October - November 1916

The days became shorter and the world prepared to lose its colour. She spent hours in the park near her home. On those beautiful gilded days that only autumn can bring, she sat with the sun at her back. When a week of rain came, she refused to change her routine and took shelter in the little wooden tea room at the gate. All the while she filled her sketchbook but her heart was not in it. The subject matter did not inspire her. Each day, children fed precious crumbs to the sparrows while old women looked on in disdain at the waste and men in uniform put their arm around any willing girl they could find. All the artists in London had access to the same dull scenes. She didn't want to follow everybody else, to be average, mediocre. She would never progress her art and prove her father wrong if she remained trapped in Islington. The war was everything but it lay beyond her reach.

One thought occupied her mind, from the times she left the house in the afternoon until her reluctant return at dusk. The man at Richard's exhibition had referred to war artists commissioned by the government. Perhaps that was a way in which she might get out to France. Determined to find out more, she had written to her old tutor at the Slade to find out if he was aware of any such scheme. The reply had been a joy to read. How was his favourite pupil? Why had she not been to visit him? Yes of course he would help in any way that he could. Muirhead Bone had been commissioned by the new Official War Artists Scheme based at Wellington House and had recently returned from the Front. The Slade had not been approached but it was likely that further artists would be needed. He'd let her know as soon as he heard of any developments.

She had replied and expressed her gratitude but she was impatient; the war was not going to last forever. She sat down one morning at the cluttered desk in her room to write directly to the scheme at Wellington House. Protocol must be followed and even she would not go so far as to turn up without a prior appointment. It wouldn't do to upset the very people that had the power to give her what she desired. Once she had their attention she planned to make it clear that she wanted this more than anyone else.

The household followed its daily gentle rhythm but her heart beat fast in the knowledge that what she was doing was extraordinary. This one letter could change her life. A door closed somewhere down below and she turned her head to listen for footsteps on the stairs. None came and she let out the breath that she'd been holding. Her parents would try and stop her if they discovered her plans. It had to remain a secret until she reached the point of no return. It was all very different to when her brother had been waved off to the recruiting office and come home to be met with a slap on the back from their father.

She searched in the desk drawers for the thick cream writing paper that she saved for special occasions. There had been precious few of those since the war started. She found it under a pile of dance invitations from years before, kept as a reminder of happier days. She took a sheet of paper, unscrewed her fountain pen and began to write, her hand trying to keep pace with the urgency of her thoughts.

*Official War Artists Scheme,
Wellington House,
Buckingham Gate,
Westminster.
SW1*

*37 Park Road,
Islington.
N1*

20th October 1916

Dear Sirs,

I am writing to you to apply to be an official war artist.

I trained at the Slade School of Art and recently graduated with Honours. I am most willing to travel to France. Indeed, this is preferable to a post in England.

I would be grateful if at your earliest convenience you could advise of a date on which to meet in order to discuss the matter further.

I enclose the details of my tutor who will be happy to act as my referee.

Yours faithfully,

Edith Howard.

She put down her pen and relaxed back into the chair, scanning the images of paintings that she had collected over the years and pasted on to the wall by her

desk. Postcards and cuttings from exhibition catalogues - works by Matisse, Derain and Picasso. She had put them up to remind her of the innovation that was possible: in style, technique, subject, composition, the use of colour. When she was a young student she had admired them but her ambition had been to be the one whose work was pored over in art college lecture rooms. Richard Nevinson's exhibition catalogue lay at her elbow. He was the new pioneer, a man who had stood at the Frontline in France. She had to experience what he did, if she were to stand a chance of success.

Once she met the convenors of the scheme in person, they'd surely be impressed by her talent and enthusiasm. They didn't need to know of her motives. If they asked her why she wanted to be a war artist, she intended to lie, claim to want to boost the country's morale or some such excuse. As long as the schemes' administrators received work that they could exhibit they would be content and her place in the new art world assured.

The letter was written and all that remained was to address the practicalities. It was simple. She would travel to France on behalf of the scheme, find a suitable place to stay not far from the Front and begin preliminary sketches. It was a difficult time of year to embark on such a venture with the cold weather setting in but a visit to the Army and Navy Store courtesy of her brother's account would take care of that. No one could accuse her of naivety. She hummed quietly to herself, an optimistic tune of her own making.

She put the letter in an envelope and wandered across to the window. The garden to the rear of the house was dominated by a great oak tree, a remainder of Islington's rural past. Its fallen brown leaves lay scattered at its base with no gardener to rake them away. She knew each major limb of that tree; had drawn them through the seasons, climbed them with her brother. Every day of her life she had been reassured by the stability of that view but she longed for change.

* * *

In the weeks that followed, she had resisted the desire to visit Wellington House to ask why a simple decision took so long. As each day came without an answer, she couldn't settle and her parents noticed her short temper. Frustration crept into her

dreams so that sleep gave no peace. It became an obsession that she was unable to discuss with a soul.

The day the reply came she intercepted it before it reached the breakfast table but she had no time to read it. A morning spent shopping in the rain with her mother added to the unbearable wait. When they got back to the house, she fled to her room. Her clothes were damp and there was no fire in the grate but she didn't care. She flung herself on to the bed and tore open the envelope.

*Miss E. Howard,
34 Park Road,
Islington.
N1*

*Official War Artists Scheme,
Wellington House,
Buckingham Gate,
Westminster.
SW1*

10th November 1916

Dear Miss Howard,

Thank you for your letter of 20th October, offering your services to the scheme, which has only recently been established.

I regret that we are unable to offer you a post at this time. Our artists in the field will be men who have seen active service and we have been inundated with requests from those who fulfil these criteria. In addition, we are not able to offer you a post based in the United Kingdom.

I wish you every success in the future.

Yours sincerely,

Mr Gilbert.

She threw the letter down and lay curled up on the bed, wrapping her arms around herself. Her damp stockings clung to her legs but she made no effort to remove them. It had been a long wait for five miserable sentences. This man, this Mr Gilbert whoever he was, may as well have slapped her across the face.

The wind shook the window in its frame and as the rain intensified the individual drops on the glass merged, until the oak tree became a blur of viridian and raw umber. Tears ran down her throat and seeped into the satin eiderdown.

She covered her face with her hands, embarrassed that she'd thought that the scheme would be interested in her. As a woman she would always be denied access to the male preserve of battle, that mystical fellowship of warriors fighting to protect their homes, women and children. If the scheme had offered her a post in England it may have afforded her some useful opportunity but she was not a famous Slade alumnus. Mr Gilbert was unaware of her existence other than the brief exchange of two letters and he obviously meant for it to remain that way. She didn't believe that he wished her the best for the future. She could not bring herself to enter into further communication with Wellington House as that way led to further rejection and humiliation.

She lay still until the late afternoon light faded and the cold forced her to pull the curtains, change and make her way downstairs. The fire was lit in the drawing room and the gaslight was burning but neither provided much cheer. The heavy mahogany furniture that dominated the room had been inherited by her father and he refused to replace it with anything modern. As a child, she had invented stories about the elaborately carved birds and plants that covered the bookcases and cabinets. All she saw now was a trap for the dust that gathered everywhere since the housemaid had walked out one day with the observation that when it came to it, munitions manufacture was more important than cleaning. It also paid a better wage.

Her mother put down one of the romantic novels that she loved to read. "Come and sit by the fire. What have you been doing upstairs all this time?"

"Not much as it happens." She sat down on the rug at her mother's feet. "Good evening, father."

He hadn't looked up from his newspaper since she'd entered the room. His legs were stretched out in front of him and his collar was undone. He was unusually relaxed. Many of the younger solicitors in his practice were away at the Front, which increased his casework. On most evenings he preferred his own company and retired early to his study with the brandy bottle and a cigar. It was the perfect time to raise the subject of the letter.

"Father, I need to talk to you."

Her mother's slippered foot pushed against the small of her back but Edith ignored the warning.

"I received a letter today from the Official War Artists Scheme. I had applied to them, you see, for a post." The words came out in one breath.

He removed his reading glasses and regarded her.

“I assume you didn’t consider it necessary to discuss the matter with your mother and me?” He stood up so that she was forced to push her head back to look at him.

“It’s immaterial now. They’ve made it clear that they don’t require my services.”

There was no point in angering him unnecessarily but she wanted to tell him. The truth was the letter had got the better of her for an hour or so. It hadn’t occurred to her that they would reject her. But it didn’t mean that it was the only way. If she told him what she had done he might understand her commitment and help her.

“What on earth made you think that they’d be interested in you?” He shook his head and his laughter had a mocking tone.

She twisted her fingers in her lap, her hands were sweating. “I believed that if they met me and saw my work they’d appreciate what I was capable of. Anyway, my tutor didn’t have any reservations. If it was so absurd I’m sure that he’d have warned me.”

“Oh, that man. He always encouraged you, particularly if it meant annoying me.”

Her mother reached down and put a hand on her shoulder. It was small comfort.

“You’re gifted, darling, but I’m not sure that this was the right way to go about things. Anyway, travelling up and down the country on your own is not suitable for a young woman.”

“Muriel, why must you encourage her? I’ve made it quite clear since your graduation, Edith, that as far as I’m concerned you have no future in art.”

“I disagree. And it may interest you to know that I didn’t mean to stay in England. I asked to be sent to France.” She immediately regretted her bluntness. Her mother sat with her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide with disbelief.

As he walked to the other side of the room, her father’s shadow lengthened until it filled most of one wall.

“Your naivety amazes me. Firstly, you think that the scheme would automatically accept you and secondly that you would be able to go to France. Just like that. Have you any comprehension of what’s happening on the other side of the Channel?”

He picked up the evening paper from the arm of the chair and threw it on to the floor beside her. She and her mother jumped.

“Your brother is out there, in grave danger. Maybe you should remember that. Men like him are made to see horrors that they should never have to. You think that the war is a show that you can watch from the wings.”

She looked at the numerous postcards of towns in France that lined the mantelpiece, with cheerful messages from John that she wanted to believe. Her mother refused to take any of them down.

“What did you think would happen?” he continued, his voice raised, “that you’d be driven up to the Front to sit at an easel with your paint brushes while the battle was fought around you?”

“I admit I hadn’t given much thought to where I’d end up. I assumed the scheme would take care of all that. But I’m not foolish enough to think that I’d see fighting at close quarters.”

“Oh well, thank heavens you understand that much. Of all the unsuitable ideas you’ve come to us with in recent years, this is the most ludicrous. You need to be less selfish and realise that your place is at home. You should marry and raise a family. It’s your duty. We’re losing thousands upon thousands of men. We will need to rebuild the country.”

Not the marriage argument again. “But all the study I went through, the cost. What was the point?”

“Your mother convinced me that you should go. I hoped that it would keep you out of trouble for a year or so before you became bored with it. Move on to a new fad. It’s not as if we couldn’t afford it.” He retrieved the newspaper from the floor and sat back down.

It was good to know the truth. It made it easier to speak her mind and she stood up, her arms relaxed at her side. “I never became bored with it. It’s all I’ve ever wanted. You must have seen that.” She looked at her mother, who sat staring into the fire. “You knew how I felt and that’s why you convinced father to let me go. When I graduated I had such ambition and then this blasted war came. Well, I won’t sit in limbo any longer and I certainly don’t intend to be married off.”

She retreated to her room and shut the door. Would she move from this house to that of a future husband’s with no significant life in between? The prospect alarmed her. It wasn’t going to happen. If her father believed that her desire to go to France was ludicrous, it was exactly what she should do.

The scheme may have refused her but it couldn’t be the only route. Richard Nevinson was not officially commissioned by the government but he had seen active service. The army would never recruit women. Her pious cousin Mary had gone out as a nurse with a Voluntary Aid Detachment but that cost money and her father

wasn't likely to agree to it. Besides, she wasn't yet twenty three and therefore too young.

She hung up her dress and started to unlace her corset. There was an answer out there somewhere and she would find it.

Chapter Three

December 1916

"I thought I might go out this morning and do some Christmas shopping," she said to her mother across the breakfast table. The sweet, sickly smell of the bacon that sat untouched on her plate made her want to retch. Lying was not conducive to good digestion. She swallowed down the last of the tepid tea in her cup to settle her stomach.

"What a wonderful idea. I may come with you."

"That would rather defeat the object, if you see what I mean."

Her mother laughed. "Ah, yes of course. Don't spend too much. You know that a book or two will make me happy."

Edith excused herself and left the room, convinced that if she stayed a moment longer she would tell her mother everything. In her haste to leave the house, she buttoned her coat the wrong way and dropped a hatpin. It was a relief to close the front door and disappear into the yellow tinged fog.

She took the Underground to Belsize Park and walked through the damp streets to Downside Crescent. The Nevinsons' red brick three storey house was a welcome sight. A few weeks before, she had written to Richard in the hope of meeting him. With his contacts in the government and France, he was the one person that she could think of that might be able to help her. His mother wrote back that he was away with his wife Kathleen in Falmouth. She remembered John, a lovely young man and was keen to help his sister if she were able to.

To her surprise, Mrs Nevinson herself opened the front door. A squat bulldog ambled out of the gloom of the hall and sat panting on the step beside her.

"Come in, my dear. Don't mind Peter, he's an absolute coward. I don't understand why Richard didn't take him to the coast. Still he is useful. Somehow he knows when the Zepps and Gothas are on their way before anyone else does."

She followed the older woman through to the sitting room. It was not as she'd expected. The walls were covered in floral patterned paper, bold petals and leaves stamped in lilac and forest green. There was a small collection of modern paintings in a style that was familiar to her. The furniture was a pale oak with clean lines. The chairs and sofa were upholstered in primrose yellow chintz. A sumptuous oriental rug

lay in the middle of the room on the polished wood block floor. A glorious fusion of light, femininity and informality. It was easy to imagine herself living in that house. It was a work of art but it was also a home that welcomed her in, soothed her.

“Sit down, Edith. That’s right. Bella! Bring the tea through when you’re ready. And some cake. We must have cake.” The invisible Bella responded with the slam of a drawer in the kitchen.

“Poor girl. All the staff have gone and she does everything for me. She’s worse than Peter, terrible nerves. The other night I had to coax her out from under the kitchen table after a raid. She was in a state.”

Mrs Nevinson sat down and drew breath. How alike mother and son were, serious dark eyes and stern mouths that could break into lightness and laughter in an instant.

“Thank you for inviting me. It’s most kind of you.”

“I’m so glad that you came. It’s very quiet at the moment with the children away.”

Edith looked over to the sideboard covered in silver framed photographs of Richard and his sister Philippa.

“It’s normally such a busy house,” continued Mrs Nevinson, “and things haven’t been helped by my having to stay in these last few weeks due to my wretched rheumatism. Until it flared up again I did masseuse work down at the hospital. Oh, those poor Belgian boys. They’re in such a terrible state.”

“And Mr Nevinson?”

It was only right to ask the usual polite questions, when she was able get a word in but it was difficult not to come straight to the point of her visit.

“Oh, he’s reporting on the war somewhere or other.”

There were no photographs of him.

Bella came into the room and put the tea tray on the table, spilling sugar cubes from the over laden bowl.

“All right, Bella, don’t worry. I’ll deal with it.”

With Mrs Nevinson distracted by pouring the tea, there was an opportunity to steer the conversation.

“I went to Richard’s exhibition at the Leicester Galleries in September.”

“How wonderful. I hope you enjoyed it.”

“Yes I did. I can honestly say that I’ve never seen work like it. And that’s the point. It inspired me. In fact, that’s not a strong enough word. It was an epiphany.” She

leaned forward in her chair and ignored the cup of tea on the table in front of her. “You remember that I studied a couple of years below Richard and John. I had ambition, as they did. I thought I had to stop when the war came. Wait until it ended. But it isn’t ending and it’s the very thing that should make me paint.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

If only Richard were here. There was no point in going into detail with his mother when she knew little of the subject.

“I want the same opportunities that men like Richard have. I want to be a war artist. Not in England but France. I contacted the government scheme but they refused me. I can’t think of a way to get out there but I thought Richard may have an idea. That’s why I wanted to see him. I’m sure if he put in a good word for me...”

“If Richard was here he’d warn you against it, my dear.” Her voice was not unkind but firm.

“I don’t understand.” She shook her head. “He’s had a successful exhibition. Everyone still talks about it.”

Peter dawdled into the room and sat at Mrs Nevinson’s feet, drool suspended in twisted strands from his half open mouth.

“Do you want some cake, you naughty dog. Of course you do. Come here.”

Had Mrs Nevinson heard her or was fussing over the wretched dog more important?

“You said he’d warn me against it. Why? Is it because I’m a woman or because the life is hard? I don’t see that either of those is reason enough to stop me. I thought he’d understand.”

“He would. You’re not dissimilar to the way he was at the beginning of the war. He saw it as the answer but he no longer thinks that.”

“I don’t believe it. His work, those paintings...”

“It’s the truth. I know because I was there when it all began and I’ve seen him change over these last few years. I lived with Richard before the war in Paris when he was studying at Julian’s. Oh, it was all very Bohemian. We lived in lodgings off the Boulevard Raspail. Richard studied during the day and I wandered round the museums and galleries, drugging myself on beauty. In the evenings we ate at *Le Dôme* and *La Rotonde*. Everyone came. Severini, Picasso, Apollinaire and Marinetti. I remember Picasso got into trouble for trying to peel paper from the wall in one of the artists’ cafés. Something to do with his collages, I suppose. They experimented

with every aspect of their work, from subject matter to materials. It was so exciting but I don't think days like those will ever come again."

It was a thrill to hear their names mentioned casually in conversation, these artists that she revered for their innovation. She looked at the paintings that hung on the opposite wall, away from the natural light that filled the room.

"These paintings, did you collect them while you were in Paris?"

"Yes. I wouldn't be able to afford them today."

"I don't mind admitting that I'm envious of you. You were fortunate to have been at the heart of such change."

"I was aware it was a special time and I never missed an opportunity to involve myself in it. Most nights were spent in the circus of Montmartre. It was very different to London. There were moving-picture shows of a very dubious nature and secretive dance halls where young girls drank milk and danced in heavy fur coats to the Tango. Many women here would have considered it shocking but I took it all in my stride."

Mrs Nevinson's eyes brightened as she remembered those days with fondness.

"Anyway, you know from your own studies, these young artists began to rally to the call of specific forms of expression. Richard joined the Futurists led by Marinetti. Futurism meant everything to my boy and that meant he saw war as a tenet in its gospel."

"Yes, yes. I remember. I explained it to some of the visitors at the exhibition."

"Well, I didn't agree with Marinetti's views on war but I went along to some of his poetry readings. They were fascinating. Although I didn't understand the language, the onomatopoeia he used meant I heard the sounds of guns and machines coming from his mouth."

This was more promising. "Did you get to talk to him? What was he like?"

"Oh yes. He was full of charm and very sympathetic towards the suffrage cause in England, which endeared him to me. Anyway, by this stage Richard was keen to go to Germany to paint. I was against it. It wasn't that I didn't like the country. I lived there for several years when I was first married. But I had a presentiment of danger. I have some psychic ability, you see."

Edith sat with her cup halfway to her mouth. Richard's mother was turning out to be far more interesting than she had at first judged.

“In the summer of 1914 we left for Marseilles and travelled in Provence. Then of course the war started. It was unnerving but the French were so matter of fact. After a long delay, we got on an overcrowded boat filled mostly with Americans. When we got home, everyone was innocently enjoying a Bank Holiday.”

“Possessed by the urge to do something and to be in the war, Richard joined the Red Cross and went out to France. He worked out of a shed in Dunkirk and cared for French soldiers with the most terrible wounds. He said he would never forget the way that those broken men cried for their mothers. After the first Christmas he fell ill and was sent home. He joined the RAMC and married Kathleen but he never returned to duty after his honeymoon. He nearly died in London with rheumatic fever and was discharged. In some ways it was a relief. What he saw at the Front made him ashamed of how he had viewed war as a Futurist.”

Mrs Nevinson sighed. The gaiety and smiles were gone.

“So Richard’s concern wouldn’t be me going to France. It’s the war itself that he disagrees with.”

“Exactly. Richard is a pacifist. I was worried about him exhibiting his work this year. It was as if painting the war might give it some aesthetic worth. I was afraid of that. The irony is that Futurism itself is on its way out but in terms of art, it is the best way to show the truth regarding war. There is nothing heroic or romantic about it.”

“He’s still a part of it though,” said Edith, raising her voice. “The war is at the centre of everything and if I want to be considered as a serious artist I need to be involved. Futurism may be at its end but whatever takes its place will be rooted in what is happening out there at the moment. You must understand that. You were in Paris when a handful of artists experimented with new means of expression and changed things forever. The place that counts nowadays isn’t Paris, it’s the battlefield.”

She fell back into the soft cushions and drummed her fingers on the arm of the chair.

“Heaven knows I understand how you feel.” Mrs Nevinson spoke gently. “When I was your age I wanted to achieve in life and contribute to society. Nothing would stop me. I was a teacher before I married and even ended up as a rent collector in the East End at one stage.”

“A rent collector?” It was hard to imagine.

“Don’t look so shocked, dear. It’s not a secret but then again I doubt my books and pamphlets on social reform are to be found in your father’s study.”

Edith laughed and relaxed her shoulders. This woman was different from anyone she had known. She was glad to have visited her, although it hadn't got her any further on her way to France.

"But I was in the minority in those days and we haven't come much further. Take the vote," continued Mrs Nevinson, "I want it but not at any price. I want equality of rights and opportunities as well. I'm glad I broke away from the WSPU when I did. Those Pankhurst women gave in as soon as the war came along. The Women's Freedom League has the right idea. What do you think?"

She had no particular view on the subject and didn't know one group of women from the next. There was no need to stay, Mrs Nevinson couldn't help her. It was best to profess ignorance and leave.

"To be honest, I'm not familiar with the complexities." She looked at her watch. "I ought to go..."

"The latest I heard was that the government plans on setting up a women's army to free up men for the Front. Quite frankly, I'm horrified. Women shouldn't co-operate with this unless they're accorded suffrage on the same terms as men."

The conversation had become interesting again. She sat back into the chair. Mrs Nevinson obviously had strong views on the subject, it was best to be cautious.

"Tell me, when will this women's army be established?" The words sounded strange to her.

"All I know is that it will be called the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. I have no idea of the timescales involved. I'm sure the Pankhursts will love the idea. They will want guns next. It doesn't surprise me, the reason I left them was because of the way they used violence to achieve their ends."

"I shouldn't think women will ever be allowed to fight in the frontline, Mrs Nevinson."

"Quite but it won't stop them wanting to. Anyway, that's enough of that or I will start to get quite agitated over the matter. Tell me, what do your parents think of your plans?"

"My father wants me to get married and have a family. My mother wants to keep the peace."

Mrs Nevinson shook her head. "It's a very difficult time for women of your age. In my day it was accepted that women married as soon as possible. Parents didn't care who it was to. You'd think that we'd have learnt but many young women I meet tell

me that it's still the same for them. The trouble is there are so few men nowadays. A generation will be lost to us because of the war."

"I'm not interested in marriage."

"Neither was I at your age. I have to say that I was impressed by Kathleen. She refused to obey Richard, left that out of the marriage ceremony entirely. Now, I can expound my views on marriage for hours but that's not why you came here."

"All I wanted was to see if Richard could smooth the way for me."

"I doubt he could have done a great deal. You will have to accept that you cannot be a war artist in France but that doesn't mean you cannot record what's happening in England. Use that to develop a strong portfolio and who knows where it may lead. I'm sorry I haven't been more help." Mrs Nevinson stood up.

"Oh, but you have been." She followed her into the hall, Peter at her ankles.

She pinned on her hat and glanced at a pencil sketch of Mrs Nevinson that hung on the wall at the base of the stairs.

"Richard did that for me a couple of years ago. It's so delicately drawn. You wouldn't think that it came from the same man that painted *La Mitrailieuse*. It's not all about this damn war."

Edith nodded but knew better. She stepped out into the cold, white lighted day. The fog had lifted.

Chapter Four

December 1916 – February 1917

In the British Museum's courtyard, the previous evening's snowfall had turned to slush. She looked up at the great, grey portico and it was hard to see where the dirt stained stone ended and the snow laden sky began. The beautiful neoclassical building was out of place in London; it belonged in a hot Greek city against a perfect blue sky.

She walked up the familiar steps to the entrance and through the swing doors. It didn't matter how many visits she'd made over the years when she needed time and space to think, the solidity and permanency of the vast echoing halls never ceased to impress.

"Parcels and umbrellas 'ere, please," shouted the elderly gentleman with impressive whiskers. "All right miss, good to see you again. Let me take that for you." He winked at her as he stretched out his arm across the desk.

"Thank you." She handed over her umbrella but held on to the tapestry bag that contained her sketchbook and pencils.

She headed to the Egyptian room and breathed deeply as she entered its quiet sanctuary. She loved to imagine the adventures that had brought the artefacts so far from their home. Glass cabinets filled with pottery, beads, amulets, scarabs and delicate papyrus. The colours alone intrigued her; paints and dyes that had survived thousands of years. She may never have travelled beyond England but where was the need when she was able to visit every continent in the safety and cleanliness of the museum.

She was attracted by a limestone sculpture of Nynofretmin. The seated woman wore a plain white sheath dress. The only embellishment was a braided wig. How Cézanne, who saw geometry in everything, would have loved it: the cylinders of the legs, the cones of the breasts, the cube of the seat. She removed her gloves, opened her sketchbook and started to capture the sculpture's outline.

The automatic movement freed her mind to reflect on her conversation with Mrs Nevinson. The change in Richard was surprising. He had every opportunity to use this war yet he'd been weakened by it. Perhaps it was inevitable, his parents were pacifists, but it was still difficult to comprehend. She would gladly exchange places

with him and the prospect of a women's army made it possible. Of course, it wasn't an army in the truest sense. The government wouldn't countenance sending women into battle but it made sense for them to work in the camps, well away from danger. There were enough post women and bus conductresses on the streets of London, why shouldn't such women go to France and make themselves useful. Naturally, they would need to recruit educated women as officers. She chewed the end of her pencil and ignored the bitter taste that diffused on the tip of her tongue. Could she be one of them? The question had been in her mind for a few days and she hadn't been able to think of any earthly reason why not. Others would apply out of a sense of duty, patriotism or revenge for the death of loved ones. Good for them but she would use it as a ticket to get across the Channel.

The outline of the sketch was complete. On closer examination Nynofretmin revealed pleasing detail: face and hands held traces of yellowish paint; a hairline crack crept across the dress below the knee. The delicate touch required to capture it was fed by the lightness inside her borne of excitement and possibility. The more she thought of it, the decision to join the army was the right one. What better opportunity would there be?

After an hour she was pleased with the sketch. Her neck ached and she rolled her head back, enjoying the delicious pull at her throat. More visitors moved between the glass cases. They were the wrong kind; laughing, talking, more interested in each other than the antiquities around them. She put her book and pencils in her bag and stepped out on to the cavernous landing.

The hum of the crowded lobby drifted up the stairs. She didn't want to join it, not yet and there wasn't anything to go back home to. She wandered into the Greek rooms on the opposite side of the landing.

The vases in the first cases challenged all expectation of antiquity. They appeared to have been painted the previous day, fresh and clearly defined. She marvelled at the way each told a story in its limited space, a circle of scenes that depicted a day in the life of one character. Many of them portrayed battles, black armour and spears stamped on cadmium orange. Even for them art and war went together.

One group of vases showed the mythical Trojan War. The painted soldiers were Homeric heroes descended from gods, not the massed ranks of the hoplites who left for the battlegrounds with the soil of their farms on their feet. Her teachers had been

very keen on the romantic nature of the classics. What was it Mrs Nevinson had said? There was nothing heroic or romantic about war.

It was all very well for Richard and his parents to be pacifists but war had gone on for millennia and would continue to do so. She didn't agree with women who handed out white feathers on the streets but neither did she send parcels to conscientious objectors in prison. People more knowledgeable than she was believed the war was right and she trusted them.

She wandered out of the room and down the stairs to the lobby where she collected her umbrella. Outside, the pearlescent sky was filled with snow and the early morning's bitter wind had dropped. By the time she reached the station, she was sweating under her thick coat.

The Underground train was crammed with men in khaki, who laughed and shouted in accents she'd never heard. It was difficult to understand what some of them said, which she considered to be a good thing. Their kit bags were thrown on the floor made wet by melted snow traipsed in on muddy boots. The soldier next to her kept digging his elbow into her side but she was reluctant to complain. He stank of alcohol, sweat and nicotine. She put her hand to her nose, lowered her gaze and stared at the filthy hands and stained coat of the soldier opposite. When she looked up he smiled at her as if apologising for the others. She blushed at the attention.

The train screeched into Angel station and she took the lift to the street, relieved to breathe in fresh air. Hunger drove her the short distance home.

"A good morning, dear?" asked her mother in the hallway.

"Yes it was. I only did a basic sketch but I enjoyed getting out for a while." She removed the book from her bag and opened it at that morning's work.

Her mother took it and held it carefully so that her fingers didn't touch the carbon.

"It's an interesting subject. It reminds me of the drawings that you used to do before you went to the Slade. Do you remember when your brother used to take you to the museum and teach you?"

"I remember." She'd not been an easy pupil, becoming frustrated at not achieving what she wanted. He took time to explain what she needed to do: a line here, some shading there.

"I'm glad to see you've put all thoughts of war art to one side. Perhaps when this is all over you could try book illustration or something."

She meant well and it was easier to let her believe what she wanted.

“Yes, I could do that. Anyway, I’ll get ready for luncheon, I’m starved.” She took the book from her mother’s hands and ran up the stairs to her room.

* * *

Cptn. J. Howard,
1st/28th Bn. London Regiment,
(Artists Rifles).

37 Park Road,
Islington.
N1

10th February 1917

Dearest John,

I hope that you’re safe and well. Your last letter reassured mother and father. They’re pleased that you’re keeping your spirits up and particularly enjoyed the story of the man who ‘borrowed’ the bicycle from the Padre. You do tell us such funny stories.

Not a great deal has happened here other than we’ve lost another cook. I know this must sound awfully trivial to you but you can imagine what father will be like if we can’t find a decent one. There aren’t many around these days as most have gone off to do war work, which brings me on to a bit of news of my own.

Do you remember I mentioned the WAAC a while ago? Well, this week it’s finally been advertised in the newspaper. They’ve asked for women to work both at home and overseas and one can state a preference. It’s likely to be the only way that I’ll get out to France. I want to be a war artist, it’s as simple as that. Joining the WAAC will make it easy. I know that you’ll back me. I haven’t told anyone else yet. I’ll tell mother and father when it’s too late for them to do anything about it.

I don’t know how long it will take to be trained and all that sort of thing but with a bit of luck I shall be out there by spring and before your next home leave. You never know, we may come across each other.

I’m so excited by all this. In the last few months, there has been inertia in my life. Soon I will be living instead of existing.

With all my love,

Edith.

* * *

37 Park Road,
Regiment,
Islington.
N1

1st/28th Bn. London
(Artists Rifles),
Attached KOSB

21st February 1917

Dearest Edith,

Thank you for your letter. It's good to know that father's priorities haven't changed! Things are fairly quiet at the moment as we're away from the line. The billet is comfortable enough. I'm writing this while I sit in the doorway of an ancient barn. The farm carries on as normal though there are a hundred or so men here. Madame is busy feeding the chickens. Her little girl is adorable. Every time I wave or salute her she runs away and giggles. I worry for her. The Front is never far away. Last night the sky in the east glowed from fire, star shells and Very lights. For hours I couldn't look at anything else. It horrified and fascinated in a primeval way.

I'm grateful for moments like this when I can sit in relative peace and imagine you all at home. I wish that I'd appreciated my old life at the time but I suppose it's difficult when you've known nothing else. The men are reading their post inside the barn and some of them have started to sing. That sound, more than anything else, brings a lump to my throat. There's a young officer, fresh from England, who has fallen asleep beside me. Poor chap, he's taking a while to get used to it all. I'm only a couple of years older than him but war pays no heed to peacetime notions of age and maturity. I've laid his coat over him and I'll let him sleep for a while.

About your news of the WAAC, word has reached us of the recruitment. What's stirred it up is that women will come out to France. England is one thing but the men feel they're fighting for their women at home and that they should jolly well stay there.

Anyway, I understand that when you have an idea in your head there's no point trying to stop you. But I want you to be very clear about what you're getting yourself into. You've never left England, let alone lifted a finger to do any type of work. It's all very well making the decision in the safety of your own home but the reality will be very different. You may think that that the raids in London mean that you're prepared

for what life is like over here. Yes they are terrible and people have died. I'm not disputing that. But way back down the line at the camps you will see things that will be more upsetting. Furthermore, we don't know what will happen in the next year or so. Those camps are away from the line at the moment but...

I believe you're very gifted and you should use that gift. I've heard about the success of Kennington, Nevinson and Bone. But you must remember that they are soldiers first. If you do come out as part of the WAAC you're unlikely to get anywhere near the Front. They'll expect you to work hard and stay in the camp. You won't be able to wander around as you please. I think you should prepare for disappointment.

When all this is over, I'll consider a return to painting but I've no desire to distil what I've seen into paint on a canvas. There is nothing here but the very worst side of man. I think I would like to paint scenes of nature, England's glorious fields and woods.

I love you and will stand by you, whatever you do. It's highly unlikely that we will come across each other out here but it would be fun if we did.

With much love,

John.

Chapter Five

March 1917

Winter and war had not lessened the grandeur of St. Ermin's Hotel, Westminster, a Victorian mansion house of red brick with hundreds of white framed windows to pull in the light. She had happy memories of the place, the excitement of her first dances and parties. How extraordinary to think that she was here to join the army.

The signs to the WAAC enrolment office led her away from the traffic of Victoria Street and into the seclusion of a small courtyard. A group of young women stood in front of the hotel entrance and spoke in raucous voices.

"You go first. You're the one that bloody suggested it."

"I will. I'm just finishing me fag." The woman rolled her eyes and exhaled smoke in one long, slow breath.

"You've got the wind up, that's what it is," jeered one of the others.

Edith walked past them and pulled her skirts to one side. "Can you let me through, please?"

"I think you've come to the wrong place, love."

Their pathetic laughter faded as she entered the lobby. She was amazed at its transformation. The white staircase and scalloped landing with its plaster balustrades were camouflaged by official posters, notices and banners. War bled into everything.

She followed the signs to the enrolment office in the Portico Lounge and paused inside the doorway. She remembered attending a lavish function there with her parents, shortly after the building was converted into a hotel. Her father complained that the rooms' cast iron columns crowned with metal fretwork were like those of a railway station. She'd loved them but they were relics in what had become a frenetic office.

Desks of all shapes and sizes, commandeered from the hotel, stood against the panelled walls. Thousands of documents and papers were filed with military efficiency. Many of the women in khaki uniforms were on their feet, too busy to sit down. They had worn threadbare paths in the plush carpet. Typewriters beat individual tattoos and fed the quick rhythm of the room. It made her uneasy; she'd never stepped foot in an office in her life, let alone one run by the army.

She tried to catch the eye of one of the women but was ignored. They couldn't fail to notice her. Did they think that she was in the wrong room?

"I'm here to enrol. Where do I go?" she asked another of the staff hurrying past her.

"Over to that desk."

The woman moved away as soon as she had spoken. It would have been impossible to identify her again, everyone looked the same in that drab uniform. She'd be no different in a few weeks and it was an uncomfortable thought.

"I was told to come to you to enrol." She waited for the dowdy young woman to finish reading some papers.

"You need to complete one of these and bring it back to me." She handed across a printed form. "You can use that table over there. Do you need a pen?"

"I have my own, thank you." She ignored the cheap one offered to her and went to sit at the table with her back to the room.

At last an opportunity to tell these people who she was and why she was here. She took out her gold fountain pen and unscrewed the lid. The questions were straightforward enough: name, date of birth, marriage status. She wrote each answer with care. The final question was the best and most wonderful of all, was she willing to be enrolled for service abroad? There was only one answer, 'yes' in bold letters and underlined.

"You're taking the plunge, then." A well dressed young woman sat down at the table and smiled. Her expensive perfume enveloped them both. "So am I. Now that Kitchener's gone we've got our chance haven't we?"

"Yes, I suppose so." It was a relief to see someone connected to her own world, not in uniform but a fur stole, gaiters and the latest in daring hat design. She was a beautiful woman undoubtedly at ease with herself.

"My name's Edith." She reached out and shook the other woman's soft, manicured hand.

"I'm Julia." She leaned across to read Edith's form. "I see you're willing to serve abroad. I am, too."

She was captivating, the sort of person you fell in love with after only a few minutes. Edith watched as she completed her form in a hurry.

"It's so exciting. Look at all this." Julia held out her hands. Her energy was impossible to resist and Edith turned round in her chair to look at the room. It was

hard to share Julia's enthusiasm but she did make enrolment into that foreign place less daunting.

"I'm ready if you are." She stood up and led Julia to the enrolment desk. The dowdy woman took Edith's form and Julia wandered a discreet distance away.

"Sit down, please. There's a range of jobs that we need people to do: cooks, waitresses, motor drivers, store keepers and clerks. Are there any of these that you are qualified for or have a particular interest in?"

She was prepared for the question. The list of jobs had been included in the newspaper advertisement and she'd remembered John's comments about being restricted to camp. Motor driver was the only one that offered any opportunity to be near the Front. Driving wasn't a problem, when she and John took trips to Surrey or the coast in their father's car, he let her take the wheel. Vehicle maintenance was a different matter. It was a dirty job, a man's job but she would have to do it.

"Motor driver, please. I've signed up to take a BSM certificate and I'm due to start next week, if that helps." She sat up straight and waited to be praised for her excellent planning. The woman merely nodded as if it was the answer she expected.

"With any luck you should have it completed before your interview. If you're called to interview, that is."

"Surely that's a formality isn't it? You need women."

"You'll receive a letter within due course to advise whether or not you've been successful, Miss Howard." The woman stamped the form with vigour, filed it and folded her hands on the ink blotter. The discussion had come to an end.

Edith stood and Julia rushed up to her.

"Would you be a darling and wait until they've dealt with me? I know we've just met but I was wondering if you'd like to go for tea. I don't want to leave here and that be it. It's the start of an adventure and we should celebrate."

"I'd love to. I'll wait for you in the lobby." She walked down the stairs, trailing her hand on the banister rail. It wasn't an anti-climax that scared her but the prospect of sitting at home alone, anxious about what she'd done.

* * *

The two women sat at a window table in a tea room near Victoria Station. Three elderly men were engaged in conversation in the far corner and an underemployed

waitress read a magazine at the cash desk. Edith was grateful to find peace after the morning's excitement. A 'bus pulled up and she observed the conductress. She'd never paid them much attention before but now she looked on this girl in her blue shapeless uniform and bobbed hair with a certain affinity.

She turned back to Julia. "Tell me, why the WAAC?"

"It's simple. Patriotism. Look at all this." She lifted her arm to the window. "Out there is Buckingham Palace, the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey. I don't want those fiends to get one booted foot in this country."

"Quite." In the beginning John used the same language to try to make them all understand why he had to volunteer. His tone had changed a few months after his arrival in France.

"I volunteer in a canteen at Woolwich Arsenal", Julia continued. "It's a bit of a lark pushing the cake trolley along miles of factory floor but it's hardly the right place for me. In the WAAC I can have a few pips on my shoulder. Now, I overheard you tell that woman that you want to be a motor driver. How thrilling."

The waitress arrived and Edith waited until she had put the tea things on the table and returned to the kitchen.

"I was happy with my decision until today but since going to that enrolment office I'm anxious I've done the wrong thing." She started to pour the tea but her hands shook and Julia took the pot out of her hand.

"Nonsense, darling. It's not what I would choose but I've a couple of friends that drive, albeit ambulances. One is the daughter of a Minister. They fit in and I'm sure you will too. If you're that worried you can tell them you've changed your mind and apply for a senior rank."

"No, no. I can't change my mind." She looked out of the window at the stream of people walking to the station; heads down, locked away in their own worlds. How prepared was she to confide in a woman who was effectively a stranger? But there was no one else. Most of her friends from the Slade had returned to family in other parts of the country, or married and moved on. John's letters meant a great deal but it wasn't the same as conversation. Besides, his experiences meant that he was moving away from her, only a step at a time and always looking back but one day he would be nearer the horizon than to her. The image became so clear that she wanted to sketch it, a lesson in perspective.

"Are you well? You seem to be a world away." Julia's eyes were wide with concern.

“I was thinking of my brother, John. He’s out in France.”

“I know how you must feel. I have three brothers in the army. We are all so terribly proud of them.”

Julia reached down and picked up her bag from the floor. She took out a photograph and handed it across the table to Edith. Three attractive, uniformed men looked back at her from a photographer’s studio. They stood close to each other, smiling as if sharing a joke.

She had seen similar photographs since the start of the war, on mantelpieces and in newspapers, albums and wallets. If they were collected and exhibited in a gallery of the dead, the dying and the lost, how many walls would they fill?

“They appear very happy.”

Julia took the photograph back and looked down at it on the table.

“It was taken when they volunteered. Peter, he’s the eldest, he came back home on leave a couple of months ago. He doesn’t look like this any more.” Her voice dropped to a whisper and the glamour that surrounded her dimmed until she became ordinary.

“It’s hard, isn’t it?”

Julia nodded but didn’t speak. The old men in the corner were laughing. Why couldn’t they be quiet? If she could return Julia’s thoughts to the day’s events, it might revive her vitality.

“Are they and your parent’s content with your decision to enrol?”

“Oh, yes. Sometimes I think my parents would join up if it was possible.”

“You’re fortunate. I haven’t told mine yet. I know what the reaction will be. I love them very much, really I do but they don’t understand. It’s always been the same. I went to art school but since discovered my father was humouring me. All he wants is for me to marry.”

Julia laughed and grabbed her hand. “Oh my dear, it’s the same for all of us.”

“I don’t see why it should be my only ambition.” She spread a thin layer of butter on a scone and it crumbled under the force of the knife. “I try and avoid going anywhere with him these days. He engineers chance meetings with men he thinks are right for me. Of course, this is all based on his criteria.”

“What are they like, these men?”

“Dull, with money and a propensity for talking over my head. That is once they’ve looked me over as if I’m a horse at market.” It was liberating to say the words out loud.

“What kind of man do you like?” asked Julia.

“If I were interested in marriage it would be to an artist or a writer. Someone who shows emotion and sees everyday things from a different angle. A man who looks at fields and sees the way the wind moves the grass, lies down and sees the infinitesimal life that it supports. Not someone who calculates how many houses it can accommodate.” She stared at the worn tablecloth and imagined a young man in a blazer on his side in the long grass, watching a grasshopper as it swayed on a blade of vivid green.

“How very romantic. I hope you find him. Sounds like someone who forgets to pay the bills or disappears and misses meals.”

“I do hope so,” she said, lifting her head. “They wouldn’t be able to criticise my absentmindedness when I’m lost in painting.”

Julia looked at her gold watch and reached down to pick up her bag. “I have to go I’m afraid. I have an appointment this evening. I’m very dull and always punctual.”

“I didn’t mean to imply that I find all punctual people dull.” She smiled at Julia and waved at the waitress, who sat at the cash desk stifling a yawn.

“I should hope not. I enjoyed our little chat, we must stay in touch.”

She pressed a visiting card into Julia’s hand. “I’d like that. We may end up in the same unit or whatever it’s called.”

The waitress brought the bill and put it in the middle of the table.

“I’ll pay for this.” Julia reached for the dish. “After all I suggested it.”

“It’s very kind but I should pay. You don’t know how much better I feel for talking to you. I’ll treat us next time.”

“There’s something I’d prefer.” Julia blushed. “Would you do a portrait of me when we next meet? Only a quick pencil sketch. It sounds terribly vain but I’ve always fancied the idea.”

“Of course I will.”

The two women left the tea room and said their goodbyes as if they had known each other for years and not a few hours. Edith walked towards the station, a smile on her face. She’d done it, she’d enrolled and if there were others like Julia in the WAAC there was no reason to be anxious.

Chapter Six

March - April 1917

“I’ve some news to tell you. I’ve signed up for a motoring course.” She watched her mother put a hand to her breast.

Silence filled the dining room. Strong perfume emanated from purple hyacinths in a ceramic bowl on the sideboard. She turned her head to look at them, nestled in their bed of soft moss. Every spring her mother brought hyacinths into the house, a sign of new life and hope. It was ironic that she chose a flower that symbolised sorrow but the war now made it strangely appropriate.

“A motoring course?” Her father stopped midway through carving the chicken.

She turned back and watched delicate twists and curls of steam rise up from the moist flesh.

“You don’t mind?” she said, softening her voice.

“Of course he doesn’t, do you Robert?” Her mother spoke quickly and added potatoes to her plate with a swift flick of the spoon. Bless her, she didn’t want there to be another argument and doubtless thought this was better than her carrying on about being a war artist.

“I don’t have any particularly strong objection to it,” her father said, continuing to carve. “But I’m curious as to where this has come from.”

“Well, I need to occupy myself and I thought that as so many other women drive, you wouldn’t want me to be left out.” She passed across her plate and looked into his eyes: they were full of suspicion. It wasn’t the time to tell the truth about the WAAC. Lying was unpalatable but what was the point of upsetting the fragile, harmonious existence of recent months?

“I’m not sure that you’ll enjoy it. All that oil and muck. Sounds more of a man’s thing but if it’s the latest fashion...”

“The other day I heard Stephen Baines say that he wasn’t interested in women who didn’t drive but expected to be ferried around.”

Her father passed back her plate of chicken and smiled. “Ah, there’s a man who I could tolerate as a son-in-law. He got those injuries because he went back for one of his men under machine gun fire, you know.”

“You say that every time his name’s mentioned.”

“He’s a fine young man. You could do worse than to marry him.”

“All the more reason to take this course and impress him.” Stephen Baines was secretly engaged to a young nurse who he had met while at a convalescent hospital but her father didn’t need to know that.

Her mother shook her head. “Robert, darling, I’d like to eat before all this goes cold. Anyway, I’m sure Edith will be very good at it and it’s not a fad. I’ve considered doing it myself.”

It was patently ridiculous. She would be distressed if the smallest drop of gravy fell on to her white linen blouse, let alone allow her hands to be defiled by grease and dirt.

“You can use that old driving coat of your father’s,” her mother continued. “You can find it for her, can’t you Robert?”

“Yes, yes.” Her father picked up his knife and fork and began to eat.

Edith savoured the taste of chicken and thin gravy as it melted in her mouth, though she knew the meat would be part of the next few meals as cook made the carcass go as far as possible. She watched her father with a little fondness. He had become used to the necessary change to his diet, perhaps he might accept her news concerning the WAAC when the time came.

* * *

The large, wooden shed vibrated with the sound of ten motor engines running at once. Each woman leaned over her charge, hair tied back in a turban and a heavy coat on top of their overalls. The smell of oil permeated every inch of the building. It comforted her with its likeness to the linseed that she used to soften her paint brushes.

Her instructor, Mr Bevan, was a similar age to her father. His passion and enthusiasm for mechanics was infectious. She adored him although she wished he would wash his hands before he ate his sandwiches out of the battered old tin he brought with him every day.

He had told her in the first week that she had a natural aptitude for mechanics and as the course progressed she surprised herself. It was no longer the filthy, necessary evil that she assumed it would be. She came to appreciate the way each part had been designed, the different metals that had been chosen for their properties and the

satisfaction of seeing those parts assembled in a creation that had purpose and all the beauty of a sculpture. It was a joy to complete each task with quick, nimble fingers, to be in control.

“Can you hear that, she’s purring?” Mr Bevan shouted at her across the shed.

“I know.” She took her hand away from one of the levers on the steering column and rested it on the wheel.

She watched as he walked round to each of the other women. The noise in the shed ebbed away as the engines were turned off one by one, until the only vehicle ticking over was hers. The others followed Mr Bevan and stood round her motor car.

“Edith, turn her off. Ladies, you now understand how to access the valves and their relationship with the timing of the engine. Remember, retiming is needed when the cam shaft, valves or timing gears need to be removed.”

The women nodded and she got out and moved alongside them. Her ears rang as they adjusted to the quiet that filled the shed.

“We’ve only got a short time left,” he continued, “so Edith I want you to demonstrate how to properly clean a spark plug. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes, of course.” She smiled, relishing the opportunity to please him.

She lifted the bonnet and swiftly removed one of the plugs with a wrench. It was easy enough to put it into the vice on the workbench and loosen the nut that held the porcelain in place. The women gathered round with their arms folded while she used a knife to carefully scrape the carbon from the glazed surface. A quick wash in petrol, a wipe with a dry cloth and it was ready to be put back.

Mr Bevan stepped forward and examined the plug. “Excellent, well done.”

She looked at the faces of the other women. They were passive or disinterested but one - Alice Carter - looked furious. Edith was unsettled by the scrawny woman and her clique, who traded in gossip and whispers. It was clear that they disliked her but she had no idea why.

Mr. Bevan dismissed them back to their cars and went off to smoke his pipe. She replaced the spark plug and turned to find Alice stood next to her.

“What do you want?” Edith wiped her hands on a soft rag. The whorls of her finger pads were stained black. The dirt embedded under her nails was not unlike paint and no longer bothered her.

“Quite the pet, ain’t you?”

The roar of engines rose to a crescendo as the other women started up their motors but the venom in Alice's voice was unmistakable.

"I can't help it if I'm good at all this. I don't ask Mr Bevan to use me as an example."

"He probably thinks he 'as to make a fuss, you being who you are." Alice looked at her through narrow, colourless eyes.

"What do you mean, who I am?" She folded the rag with care, not wanting Alice to know she was rattled.

"Well, you ain't like the rest of us, are you? You're a woman of independent means. You've never worked a day in your life."

"That has nothing to do with it. There are plenty of women like me on these courses." She picked up a wrench and threw it into the open tool box at her feet. None of the other women spoke to her in this way. Why couldn't Alice leave her be?

"Yes, but you're the only well-to-do woman in this place." She cocked her head to one side, a smug look on her face.

Edith slammed the bonnet down and Alice flinched. The woman was mistaken if she thought that she could drive her away with a few spiteful remarks.

"Perhaps if you concentrated your efforts on learning rather than on gossip, Mr. Bevan may pay you more attention."

"You're brave, ain't you? I'd be careful. I don't take well to criticism."

"You'd better get used to it because I'm not going anywhere. I have as much right to be here as you." Her hands were clammy but she stood still and stared at Alice. She wanted to do her work, pass the course and move on. There wasn't any need for this friction. "Alice, why can't we get along?"

Mr. Bevan walked to the middle of the floor and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Right, ladies, that's it for today."

"It's been lovely talking to you, I'm sure," Alice whispered. "But I'm going back to my friends." She strutted away across the shed.

Edith stood up straight and rubbed the muscles in the small of her back. She watched as the other women hurriedly put their tools away and left in a noisy gaggle, eager to get home.

"Come on Edith, you can't stay here all night." Mr Bevan jangled the large bunch of keys in his hand.

“...And don’t worry about those,” he said kindly as she started to pick up her tools.
“You go and get cleaned up.”

“Thank you. See you tomorrow, Mr Bevan.”

She pushed open the heavy wooden door and crossed the yard. The rain had stopped but the sky was overcast, the light dull. A film of oil floated on the surface of the puddles, letting rainbows of colour into that ugliest of places. She entered the washroom housed in a cold, grubby outbuilding. The women cleaned the surfaces and swept the floor but dirt fell from the cobwebbed rafters.

“The others have gone.” Betty stood in front of one of the deep sinks. She had short black hair and dark, mischievous eyes. “You look tired, Edith.”

“I am.” She turned the stiff tap and began to scrub at her hands in the icy water.

“Don’t let Alice bother you.”

“I don’t know what you mean. It’s been a long day, nothing else.” She reached for the soap and hoped that Betty would hurry up and go.

“Yes you do. I’ve got eyes in me head. Anyway, she talks about you. Moans on that you’re not one of us. A few of ’em are weak enough to follow her but the rest of us can make up our own minds. We like you.”

“That’s very kind of you but...”

“We’re curious, though. Why are you doing this course? You don’t need to, surely?”

Betty probably meant well and it wouldn’t do any harm if she knew the truth. “I’m joining the WAAC.”

“Ah, that’s interesting.”

“Is it? Why?” Betty took longer than necessary to towel her hands.

“I’m not saying you’ll end up working with her. I mean, there’ll be hundreds of you. It’s just that Alice, she’s joining the WAAC as well. Right, I’m off. See you tomorrow.”

The door slammed after Betty. Edith remained at the sink and held her hands under the water long after the last traces of dirt had disappeared.

* * *

4 Downside Crescent,
Haverstock Hill,
Hampstead,
NW3

37 Park Road,
Islington.
N1

2nd April 1917

Dear Mrs Nevinson,

Please accept my apologies for not writing to you for some time but I've been terribly busy.

Since my last letter, I've started a course in driving and motor mechanics. If someone had told me a few months ago that I'd do something like this I wouldn't have believed them but I enjoy every minute. It's wonderful to wake up each morning and know that I've somewhere to go, a purpose once more. Goodness, my muscles ached in the beginning but I've become used to it. I get on with most of the others. A couple of them aren't too keen on me but you can't be liked by everyone.

I haven't neglected my portfolio, although the last two weeks I've been too tired to pick up a pencil. How do people work all day, every day, except Sundays?

I hope that you and the family are well. Is Richard working on anything new? John is still somewhere in France. I will let you know when he's on leave. I remember you said that Richard would like to see him.

Kind regards,

Edith Howard.

* * *

37 Park Road,
Islington.
N1

4 Downside Crescent,
Haverstock Hill,
Hampstead,
NW3

5th April 1917

Dear Edith,

Thank you for your letter. It's good to hear you're engaged in something that you enjoy. However, I'm puzzled as to why you've taken up such an unusual pastime, as

well as sidelining your painting. My understanding was that the progression of your art was your one and only objective. You must write soon and let me know what this is all about.

The family is well. Richard is working on some lithographs of the different stages of aircraft production. He's been commissioned by the Department of Information to spend time at a factory and record what he sees. There is an excellent one of a woman with an acetylene torch. This is the sort of thing that you could do!

Best wishes,

Margaret Nevinson.

** * **

*4 Downside Crescent,
Haverstock Hill,
Hampstead.
NW3*

*37 Park Road,
Islington.
N1*

8th April 1917

Dear Mrs Nevinson,

I'm afraid that you've caught me out. To answer the questions in your letter brings me to news that I'd not intended to share with you until I knew whether I'd been successful.

When I visited you last December, you mentioned that the government intended to form a Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. This has gone ahead, as I'm sure you know. I've enrolled but have yet to hear the result.

The reason for the motoring and mechanics course is that I intend to be a driver. This may mean that I will be able to get near the action. So you must see why I'm doing this. It's a benefit that the mechanics training is enjoyable but even if I hated every moment of it I would continue. This is my way to the Front.

I'm pleased to hear that Richard has a commission from the Department of Information, which will undoubtedly lead to greater things. I understand your suggestion that I could take a similar approach but it's not enough for me - you know that. My mind is made up.

The reason that I didn't mention the WAAC in my last letter is that I didn't want you to be angry with me. I value your friendship. I should have realised that you'd guess that I wasn't telling you the whole truth and I apologise for that.

Kindest regards,

Edith.

* * *

*37 Park Road,
Islington.
N1*

*4 Downside Crescent,
Haverstock Hill,
Hampstead,
NW3*

12th April 1917

Dear Edith,

Your letter elicited a number of emotions, primarily one of disappointment. Further reflection has also made me concerned that you don't understand the danger and horror that you may be exposed to. You might have a sense of what life is like in France, through the newspapers and letters from John. That's all very well but how will you feel if confronted with it. This is not a game.

You may wonder by what right I can discuss such things. What do I know of it, any more than you? It may surprise you to know that I have some experience of it myself.

When I was a girl I was educated for a while in Paris. The school had been used as a barracks in the '70s war and the walls of the playground still retained black marks from the smoke of the Prussians' watch-fires. Some nights, the older girls on the dormitory told us how they had lived in fear of what would happen when the Prussians reached them. They talked of the terrible living conditions, that they were forced to eat dog and rat.

When my brother married, Henry and I went to visit him and his French wife in Vosges. They lived in a beautiful valley and we arrived as autumn began to claim the trees. The Germans arrived at the same time to carry out manoeuvres. At first I was fascinated. We sat high up on the hillside and watched a never ending line of soldiers and horses wind through the valley. The sound of their shouted orders and

singing reached us. However, I couldn't help remember the stories told by those girls at school and I admit I was frightened. I was a stranger in another country and I felt as if something dreadful would happen. They billeted soldiers in my brother's house. My room went to a Lieutenant, a fat, odious man who had no manners despite his position in society. My sister-in-law carried out his endless demands and there was a constant level of fear in the house. You must remember that this was peacetime.

Today that man, his soldiers and thousands upon thousands like them are over there wreaking havoc and destruction. I have looked men like that in the eye and I didn't like what I saw. They were cruel and I believe capable of anything. But I cannot condone war, though I know we fight to defend ourselves and others.

I was asked to address recruitment rallies because of my outdoor speaking experience with the WFL but I refused. How could I ask those men to go out there to do what I cannot because I'm a woman?

My work with the Belgian soldiers has been difficult. Those poor boys; their limbs ripped from them, faces mutilated, blind and terrified. Perhaps I should take you to see them, to show you the reality of war.

But the awful thing goes on, month after month, taking fresh batches of young men. Many of them don't want to go. I know because they tell me. We used to hold parties for them when they came home on leave, a bit of fun before they had to go back to the line. Some of them were war poets: Sassoon, Nichols, Sitwell. It comforted me to know these men, decorated for valour, didn't believe in war. We stopped the parties after a while, it seemed wrong to continue them. I think Edith Sitwell's poem, which is yet to be published, says it very well:

*The floors are slippery with blood:
The world gyrates too. God is good
That while His wind blows out the light
For those who hourly die for us –
We still can dance, each night.*

*The music has grown numb with death –
But we will suck their dying breath,
The whispered name they breathed to chance,*

*To swell our music, make it loud
That we may dance, - may dance.*

Those men in my living room were able to do it, to dance as if nothing had happened before they went back the next day to be killed. I couldn't do it any longer.

So you see, I've experienced a little of war. It's not too late to change your mind. I acknowledge that you're young and headstrong but you need to be sensible. It's no place for you and I hope that you will reconsider. I wish that I had never mentioned it to you.

Regards,

Margaret Nevinson.

** * **

*4 Downside Crescent,
Haverstock Hill,
Hampstead.
NW3*

*37 Park Road,
Islington.
N1*

15th April 1917

Dear Mrs Nevinson,

Your letter was, as intended, very thought provoking. You've experienced many things and I agree that you do have the right to challenge me on my decision.

It's not because of you that I've enrolled for the WAAC. I'd have found out about it anyway. I won't change my mind but hope that this does not mean an end to our friendship.

I'm not going to fight. I'm not John or Richard or one of your Belgian boys. My experience will be different. There's no reason why I shouldn't go out to France and every reason why I should. I know this is the right thing for me to do.

Please don't worry about me. It will be fine, I'm sure of it.

Kindest regards,

Edith.

Chapter Seven

April 1917

The beautiful spring day drove crowds to Kensington Gardens. A flock of nannies chattered like sparrows while their charges played on blankets under the green budded trees. Two women sat and gossiped on a bench, half eaten sandwiches forgotten on their laps. A soldier on leave held a proprietary arm around a young girl who smiled occasionally but her eyes were sorrowful.

Edith looked across at a couple of picnickers who had entered into a fenced off area of the park. They were sitting on the edge of the exhibition trenches, dangling their legs over the side. She shivered and pulled her coat tighter around her body. The trenches were meant to replicate those on the Somme but John had derided them in one of his letters. Nothing, he wrote, could ever convey the horrendous conditions that he and his men were forced to suffer. It was hard to read his graphic description: thick mud mixed with bits of brain and bone, the stench of decomposed corpses encased in the walls, the constant fear of being buried alive.

She turned to a fresh page in her sketchbook and shifted position on the bench in order to see Julia's profile. It was important that the pose was natural otherwise the portrait would reveal nothing of her friend's true character. The way that Julia held her head expressed self confidence and her eyes radiated kindness.

"Just lower your chin a bit."

Julia moved her head and the drop pearls in her fashionable earrings trembled. She brought to mind Vermeer's entrancing lady, with her gentle gaze and red lips. The curls of hair that rested on her neck and cheek stirred in the light wind that blew across the park.

"Isn't it bliss to feel the warmth on your face again after months of winter?" Julia closed her eyes, content as a cat in the sun.

"Yes but I'm not ready to take my coat off quite yet." Her body was stiff and cold. "Right, I'm going to start. Try and keep your head at the same angle."

She began to capture the outline of Julia's face. The bone structure meant that however worn her skin became, the contours that defined her beauty would remain. Other women might be envious but what was the point? She herself would never be attractive but that was no reason not to celebrate the loveliness of others.

She was no longer aware of what was happening around her. Head down, she relaxed into a hypnotic state and concentrated on every pencil stroke.

The area between the ear and the cheek wasn't quite right. She looked up to examine Julia's face and recoiled at the fleeting horror superimposed there: a bullet hole was punched cleanly through the forehead, a scarlet rivulet of blood ran down the porcelain skin.

"Damn." She didn't mean to call out but the vision was so vivid.

"What's the matter?" Julia remained motionless.

"Nothing. The end of the pencil snapped. It serves me right for buying cheap materials. Still, I mustn't blame my tools." She laughed a little, forced laughter but it helped to turn back the adrenalin that threatened to take over her body.

Why did Mrs Nevinson have to sow the seed of doubt in her mind? But perhaps she was right to remind her of the dangers she faced. At the beginning of the war there were terrible descriptions in the newspapers of atrocities in Belgium: women raped in the market places, breasts sliced off, babies taken from their mother's arms and bayoneted. It sickened her to think that men did such things to women. For several days she was fearful that the same might happen to her if the Hun reached England but the stories were replaced by others and quickly forgotten.

After three years, the stock phrases that journalists employed as short hand to describe battle and death on a massive scale didn't shock her any more. But in the last few days, she'd tried to find the truth behind those words. What was it actually like out there? What could happen if the Germans pushed forward when the WAAC were at the French camps, their backs to the sea?

"Julia?" She sharpened her pencil with a small pocket knife. Slivers of clean wood fell on to the path at her feet to be blown away into the grass.

"Mmmhh." She appeared to be in a trance.

"I know we haven't heard yet but if we're posted overseas, will you be frightened?"

"Frightened? Goodness, no. I'm excited. Why do you ask?"

"I had a letter from a friend recently. I had written to her to explain about my enrolment and she told me it isn't a game."

"Well, of course it's not a game. You know that, you're a grown woman. What a strange thing for her to say. You want to serve your country and she should be more encouraging." Julia shook her head, her earrings swung back and forth.

“I must say, I thought it was a bit much. She asked me to reconsider joining the WAAC although she knows what it means to me.”

“You won’t change your mind, will you?” The passion in Julia’s voice was hard to ignore.

“No. I simply needed some reassurance from you.” She finalised the outline by pressing the pencil hard against the paper and began to shade the area around the lips. “I don’t have anyone else to discuss it with. Not anyone that understands. Anyway, she’s a lot older than us and probably sees it in a different light.”

“That shouldn’t have any bearing on it. I know plenty of older women who’ve said they’d enrol if they were younger. They’ve got more fight in them than some men. Let’s be honest, there are men who haven’t done anything. It’s now about those prepared to stand up and fight and the people who hide behind them, regardless of age or sex.”

“You’re right. Of course you are.” She stopped to take off her coat. The sun was warm on her back. It was a balm, that and Julia’s presence. Mrs Nevinson did have experience but she and Julia were younger. It would be different for them.

Julia turned to face her. “Don’t think I wasn’t nervous to start with but it’s nothing to what our brothers face every day. Do you honestly think the authorities are going to send women into areas of real danger? It will be fine. We’ll have the time of our lives. Oh sorry, I’ve moved. Does it matter?”

“It’s fine. Try and go back to where you were. That’s it.” She brushed a greenfly from the paper. “I don’t want you to think I’m a coward. I want to go and I won’t be swayed. Her letter made me think too much, that’s all.”

“I don’t think you’re a coward. Don’t forget, this is easier for me. I come from a family with an army history. My father was in the Boer war and I grew up with stories of battle and death. It must be difficult for you but you’re doing a good thing, Edith. You have the choice to sit at home and have an easy life of it but you’ve decided to go out and help the men at the Front. How can anyone question that? It’s quite reasonable that you should be anxious but please trust me. It will be an adventure.”

She began to work on the detail of Julia’s eyes and wished that she had her paints so that the picture could be brought alive with that glorious honest blue. If she intended to join the WAAC purely to do her duty, Julia’s words would have been of more comfort.

“Anyway,” Julia continued, “God will protect the righteous and make them victorious. You remember the Angels of Mons? Maybe they will come again if we need them.”

Edith had read of the myth that told of divine intervention on the battlefield, ghostly figures that descended in their thousands to kill on behalf of the beleaguered British soldiers.

“That was propaganda. I think there’s something more powerful than us but not angels or mystical bowmen or whatever it was meant to be.”

“My mother’s spiritualist says it happened.” Julia sounded serious.

“Those sorts of people tell you what you want to hear. You don’t believe in all that rubbish do you?” She didn’t want to upset Julia but spiritualism, any religion, superstition were of no consequence to her.

“Not spiritualism, no but it keeps mother happy. I’m not sure about the Angels though. It was virtually heresy to deny it a few years ago and I suppose I’ve come to accept it as the truth.”

For a further half an hour, Edith worked at the sketch. The conversation moved on to lighter subjects and the air grew warmer. Two redheaded children, their clothes stained by the new grass, stood behind her and giggled.

“Away with you!” She laughed and they ran towards the Serpentine, two splashes of colour darting through the trees.

“I think I ought to see this picture, especially as those two found it so amusing.” Julia stood up and stretched her arms out behind her.

“It’s done. What do you think?” Edith turned her sketchbook around and held it up.

“It’s as if I’m looking in a mirror. I wish I was as talented as you. You must make the most of it.”

“I intend to.” She removed the page from the book and handed it across. It was the best work that she’d done for a while. She’d connected with her subject to the point where she imagined a part of her was still alive in the pencil strokes. It was enough to make her want to shout out loud with joy.

Chapter Eight

April – May 1917

The wooden chair in the corridor outside the interview room was worn from years of use. The skin of varnish had thinned so that the flesh of the wood was exposed and the legs were scuffed and splintered. She sat and stared at the notice board on the opposite wall. Official typed notices, each with an army number, were pinned up in neat rows. They meant nothing to her and may as well have been written in a foreign language.

She reached into her bag, pulled out the succinct letter that had arrived the previous week and read it, although she knew the content by heart.

Form 123/25 Women's Army Auxiliary Corps.

Candidates Form of Summons

Miss Howard residing at 37, Park Road, Islington is to report for an interview at Devonshire House, Piccadilly, at 9 o/c on 30th April with a view to being enrolled in the above Corps in accordance with her application received by the Director-General of National Service (Women's Section).

If approved by the Selection Board and passed fit by the Women's Recruiting Medical Board, the candidate will be enrolled in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps and be posted accordingly.

If accepted for service the above candidate will be required to report for duty on a date specified by the Selection Board.

Director of Recruiting

It was daunting to see her name and address on the formal, impersonal letter but nothing could temper her excitement. She put it back in her bag and checked her watch. It was two minutes to nine. She tapped her foot on the linoleum covered floor.

The door to the interview room opened and a young woman stepped out into the corridor.

"Miss Howard?"

"Yes." How trim the other woman looked in her uniform.

“Excellent, come in. We’re ready for you.”

Edith stood up and followed her into the room. It was economically furnished with a large table, four chairs and a filing cabinet. There were no curtains and no pictures on the walls. It wouldn’t be easy to adjust to the army’s insistence on functionality.

Two women sat behind the table with their backs to the window. The sound of traffic on the busy street several floors down crept in through the cracks of the frame.

“Please sit down. We’ve looked at your application. We’re not here to interrogate you.” The middle aged woman laughed. “This interview is intended to help us get to know you and decide on the best job for you if you’re accepted. Would you like a glass of water before we start?”

“No, thank you.” She relaxed back in the chair and rested her hands in her lap.

The older, stately woman didn’t suit her uniform and looked more like a dowager duchess engaged in a little light war work. She looked up from the papers that lay on the table.

“You wrote on your form that you were due to attend a motor mechanics course. Have you finished it yet?”

“Yes, I’ve completed my final exam and passed at the top of my class.”

“Oh congratulations, you must be terribly pleased,” said the younger woman.

“Yes, I am and I’d welcome the opportunity to apply what I have learned to a job in the WAAC.” She spoke quickly, encouraged by the response. “You’ll see from my form that I’m willing to go overseas. I...”

“It’s obvious that you’re very keen but it’s best if you answer the questions that we put to you.” The old woman paused and took a sip of water. “Now, it’s all very well that you have this qualification but don’t you think that you ought to work in administration?”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s quite simple. Wouldn’t you prefer a post more appropriate to your social standing?”

“A post as a driver is suitable, as far as I’m concerned.” She was glad that she’d worn her plainest dress in an effort to show that she wanted to fit in. “In any case, I’ve never worked in an office or in any clerical capacity. I’m qualified in driving and mechanics and that’s what I want to do.” She sat back and folded her arms.

“I think what my colleague’s trying to say,” the cheerful woman said, “is that unlike some of the other organisations, the VADs, for example, the majority of our

volunteers come from the working classes. Our more educated ladies tend to be administrators rather than workers. Tell me, how did you get on with the other women on your mechanics course?"

"One took issue with me but I think that it was because she was insecure rather than me having done anything to particularly annoy her. To be honest none of the others were that enamoured with her. The rest of us got on very well together and I'm sure it'd be no different if I were to be placed with any other women drivers."

"Well, that's good to hear. It's very important that our girls work as a team. There's no room for individual wants and needs. It's all about working together towards a common aim, whoever we are." She smiled and the young woman next to her nodded emphatically. They were on her side and the old dear could think what she wanted. Edith looked over their heads at the sunlit elm trees outside the window.

"You state that you're willing to go overseas." The old woman's harsh voice brought her back to attention. "Why should we recommend it?"

"I think I'd be of more use in France. I speak excellent French..."

"You're not expected to need any in the camps." The older woman snapped her jaws shut and blinked slowly. She resembled a tortoise and it was hard not to smile.

"As a driver I won't be in the camp for most of the time, will I?"

The old woman glared at her, unable to argue with logic. The sinews strained in her neck.

The cheerful woman seemed keen to brighten the atmosphere. "Excellent, excellent. That pretty much concludes it for us, I think. Do you have any questions?"

"Yes. When will I be told that I've been accepted?"

"You'll be advised of the result, whatever it is, in a matter of days. You need to go for your medical now. "

"Thank you."

She stood up and the young woman escorted her out of the room.

"That wasn't so bad was it?" She laid a hand on her arm. "I think you did very well. Ignore the old battleaxe."

"Yes, I think I won the argument. It goes to show that you can challenge these people. When I join the army, I'll be in a uniform but underneath, I'll still be me, won't I? It's not as if they'll own me."

The young woman opened her pretty mouth to speak, stopped and produced yet another form.

“You need to take this to room 403 for your medical.” She returned to the interview room.

Edith put her shoulders back, her head up and marched off down the long corridor.

* * *

The room reminded her of a public lavatory with white and green tiles on the walls and floor and a strong smell of disinfectant that clung to the inside of her nose. In one corner stood a metal framed bed, a screen on wheels and a small table with a lamp.

It did not compare favourably with her own doctor’s rooms which were furnished as one would expect: a solid mahogany desk, bookcases from floor to ceiling and thick red plush curtains. An oil painting of a harvest hung on the wall in the waiting room. As a child she had lost herself in its painted fields in an effort to control the anxiety brought about by the visit.

The metal platform was cold under her bare feet. The doctor slid the weighing scale back and forth with shorter and shorter movements. It was strange but reassuring to see a woman in a white coat.

“You’re just within the required weight bracket for your height. Are you eating properly?”

“Yes. I’ve always been slight.” She stepped off the scales and waited for further instruction. She wished that she could put her stockings back on.

“Be careful. There’ll be further medicals if you join and you don’t want your weight to be an issue.” The doctor went over to the table and made a quick note on a form.

“I may not look particularly strong but I can assure you that I have plenty of stamina.” It was irritating, anyone would think that these people didn’t want to recruit volunteers.

The doctor lifted her head and ran a hand back and forth across her forehead. “I’m sure that’s true but it’s not me that you’ll have to prove it to. Right, you need to go to the room next door for an examination. I’m afraid it’s a bit of a factory. You’re the first of the day but it’ll get busy soon.”

Edith went behind the screen, put on her stockings and laced up her boots. The morning’s events left an unpleasant taste in her mouth. It would have been better if Julia were with her. It might have been a bit of a giggle.

She hurried out and knocked at the door of the adjoining room as the next woman arrived behind her to be processed.

“Come in.”

She opened the door and walked into the room. A tall middle aged man with hunched shoulders waved her towards a chair. He wore a tweed suit and highly polished chestnut shoes.

“Let’s get this done as quickly as possible and you can be on your way.”

The room was the same as the previous one except that the window was open. An icy draught blew around her bare head. She promised herself that once her medical was over, she’d go to a tea room for a treat, somewhere warm, with tablecloths and polite waitresses. She’d eat a lovely dainty pastry.

“Open your mouth wide, please.”

She gagged as he pushed the back of her tongue down with a wooden spatula.

“Come on. Try and relax. That’s it.”

The doctor recorded notes on a form but the table was too far away to read what he had put.

“Is everything as it should be?” Her voice sounded small and she swallowed hard.

“Yes, it’s fine. All that’s left to do is examine your chest. Undo your blouse.”

She followed the order. The small pearl buttons were awkward to undo and she fumbled with them. The doctor tapped his pen on the table and sighed.

“Ready?” He pressed the cold stethoscope on to her chest. “Breathe in and out. Good and again.” More notes were made on the form. “That’s you finished. You can get dressed.”

“Thank you,” she said. She wasn’t sure what for. “All I have to do is to wait for the outcome of the interview.” She sighed with relief and began to do up her buttons as fast as her fingers allowed.

The doctor put his pen down and looked at her over the top of his glasses.

“Oh, you haven’t finished. You’ve got another examination yet. Go to the next room please. Quick as you can.”

She finished dressing and dragged herself up off the chair. She was tired, surely there wasn’t a part of her that remained to be prodded or measured.

She walked down to another dull wooden door, identifiable from the others only because it had a different number. She knocked and was summoned in.

“Go behind the screen please. I need you to remove your undergarments and lie on the bed. Please cover yourself with the blanket and let me know when you’re ready.” The doctor didn’t turn round to look at her but thankfully she was female.

Edith made her way to the screen. Her legs moved as if she were trying to wade through water. What was this about? What was the doctor going to do to her? She shivered as she removed her clothes.

The doctor called out from the other side of the screen. “Your form states that you’re unmarried. Have you ever had sexual relations?”

“No.” She undressed and climbed on to the bed. Wasn’t it obvious from her appearance that she wasn’t that sort of woman? The rough blanket was disgusting. Goodness knows how many people had used it before. She didn’t want to touch it but there was no choice, she didn’t want to lay exposed.

“Are you undressed?”

“Yes.”

The doctor pulled the curtain aside and looked down at her on the bed.

“What are you going to do to me?”

Her head was tight and hot. Time slowed down and she noticed every detail of the doctor, the deep lines around eyes strained by studying in candlelight, dull hair held tight to the scalp and a ring so loose that it slid up and down her finger.

“Don’t worry.” The doctor’s voice was gentle. “I’m only going to do a visual examination. It’s the rules, you see. I’m sure you’ve told me the truth but some women don’t. I need to check for any signs of venereal disease.”

The doctor lifted the blanket with care and Edith closed her eyes. Her legs and stomach grew cold. It was hateful, humiliating and she wanted to cry with shame. She made herself think of the harvest painting in her doctor’s waiting room, the hay ricks, the carts and the distant farm lit by the orange of the dying sun.

“Right, I’ve finished. You can get dressed.”

The doctor stepped out past the curtain and disappeared into the room beyond. Edith rushed to put on her clothes. What on earth made her believe that she was worldly enough to join the military? The thought of a tea room was the last thing on her mind, all she wanted was to go home and wash.

* * *

The starry white hawthorn flowers in the garden had begun to fade, replaced by heavy scented blossom on three apple trees that bloomed in the same sequence every year. The oak had woken and the house martins returned to their nests under the eaves of the house. A peacock butterfly rested on the gravel path with its wings open. She painted them many times as a child, attracted by the blue, red and yellow on the muted browns.

The early afternoon sun was strong and warm. She and her father sat at the cast iron table, brought out of the shed for the first time that year and put out in the middle of the lawn. Her mother hummed to herself as she fussed over her old English roses in the nearby border. A bee flew in and out of the blooms, keeping her company as she worked.

“I don’t believe that your mother and I will ever move from this house. She won’t want to leave the garden. If we did, I’m sure she’d uproot those roses and take them with her.” He lowered his old straw hat on to the bridge of his nose to keep the sun from his eyes.

“I’m glad she has something to keep her occupied. At least it stops her worrying about John, if only for a few minutes.”

It was hard to watch her mother as she potted back and forth with an absentminded smile. It wasn’t the right moment to tell them she too might soon be in France but when would it be? The letter had already been hidden in her desk for two days.

War Office Annexe, London, S.W.

Miss Howard, 37 Park Road, Islington, N1

5th May 1917

You have been accepted for service in the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps and are hereby ordered to report at Farnborough on Monday the 14th May travelling by a train which will enable you to leave Waterloo Station, London on that day by the 5.05pm train, arriving at Farnborough at 6.02pm.

A railway warrant for your journey to Farnborough is enclosed, as well as a red tape which should be worn tied around the sleeve of your left arm in order that you may be identified at Farnborough Station.

The train will be met by an Administrator of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps who will be dressed in khaki and will wear a red band around her left arm.

You should bring all necessary underclothing with you and your luggage should consist of a small handbag or parcel only. It is suggested that you provide yourself with a rug.

Director of Recruiting

She dabbed the tip of her finger on the plate in front of her, the hand painted roses pushed against the surface of her skin. She picked up the last crumbs of cake and popped them into her mouth. They were dry and tasteless. It wasn't one of cook's best efforts.

"In his last letter, John asked how the apple trees are," her mother said, as she laid cut flowers in the basket at her elbow. "I might press some of the blossoms and send them with his next letter. What do think?"

"A lovely thought, Muriel." Her father mumbled from under his hat.

"I'll help you, mother, if you like."

"Thank you, Edith. John asks after the garden more and more these days. I suppose he knows how much I love it and that it pleases me to write of it."

"It may be that or perhaps it's what he thinks of most when he imagines home. I doubt there's anything where he is at the moment that vaguely resembles this little piece of heaven." She looked around with nostalgia at the garden overlaid with memories.

"You seem distracted, dear. Is anything the matter?" Her mother stood and watched her, a pair of secateurs half-open in her gloved hand.

"No, no, I'm fine. The sun's made me lethargic. I may have to move into the shade in a minute."

"Nonsense, I recognise that expression. You're worried. What is it?" She held her head to one side and frowned.

"You're right." Edith pushed the plate away across the table and winced as it scraped on the metal. "I don't want to spoil things, that's why I've waited but you'll have to know sooner or later."

Her father lifted his hat from his face and laid it upside down on the table. She stared at its stained rainbow silk lining and avoided his gaze.

“I’ve applied for the WAAC and been accepted.”

Her mother walked across and sat at the table. “What’s the WAAC, dear?” Oh poor, innocent mother.

“What it is Muriel, is a joke. The WAAC is a women’s army corps.”

Her mother shook her head and peeled off her gardening gloves. “I don’t understand. You, in the army? But when did all this happen?” Edith took her hand to try and reassure her, distressed by the confusion on her face.

“I enrolled in March and had an interview last month. I received a letter two days ago telling me that I start in a couple of weeks.”

Her father brought his fist down on to the table and her mother’s hand trembled.

“You’ve lied to your mother and me, all this time?”

“I didn’t want to tell you until it was definite. There was no point in causing unnecessary upset.” She remained calm for the sake of her mother.

He stood up and gripped the back of his chair. “It was that damned driving course, wasn’t it? Those women put the idea into your head. You haven’t thought of it yourself.”

“Robert, please keep your voice down. The neighbours will hear.”

He sat back down and leaned across the table. His eyes were bloodshot and flecks of white spittle clung to the corners of his mouth.

“You’re not going anywhere. I’ll tear up your papers.”

She let go of her mother’s hand and stared at him. Her breathing was measured and controlled, her voice low.

“I don’t think that will make any difference. I’m committed. Don’t you see this is a war of attrition? None of us know when it will end. It may never end. I’m going to be involved in it at some point and I’d like to choose what I do.”

“I suppose you got all that from your mechanic friends, as well.”

A sparrow that had hopped under the table to look for crumbs flew off at his raised voice.

“No father. I’m capable of independent thought.” How dare he think she was that impressionable? “Up until this war everything was static, in terms of what was expected of us all. Well, that’s changed. You can’t see it, safe in this garden, this house. Then again, perhaps you can and you won’t admit it.”

“Edith, this doesn’t concern your mechanics course or anything that the others may have suggested, does it?” They both turned to look at her. “I know you so well. This

is about you wanting to be a war artist. I thought that you'd given up on it rather easily but I couldn't see what other option you had."

Her father leaned back in his chair with a sigh, he appeared defeated.

"My God, you really have been devious about this haven't you? Are you telling us that you'll be posted to France?"

"I haven't been told yet but it's likely. Don't you see, as a driver I'll be able to get out from the camps and maybe get close to the Front? The War Artist's Scheme is only interested in men who serve overseas. Well, I will be too."

Her mother started to weep. "I can't bear the thought of both my children being over there. What will John think?"

"He knows. Well, he's aware that I've applied but I haven't told him that I've been accepted. I thought it only right that I tell you first. He's very encouraging, though." She regretted it as soon as the words were out of her mouth.

Her father ran his hand across his forehead. Sweat beaded on his face and the hair at his temples was damp.

"So you're in this together. He should have told us what you were planning."

"I asked him not to. To be fair, he isn't aware what life is like here and he trusts me to know what's best."

"The boy's a fool."

"Robert!"

"There's no excusing this, Muriel. Edith has lied to us because of her selfishness and she's involved her brother in the deceit. I suppose the WAAC know why you're keen to join them and go to France?"

A nervous rash began to spread across her mother's neck. This must stop, it wasn't fair on her.

"No, they don't. I don't think it would have helped if I'd revealed my true reasons. I did feel awkward, especially when I spoke with one of the other women who enrolled. She was so altruistic and patriotic. I've also questioned whether I'm capable of being a WAAC."

Her father nodded. "At last, some sense."

"But now that we've had this conversation, I'm more determined than ever. I leave on the fourteenth. I don't expect you to wave me off."

She stood up and laid a hand on her mother's shoulder. "I'm sorry but I need to do this. I hope that you'll understand in time. If I stay here, I shan't be truly happy."

Her legs were leaden as she walked across the lawn and into the cool shade of the house. She turned and looked back at the garden. Her mother sat with her head down, her shoulders jerked as she sobbed. Her father stood and rubbed his wife's back with his hand. It hurt to see them that way and know she was the cause of it but it couldn't be changed. She turned away, unable to watch.

Chapter Nine

May – June 1917

Edith had been at Star Hill Barracks, Farnborough, for two weeks. The War Office had commandeered the convent and day school and moved the nuns to nearby Sycamore House. Women in military uniforms marched up and down corridors that had known only the quiet swish of religious habits.

The uniforms were the main topic of discussion after the women's arrival. There was a khaki gabardine coat dress with two large pockets that sat on the hips. The dress was pulled in at the waist with a belt and finished off with shoulder straps and a dark collar. On top was a khaki overcoat, a small replica of the men's great coat, as well as a brown felt hat with a badge. The women were expected to provide their own undergarments but were issued with two pairs of woollen stockings and high leather leggings to the knee for wet weather. For several days, any woman who could sew was kept busy altering uniforms in an effort to make them fit, they undid pleats, put in gathers and moved buttons.

She hated the shoes, black, army pattern and made of stiff leather.

"I'll never get these wretched things to shine." She knelt on the hard dormitory floor, with a rag in one hand and a shoe in the other. A sheet of newspaper was spread out in front of her.

"You've got more polish on your hands than on the shoes," Hannah said. She laughed and put down her book. "Let me help."

"No, I've got to learn but thank you anyway." She was fond of the older girl, with her humour and quick wit. Julia would like her and it was a shame that they weren't all training together.

"Suit yourself. Oh, I've had enough with being cooped up in here in the evenings." Hannah picked up her book and threw it down on the bed. "Why don't we set up a club? I'm sure we can get the Administrator to give us a room in the main building."

"It's a wonderful idea. We could smarten it up. Anything to make it a bit more homely. Curtains, cushions, that sort of thing. I can do some art work for the walls."

She peered at her shoe in the dim light from the bulbs suspended high up in the ceiling. At last there was a slight reflection and she redoubled her efforts with the rag.

“You can draw?” Hannah lay on her front and kicked her legs back and forth in the air.

“Yes, fairly well. I could do caricatures. Nothing mean but fun. People like them, don’t they? They’d be reminders of us when we’re gone.”

“You make it sound as if we’re not coming back. Excellent idea, though. I’m impressed that you have a hidden talent. I wish I was able to draw. I’m useless.” She sat up on the bed and crossed her legs. “We can get everyone to pool their books and magazines. Oh, and we’ll need to get a gramophone. I’m not sure how but I’ll think of something. If we all put in a bit of money...”

“Of course we can. What do you think, Bridget?”

She looked across at the younger girl, knelt at the side of her bed. Her lips moved in silent prayer. A wooden crucifix and a tiny statue of the Virgin Mary sat on the top of her locker. Each to their own but she didn’t need prayers, it was better to rely on yourself.

“Hang on.” Bridget mumbled some more, crossed herself and climbed on to her bed.

“You’re praying particularly hard tonight,” Hannah said. “Anything you’d care to tell us?”

“I feel soiled after that lecture this afternoon. My Jack wouldn’t like it if he knew what they taught us.”

“I didn’t enjoy it either.” Edith shook her head. It had been embarrassing to be lectured on female cleanliness and venereal disease. She had squirmed in her seat for an hour while a female doctor showed them lurid hand painted magic lantern slides. Appalled, she had tried to imagine that they were landscapes on a faraway planet but there was no escaping the disgusting reality and she had looked away. The suffering of infected women did not seem to be a concern but rather that men would be temporarily removed from the line. She had not forgotten the unpleasant examination at her medical. The authorities need not worry on her account, she would stay away from the common soldier.

“You’re both too sensitive.” Hannah said and ran her fingers through her short black hair.

“You’ll have to toughen up, you know.” It was curious. She appeared confident but something troubled her. Edith saw it when presumably Hannah thought no one was watching, head down, eyes closed, still.

“I’m not that sensitive. If I was, I wouldn’t be able to cope with the routine of this place.” She buffed the second shoe with the rag, satisfied with the shine.

From the day she received her regimental number and swore her oath of allegiance to serve the King, she was determined to keep up with the demanding timetable. They were up at 6 o’clock to do physical training and a route march. After roll call and breakfast, there was drill in the square, taken by an old soldier who seemed keen to get them to form fours and do section drill if it was the last thing he ever did. The afternoons were taken up by lectures on every conceivable topic.

“All right, I admit you’re made of tough stuff. Anyway, back to this idea of a common room, what do you think Bridget?”

“I can’t see the harm in it and if anyone can get it done, it’s you.”

“If only you were able to sort out the food while you’re at it.”

“Edith, it’s not that bad and more importantly, there’s plenty of it.”

“I can cope with everything here. Getting up at dawn, drill, study but I’m sorry, a semi-raw herring for breakfast isn’t acceptable. I bet Lord Devonport still has bacon in the mornings.” She wiped her hands on the rag and folded away the newspaper. “Thank goodness for the café round the corner.”

The food in the barracks may have been poor but it surprised her how she had adapted to such a different life, to know that she had so much potential yet to be realised as long as there was the opportunity. What would she be capable of, given half a chance?

The door opened. “Lights out in ten minutes.” It was slammed shut and the sound of brisk footsteps faded as the Forewoman made her way down the corridor.

The women changed and climbed into bed. Edith lay awake after the lights were turned out. She waited for the inevitable crying from the girl at the end of the dormitory. She had run away on a visit to town in the first week but the red caps had picked her up at a station down the line and delivered her back. Edith had tried to comfort her on other nights, guilty at how she and the others were settling in to life at the barracks but it made no difference. The sobs began and the sound of engines being tested on the airfield didn’t drown them out. Edith pulled the thin blanket over her head and tried to sleep.

* * *

On Sunday mornings the women attended church parade but on their third Sunday at Star Hill, they were taken to Aldershot for a drumhead service. She stood in the warm sunshine next to Hannah and Bridget, their scarlet armbands marked them out as drivers.

"I didn't expect so many people to be here," she whispered to the others as they waited for the service to begin.

They were meant to look straight ahead but she took a quick glance to her left and right. Three sides of the quadrangle were formed of soldiers stationed at the barracks, as well as the WAAC contingent from Farnborough. They stood in khaki lines, eyes straight ahead and their bodies motionless. She made sure that her back was straight and lifted her chin. Who would have thought that she'd be content to follow orders and stand in line but the magnetism of military control drew her in?

People from the town, in their Sunday best, gathered on the opposite side. The feathers on the women's hats dipped and fluttered as they moved their heads to speak to each other and children ran excitedly through the crowd. Her gaze fell on a group of men in hospital blues who held a banner in memory of their fallen comrades. She looked away, not wanting them to think that she was staring at their disfigurement.

The procession into the quadrangle was led by a small band of children playing brass instruments that had seen better days. The noise was dreadful but she couldn't deny their enthusiasm. They were followed by the clergy and altar boys, their surplices white and pure against sombre black and khaki. The mayor and local councillors were the last to enter the ground. The chaplain took his place by the pyramid of old drums draped with a worn union flag.

She followed the service though she was ambivalent towards it, sang the hymns and recited the prayers that they all knew by heart. It was enjoyable at first to be part of the ritual and to be seen in her uniform. The WAAC certainly drew attention whether they wanted it or not.

As the service went on she was no longer at ease. It was the first time since joining the Corps that she had been in the company of soldiers on duty. As a civilian she had viewed them as other. She was now theoretically comparable to them but to what extent? The WAAC weren't armed, they were posted far from the Front and they were protected from the horrors of war. Watching the civilian women across

from her, she knew that she had moved away from her old life. But how did she fit into the military? She was neither civilian nor soldier.

The service ended and she sighed. Her back was stiff and sweat trickled down between her shoulder blades. Not long and they would return to the barracks. She watched as the ragged procession of clergy made its way from the ground. They were followed by the soldiers who were cheered by the crowd. She saw a small boy marching next to them with a wooden gun in the crook of his arm.

“I’m coming to join you!” he shouted to the men by his side.

“Well done, laddie but you stay here for now and look after your ma.” The soldier winked at the boy who tried to keep pace with the men as they marched away and out of her sight.

“Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps, about turn!”

She straightened her sore back, transferred her weight on to her right heel and swivelled round to the right.

“By the left, march!” They set off and the blood returned to her legs and feet. The crowd was quiet and watchful and as the column turned into the street, she heard a woman shout out.

“Who do you think you are, going out there and pushing our boys further up the line?”

“They’re tarts,” shouted another woman, her voice full of anger.

It was important to remain dignified. Edith kept her head forward and concentrated on marching to the steady beat of the drum. Women and old men lined the streets, leaned over their gates and whispered to each other.

She muttered to Hannah. “I didn’t think they’d throw flowers at our feet but this is a bit much.”

“The majority are all right but believe me, there’ll always be a few who don’t approve of women who are different.” She laughed. “They’re probably worried that we’ll take their men. I don’t think they need worry.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way. Why would I? It’s not my intention.”

These women could say what they wanted but she wouldn’t take it personally. Presumably they were content for women to take on men’s jobs at home but to go overseas was a step too far.

The crowd thinned out as the Corps marched down the centre of the road and towards the edge of the town. The drum continued to beat. Out of the corner of her

eye, she saw that a woman in a brown dress and shawl was keeping pace with them.

“You’re prostitutes in uniform!”

How dare the hateful woman use such language? Did she have no shame, to scream at them in the streets? The Forewoman should do something. Edith kept marching, eyes front. Clouds of dust rose from the dry road and settled on her polished shoes.

Bridget, who was behind her and Hannah, broke ranks and ran towards the woman who had shouted the insult.

“I have brothers and a fiancé in France. Fighting for me, for you, for all of us. I’m going to do whatever I can to help, you stupid woman.”

Bridget was right and she shouldn’t be left to defend them alone. Edith started to walk towards the two women but Hannah pulled her back.

“You mustn’t get involved. Stay in line. Look, the Forewoman’s on her way.”

“We can’t let Bridget do this on her own. We’ve got to help her.” She thought better of Hannah. It was disappointing to think that she was content to let Bridget fight their battles for them.

“You’re in the army. You can’t do what you want. Our orders are to stay in line. There’s no point all of us getting into trouble.” Hannah stared forwards, her face showed no emotion.

Following orders was fine when those orders made sense. Edith shook her head and marched to the beat of the drum. She might have adjusted to life in the WAAC but not everyone had adjusted to them.

At the barrack gate, the women were ordered to march straight to the apsidal chapel. The names of the first draft were to be read out. Bridget caught up with her and Hannah as they stepped into the cool room.

“It’s not right that they put us in here for anything other than mass.” Bridget dabbed her finger in the stoup of holy water and genuflected. Edith raised her eyebrows at the unfamiliar ritual.

“It’s the only room big enough for us all to gather in,” Hannah whispered.

Edith led the way to a pew near the back of the chapel. Once they were sitting on the hard, unforgiving seat, she leant across to Bridget.

“What did the Forewoman say about what happened with that woman? I wanted to help but...”

“I’ve been given a warning. Hopefully we’ll be in the first draft and we can get away from people who don’t understand us. Thank you for your concern, though.”

“We’ve got to look after each other.”

She looked down at the colour projected on to her skirt and hands by the sunlight that cut through the nearby stained glass window. The morning’s events had upset her and she was grateful for the calm of the chapel, safe from the outside world.

She held hands with Bridget and Hannah as the names were read out. They were all to go to France. She smiled at the others, it was wonderful news. She should be more excited. After all, this was what she had been waiting for. What was the matter with her? The plan had been successful, she would be able to get out to the Front and sketch. But apart from the artwork that she’d done for the club, she had forgotten her objective for joining the WAAC. The intense training and camaraderie meant she saw herself as a Florence Nightingale, an angel in uniform. She must try and remind herself why she wanted this.

* * *

*Hotel Metropole,
Folkestone.*

*37 Park Road,
Islington.*

N1

18th June 1917

Dear Mother and Father,

Thank you for your reply to my letter. I’m glad that you’re keen for me to continue to write. I know that all this is difficult for you. It’s difficult for me too. I’ve left the training camp at Farnborough. On our last day there, we had to have vaccinations and inoculations. My arm has taken but some of the other girls have had terrible trouble. Quite a few of them actually fainted. I suppose it’s down to luck. We were told not to touch the crusts or to knock them off and mine has behaved itself.

We were taken to the Connaught Club. I didn’t tell you because it wasn’t likely that I would get time to see you and in the end we were only there for the one night. It was a decent place to stay, better than I expected. There were nearly five hundred of us. I spent most of the time sitting in the window, watching the traffic going round Marble Arch.

We took a train from Victoria to Folkestone. Please don't be upset that I didn't tell you so that you could come and see me off. I wasn't sure how you'd feel about it. To be honest, I don't think that I'd have coped with it very well. It was best to get on the train with the others and treat it as an adventure. I'd have cried terribly if you'd been there.

The two girls that I mentioned, Hannah and Bridget, are with me. We're all to be drivers together. Hannah's father is a doctor in a little village in Hampshire. Bridget was in service until recently. You'd think that I'd have nothing in common with her but it isn't the case. Our backgrounds don't matter here and she knows much more about the world than I do. The three of us had a photo taken in a place off the Strand before we left London. I've enclosed a copy so that you can see how jolly we look in our uniforms. Do you recognise me?

The train journey to Folkestone was uneventful and dull. The hotel is rather grand but like many things these days it's masquerading as something else. The ballroom where the King danced is full of rows of beds for casualties. There are VADs everywhere but they don't seem too keen on us.

Well, I must go otherwise I'll miss the post. My next letter will be from France. Please don't worry. I know exactly what I'm doing.

With love,

Edith.

Part 2

Painting and war don't go together.

Rose Macaulay

Non-combatants and Others

1916

Chapter Ten

June 1917

“Once you’re on the ship, make your way down to the lower deck and put your life jackets on.”

The Forewoman marched backwards and forwards beside the queue at the dock. Edith glanced up at the soldiers who hung over the rails on the deck above and watched the women with expressions of curiosity, humour and suspicion. She blushed and looked away.

“In an orderly fashion, please. Stop all that giggling,” the Forewoman shouted as she reached the gangway. “Remember that the reputation of the WAAC is at stake. You will remain dignified at all times.”

The line wound its way on to the ship and Edith took a deep breath as she stepped through the small doorway cut into the hull. The corridors were narrow and the women squeezed their way through to the sanctuary of the saloon, reserved for the WAAC.

“Life jackets on please.”

They each took one from a pile on the floor in one corner; bulky objects that smelt of tobacco and salt.

“I can’t get the wretched thing on.” Hannah had one arm through but struggled with the other.

“Wait a moment and I’ll help you.” Edith tied the strings of her own jacket.

“I’m too damned large, that’s the problem.”

“I see you more as statuesque.” She guided Hannah’s arm into the jacket and took hold of the strings.

Hannah shook her head. “You would. That’s what comes of being an artist, I suppose.”

“It’s the truth. I do wish you wouldn’t put yourself down. There we are, you’re done.” The strings were a little tight but it was the best that she could do.

The metal walls vibrated as the ship’s engine turned over and the cloying smell of fumes made her nauseous.

“I need air. Let’s go up on deck. I saw Bridget head that way a moment ago. No doubt we’ll be jeered at by soldiers but I can’t stay down here.” Hannah was more than capable of protecting them both.

Edith led the way up the steep stairs from the saloon and opened the door to the outside. The wind took her hat and carried it along the deck to the feet of a group of soldiers. She stood still and waited, wary that they might cause a scene.

One of them reached down and picked it up. He was tall and smart, his polished buttons reflected the sun as he walked across to her.

“Steady on, miss. If this goes over the side none of us will be going in after it.”

“Thank you.” She took the hat from his outstretched hand and he smiled. She’d been too quick to judge, not all the men were ready to poke fun.

She picked her way along the crowded deck with Hannah close behind her. Hundreds of men sat and smoked, played cards or wrote letters. They had made it their home before the ship left the harbour. A few raised their heads as the women walked past but none made any comment. They were quiet and subdued.

Bridget was at the stern of the ship, a small figure with her back to them. They pushed their way through and joined her. Edith leaned over the rail and watched as the sodden mooring ropes were thrown back on to the dock. That was it, there was no return. Home was seventy miles away. Were her parents thinking of her? Her father would be at the office, poring over papers while a forgotten cigar burned in the ashtray. Her mother read at that time of day, once menus were agreed with cook. In the face of it all, they maintained their routine but there wasn’t much else they could do.

The engines shuddered as the ship pulled away, weighed down with its human cargo. Thick black smoke poured from the funnels. Seagulls screamed and circled over the wake as it churned green to white. When they left the protection of the harbour, the wind gathered strength and forced her to catch her breath in gulps. She turned her back to it.

“It’s the first time I’ve left England. I’m excited more than anything else. Is that wrong, do you think, when we’re heading out to war?”

“I think we’re entitled to feel how we like,” Bridget said.

“I, for one, am glad to see the back of it.” Hannah stared at the retreating dockside.

Edith and Bridget looked at each other but said nothing.

The women stayed on deck as the ship moved out into the Channel. They watched until England's coast had receded from view and all that was left to see were the battleships that escorted them.

* * *

The women were met at the dock in Boulogne by a weary Forewoman. Most of them piled into the backs of battered army trucks and were driven away. Edith was escorted with Hannah, Bridget and twenty others to the town. She lost sight of the dome of the Basilica Notre Dame as they entered a labyrinth of narrow streets and tall stone houses. Women hung out their washing and beat carpets but stopped to watch as they walked by. A tabby cat lay on its side in the sun, one eye open. Nothing suggested that there was a war on.

Her bag knocked against her legs and the palm of her hand was sore. She hoped that the Forewoman was not taking them too far. They passed a couple of small shops with beautiful painted signs, the words familiar to her from school books. One had postcards in the window, presumably for the soldiers that passed through the town on their way to the Front or back home. At once, everything was familiar and exotic. She wanted to explore but they marched on through the streets.

They halted outside a dilapidated wooden building beside the River Liane.

"WAAC, fall out! This is the boathouse and your home for tonight. In you go, come on, that's it."

Edith stepped into the gloom and put a hand to her nose, the place reeked of damp and old sacking. Bedding was arranged in rows along each side and a basic supper was laid out on a long trestle table in the middle of the room.

"Take a bed. They're made up of what we call biscuits. You have three each. They're filled with straw. Use the blanket to wrap them together to make a mattress."

Edith put her bag down by one of the beds. She started to make it up as best she could and tried to ignore the stains on the blanket. It was impossible. However, there was always a way round things, it just required a little thought. What about the thin travel rug that she had been advised to bring? She put her hand in her bag and found that her clothes were still damp from when they'd been hurriedly pulled from the washing line and packed the day before. It would be disastrous if the moisture

made its way into her sketchbooks. She pulled everything out on to the bed. The pads of expensive paper were untouched.

“There’s no point taking all that out now,” the Forewoman shouted across the room. “You won’t need it today. You can wash and change in the morning.” The woman turned back and moaned at one of the others over the way they’d made their bed.

Edith repacked her things, alarmed by the thought of not washing until the next day. She took time to wrap the tartan rug around the biscuits. It was clean, for one thing, as well as a reminder of home. Content with her efforts she joined the others at the table.

“I hope the camp we go to will be better than this. Thank goodness we’re only here for one night.” She reached out and took two pieces of bread, the next meal might be a long time coming.

“I swear I saw a rat earlier,” Bridget said, and looked down at the floor by her chair. “The one thing I’m frightened of and I have to share a room with them.”

“Even more reason to make sure that none of this food is left lying around.” Hannah reached across for the cheese.

Edith picked crumbs off of her lap one by one, it wouldn’t do to encourage the creatures. How different it was to Star Hill barracks. The conditions may have been basic but they were tolerable. It had reassured her to know that she was able to step out of the front gate and be in the leafy roads of the town where English life continued as normal.

She thought of the old quarter of Boulogne through which they had walked. It was a shame to waste her first evening abroad in the boathouse. Besides she wanted to buy a postcard to send home. She hoped that her mother would put it on the mantelpiece as she did with John’s.

“Perhaps they’ll let us out for a bit. It’s not that late and I want to see round the town.”

“Good idea, Edith.” Hannah poured out mugs of tea. “I’d be happy to get out of here for an hour or two.”

“I’ll go and ask the Forewoman. She’s looked harassed ever since we got here. You’d think that she’d be glad to have us out from under her feet. I’m surprised that she hasn’t already suggested it.”

She walked towards the far end of the boathouse where the Forewoman's quarters were on a separate raised platform, partially curtained off from the rest of the room. The middle aged woman sat hunched at a small desk and entered numbers in a ledger. Her coat dress was far too large for such a wiry frame. Long strands of greasy hair hung down around her face.

"I wonder if it's possible to have permission to go into the town for an hour or so." The woman looked tired and she regretted disturbing her but surely she would be grateful.

The Forewoman rubbed her eyes with an ink stained hand. "That won't be possible. I can't have my workers running around town. This isn't a hotel and you're not on a Cook's tour. I need you all in one place."

"I'm sure we can be trusted."

"I'm afraid that I can't take that chance. Please go back and find some other way to entertain yourselves."

The Forewoman returned to her ledger. It was clear that the discussion was over. With any luck when they reached the camp, she would have more freedom. In the meantime, it was best to go along with it all and not draw unfavourable attention. She made her way back to where Bridget and Hannah lingered over their meals.

When the light began to die in the boathouse, they lit candle lanterns and hung them on hooks along the walls. She and Bridget lay next to each other on their beds. It was quiet for the first time since leaving Folkestone. She reached out and took Bridget's hand. How hard the skin was, with calluses on the pads of the fingers.

"Are you happy?"

"Of course I am. And you?" Bridget turned to face her.

"We're really here. We're in the war. It all seems rather surreal."

"It'd be better if there were fewer rats. They're real enough."

"You're meant to be braver than me," she said, squeezing Bridget's hand. "It will be all right if we leave the lantern on. Anyhow, it could be worse. My brother wrote to me that the ones in the trenches are the size of cats."

John. Oh, where was he? He may only be a few miles away. She must write as soon as possible to tell him that she'd arrived and wanted to see him.

"This must be very strange for you," whispered Bridget. "I'm used to a lack of comfort but you're not."

Edith looked down at the gap between the floorboards by the side of her bed, where the yellow lamplight was reflected on the still water that lapped below.

“It’s true but I think of my brother and I can’t complain. If he has to sleep in a trench then I can manage without sheets. Anyway, we all have to make changes and no doubt we will need to make more.”

“The difference between you and me is that when this war is over you will go back to how things were.” There was an unfamiliar hardness in her voice.

“I’m not sure that it will be the same. So many men from the old families have died. Servants have come out here to fight but they won’t want to serve again if they survive. Many families won’t be able to employ them if they did. My life won’t be very different from yours.”

“We’ll see. I doubt much will have changed when I go back to Whitechapel.”

Edith didn’t respond and rolled on to her back to try and sleep but it evaded her that night. It wasn’t that it took a while for some of the more over excited women to settle down and the Forewoman had to shout at them more than once. It wasn’t the light that shone softly from the lamp above her head. It wasn’t the sound of endless lines of men marching past the boathouse on their way to the delousing station and the boat home. It was the thought that not many miles away, thousands and thousands of men slaughtered each other. She was in the army machine that was soon to carry her from the last place of safety to the male world of war.

* * *

The next morning, the women were taken to Camp 1 outside the town of Abbeville. As they were driven along the dusty roads, she observed the countryside framed by the back of the army truck and was surprised by the similarity with the fields and woods of England. There was no resemblance to the paintings of the radical French Impressionists, with their vibrating colours and transient light.

They were given two days after their arrival in which to acclimatise themselves to the camp. There were rows of Nissen huts, in each of which eight women were housed. They slept on ancient metal framed hospital beds that had been in service in South Africa years before. There were no sheets or pillows, only biscuits and grey army blankets that were never washed.

Beyond the Nissen huts were the ablution block, mess hut, cook house, recreation hut, Administrators hut and sick bay. Most of the grass had died away and gravel paths cut through the camp in all directions. Sandbags were built up around the huts which made it impossible for the women to plant the flowers they wanted. She disliked the bleached look of the place and craved colour.

The entire camp was enclosed by a white canvas screen to stop people looking in at the women. It was useless. Local people walked up from the town and peered through the gaps, watching them go about their work as if they were a freak show at a fairground. It didn't bother her but she was relieved that she had chosen to be a driver and couldn't wait until her first trip out of the camp.

There were four German prisoners of war whose job was to empty the latrines, kill rats with spades and chop wood for the cook house. At first she had stared at them and tried to find something in their faces that pointed towards the cruelty that Mrs Nevinson referred to. There wasn't the merest hint. They had nothing in common with the caricatures of Germans drawn in English newspapers, fat humorless men with heavy moustaches and porcine features. They were like any other man back at home.

The quiet routine of the first couple of days lulled her into a sense that the war was happening elsewhere. She heard the guns to the east and the occasional plane flew over. A British plane was always met with a cheer but they fell silent when a German Taube circled the camp to take reconnaissance photographs. It was sinister that one man high above in that expansive sky had such power over them. Other than that, all was quiet.

On the third night a few hours after the lamps were put out, she was woken by the mournful whine of the air raid alarm. She reached for her coat and shoes which had to be kept by the bed and tried to get ready in the darkness. The sleeves twisted and resisted her arms. Why was a simple task so difficult? A few of the others had left the hut and were closer to safety. She fumbled with her shoelaces and gave up. It was better to risk a fall in the dark than be hit by a bomb while trying to get ready.

"Come on. Come on. Out as quick as you can. Head straight for the trenches!" The Forewoman stood outside her cubicle at the entrance to the hut until the last of the women was out.

Edith ran down the path between the huts and looked up at the patches of sky between the roofs. Searchlight beams strafed across the blackness, the white light

seeking out and pinning down anything that came into its path. It was beautiful despite the threat of death. She mustn't stop but follow the shadows of the women on the path in front of her.

Hannah and Bridget reached the trenches seconds before her and they all slipped in under the corrugated iron cover. They moved forward, feeling for the sandbags on either side, and sat down once they reached their section.

She rested her head on the rough wall and closed her eyes against the darkness. How long before it happened, whatever it was? She held her body tense and waited. The minutes passed by and there was no bomb, no bullets. Hannah and Bridget chatted without apparent concern. If she joined them it may help her relax.

"For once I was getting a good night's sleep." She heard a slight waver in her voice and coughed.

Bridget's hand found hers. "Don't worry, it's like a raid in London. The difference is here we've got a shelter."

"I understand that you're trying to make me feel better but the reason we've got a shelter is we need one more than in London. Anyway this is less protection than my cellar at home." She pulled her coat tight around her. Despite the mild night fear had sapped the warmth from her body.

"Edith, that's true but we don't know what it is." Hannah's voice soothed her. "It might be a false alarm. They may have seen something up there that's heading for England, not here."

The women were silent for a while. Edith thought of her parents at home, asleep in their soft bed, unaware of the danger that might creep towards them through the darkness. She shifted on the floor and small stones dug into her flesh.

Why were the others so calm? She wished that their faces were visible, that they would speak.

"Bridget. Have you heard from your fiancé?"

"I got a letter this morning. Jack's very honest about what it's like up the line. He says that there's no point trying to hide it now I'm over here."

Edith laughed. "We know less than we did before. At least in England we had newspapers. This camp is cut off from the world. It's not as if we talk to any of the soldiers."

"Well we haven't yet but that probably won't last. How's John, Edith?"

“There’s been a change in his recent letters. It’s as if he’s tired. I don’t mean physically but tired of it all. I’ve begged him to take leave and come to Abbeville but he wrote that he won’t have any opportunity for a while. I’d give anything to see him.”

“You’re both too gloomy. I think that we need to have a bit of fun,” Hannah said. “I’ve heard that the men in one of the camps on the other side of town have concerts and dances and they’re desperate to get us to go over there.”

“I’m not sure.” Edith dreaded the prospect of mixing with the soldiers.

“We might be able to find you an officer.” Hannah laughed and the sound of her deep voice reverberated around the trench.

“I’ve enough to do without the bother all that brings.” If she got any spare time she planned to spend it with her pencils and sketchbook and not be distracted by a man.

“I think it’s a splendid idea,” said Bridget. “We’ll be working hard enough. A dance will do us good.”

“I didn’t think you approved of associating with soldiers, particularly over here.” Edith was surprised. “You talk so much about Jack and your good catholic upbringing.”

“A concert is fine. Even a dance isn’t a sin. There’s no harm in it. We don’t know what will happen to us, let alone them.”

“It seems that particular argument is used to justify all sorts of behaviour these days.” She took Bridget’s hand. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean anything. We’ll all go together.”

For the next few hours she tried to sleep but it was impossible. Hannah was right, whatever it was had probably gone over the camp to England but she’d heard that the Germans dropped any spare bombs on the French coast when they returned. She rolled up her coat as a pillow but her neck ached and strained. She listened to Hannah and Bridget’s slow and rasping breaths as they slept. At 5 o’clock, light filled the trench and they were given the all clear. The Zeppelin that had passed over them on its way to London had returned and left Camp 1 in peace.

Chapter Eleven

June - July 1917

Early morning mist clung to the fields between Camp 1 and the Transport Depot as the three women set out for their first day on duty. Hannah marched in front. Her long stride made it impossible to walk with the others. Edith and Bridget linked arms and picked their way slowly through the grass. Dew soaked their hems and stockings.

The wet wall of the barn materialised like the hull of a ship emerging from fog. She heard men's voices in the still air.

"I can see one of 'em. An angel descending from the clouds of heaven."

"Don't talk bloody nonsense. They're more like devils. Where do you think we'll end up once they get settled 'ere? Nearer the fuckin' show, that's where."

She stopped walking and pulled Bridget up short. "They don't sound very welcoming. This will be awful, won't it?"

"Trust me, there's nothing to be worried about. Their bark will be worse than their bite. Come on." Bridget pulled her forwards and they caught up with Hannah as she reached the barn door.

"I heard every word of that." Hannah put her hands on her hips and shook her head at the two men.

One of them removed his cap and ran his fingers through his hair. "I'm sorry for the language, miss. But you'll 'ave to get used to that I'm afraid. We'll do our best but you can't expect us to change the 'abit of a lifetime."

Edith slipped her arm out of Bridget's and stepped into the gloom of the barn. She breathed deeply and relaxed at the familiar smell of oil. On each side was a line of vehicles, everything from Daimlers to Rovers and she recognised them all. Numerous spare parts hung from nails hammered into the wooden walls. The entire garage was tidy and the vehicles were immaculate.

The rest of the men stopped work and gathered together in a pack. She raised her chin and looked back at them. They must have been in France for many months. Most of them were thin, with faces that were creased and brown from the sun. It wasn't possible to tell from their expressions what they thought of her. She lowered

her head, embarrassed by her wet stockings and the hot, pricking blush that spread across her face.

The sergeant stepped out of a cramped workshop cobbled together from salvaged planks. He was older than his men and reminded her of Mr Bevan. He looked down at a piece of paper covered in his oily fingerprints.

“I don’t want all three of you in ‘ere on the first day. Finch and O’Brien, you get to ‘ave the tour of the outfit. You won’t work in stores or the office but you need to know how they operate. They’re staffed by women. You’re everywhere now it seems but you three are the first we’ve ‘ad in ‘ere.”

She raised her hand to wave at Hannah and Bridget as they were led away by one of the men but dropped it back down to her side. How foolish she must look. If she could get started on some work, prove that she knew her way around a garage and belonged there as the men did.

“You must be ‘oward. You’ll start by showing me what you know about motors. A certificate’s all very well but if you can’t do what I need you to then you can go back ‘ome.”

She rolled up her sleeves and followed the sergeant to one of the Wolseys. The men followed and stood around with their arms folded. They didn’t speak and the sergeant didn’t ask them to get back to work. It was an initiation as much as a test of her ability. Her stomach tightened and she took a deep breath.

“Right, ‘oward. I want you to take the clutch out and clean the discs. Do you think you can do that?”

The breath that she had been holding pushed out through her lips with a sigh. She wanted to dance with him round the barn as it was the very thing that she had successfully completed for her final BSM exam.

“Yes, sergeant. Please may I have a wrench?”

One of the men placed a few tools on the bench next to her. She glanced at them and saw that all she needed was there. The men were playing fair. The weight of the wrench in her hand stopped it from shaking. She had one chance to prove that she was competent.

She worked in silence and heard the men whisper as she removed the clutch. They obviously hadn’t expected her to get that far. She cleaned the discs, her hands moving easily over the smooth cool metal. She took her time to put everything back

in its place. When she was finished to her own satisfaction, she stepped away and wiped her hands on a rag. The men applauded and one of them gave a cheer.

She laughed and turned to the sergeant. "I presume I've passed the test."

"That you 'ave. I think we'll keep you." He gave her a wink. "Come with me and we'll find you something to get on with."

She followed him to his workshop. The men drifted back to their vehicles and talked loudly to each other. The atmosphere of quiet suspicion had lifted.

* * *

"'oward. Over 'ere!" The sergeant shouted across the barn to where she was polishing the beetle black bonnet of a Daimler.

She walked across the dusty floor to where the sergeant stood with an officer. They fell silent as she approached and the visitor looked her up and down. She stared back. He was young, the skin of his face fresh but there were dark shadows like smudged charcoal beneath his eyes.

"This is Captain Bradshaw. He needs a driver and I've recommended you."

"Yes, sergeant."

"I've never used a woman driver but the sergeant thinks that you'll be able to manage it."

It was difficult to tell from his tone whether he intended to upset her but she had to admit to her own anxieties. It wasn't the driving but fear of getting lost, she hadn't been further than Abbeville or driven in the dark.

"As long as you don't mind the odd detour."

"'oward!"

"It's not a problem, sergeant. I like someone with a bit of spirit."

She caught the quick smile partly hidden by the Captain's moustache. At least she would be driving for someone with a sense of humour.

"I need to get into Abbeville within the hour, sergeant. Can Howard take me?"

"Of course, sir. She's yours for as long as you want her."

She forgave the comment and walked back to the Daimler. It would have to be polished all over again on her return. The Captain sauntered across the yard and watched as she turned the crank handle. The engine started first time. Relieved, she opened the door for him. He climbed in, laid his portfolio across his knees and folded

his hands on top of it. Her heart beat fast as she walked round and got into her seat, anxious to make a good impression on her first passenger.

She set off with care down the track and on to the Abbeville road. A considerable number of military vehicles were heading in the same direction but they maintained a steady pace. She glanced occasionally in the mirror at the Captain and he appeared relaxed as he looked out across the fields. His cap cast a shadow over his eyes but his lower face, lit by the sun, was strong, angular, attractive.

In Abbeville, the traffic slowed down as they mixed with the horse drawn carts in the narrow streets. She turned on to the busy Rue Saint-Gilles lined with shops and cafés. Striped awnings, the fabric bleached and torn, cast tiny strips of shade on to the pavement. She peered at the wreaths in a funeral parlour window. It was easy to forget in the midst of war that the townspeople died their own deaths beyond the bloody battlefields.

She was startled by the Captain as he leaned forward. "You can drop me at St. Vulfran's."

"Yes, sir."

"That wasn't as bad as I thought it would be, Howard. Don't pull that face, I can see you in the mirror. You know I'm joking, don't you?"

"Yes, sir." She decided that he was.

"What made you come out here, Howard?"

"I want to do my bit." It was probably what he expected to hear and she doubted that he was interested.

He sat back in his seat and she drove on to the Rue Saint-Vulfran, her eyes fixed on the road in front of her.

Every morning of the following week, she was up before 6 o'clock with only a cup of tea for breakfast. She, Bridget and Hannah had to be out of bed before everyone else so that they could walk down to the depot and get the motor cars ready. The women in their hut called them nobody's children as they were always too early for breakfast and too late for tea.

The Captain needed to be driven between Abbeville and towns further to the east. At first, she consulted maps but she got to know the various markers: a crucifix at a crossroads, an empty cottage, a dead tree with exposed roots. They often ended up far from where they were originally meant to be and she learned how to prepare for every journey. Petrol cans needed to be filled and stowed in the motor car as well as

sufficient rations, mainly the ubiquitous army biscuits. She loved to get out of the camp, confident in her own abilities and enjoying the routine.

Occasionally, she made running repairs on the vehicle and took pleasure in the Captain's praise. He requested that she remain as his dedicated driver and she was grateful. The others told her terrible tales of the stern brass hats they drove around and she considered herself fortunate. The Captain consulted his notebook much of the time but he often put it aside and leaned forward to talk to her. It was never anything particularly serious, mainly comments about what they had seen that day or the countryside that they passed through. It amused her that in England they would have needed a chaperone but in France she drove him alone all hours of the day and night, as if her uniform meant she was no longer viewed as a woman. It thrilled her but she didn't think that anyone else had noticed.

* * *

She drove into the yard in front of the depot where Hannah and Bridget were cleaning their vehicles. She parked next to them, got out and tapped her watch.

"We've missed dinner again."

"It'd be nice if cook kept something back for us occasionally." Hannah scrubbed hard at the windscreen, her mouth pursed.

"Quite, though the offerings are rather poor. I wish they'd at least wash the coppers out properly between making stew and coffee. I'll never get used to that awful film of grease that floats on the top."

"Why don't we go into town and eat? I can't take another night of those horrid biscuits."

She was not surprised by Hannah's suggestion. Food had become her obsession: the less there was available, the more she wanted.

"It's too late to take the service wagon. It'll be on its way back."

"Edith, it's only two miles. We can walk."

"It's more like three but I suppose I can manage." She put her hands into the small of her back and stretched. "I've been sat down for most of the day and the walk will do me good. As long as we're back before the camp gates shut. I don't fancy climbing over the fence. I'll let the sergeant know we're off."

She walked to his workshop and popped her head round the makeshift door. He had a lit cigarette in his hand, boots off and his feet up on a wooden crate.

“Sergeant, we’re off into town to see if we can find something to eat. I haven’t cleaned the motor but I’ll do it first thing.”

“Strictly speaking, ‘oward, you should do it before you go but seen as how you’ve caught me in flagrante as they say, I can hardly say no. Off you go and get some grub inside you.”

She ran back to the others. “I’ve told him. Let’s go before he changes his mind.”

They grabbed their hats and walked down the track from the depot to the Abbeville road. The warm air was redolent of the sweet aroma of sun dried meadow. Bats shot over their heads and feasted on clouds of midges. She pulled a piece of long grass from the verge and twisted it round her fingers, reminded of happy childhood summers. Her reminiscing was interrupted by the distant guns that imitated thunder.

“I swear they get nearer each night.” Bridget flinched and pulled her hat tighter round her head.

“The guns or the bats?”

“The guns.”

“I think you’re right.” She looked at her friend’s faces, sombre in the blood red light of the sunset.

They arrived in Abbeville as darkness fell. It was agreeable to be back among solid buildings after the huts and tents of the camp but there was no welcome. She watched as a woman shook her head at them and pulled her child inside the house. The doors and windows were shut against the night, the war and the women.

“Do you know what someone said to me here the other day? I was with the Captain. He’d gone into one of the shops and I was with the motor car. Two women came up to me and said *khaki girls no bon.*”

Bridget nodded. “They’re not keen are they. A child said to me *jig a jig one franc.* He thought it was awfully funny. He could only have been seven or eight.”

“I doubt he knew what the words meant.”

“That may be so,” Hannah said, “but he must have picked it up from somewhere.”

“He probably heard his mother talk about us. The Forewoman did warn that the locals believed we were here to comfort the men. No wonder she told us to stay away from the townspeople but perhaps it’d help if we did mix. They might learn the truth and stop thinking of us as camp followers.”

“Thankfully the men at the depot understand and that’s all that matters.” Hannah raised her voice and said, “this lot can think what they want. They’re no different to those women at home who insulted us.”

The Café de la Paix was in need of repair. Petals of green paint had peeled away from the shutters and the gold lettering on the window was faded. It was her favourite place in the town; the omelettes prepared by Madame were delicious. Bridget struggled to pay for much more than the occasional piece of stale cake or stewed fruit at the Salvation Army canteen but she would treat her.

She pushed open the door and the little brass bell announced their arrival. The customers, old men with nicotine stained fingers and tired eyes, ignored them. Madame bustled out from behind the bar and pulled at Edith’s sleeve.

“Welcome, welcome. With me please.” She led them to the back of the café, apparently happy to take their money but without upsetting her regulars.

They sat down at a small wooden table in the corner.

“What would you like, mes dames?” The old woman’s tone was sarcastic.

“Coffee and omelettes all round, please.” Hannah rubbed her hands together.

“Perhaps a bottle of wine?”

“Can’t drink in uniform, I’m afraid.”

Madame narrowed her eyes as if unsure whether she was being made fun of and walked away.

Edith brushed crumbs from the sticky surface of the table on to the floor and sighed. It was the perfect time of day when the work was done and there was food and a night of sleep ahead. Hannah sorted through her purse but Bridget sat and stared at the wall.

“Are you well?” Edith put a hand on the other woman’s arm.

“Just ignore me. I feel a bit sorry for myself.”

“Don’t be silly. I’m not going to pretend there’s nothing wrong with you. I don’t like to see you unhappy. Now tell me, what is it?”

“I thought if I was out here I’d be aware of what was happening to Jack or at least his battalion. I’d know if he was near the action or behind the lines and I’d be able to prepare myself.” She put a hand to her forehead, hiding most of her face. “But I feel further away from him than ever.”

“Sometimes I think it would be easier if we didn’t love at all.” Hannah looked up and the conversation stopped at the alien bitterness in her voice.

Madame arrived and set down three tiny cups of black coffee on the table. Edith smelt stale sweat as the woman leaned across her. It lingered after she'd gone.

"Why did you say that? I couldn't live without Jack." Bridget's voice wavered.

"It's not the loving. It's the pain of loss. If you don't get close to someone, it doesn't hurt so much when you lose them. And you will always lose them in the end." She blew on the hot coffee and took a sip. She didn't seem concerned about the effect she might have on Bridget.

Edith leaned forward across the table. "You can't live like that. Are you jealous, is that what this is, because you don't have anyone."

"Why do you think I feel this way? Perhaps I had someone once." Hannah showed none of her usual exuberance and appeared fragile.

"Did you? What happened?"

"I had a companion. It was impossible to keep it secret for long. Some people resented it. Said some damned unkind things. I was prepared to put up with it but she wasn't. We argued and she blamed me, said that I had perverted her. I never want to hear that word again for as long as I live. She refused to see me again and I understand that she went to America. Not that I care." She put her elbows on the table and rested her head in her hands. "Now you know what I am."

Bridget laughed. "Oh Hannah, did you think we didn't know?"

Edith wrapped her hands around her cup of coffee and chastised herself for not seeing what had been obvious to Bridget.

"I presumed," Bridget continued, "that you joined the WAAC because it would make it easier for you to be yourself."

"It was quite the opposite. The papers made such a fuss about the WAAC, all that talk of Amazons and mannish women. I didn't want to draw any more attention to myself. I felt out of place as it was."

"We can't win." Bridget shook her head. "One day we're prostitutes because we follow the men out here and the next we're inverters because we're in uniform doing men's work."

Hannah sniffed and pulled a handkerchief out of her dress pocket. "When I was with her I knew who I was but when she left I was filled with self doubt. I joined the WAAC to serve my country but also in order to escape. I volunteered for overseas service in the hope that I would be exposed to danger and, well...."

“I’m glad that you’ve told us the truth.” Edith smiled at her. “There were moments when I thought you were troubled but you’re so cheerful most of the time that I thought I must have imagined it.”

“Once I started at Star Hill and met both of you, life changed for the better. I thought of her less and less. I’m ashamed that I had such disregard for my life. It was selfish of me because...well I don’t need to explain why. I didn’t tell you about any of it because I wanted to forget but more than that I didn’t want you to change your opinion of me.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, life’s been turned on its head. None of us know what will happen to us from one day to the next. There are no rules any more. I don’t care about your background or who you love. All I care about is that you’re my friend and we should look after each other. Don’t you agree, Bridget?”

“Absolutely.”

Hannah laughed. “Aren’t you concerned for your mortal soul?”

“I think the Lord has more to worry about. Love and friendship, whoever it’s between, can only be a good thing.”

Madame brought the omelettes and Edith’s mouth watered at the smell.

Hannah put a large piece in her mouth and chewed it with obvious delight. “If we’re going to be honest with each other, perhaps Edith should tell us what’s happening between her and the Captain.”

“I don’t know what you mean. All I do is drive him round the countryside for hours on end. He’s all right but he doesn’t say much. At least he doesn’t refer to me as *it*, the way that your man does.”

“We’ll see.”

“You’re making mischief.” She wanted to know what it was that made Hannah say what she had. The last thing she wanted was for any of the men, or the Captain, to think that she harboured any romantic ideas.

* * *

Cptn. J. Howard,
1st/28th Bn. London Regiment,
(Artists Rifles)

WAAC Camp 1
Abbeville

10th July 1917

Dear John,

Thank you for your last letter. I do respect you for refusing to take leave. It must mean a lot to your men but I miss you. You're my brother, my flesh and blood. You mean more to me than a sweetheart ever could.

I saw the strangest thing today, the King and Queen were in Abbeville. They were at the British Officers Club, of course. I had driven the Captain into town and there was a quite a crowd in the street. The royal party came out of the building. The King got into one motor car and the Queen another. It was as if it was all taking place in another world. The Queen and her lady-in-waiting wore light coloured dresses and hats with huge white feathers. They were like birds of paradise. All I have seen for weeks is khaki and the black mourning clothes of the French women.

At one time, not that long ago, I would have been excited to see her. But today I couldn't have cared less. The senior officers, in pristine uniform, swaggered around and behaved as if she were a goddess. The memories that she will go away with won't be of the real France, the real war. Rather she will remember a sanitised version of it all. Perhaps it's unfair of me. They can't take her up to the Front but I wonder what role she has to play in this modern world.

Of course, when I write to mother and father I won't describe the visit like this. I'm sure they see it as a wonderful gesture on behalf of the King and Queen and will continue to praise them. One of the things that this war has shown me is that there is no class. We're all the same out here in the face of the enemy. I'm sure that you see that with your own men. Listen to me, I'm one of the girls!

I'm not sure how much of this will be crossed out by the censor. You may receive a letter that makes little sense at all. I hope that all is well with you and I live in the hope that I will see your face soon.

All my love,

Edith.

Chapter Twelve

July 1917

Edith entered the recreation hut and took a crudely printed programme from the soldier at the door. She reviewed the list of acts with interest as she had never been to a music hall. Bridget and Hannah stood behind her and whispered to each other in excited tones. For days they had talked of nothing but the concert, got up by a Major for his battalion before he and his men went up the line.

Once the concert had been announced it was impossible to avoid being swept up by the sense of anticipation in the women's camp. She relished the opportunity to leave the dirt and grease of the garage behind and take pride in her appearance. They would have to wear their uniforms but worked hard to make them attractive and individual. She bought a coffee coloured collar to replace the dark one issued at Star Hill. It was forbidden but she hoped that she would get away with it.

A few of the women went to the male hairdresser in town to have their hair bobbed. They claimed it was for hygienic reasons but it was convenient that they had done it in the days leading up to the concert. She had no intention of copying them, the result was far from feminine. John often said that her hair was her best feature and her mother would be horrified if she cut it off.

"This way please, miss." The young soldier put his hand on her shoulder and guided her towards the front of the hut.

She glanced back to make sure that Hannah and Bridget were with her. A number of low wooden benches in front of the stage were reserved for the WAAC. She sat down and looked round at the hundreds of unfamiliar men who filled the rows behind and were perched on narrow window ledges. A couple of them looked at her and smiled but she turned away.

The small windows and the door were open but the room remained warm. The rough material of her dress pricked the skin under her arms and she fanned her face with the concert programme. The place reeked of masculine sweat and cigarettes.

"Isn't this exciting?" Bridget leaned in close, her face flushed.

"Yes it is rather fun." She was determined to enjoy herself.

The men clapped and called for the show to start. A few of them stamped their feet on the wooden floor. Bridget offered her a paper bag full of hardboiled sweets. She

popped one in her mouth and examined the stage backdrop. The skilful artist had painted a fairytale castle bordered by mountains and a forest. The turrets were fantastical and she envied the artists' opportunity to escape into his imagination.

A man in an ill-fitting suit and felt top hat stepped on to the stage. "Ladies and gentleman. Welcome to this evening's entertainment. I would like to present to you our first act, that world renowned conjuror, the Great Roberto."

The men applauded and she joined in with enthusiasm. The magician walked on to the stage, wearing a black cloak over full evening dress. He removed his pointed paper hat, painted with white stars and crescent moons and showed it to the crowd. After a flourish with a wand, he reached in and pulled out a fan of cards. He proceeded to make coins disappear and reappear, scarves change colour and cut rope become whole. The crowd clapped harder and harder with every trick. It reminded her of childhood birthday parties. She looked at the soldiers sat on the nearby window ledge and was touched by the innocent delight on their boyish faces.

The second act was a comic singer, a short, rotund man in a blazer with a rose in the lapel. He opened with a few innocuous jokes and to her surprise there was silence. The comic tried again but they stared at him, eyes blank and mouths shut. It was as if they were unsure whether they should laugh. He was undeterred and pressed on with *Henry the Eighth I Am*. The men sang along with the chorus and she tapped her foot. The comic smiled with obvious relief and applauded his audience. He returned to his jokes; gallows humour of life in the trenches. Surely it was wrong of him but the soldiers clapped and laughed out loud. They were entitled to but she wasn't. Perhaps if they laughed at death they felt that they could cheat it.

The compère returned to the stage, his face shone with sweat. "Ladies and gentleman, our final act this evening is a play brought to you direct from the West End. I present to you, Cinderella!"

A man in a black dress and apron stepped out from the wings with a broom. The crowd erupted into applause and prevented him from speaking. He twirled a few strands of his yellow wool wig round his finger and winked. The men stamped their feet and a few whistled.

"They don't need us women," she said to Hannah, "they're more interested in him."

"He's certainly made an effort."

The men settled down and the play commenced. The acting was terrible and the language risqué but she loved it. The ugly sisters stole the show, their eyes and lips

exaggerated by face paint, backsides covered by enormous bustles and the fronts of their dresses stuffed with goodness knew what. They were grotesque but received the most applause. The men and the WAAC demanded encore after encore.

The white sheet was pulled across the rope for the last time and the show was over. Her hands stung from clapping.

“I’m glad we came, I enjoyed every minute of the last act. It’s a shame it’s over.”

“There’s dancing yet,” replied Bridget. Curls of hair escaped from under her hat and clung to her damp cheeks.

A soldier made his way down the rows and politely asked the women to move aside so the benches could be stacked and the dance floor made ready. The three of them stood up and leaned against the wall. She watched a man set up a gramophone on the stage and sort through an untidy pile of records.

“Have you got your dance card ready, it’s on the back of the programme?” Bridget asked and looked round the room in the hunt for her first partner.

“There are more than enough women to go round. I think I’ll just watch for the moment.”

“But that’s why we’ve been invited, to dance. Come on, Edith.”

“I said in a moment. There’s plenty of time yet. Hannah and I can watch you show us how it’s done.”

She heard a crackle as a record was placed on the gramophone and a foxtrot rhythm transformed the room into a dance hall. A young man approached Bridget and she let him lead her through the crowds to the floor.

“She’s happy tonight. It’s good to see her distracted. She’ll make herself ill worrying about Jack.” The room was humid and she fanned her face with the programme.

“The man she’s dancing with is Australian, isn’t he?” asked Hannah.

“Yes. And it looks as if all his friends have found partners as well. The Australians get paid more and the women know it.”

“Let’s be honest, it’s the reason many of them have come out here, to escape poverty and find a man.”

“I know.” It was mercenary but they all had their own reasons for enlisting. She was no different; she couldn’t claim to be a patriot.

“The men aren’t stupid,” Hannah continued, “they’re aware of what some of these women want but what does it matter? Tonight is good for their morale.”

“Yes, you’re right. It may be the last bit of fun they have.” She watched the dancers cling to each other as they paraded round the floor. Mrs Nevinson had written that she couldn’t hold dances when she knew what the men were returning to. Those in the hut seemed happy enough. It had to be preferable to waiting in silence for the morning to come.

“I say, isn’t that your Captain over there?” Hannah raised her arm and pointed towards a knot of people on the other side of the hall.

“For heaven’s sake, stop it.” She pulled Hannah’s arm down and looked across to see Captain Bradshaw deep in conversation with the Major.

Hannah grinned. “Don’t you want him to know you’re here? I’d have thought you would.”

“It doesn’t matter to me one way or the other.” It took a great deal of effort not to stare at him.

“It’s a shame that officers can’t dance with workers. If we were at home you’d be part of the same set.”

“Well, those are the rules.” She had wondered what it would be like to dance with him but didn’t want to discuss it. “It’s too warm in here. I’m going outside for some air. You can manage without me, can’t you?”

“Yes, of course. I didn’t mean to make fun.”

“I know. I’ll be back in a bit.”

She made her way through the throng to the door and stepped out into the cool air. She undid the top two buttons of her coat dress and ran her hand round the back of her neck. The skin was clammy.

She walked a short distance to a hut and sat on the step. It was unlikely that she would be disturbed as the door was fastened with a chain and padlock. The gramophone music drifted across to her, a slow romantic melody. She traced patterns in the dust at her feet and reflected on the evening. It had been far more enjoyable than she expected and the men weren’t so bad. A part of her wished that the Captain might leave the hut and come across to her but what would she say? She wasn’t sure how she felt about him.

“Look, George, one of them’s escaped!”

Three soldiers walked towards her. They were out of luck if they thought they could convince her to return to the dance.

“How come you ain’t in the hut with the others? I thought you’d all be in there, leading the men on.” George was thin but wiry. His face was rat-like, narrow lips pulled back over yellow teeth. He knelt down and blew dirty white cigarette smoke into her face. She coughed and he stood back up, all she was able to see of him were his cracked boots and puttees.

“’ere, George. Perhaps she thought she’d get lucky if she came out ’ere on her own.” The other man’s skin was pale and his nose had been broken in the past.

A bit of light heartedness was to be expected but not this. The man’s voice was humourless, threatening. She stood up so that the men no longer looked down on her. The third man hung back and glanced nervously around.

“I came out for some fresh air. I’d appreciate it if you left me alone.”

The final rays of sunlight were pulled down behind the horizon, making it difficult to read the men’s faces.

“Is life out here what you expected? If you’re not in there with the men, lifting your skirts, perhaps you’re missing home. In fact, why don’t you piss off back there and take your little friends with you?” He took a long drag on his cigarette and exhaled slowly.

Her chest tightened. “You can’t talk to me like that. I’ll report you.” She looked behind him but no one was in sight.

He grabbed her arm. She stepped back against the locked door and the padlock pressed into her spine.

“I was the first man in my village to volunteer. I wanted to protect my home, my wife and children. The whole point is that we stop the Hun getting to England. And what do you lot do? You come out here.” He pushed his face near to hers and she felt his spittle on her cheek.

“There are plenty of men skiving who should be out here instead. You give those cowards a way out. Women like you aren’t doing what’s expected of you. Your place is in the home. If I had my way, you’d all be sent back on the boat tomorrow.”

She tried to pull away from his grip, angry but fearful of what he might do to her. “Our place is wherever we’re needed. The government asked for volunteers and here we are. Now, let me go.”

“I haven’t finished yet,” he said with a hiss but released her arm.

“You tell her, George,” said the man with the broken nose. The third lurked in the background, his cigarette glowed in the dark. She shivered and fastened the top buttons of her dress coat.

“Do you know what it’s like up the line?”

The sound of music and laughter floated across the parade ground.

“I have a brother at the Front, if you must know.” She stuck her chin out and put a hand on her hip. “He writes regular letters to me and tells me as much as he can.”

George turned and spat into the dust at her feet. “Do you think he tells you the truth?”

“Of course he does.”

“No man could ever say in words what it’s like, even if he wanted to.” He stared into the darkness.

“You don’t see the broken men come back from the line. You’re protected in your camp.” His tone was quiet, a whisper. “It’s like a hell on earth for us. Unconscious men who don’t know their legs have been blown away, young boys with their faces hanging off. If they do survive, and they don’t want to, not even their mother would recognise them. No woman will ever want to go near them. There are women down there too, ambulance drivers. They have to pick those poor bastards up from the trains and bring them to the hospitals in Abbeville. They shouldn’t have to see that. But those women are women no longer. They’re clapped out machines like the rest of us.”

He was no longer threatening but a pathetic figure. “I know that I can never understand but it’s not my fault. Please, let me get back.”

George dropped his cigarette and ground it into the dirt with the toe of his boot. She stepped forward. He made no attempt to stop her and she ran towards the light that fanned across the ground in front of the recreation huts’ open door.

No one paid attention as she elbowed her way into the busy room. People danced in the middle of the floor and couples lined the walls intent on each other. She couldn’t see Captain Bradshaw but didn’t care. All she wanted was to get back to camp.

Hannah and Bridget waved and made their way across to her. “We were about to come and look for you. Where have you been? The Administrator has told us we have to start back otherwise we’ll be late for roll-call.”

“I’m sorry. I got waylaid by someone who didn’t think we should be here.”

Bridget tried to push her curls back under her hat. "But we were invited, by the Major."

"I meant France, not the concert," she said, raising her voice in order to be heard over the voluble conversations throughout the hut.

"Will you report him to the Administrator?" Hannah asked.

"No. I won't pretend that he didn't frighten me but he's in the minority."

She followed the Administrator and other women out of the hut. The men cheered and shouted promises that they would invite them back. She wasn't sure if she wanted to return.

They reached the camp at half past nine. Three army trucks were parked by the parade ground and women were climbing out of the back assisted by the drivers.

"Must be a new draft," she remarked to the others as they walked past.

"Edith!" a familiar voice shouted out. "Edith! I guess you didn't think you'd see me again."

She stopped and peered through the darkness. Alice Carter stood with a bag in one hand and a coat slung over her arm.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" Alice continued. "I thought you could show me round, introduce me to your friends, assuming that you have any."

She sighed. "I'm sure you can find your own way. It's not as if you lack confidence."

"Who is she, Edith? I take it she's not a friend of yours," Hannah asked.

"No, just someone I did my mechanics training with. Come on or we'll miss roll call." She marched on to the parade ground, grateful that her friends were at her side.

Chapter Thirteen

July 1917

The haunting sound of the Muslim call to prayer reached her on the hill above Étaples camp. She looked down and made out the Imam on the top of a gun turret and the Egyptian soldiers prostrate on the ground beneath him. Men from all over the Commonwealth gathered there: Australians, Canadians, New Zealanders, Indians. With so many nations to call upon the war may soon be over. But she only sensed men waiting: to go up the line, to go home on leave or to die in one of the twenty hospitals.

The Captain didn't need her for an hour. She sat down in the shade of a tree and took a book and pencils out of her canvas bag, thrilled at the opportunity to sketch. She smoothed down the first page with her hand and studied the camp in the valley. Row upon row of huts housed hospitals, supply stores, canteens and a cinema. Next to the prison camp was a makeshift football ground and stables, where hundreds of horses waited for the move up the line. It was difficult to tell the animals from the men. The remaining space was studded with lines of conical bell tents. The edges of the camp were not visible, let alone the village of Étaples itself or the railway line that ran alongside the river and away to the east.

It was easy to make a straightforward copy of the scene but the result would be a depiction of fact rather than an interpretation imbued with depth and quality. The Futurists believed that a picture created a sensation and completely involved the observer. To achieve that she needed to have some connection with the camp, be able to express what it meant to experience it as a soldier but she was an outsider.

She sighed and laid the sketchbook on her lap. How could she be a war artist? The major subject of interest was the Front but that was inaccessible to her. Even the illustrated papers did not publish images of the camps. The editors probably believed that their readers weren't interested. Perhaps that was the answer. Instead of attempting a Futurist approach she should try and see the camp through the eyes of those at home. It wouldn't be a view dissimilar to her own.

Excited, she picked up a pencil and began to sketch. The sheer scale of the place was awe inspiring. Although transitory, it had invaded the land and taken control of it.

That was the narrative to convey to those who would never visit this place. It was wonderful to fall back into the familiar trance that accompanied drawing.

After an hour, she blended the last area of shadow with a fingertip and looked up at the sky where the sun was directly overhead. The Captain would be waiting for her. She stood up, grabbed her things and ran down the hill. The long grass and wild flowers gave way to scrub and the dried ruts of the road.

Captain Bradshaw stood by the motor car. "Ah, you're here. Good. I was about to search for you."

"Sorry sir, I lost all sense of time." She put a hand to her throat and breathed heavily.

He removed his cap and turned it round and round in his hands. He'd had his hair trimmed. She wanted to reach up and brush away the fine blonde hairs that adhered to his collar.

"You seem flustered, Howard."

"I've been running, sir and it isn't really the weather for it."

"I assume you've eaten so we might as well go back to Abbeville."

"Yes, sir." She hadn't eaten since breakfast.

The crank handle slipped in her damp hands but thankfully the engine started on the third attempt. She threw her things on to the front seat and he climbed into the back. A stream of vehicles passed by and threw up clouds of dust. She waited for them to pass and pulled out.

The drive through the camp required her full concentration but she relaxed once they were on the open road. She occasionally glanced at him in the rear-view mirror but he was engrossed in a folder full of papers. The sun warmed her face and she smiled, driving as slowly as she dared through the vibrant countryside. The fields were full of women bringing in the harvest; bright coloured headscarves moved amongst the tall grasses as the women bent forward with their scythes. It must be back breaking work, far more difficult than driving around day after day.

The steering wheel shuddered and she pulled off the road on to the verge.

"What's happened?" He leaned forward and his shoulder touched hers.

"A puncture. It shouldn't take me long to sort it out." It was an easy enough job.

Captain Bradshaw got out and wandered off to stand in the shade of the hedgerow. She walked round and opened the tool box. There were no patches. It was impossible. They had been there when she checked the night before. Punctures

were so common that to be found without patches was as embarrassing as running out of petrol. She kicked the tyre. It had to be Alice. It wasn't the first rotten stunt she had pulled.

"Whatever is the matter, Howard? I'm not familiar with vehicle repair but I'm sure that's no way to fix a tyre."

"I'm very sorry sir. I hope you don't think I'm incompetent. The thing is someone has sabotaged my tool kit. But all I need is some grass. We haven't too much further to go. If I pack some tightly into the tyre it should get us back."

"Let me know if there's anything I can do."

She walked along the verge and grabbed a handful of tall grass. It hurt her wrists to twist the bruised stems but she did not ask him for help.

"Is this your sketchbook?" he called out to her.

She hadn't seen him go back to the vehicle. He opened the door and reached in for the book. It was too late to stop him, not that she could even if she wanted to. The book was small in his hands as he opened it.

"You must have done this today while you waited for me. It's excellent."

"Please sir, I'd prefer it if you didn't look."

"There's no need to be so prickly, Howard. I'm genuinely interested. I'm no artist but my father and younger brother are. The talent skipped me but I know a bit about what's good and what isn't."

"Sorry sir, it's just that it isn't the best that I can do. It was an idle sketch that no one was meant to see. I'm capable of better." She took a step towards him, the bundle of grass in her arms. "I trained at art school."

"I don't doubt it. What puzzles me is why you're a driver out here." His brown eyes were solemn.

It would be a relief to tell him the truth and there was no reason not to trust him. He was a thoughtful and gentle man. She took a deep breath and stepped forward until she stood in his shadow.

"It was the one thing I could think of that might get me near to the Front and have the same opportunities as men like Nevinson. I applied through the official channels and they refused me. It was naive of me but I had to try."

His eyes opened wide but his voice was serious. "You want to be what, a war artist?"

"Yes. It must sound ridiculous but..."

“No, Howard, it doesn’t. A little unusual, perhaps. I knew that there was something different about you but I didn’t know what. It all makes sense now.”

“What does, sir?” He must have watched her, thought of her.

“I’ve noticed how unusually observant you are. Only children or artists are that sharp-eyed.” He laughed and her body relaxed.

“Have you done a lot of work since you’ve been here?” he continued, “there’s one sketch in this book.”

“It’s the first. I have no spare time. I’m either out with you all day or back at the depot. We get half a day off a week and every other Sunday. But all that time is taken up with laundry in town or a thousand other things.”

He drummed his fingers on the bonnet and raised his eyebrows.

“I don’t mean to complain, sir. After all, I’m here to work.”

He didn’t speak for a few moments. The bundle of grass made the skin of her hands itch.

“Howard, I’m the one person who can assist in this matter as the majority of your time is spent with me. I’ll need you to drive me more often in the next week or so. I can’t tell you why but suffice it to say we’ll be going up into Flanders. I want you to use any opportunities you can to go off and sketch. I don’t want you to waste time sat with the car or in canteens. You have my permission to go off on your own. How does that sound?”

“It’s wonderful, sir. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Just make sure that you don’t make it too obvious or you’ll be carted off as a spy. And another thing. Tell me if you can’t get hold of materials. I can arrange to get some sent out. My father tells me that good quality paper is hard to come by but I’m sure I can get him to find you something.”

“That’s very kind of you, sir.”

“Now, I don’t mean to bring us back down to the more mundane but I really do need you to get me back to Abbeville.” He sat on the grass and spread his papers out in front of him.

She returned to the vehicle and knelt on the ground. Her back and shoulders ached as she twisted handfuls of grass and forced them into the tyre but she didn’t care. He knew her secret and wanted to help.

* * *

Edith drove into the depot yard, got out and slammed the vehicle door shut. She called across to Alice who was cleaning her motor car.

“I had a puncture today.”

A leather bucket filled with dirty water rested on the cobbles. It was tempting to pick it up and pour the contents over the other woman but it would do no good. In any case, she had Alice to thank for her conversation with Captain Bradshaw.

“That’s not news is it? We all get at least one a day. What makes yours so special?” Alice walked round to the bucket and wrung out the sodden cloth. Her knuckles were white against the red chapped skin of her hands.

“Oh, I don’t know. Perhaps, the fact that some selfish little cat removed the patches from my tool kit.”

“What can I say? You’ve got to watch your back out here.”

“Quite.” She picked up the bucket.

“Hey, where are you going with that?” shouted Alice.

Edith ignored her and poured the dirty water down the drain before refilling it at the stand pipe. She returned and started to clean the dust off of her vehicle. No one, especially Alice, could ruin such a wonderful day.

Captain Bradshaw had offered her a considerable opportunity and she needed to make the most of it. There was no guarantee that she would be his driver for long or that he wouldn’t change his mind. Étaples had shown that she needed to utilise her unique point of view rather than try to understand that of the soldier. It was the subject matter itself that gave cause for concern. The camps may be suitable as the basis for a few pieces but that was all. He said that they were going to spend time in Flanders but it would be more of the same - camps, villages and fields.

She moved round and started to polish the bonnet. It was hard work but not as demanding as the physical labour expected of the peasant women she saw in the fields outside Étaples. Their men were dead and they had to find a way to stay alive. Surely it was a story equal to that of the English soldier; they may not be in uniform or carry a gun but they lived and worked within the shadow of the battles. She stopped polishing and leant on her elbows, looking at her reflection in the rippled metal. No one ever talked of those women but she could change that by sketching them. Not only were they a unique subject but she would see them through the eyes of a woman.

“What are you grinning at?” Alice called across to her.

“Nothing you’d be interested in.”

An engine roared up the track from the road and Hannah drove into the yard.

“One of your friends is back,” Alice muttered. “I still don’t understand what those two see in you.”

“It doesn’t matter what you do or say to me today, you won’t spoil my mood.”

* * *

Edith had visited the Flemish farmer, Madeline, twice that week. She was widowed and lived with her daughter, Marie, in a small farmhouse not far from the line. Every window was broken and most of the furniture had been used as firewood. They clung on to their old lives rather than join the refugees that poured along the main road. Marie had a baby and both she and her mother refused to leave. They were safer on the land they knew, they told her, than in an unfamiliar town where thousands tried to find shelter and food.

She had been wary when she first made her way to their door. The women at home and in Abbeville were hostile towards the WAAC, why should these peasant women be any different. Madeline and Marie welcomed her in and sat her down with a small bowl of bitter coffee that tasted of smoke. They had never seen a woman in uniform and Madeline wanted to know all about her; why was she in France? Why was she dressed like a soldier? What did her mother think of her being in a war so far from home? Edith didn’t mind the questions as the woman’s curiosity was understandable. They weren’t forthcoming about themselves and didn’t ask for information on the war beyond their fields. Madeline was content to be sketched and invited her to visit whenever she wished. Marie was quiet and tended to shut herself away as she carried out her work, only her baby elicited a smile.

The charcoal glided across the paper, allowing her to sketch quickly and with confidence. She concentrated on the angle between Madeline’s arm and the handle of the scythe that she swung into the tall grass. She could have spent hours on the arms alone but there wasn’t the time. They were lean and brown but as Madeline swung the tool rhythmically from right to left, taut muscles appeared beneath the surface of the skin.

She moved her hand across the page to work on the folds of the skirt, careful not to smudge the charcoal. Madeline bent over as she moved forwards and the material fell in a graceful line from the waistband to the top of her boots. It was fascinating how clothes had such power within a drawing. The light coloured scarves tied around the women's heads, the white blouses with short sleeves and rounded low necks may be feminine but they belied the strength that was needed to carry out the strenuous work on the farms now that their men were gone.

"I must go soon. The Captain will be expecting me." She would finish the sketches that night after she'd gone to bed and add watercolour by lamplight. The paintings of the battlefields meant that new colours needed to be found but for her the traditional palette remained.

Madeline laid down the scythe and sat on the ground. Her hair and blouse were drenched in sweat.

"Tell me, are you not afraid of your Captain? The soldiers?" Her voice was strong and low.

"No. I was nervous at first but they look after us well. Some of them are unfriendly but I'm not afraid."

"Can they be any different to the Germans? Men are men, soldiers are soldiers." Madeline shook her head and looked across at Marie.

"I'm sorry I didn't know, I..." What was it about the war that made men capable of such things? It wasn't all men. Her brother and the Captain, they wouldn't behave in such a way.

She looked across at Marie sat in the sunshine with her baby girl feeding at her breast. Maternal love was older than man's battle lust. In that broken landscape nature managed to find a way to push through. The grass continued to grow and the skylarks sang.

"Be careful, Edith."

"I will." She put her sketchbook away and stood up. There was no need to worry. The camp was safe and Captain Bradshaw would never put her in harm's way. She may be in the military but she was further from danger than Madeline and Marie. They were the ones who needed to be careful. It wasn't right that they should live in fear but there wasn't anything that she could do to help them, they wouldn't leave the farm. Their strength was incredible. She thought that she had been brave to leave

her privileged life behind and go to war but it was nothing in comparison to what Madeline and Marie suffered. She was spoiled and naive.

Madeline stood up and retrieved the scythe. "Will you come again?"

"I hope so but I can't promise." She kissed Madeline on the cheek. "Goodbye Marie." She waved at the girl and made her way down the side of the field.

She turned back when she reached the gate and watched them. They were hidden from the road by the hedgerows, invisible to the traffic that passed by on the road to Ypres. Her sketches would show them for who they were. How different from Richard Nevinson's paintings that showed faceless men in uniform indistinguishable from each other and the war machine that they inhabited.

Chapter Fourteen

July – August 1917

Searchlights scanned the sky and found nothing but bellies of cloud. The women were crammed into the shelter. Hannah was asleep and her face twitched while she dreamt. Bridget's knitting needles clacked softly together. She worked in the light from a small stub of candle, the precious ball of white wool in her lap to keep it from the dirt floor. It was a homely scene; a Flemish realist painting brought to life.

"When's your sister's baby due, Bridget?" Edith whispered.

"In October. I feel guilty that I won't be there but at least I can do this for her."

"She's fortunate to have such a kind sister."

Bridget smiled. "I'm sure you'll do the same when your brother has children."

Another candle was lit and Alice's face appeared out of the darkness. Sinister shadows danced across her gaunt features.

"What a pretty blanket." Her tone was sarcastic. "It's good to have something to keep you occupied in your spare time."

Bridget laughed. "True but it's not as if we get much of that."

"Oh, I don't know," replied Alice, "some of us have more than others. Don't we, Edith?"

"Please keep your voice down." The chalk walls and tin roof pressed in on all sides.

"Edith, you have a gift. You shouldn't hide it."

"*You* have a gift for speaking in riddles. What is it you're trying to say?"

Hannah opened her eyes and yawned. Bridget's hands were still.

"I found your sketches, yesterday." Alice moved so that the candle illuminated Edith's face. "Very good they are. They're clearly not done from your imagination. Which begs the question, when did you do them?"

"You've been through my things! You little brat. I'll report you for this."

"You can report me if you like but I'm sure the AC would love to be made aware of how accommodating your Captain is. He obviously lets you have a lot of freedom when you go out on your travels. What does he want in return, that's what I'd like to know." Her face was hidden as she backed into the shadows.

“Leave her alone.” Hannah’s voice was firm. “Ignore her, Edith. I’m glad that Captain Bradshaw gives you time to enjoy your hobby.”

“It’s not a hobby.”

“There’s no need to sound defensive. I’m on your side, remember.”

“I’m sorry. It’s what my father always says but it’s more than a pastime. It’s everything to me, it’s who I am.” She leaned back against the cold wall and sighed as she stretched out her legs. The blood ran back into her feet. “I haven’t told you the complete truth. I joined the WAAC so that I could get to France.”

“I don’t understand.” Bridget curled a strand of white wool round and round her finger. “What’s France got to do with it?”

“I want to be a war artist. It’s where the future of art lies and all that anyone’s interested in. I had to find a way to get out here.”

Hannah frowned. “Why didn’t you tell us? Did you think we wouldn’t understand?”

“I didn’t want to say anything when we first met at Star Hill. I wanted to fit in with the rest of you. As time passed it became more difficult to mention it.”

“Wait a minute.” Hannah’s eyes narrowed. “When you joined the WAAC did you have any intention of contributing to the war effort?” The candle flame guttered and threw shadows across her face.

“Not when I joined, no. But that changed when we arrived in Abbeville. I do my work and I enjoy it. I’m a driver first and an artist second.”

“You say that but what about the sketches that Alice says she found?” Bridget’s soft voice didn’t lessen the accusatory tone.

“Captain Bradshaw found the one drawing that I’d done since we arrived and said that if there was an opportunity to sketch when we were out I was to take it. It doesn’t interfere with my work. I haven’t done anything wrong. Anyway, it’s not as if I’m the only one here for other than patriotic reasons. Hannah, you came to escape your past and you, Bridget, came to be closer to your fiancée.”

“Yes but we were both honest,” replied Hannah, “and at least we’re not using this war for professional gain.”

“Neither am I. I don’t know what will happen when I get back home but I am a part of all this. I experience the same things as you. If my work is influenced by that when I return home I make no apologies. That’s what artists do.” She wanted to tell them about the sketches she had made of Madeline and Marie but they wouldn’t understand. She slumped back against the trench wall.

Alice emerged from the gloom and smiled. "I think it's good to get everything out in the open. Very healthy, I say. Though I must admit, I'd still like you to tell us what goes on between you and your Captain." She blew out her candle.

Bridget's nimble fingers weaved wool between her knitting needles with mechanical ease but her mind was obviously elsewhere. Hannah turned her back and pretended to sleep but Edith knew from her breathing that she was awake.

* * *

Hannah and Bridget did not speak to her the next morning, before or after Sunday service. She asked for a pass to go to Abbeville but had no intention of going: it was an excuse to get away from the camp.

There was no shelter from the sun as she walked along the verge beside the main road. A few men sounded their vehicle horns at her. She slipped through the first gap in the hedge that she came across and took off her hat. The skin on her scalp prickled as the sweat condensed into the air.

A red admiral quivered on a grass stem a few feet away. It flexed its delicate wings and drifted to the next stem and the next. She followed it over a rise in the hill and met a worn footpath that led to a wood on the other side of the field. It was a promise of cool shade and sanctuary. As she drew nearer she glimpsed grey stone and the carved wings of angels. It must be the edge of the old French cemetery. She pushed open the gate and flakes of rust stuck to her palm. The graves were overgrown, memorials of the long dead who had known other wars. The path widened out between recent graves graced with flowers and candles.

She moved through the rows of small wooden crosses for fallen French soldiers and toward the sound of voices. The British cemetery spread out daily to the north of that of the French. A burial was underway and she leaned against a tree a short way off. The Padre stood beside the open grave, a small battered bible in one hand whilst the other was raised. He performed the ceremony with a solitary nurse to act as mourner. She exhibited no emotion but how many burials had she been instructed to attend? A couple of male grave diggers lowered two plain wooden coffins into the same hole. Everyone stood to attention including two WAAC workers. Within minutes the formalities were over and the women were left to fill in the grave.

She walked across to them. "I wasn't aware that the WAAC worked in the cemetery."

They stopped and rested on their shovels. "When the men left at home, we volunteered as gardeners. Then the opportunity came along to join the WAAC and here we are, hidden away with the dead."

"Doesn't it depress you?" She looked around at the fresh graves. On a summer's day it was still an awful place.

"Not really," the taller one replied. "It's a job."

"That's right," added her friend, vivid blue eyes in a tanned face, "just a job. You get used to it. The men dig the graves and we seed and trim them. We have to save our own grass seed and the tools are useless but we manage."

"I'm sure the families would be grateful to know what you do for their men."

"Poor sods." The woman picked up her shovel. It wasn't clear whether she referred to the men or their families.

One of the gravediggers opened the door of a shed that stood against the cemetery's stone wall. All it contained were stacks of white wooden crosses; mass death was expected and planned for in typical military fashion. The man hoisted two of them on to his shoulder and made his way across the cemetery where he hammered them into the freshly turned soil.

She turned and wandered over to a row of recent graves. A number of the crosses were decorated with wreathes from home. Dead flowers clung to wire frames, black and purple ribbons bleached by the sun until they were all the same grey colour. On one wreath the message in silver paper letters was still readable - *To George from his wife and sons*. There was nothing to suggest that this was the man that had spoken to her with hatred a few weeks before. There would be hundreds of men with that name but it was hard to dismiss the thought that he rotted in a box beneath her feet. The crosses to the left and right might be for the men that Hannah and Bridget danced with that night.

She knelt down on the dusty ground. The heat was unbearable but she had no right to complain; the men buried around her would never know the sun again. Perhaps the girls were right to be disappointed in her. How could she think of art when the reality was that thousands of men had been taken before their rightful time? There had seemed a point to drawing the Flemish women but although they

suffered hardships, they were still alive. Her trivial sketches meant nothing. Art had no place in this war.

Her gaze returned to the wreath. If Madeline and Marie died, no one would lay one in their memory. They were alone. The soldiers had family and friends back home in England who would memorialise them as war heroes in black framed photographs and local newspaper columns. There would be no memorial for the women in the fields behind the Frontline and in the ruined villages. Her sketches of them may be few but they were proof of their existence.

Clouds began to fill the sky and two more coffins accompanied by the Padre and the nurse had arrived at the cemetery. She didn't want to watch another burial and made her way back along the path. Fat drops of cool rain soaked into the earth. It was the end of July but the rains had come early.

* * *

The rubber apron that she wore was useless in the torrential rain that poured into the exposed front of the vehicle. Her clothes were sodden but nothing could be done. All her attention was focussed on keeping the motor car on the damaged road.

She was taking Captain Bradshaw and an Army Ordnance Officer beyond Ypres to repair a gun that supported the attack against the German lines to the south east of the town. Officially she was not meant to drive close to the Front but she went wherever he demanded. The road to Ypres had been extremely congested and it took a long time to pass along it. Hundreds of men lay still on one side of the road, resting on their way back from the line. Their filthy faces were indistinguishable from one another and they didn't speak. She kept her eyes fixed on the road ahead and the backs of the men that marched towards the trenches.

Once out of Ypres, the road that led to Menin was devoid of life. The battle and the rain left a world of glutinous mud populated with rotting corpses. Broken and blackened cylinders were all that were left of the trees. The sky was the colour of cobalt turquoise, swirling from a paintbrush into a jar of water. It was a journey through someone else's nightmare. Her numb hands gripped the steering wheel as the rain pelted her face and ran down the back of her neck.

"Can we go a bit faster, Howard?" Captain Bradshaw shouted from the enclosed rear seat.

“I’m doing my best, sir!” Could he not see that the land and the road were pocked with craters filled with stagnant water? The shelling continued throughout daylight hours. It was one of the most dangerous stretches of road in Flanders.

“We need to get to the gun today. If you can manage it, of course.”

She drove with care around the lip of a shell hole. A dead horse lay beyond it in the early stages of decay. The stench hit hard, reaching into her mouth and down her throat. Acid roiled in her stomach. To think that this was what she had wanted. No one could express the horror, in words or paint.

There was movement ahead through the veil of rain. A group of men were trying to pull a horse free from the mud at the side of the road. Their hands slipped on the wet, frayed rope. Its hindquarters were submerged, weighed down by the cart that it was still harnessed to. The animal’s forelegs were sunken as far as the knee. It was at the mercy of the men.

“Look ahead!” she shouted over her shoulder at the Captain. “Shall we stop and help?”

“Absolutely not. We’ve got to get to that gun.”

The men stood around covered in mud, faces black. Two of them shook their heads in defeat, while the other tried to light a cigarette in the rain. The horses’ eyes rolled as the motor car went by as if imploring her to stop. When they were a few hundred yards further along the road, a single shot rang out. She bit her lip but the tears fell and mingled with the rain.

She preoccupied herself with manoeuvring the motor car along the remains of the road. The chassis vibrated on the damaged surface and jolted her bones.

“We’re there, Howard. Pull over.”

It was difficult to park the vehicle so that it didn’t get stuck in the mud but kept the road clear. The Ordnance Officer got out and made his way up a track constructed of duckboards and pieces of broken wood.

“We’ll wait here now, Howard.” Captain Bradshaw sat back and pulled a rug over his knees. He removed a silver hip flask from his pocket and took a long draft.

She watched the water pool in the apron at her lap and shivered as the cold started to eat through her saturated clothes to her skin. The rain did nothing to take away the putrid smell in the air. No corpses were visible but the stench escaped through cracks and fissures in the broken earth. Damn this place, damn it all to hell. There was a barrage of sound but it was impossible to determine the source. Were

they British guns or theirs? Captain Bradshaw appeared unconcerned. She prayed to a God that she had thought she no longer believed in that they would be spared.

A small band of soldiers approached from the direction of the Front. She glanced at the petrol can filled with clean water that she kept in the foot well. The men this far forward had to drink the chlorinated kind and would appreciate a drop of something pure. Four of them walked with their heads down and unlike their escort, didn't carry guns. Their arms were behind their backs. Perhaps they were prisoners but that wasn't right, they were in khaki.

They stopped when they reached the motor car. The four men had their arms tied with rope. Their boots and puttees were encased in mud but the rest of their uniforms were relatively clean. Three of the men were passive but the fourth was disturbed. He was unable to keep his body still and jerked his head with an exaggerated tic. His eyes moved rapidly as he looked at his captors, the motor car, her, the battlefield and back to her. He muttered under his breath but the words made no sense. She shrank back against the wet leather seat.

"What's this then, sergeant?" Captain Bradshaw climbed out of the vehicle and addressed a short, thin man with dark shadows under his eyes.

He stood to attention and saluted. "Deserters, sir. They tried to run away this morning but they didn't get very far."

She looked at their faces. None of them were older than her. "We've got some fresh water, sergeant, "You and your men are welcome to it."

"Very kind of you, miss but no."

"A drop of water can't do any harm." The prisoners hung their heads.

"Men are fighting and dying up there and they ain't got none so these bastards certainly won't be 'avin any."

"Quite right sergeant," Captain Bradshaw said, waving a gloved hand. "Get them out of here."

The sergeant pushed the nearest soldier in the back with the butt of his rifle and they started to move off.

"Don't worry, miss," one of them said. "We deserve it." He was no more than a boy, his eyelashes long and blonde. He stumbled off through the mud with the others.

"What will happen to them, sir?"

"They'll probably be shot." Captain Bradshaw leaned on the driver's door and she smelt alcohol on his breath.

“But they’re so young. This hell is bound to make some of them lose their minds. Why can’t they be shown leniency?”

“There’ll be a court martial but I’m afraid the prospects for them aren’t good. Morale is low at the moment and they’ll want to make an example of them. Otherwise half the army will think it’s all right to run.”

“But they’re conscripts...”

The Ordnance man shouted out as he ran towards the vehicle. “All done, sir.”

“Good man. Excellent job. Right, Howard, let’s move. We’ve tempted fate long enough. We don’t want be here when the Hun send a plane to attack this battery.”

The gun beyond their position began to fire across to the enemy line. The sound vibrated through her entire body; it took over, invaded her. The Captain and his man congratulated themselves on a job well done. The gun protected the allied soldiers as well as attacking the Germans but she couldn’t bring herself to join in with their high spirits.

* * *

*4 Downside Crescent,
Haverstock Hill,
Hampstead.
NW3*

*WAAC Camp 1,
Abbeville,
France*

12th August 1917

Dear Mrs Nevinson,

I trust this letter finds you well. I hope you don’t mind me writing to you. I’m aware our correspondence ended abruptly. I regret it and take full responsibility. I have had cause to reflect on your last letter to me, as well as my response.

It’s difficult to believe that I last wrote to you in April and a great deal has since happened. I was trained at a barracks in Surrey. As you can imagine, it was considerably different to my privileged life with my parents. I threw myself into it because it was a means to an end, the end being my art. Indeed, I looked upon the war with a view to what I could gain from it. Even when I reached the camp in Abbeville, I was sheltered to a certain extent. There are raids but that’s no different to London. We don’t often mix with the soldiers. We’re invited to occasional dances

and concerts but they don't want to talk about what they've seen and done. They want to forget.

As I'm sure you will know from the newspapers, there has been a recent push in Flanders. I cannot go into detail but I can tell you that I was required to drive very close to the Front. In April I would have viewed it as a wonderful opportunity, to see a little of what men such as Bone, Nash and of course Richard, were able to. Oh Mrs Nevinson, I don't want to remember what I saw that day, let alone paint it so that it remains in perpetuity. Nothing could have prepared me for the scale of the devastation.

I haven't changed my view on whether we should fight this war but it's a more complex matter than I initially realised. I now have a better understanding of what war means. It may have been a fleeting glimpse but I learnt more in those few hours at the Front than at any point since the war began.

It all leaves me in a rather difficult position. I'm no longer the naive girl that I was when I left England. I'm a driver and I carry out my duties to the best of my abilities. That comes first. However, my heart is never far from my art. After all, that's who I am and who I will be when this war is over - if that ever happens. I have had the opportunity to make some studies of women who are working the land. I felt that this was a viable undertaking. They have no voice and I thought that I could document their experience so that people are aware of them and they are not forgotten. After my recent drive to the Front I don't know what I should do. Is there a place in war for art? I welcome your advice.

I would very much like to receive a reply from you. Letters mean a great deal to us. However, I understand if you do not wish to respond. Once again, please accept my apologies. I understand that you were trying to protect me.

Kind regards,

Edith Howard.

* * *

*WAAC Camp 1,
Abbeville,*

*4 Downside Crescent,
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France

Hampstead.

NW3

18th August 1917

Dear Edith,

Thank you for your letter. I have been very concerned about you as I knew that you had been posted to France.

You do not need to apologise. I understand what it is to be determined. It's difficult to accept what others tell you, even if you know that they have your best interests at heart. One can only learn through experience and that's what you have done.

We've heard of the battle in Flanders. There has been quite a change in attitude in England. There is concern that this will be a repeat of the Somme and questions are being asked as to the objective of this war. Indeed, The Times has published a letter from Siegfried Sassoon which can only be seen as a direct challenge. He stated that "I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust...also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realise." He is one of the many voices against the war.

Richard is on a four week tour of France and Flanders. He's working for the Department of Information, although he's not paid as an official war artist. I do believe that there is a place for art in this war. As Sassoon remarked, most people at home in England cannot imagine what it is like in France and Flanders. Art can address that. I'm intrigued by your work with the peasant women and would encourage you to continue with it. You may also want to record some of the activities that the WAAC is engaged with in order that they, too, are not forgotten. You need to find and record what is different. This war will need to be remembered from all perspectives.

I am keen to recommence our correspondence. Please write soon and take care.

Best wishes,

Margaret Nevinson.

Chapter Fifteen

August 1917

The sun wheeled towards the horizon, chased through the powder blue sky by a waxing moon that heralded nights of raids. Edith pulled into the depot yard and turned off the engine. She rested her head back against the seat and closed her eyes.

“Oh good, you’re back,” Alice said, running out of the barn. “You need to go and see Bridget. Hannah took her up to the camp.”

“This had better not be one of your pranks. I’ve done fourteen hours and I’m exhausted.”

Alice opened the driver’s door. “It’s your choice whether to believe me, of course but she’s in a terrible state.”

“All right, all right. I’ll go.”

She got out and grabbed a bucket. Water splashed up her arms as she filled it at the tap. She gave the vehicle a cursory wipe down with a damp cloth. Hannah and Bridget had avoided her for a couple of days but that didn’t stop her worrying about them.

“I’m off sergeant!” She shouted towards his office and heard a muffled response. Alice didn’t look up and continued to work on her own vehicle.

She crossed the yard, opened the gate into the field and ran through the dusk. The rain had stopped but the air was muggy. She arrived hot and breathless at the hut and flung the door open on a wretched tableau.

Bridget was on her knees between the two rows of beds, a single sheet of paper in her hand. Hannah knelt next to her with an arm around her shoulder. The Forewoman stood behind them with an anxious expression on her face.

“Good, you’re here Edith. Now that she has both of you I’m not needed.” She disappeared into her cubicle and pulled the curtain.

“What’s happened?”

Bridget let out a wail shot through with pain and rocked back and forth.

Hannah pulled her up and sat her gently on one of the beds. “Come along darling, let’s get you comfortable.”

Edith stepped towards them but Hannah led her to the other end of the hut and spoke in a whisper. "Jack's dead. She got a letter this morning. He was killed on the sixteenth of August at Langemarck. The telegram went to his mother first and she wrote to Bridget."

"What do we do?"

"Make sure that we're there for her. She'll need us both."

"I want to say something that will offer consolation but look at her. What words can ever make this better?"

Bridget wept, her white face contorted in anguish. The small statue of the Virgin Mary looked down on her from on top of the locker.

"I want to die, too." Bridget keened.

They walked back across the hut. Hannah sat on the bed beside Bridget and took her hand.

"I understand that the pain is unbearable but that's not the answer. Tell her Edith."

"Hannah's right. Jack wouldn't want to hear you talk that way and neither do we."

The sun had set and colour drained from the hut, blurring the outline of the beds and lockers. Hannah and Bridget were ghostly grey forms. She lit the nearest lamp and warm yellow light bloomed in the darkness.

"Don't do that!" Bridget rolled over on the bed to face the wall.

"We can't sit in the dark."

"You don't understand. Once the night has come, that's it. The last day when I believed he was alive will have gone."

"You can't stop time." She lit each of the lamps and sat at the foot of Bridget's bed. Bridget turned over and faced her, eyes swollen and her skin creased. "What was it like, Edith?"

"What?"

"Flanders. You've been there. I want to hear about the place where he died."

Hannah shook her head. "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"I honestly don't know, Bridget. Langemarck is further north of where I went to."

"Were there lots of fields in Flanders? I have an image in my head of him dying in a field and looking up at the sky. He'd have liked that, he grew up on a farm." Her eyes were wide and serious.

“There were fields. I don’t suppose there’s any reason why it wouldn’t have been the same where Jack was.” She remembered the landscape beyond Ypres: no grass, no trees and no colour other than infinite shades of brown and black.

“Well, that’s a small comfort.” She smiled weakly and took Edith’s hand. “I’m sorry things haven’t been the same between the three of us recently. I...”

“Don’t worry about that, it’s in the past. The important thing now is that we look after you.” She reached out for the letter in Bridget’s other hand. “Let’s put this in your locker. It’ll be safe there.”

Bridget allowed her to take the letter. “I want to go to church tomorrow and light a candle for him.”

She swallowed hard. “If that’s what you want, that’s what we shall do.”

* * *

She put her hands over her ears to block out the man’s screams. They had been alone in the dark shelter at the depot for a couple of hours. The barrage of anti-aircraft fire made it impossible to determine whether bombs were falling.

“Oh God, oh God!” he cried.

“What’s the matter with you?” Her voice was curt. His shouts stopped but he began to cry.

“I’m sorry. Come on, it’s all right. What’s your name?”

“W-w-w-illiam.”

“My name’s Edith.” She felt around the uneven chalk floor. “I can’t find any candles so we’ll have to stay in the dark. Are you happy to talk? It’ll make the time go faster and it might help to take your mind off things.”

“Th-th-that seems sensible.” His breaths were laboured.

She crossed her legs and rested her hands in her lap. “Let’s start with the usual questions. When did you arrive at camp? What do you do?”

“I got here three days ago.”

The adjacent gun resumed its attack and stray bullets pinged on the shelter’s metal roof.

“And what do you do?” She prompted.

“I help out at th-the-the garage.” He took a deep breath. “I’m convalescing.”

“Convalescing? I don’t understand.”

“I’m not dead yet nearly.”

“That’s a rather strange turn of phrase. What do you mean by it?”

He laughed but the noise was wrong, he sounded bitter and angry.

“It’s a play on words. I’m Not Yet Diagnosed Nervous. They’re n-n-n-ot allowed to call it shell shock any more. I was at a forward psychiatric unit at Four Stationary Hospital in Arques for a month. They wanted us to remain within earshot of the guns. They thought it would help us recover.”

William’s boots scraped along the floor as he shifted position. The anti-aircraft gun fell silent.

“Go on. What happened next?”

“They moved me to Thirteen Convalescent Camp in Trouville. It was a vast tented place near the sea. They made us do exercise and play games as if we were children and put hot water bottles on the backs of our heads. They decided that I was usable and sent me here. Are you frightened of me now that I’ve told you that?”

“Should I be?”

“No. Although in the beginning I sometimes scared myself.”

She moved closer to him. He smelt of dubbin and tobacco. “What happened for you to end up in the unit?” She shook her head in the darkness. “I’m sorry, you don’t need to answer that if you don’t want to.”

“I hadn’t been at the Front long. My best friend, Henry, and I volunteered together back home in Australia. We were like brothers, we’ve known each other since school. It was a hell of a long journey and when we got to France we were kept in reserve. We wanted to get into the thick of it. In May we started practice attacks. They even showed us a model of the Front. Impressive it was. Made of soil with little mock-ups of farms and villages. It reminded me of the toy village in our tailor’s window back at home with a figure of Gulliver tied down on it. On the seventh of June we were at Messines Ridge. Did you hear about that?”

“I remember it well. We were woken in the early hours by the explosions and felt the tremors that ran through the ground. I was frightened.”

“It was our first major engagement. Henry and I were very excited. At ten past three in the morning the mines went off. Huge flames reached up into the sky, white with heat and as tall as a cathedral. As they retreated back to earth they turned yellow and red and the sky glowed. Anyone caught in that would have been vaporized. And do you know what? We all cheered.”

“William, I can’t imagine what it must have been like for you.”

“We pushed forward at the German lines. The ground had been thrown up in the air and landed back down, burying men. Everywhere we looked there were bodies. Many of them had their eyes open. I didn’t like that. I wanted to go round and close them all but of course I couldn’t. It was one thing to watch the mines go up from a distance but another to see what it did to those poor bastards.”

She looked around at the darkness of the primitive hole in the ground and shivered.

“We advanced under the cover of a creeping barrage of shells and machine gun fire. The noise was phenomenal. The air was filled with dirt and the smell of cordite and gas. Planes flew low to protect us, like angels. By midday we knew that we had been successful. Henry and I agreed that it wasn’t what we’d expected and all we cared about was that we were both still alive.”

“In the afternoon, we moved forward again. Henry got hit and fell to the ground. He wanted me to hold his hand. I held it until he died. They didn’t let me stay with him. As I moved on I passed hundreds of German prisoners. I couldn’t understand why I didn’t hate them but I was unable to feel anything. I saw Henry’s face amongst them. I reached the German trenches and they were filled with charred corpses. We were told it was a new chemical which meant the shells turned to fire when they landed. I vomited until there was nothing to bring up but bile.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s not much you can say.”

The ack-ack of the anti-aircraft gun started up and he whimpered. She moved further down the trench and put a hand on his arm.

“I thought that the war was over that day but it wasn’t,” he continued. “When I realised that Henry was dead and I was left alone to fight, my mind shut down. Like when you’re very cold and you can’t react as quickly. But this was a lot worse. I couldn’t move. I sat and stared into space. I thought, I’ll move in a minute, just another minute. But I didn’t. I heard them talk about me. I wasn’t me any more. All feeling, memories, thoughts had been stripped away and I was an animal squatting in the mud. The bit of me that was left was buried deep inside my head.”

“You must have recovered a little, to be able to talk about it like this.”

“Oh yes, I’m better than I was. Lucid is the word that they use. It’s a nicer word than sane. Part of me didn’t want to get better but the mind is a queer thing. I still

had some reserves of strength in spite of the terrible experience I'd had. But if they send me back I don't think I could cope."

"They won't send you back. They can't."

"They can and they will. They need all the men they can get. That's why they've drafted in women like you. But I don't want to go."

She wrapped her arms around herself and closed her eyes.

"Even if they don't send me back to the line," he continued, "I don't want to be a part of all this - the camp, the depot. It means supporting the lines so that more men can be killed."

She opened her eyes. "I don't see it like that. I think that we'll help to end this war as quickly as possible so that fewer men have to die."

They sat in silence. The anti-aircraft fire had ceased and the only sound was that of the corrugated metal as it contracted in the cool night air.

"What do you do here?" His voice was more confident.

"I drive for a Captain. Actually, I've been up to Flanders quite a bit. I got very close to the Front."

"It's interesting that you travel so far. I thought you drove between camps."

"Well, that's all we're supposed to do," she said, "but we go wherever we're ordered."

She sensed him turn to face her. "Edith, do you have anyone fighting? A sweetheart or a brother?"

"A brother. I haven't seen him for months. At this rate I won't see him before the war ends."

"I don't think this war will ever end and if they send me back to the trenches I'll find a way out. I'll stop at nothing."

"What option do you have?"

He sighed. "I'll shoot myself. Save the Hun the bother."

"Oh you can't do that, William. You've survived so far." She squeezed his arm. "Anything might happen. You may get injured and sent home. You may get through it. You can't take your own life."

"I worry about the shame it would bring on my family. Of course, there is another way."

"Is there an official route? A Review Board that you can appeal to?"

"I thought that you could help me." He spoke quietly.

“Me? I don’t know what I can do.”

“I didn’t think there was another way out until I met you. You see, there are other men like me who don’t want any more of this. I’ve heard about bands of men that live in the woods. They call them deserters but that’s if you believe that the war is the only way. Those men are exercising their God given free will.”

“I still don’t see where I fit into this.”

“You could drive me there, to the woods. If I try and go alone and on foot the Military Police will pick me up. You can hide me in your vehicle. The thing is I’m not sure if the rumours of the others are true. In fact, it would be better if you took me as near to Paris as possible. I can disappear amongst thousands of others.”

“I do have a degree of freedom and it’s possible. But what if I’m caught? What would they do to me?”

“Edith. Think of your brother. I bet that you’d help him wouldn’t you? You don’t know me but I’m no different to him. Just another man in bloody uniform. Please Edith.”

“I need time to think about it.” She was too tired to make a decision. She hadn’t seen William’s face, he was only a voice.

“Thank you but please make a decision soon. It won’t be long before I’m sent to the Front.”

She moved back along the trench and pretended to sleep until the all clear came. Dawn broke as William helped her out of the shelter. He was no more than a boy.

Chapter Sixteen

September 1917

The hut was in darkness and it was impossible to read her watch. It had to be the early hours of the morning, the time when those who have troubles find themselves awake. She lay on her back and listened to the wind. Her thoughts were of William. He had spoken to her a number of times since the night in the shelter and begged for her help. Thousands had been lost in Flanders in the battle near Passchendaele and the army wanted anyone that could stand up and hold a gun. He asked if she wanted to help him live or die.

She pulled the blanket up to her chin and remembered the deserters that she had encountered near Ypres. What had happened to the young man that told her not to worry because he deserved it? He was probably dead, shot in cold blood like an animal. He was so matter of fact in his acceptance of the consequences of his desertion. What terrible things had he experienced to drive him to that point? There was a fine line between him and William. The memory of the deserter troubled her. She hadn't been able to do anything for him but she could help William.

Gusts of wind beat against the hut walls. She rolled over and faced Bridget's empty bed. Poor Bridget, sent home on compassionate leave. She had tried so hard to be brave but the loss of Jack was too great. William hadn't mentioned a wife or sweetheart but that didn't mean that no one loved him - parents, brothers, sisters. If he died they'd be left to grieve thousands of miles away without the small comfort of a burial. He would never go home, his body claimed by French soil.

She rolled over and faced the other way. Jack's death appeared to have banished Hannah's ill feeling towards her. It was difficult to forget that her friend believed her to be selfish but it was the truth. She had always thought of herself and wanted for nothing. This was an opportunity for redemption. If she helped William she could show that she cared enough about someone to risk her own wants and desires. It was impossible to ask anyone what the consequences may be as it might lead to more questions. At the very least she'd be sent home.

The sound of a pair of boots tramping on the gravel path grew louder as someone marched towards the hut. She lay on her back and listened to the footsteps. Whoever it was passed by and disappeared into the night.

She must trust William when he said that the authorities would acquit her if she insisted that he had forced her to do it. All she needed to do was make the Captain believe that she intended to go on a trip south to sketch. He'd cover for her and no one at the depot would question it. She could tell Hannah later, when William was far away.

A match flared and Hannah's face was bathed in yellow light as she lit her candle lamp. She stretched and yawned. The acrid smell of the match lingered in the air.

"You're awake, Edith. That's not like you. I thought I heard you tossing and turning. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She threw off her blanket and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. "It's going to be a good day."

* * *

"I thought you said that the Captain didn't need you today." Hannah shouted from the other side of the garage where she was working. The men lifted their heads to listen.

Edith walked across to her. "He doesn't."

Hannah continued to work, bent over the engine of her vehicle. "Ah, so you're off on one off your sketching trips."

"Yes. Is that all right with you?" She picked up a spanner, turned it over and over in her hands and put it back down.

"Of course." Hannah straightened up and turned to face her. "I didn't mean anything by it. I just noticed that you'd loaded up with more rations than usual. You don't eat enough to keep a bird alive. What do you plan to do with it all?"

"Nothing, really. I..." A hot blush spread across her face and neck.

"Edith, I'm not a fool. What's wrong?"

"I said, it's nothing."

Hannah's expression was triumphant. "I knew it. You're up to something. Tell me. I may be able to help. Is it the Captain? Is that the secret? No wonder you're blushing."

"It's not the Captain. It's William." She pulled Hannah by the arm and led her out of the garage and into the yard. The sky was overcast and the wind chased crisp reddish brown leaves along the ground to their feet.

Hannah frowned. "Who's William?"

"He's an Australian who works elsewhere in the depot. He's recovering from shell shock."

"How did you meet him? I haven't seen you talk to anyone like that."

One of the men walked past and Edith pulled her further away from the garage to where the yard bordered the field.

"It was last week when I got caught in a raid down here at the garage. Do you remember that I told you I was in the shelter on my own? Well, I wasn't. I was with William. But you mustn't think he tried anything. It wasn't like that. He's worried that they'll send him back. Oh Hannah, you should have heard what he's been through. He's so young. But I can help him."

Hannah shook her head. "How?"

"I can get him away from here. I know it's a great deal to ask but please don't tell anyone. I plan to drive him beyond Rouen and then he'll make his way to Paris. That's why I need all the rations. There's less chance that he'll get caught if he doesn't have to go in search of food. He can stay well away from the villages and towns."

Hannah took her by the arms and shook her. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm helping him."

"No you're not. He'll be caught and the consequences will be dire. It won't be much better for you, either. I don't know what he told you but for pity's sake every man that's been to the line has had a terrible experience. But they don't all desert."

"You don't understand. He's ill."

"So are thousands of others. There are camps along the coast full of men like him. But they're fixed up and sent back to the line. You can't change it by helping one of them. All you'll do is destroy both his life and your own." Hannah sighed and let her go. "Were you going to tell me afterwards and expect me to keep it a secret?"

"I thought you'd be pleased that I'd helped someone. I want to do the right thing."

"I know that you think you are but you're not." She softened her tone. "I understand your reasons but this isn't the way to go about it. Of course it's good that you've thought of someone else before yourself but you've gone from one extreme to the other. Why would you risk everything for this man?"

"You weren't there. You didn't hear what he said." The wind picked up and stung her face.

“Don’t tell me, that if you didn’t help him he’d find another way. He’d kill himself.”

“How do you know that?”

Hannah took a few steps back and held out her hands. “Because it’s obvious. He would say that. He’s sensed a weakness in you and exploited it. Thank God I found out in time.”

“But he’s ill. His state of mind drove him to it. He’s desperate.”

“I don’t doubt it but he’s using you.”

“I made the decision myself.” She took a deep breath. “But you’re right about one thing. I can help him but they’ll be another and another. I can’t help them all. And if I’m found out and they send me home I’ll bring shame on my brother and my parents. What should I do?”

“Nothing. Stay here today. I’ll find this William later and set him straight.”

The sergeant came out of his office and leaned against the wooden wall of the barn. He lit a cigarette and watched as they walked back across the yard and into the garage. Edith sat on the running board of the vehicle that she had planned to take to Rouen. Her hands shook and it was a while before she was ready to pick up her tools and start work.

* * *

The Café de la Paix was quiet. Madame stood by the counter and smoked a thin cigarette. Curls of smoke drifted up to the nicotine stained ceiling. Edith and her brother were sitting at a table near the front window.

John had surprised her when he turned up at the camp that afternoon. He had been ordered to take two days leave. The intensity of the battle in Flanders, coupled with the fact that he had not taken leave for many months gave his superiors no choice.

He was thin and the hair at his temples was grey, wasn’t he still too young for that? His uniform was pressed but faint stains showed on the cuffs. She watched him tuck into his omelette as if he hadn’t eaten in weeks.

“I was concerned by your letters, Edith. You’ve been far too close to the Front. It’s not right.”

“Perhaps it’ll help you understand how much I worry about you. You’re in the middle of it all. Anyway, what’s the difference between us?”

“I’m a man.”

She put down her knife and fork. “But you’re not a career soldier. You’re an artist. Neither of us belongs here.”

“I’m not sure what I am any more. I don’t think I want to paint again. I can’t see a time when I won’t have images of war in my mind and to paint anything else would seem superficial. Landscapes and portraits, I know what sits beneath them: soil, mud, flesh, bone, sinew. It’s all temporary, even hills can be blown to pieces by mines. Nothing lasts forever. I used to look to the future and see years and years of possibility. Now I fight each day to survive. If I live and this war ends what will there be for us?”

“Of course you’ll paint again. It’s who you are. You could use your art to replace war images with those of beauty. Re-dress the balance. Remind us that we’re civilised and not animals that kill each other over pieces of land.”

The little bell over the café door jangled as an old man shuffled in and walked past them to the counter. A cold draft blew around her ankles.

“I’ve been blinded by the war, Edith, so that I can’t see beauty any more. All I’m left with is war art but art isn’t reality, it’s a version of it. The reality is a living hell. How can I communicate what’s happening here to people at home, in a way that they could understand it? I’m not sure that it can be done or that I want to try. There’s no point using conventional methods. All that would result in is vast heroic battle paintings, like those of the Crimea and the Napoleonic wars. They dignify war and give it worth and a value which should never be attributed to it.”

“But that’s where your future could lie, at the forefront of new techniques and styles and upsetting tradition in order to show the truth. Aren’t you excited by that?”

He shook his head and slammed his fist down on the small round tabletop. The other customers looked up and Madame stood with her cigarette half way to her mouth, her eyebrows raised.

“I don’t believe in this war any more and I’m weary of it. I care only about my men.”

She sipped her coffee and watched John’s hands as he finished his omelette. His beautiful long fingers were scarred, with fresh cuts on the knuckles. The skin that had once been soft was calloused and his fingernails were dirty.

He gulped down the contents of his wine glass. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have pushed you on the matter. It’s just that I’m so passionate about it.” She bit her lip. “I’ve done a few sketches since I’ve been out here.”

He smiled. “I’m surprised that you find the time.”

“It’s difficult but the Captain I drive for has encouraged me. I’ve made a few studies of women up in Flanders who work the land behind the lines. I too struggled with reconciling art with war but I’ve used a different angle, seeing those that others don’t. I make quick sketches in the field. It’s as if my sketchbook is my camera. There is energy in them and a sense of movement. They are fragmented but so are our lives. My work isn’t decorative and there is no allegory, no use of classical reference. The Slade didn’t prepare me for what I’ve found here and I’m looking forward to painting these subjects whenever I return home. We need to find a new language for what we are seeing, use brushstrokes to create new words.”

He poured out the last of the wine into his glass. “I’m pleased for you.”

“Do you mean that?”

“Yes. If you can make something of this mess then good luck to you.” He reached out for her hand. “Do it for me. I want to come to your first exhibition and tell everybody how proud I am of you. I might not want to paint but there’s no reason why you shouldn’t. You’re not me and you’ve had a different experience out here. We’re not all the same although the authorities treat us as if we are.”

“No we’re not. We’re not the same people that we were when we first came out to France.” She squeezed his hand. “I’ve learnt a great deal, particularly in the last week. From this point on I’m going to get on with my work, sketch when I can and keep my head down.”

“I love you, little sister.”

“I love you too. Now, are you going to escort me back to camp before it gets too late and I have to climb over the fence?”

He waved his hand at Madame. She put out her cigarette and rushed across with the bill, all smiles and platitudes. Edith stood up and put on her coat. She followed John out of the café and slipped her arm through his. She didn’t let him go until they reached the sentry at the camp gate.

Chapter Seventeen

October - November 1917

Autumn moved into a winter that threatened to be as cruel as that of the previous year and the WAAC was unprepared. Their uniforms were inadequate against the relentless cold and needed to be supplemented with anything suitable from town or sent from home. The administrators decided that it was unhealthy to light the small stoves in each poorly ventilated hut. Edith had bought a few Tommy cookers filled with methylated spirits for sixpence each, much to her friends delight.

“Bridget, grab your hot water bottle and let’s go.” She opened the hut door and cold air reached into the room.

Bridget walked across the hut and stood beside her. “Another lovely day.”

“The sooner we get there the better. The garage will be warmer.”

They set off in the darkness, through the gate and into the field. The waning moon was low in the sky.

“How’s the new man you’ve driven for since you’ve been back?”

“Pleasant enough. He doesn’t talk much but that suits me. I’m not great company these days. How’s Captain Bradshaw?”

“He’s been different towards me lately, softer somehow.” She hugged the hot water bottle to her body. “The other day he asked what my Christian name was. I told him but of course he doesn’t use it. It’s the fact that he wanted to know that, well... I really like him and can’t imagine driving for anyone else.” She sighed and listened to their boots hit the frost hardened path.

“It’s all right, Edith, you can talk about your feelings towards him. I’ve lost Jack but it won’t do any good if I get upset every time someone tells me that they’re in love.”

“I never said that I was.”

“You don’t need to. It’s obvious. The question is, is he?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I like him, that’s all.” She quickened her pace.

Light from the garage spilled across the field and she heard the men’s shouts and laughter. A familiar figure stood silhouetted in the doorway, Captain Bradshaw was early. She walked across the yard and stood in front of him, arms by her side.

“Morning, Howard. There’s been a change of plan. No more Flanders. I need you take me to Albert for the next fortnight, starting today. It’s not a bad little place.”

“Yes sir.” She bowed her head.

“That’s not a problem is it?”

She looked up at him. “No, in actual fact the shorter journey is welcome in this weather. It’s just that...”

“You’ll miss sketching those women, won’t you?”

“Yes. But it’s more than the sketches. The baby is underweight and I take them any food that I can spare.”

“I’m sure that they’re grateful but it couldn’t last.” He turned and walked away. “I’ll wait in the sergeant’s office until you’re ready.”

She hurried to prepare the vehicle, distracted by thoughts of Madeline and Marie. She would miss them but she had to go where he went. When she was ready she fetched the Captain. Bridget waved as they drove out of the yard and down to the main road. The sun came up over the horizon but there was no respite from the bitter wind. Her forehead and cheekbones were painful to the touch by the time that they reached the outskirts of Albert.

He leaned forwards and pointed ahead. “Turn in there, Howard.”

She pulled up in front of a low wooden building set back from the road. The fresh painted sign above the door read *Tank Corps Training Office*.

“Pick me up at four o’clock sharp this afternoon. You’re free to go into Albert. There’s no point going back to the camp.”

“Yes sir.” She looked at him in the mirror as he got out and watched him enter the building. Another vehicle pulled up and she was forced to move on.

She drove towards the centre of Albert, guided by the Basilica Notre Dame de Brebières that towered over the decimated town. Shells had torn holes out of the few remaining buildings the way bullets ripped men’s flesh. Piles of red brick and splintered wood were shored up at the side of the road. A weathered door, ripped from its hinges, lay several feet from the bombed out shop it had once belonged to. The frayed strips of a white sheet fluttered in the breeze as if in surrender.

A few civilians shuffled along the streets. They lived in the shadows of what had become a military town. Why did they stay? Perhaps some didn’t want to leave and others saw a way to make a living from the soldiers. An old woman sat wrapped in a blanket in the doorway of a cottage with exposed rafters. She looked up and scowled. It was as warm a welcome as that in Abbeville, there would be no sketching the women in Albert.

She continued past the railway station. It had been reduced to a heap of rubble but a narrow path led from the road to the one platform that survived. Men wrapped in coats and hats against the cold, their faces hidden, unloaded crates from a military freight train. She drove on with care through the narrow streets and parked her vehicle in what remained of the small square at the side of the Basilica.

Her feet were tight and swollen in her boots. She got out and stamped them, tipping her head back to look at the immense gilded statue of the Virgin. It hung precariously at right angles from the Basilica's dome and threatened to plummet into the street below. In her stretched out arms she held the infant Jesus.

"This your first time in Bert?" A soldier called out and crossed the street.

"Yes." She looked back up at the statue. "I've finally got to see the famous leaning Virgin."

"She's wonderful, ain't she? The story goes that when she falls it'll be the end of the war." He blew on his hands and rubbed them together.

"The supports that hold her in place must be very strong."

"That's not what keeps her there like that, miss. It's the hand of God what does it." He shook his head. "But not everyone respects her. The Anzacs call her Fanny Durack after some swimmer and the locals make money selling thousands of postcards of her. I think she's a bleedin' miracle."

The man crossed himself and walked away. To him the Virgin might be a marvel but it was no more than a shelled statue. She looked at her watch. The Captain didn't need to be collected for hours. She may as well sketch the Basilica. The subject matter wasn't original but there was nothing better to do.

A number of damaged buildings overlooked the square. She stepped into one that had once been a café. It provided some protection from the cold. A few stools were still in place where locals would have watched the world go by over a coffee and cigarette. She sat down and rested her sketchbook on the windowsill. One narrow pane of glass remained in the front window and the view of the Virgin was uninterrupted. She removed her pair of heavy gloves but kept on the thinner second pair.

She pencilled a rough outline of the tower and began work on the intricate detail of the Romanesque red brick façade. The arches and stone supports were attractive but it was the solidity and strength of the building that needed to be communicated. She concentrated on the dome. Shelling had peeled away the outer layer of stone

and revealed the metal crown beneath that maintained its integrity. Clouds were visible through the skeleton of girders. She longed for her paint box and the familiar feel of a paintbrush in her hand but they were tucked away in her locker in the hut. She would have to wait until later to lay colour down on the paper in graduated tones, bringing the drawing to life.

She narrowed her eyes and began to sketch the Golden Virgin. Its tenuous position, suspended below the horizontal, made it more than a variant of the Madonnas found in Abbeville and every other French town. Maybe she had been too quick to dismiss the mysticism that surrounded it. The men that marched beneath her on their way to or from the line were bound to find some portentous meaning in such a remarkable vision. Some may have seen her reach out to save her child from falling. Had such strong maternal instinct given them comfort on their way to the slaughter of the Somme? Did they long to feel their mother's arms around them? Others may have supposed that she threw her child as a sacrifice to end the war, a metaphor with strong resonance for Christian soldiers. How many believed that such a time of human suffering must surely herald the second coming.

They were metaphors that held a little hope but what of those men who saw her actions as the prelude to suicide, in despair at what man is capable of? For men who could no longer live with their own minds, who wanted to die, it would be of no consolation to believe that even the mother of God saw no other alternative than the taking of her own life and that of her son. How many had a crisis of faith?

She paused, put down her pencil and looked across the town square at the swarm of lorries and men. None of the various interpretations of the Golden Virgin resonated with her but it was a reminder of Madeline and Marie; mothers who clung on to their farms and refused to be beaten by the war. They were strong, like the mothers in Britain who sacrificed their children and Bridget who had lost her love. The men wrapped the Virgin in their own myth but she was a symbol of all those women affected by the war.

What would happen if the Virgin fell? It was a world where luck and fate were prevalent. Superstition and ritual had become a part of each soldier's life and most carried talismans and lucky charms. It was all nonsense but she couldn't help feeling that the fate of the Virgin was intrinsically linked to that of the women of the war. If she fell would they lose their strength?

She picked up her pencil and sketched with renewed urgency, keen to have her own personal record of the miracle of the Golden Virgin of the Basilica Notre Dame de Brebières.

* * *

WAAC Camp 1,
Abbeville,
France

37 Park Road,
Islington.
N1

26th November 1917

Dear Edith,

Thank you for your letter. Your work sounds demanding and I'm concerned that you're not getting enough rest. I'm sure that you'll tell me that I don't understand and that you have no choice but I still worry.

Your father and I had a most wonderful day. We went to Trafalgar Square to see Nelson, the tank that they have brought over from France. At first it was difficult to see anything as there were thousands of people. The Lord Mayor eventually had to stand on top of it and gave the first of many speeches by all sorts of important men. There were even chorus girls! We queued for a long time to buy our war bonds. They set up a small kiosk inside the tank itself. We suffered from the cold but I'm glad that we did it. I touched the tank and secretly wished it luck when it returns to France.

These new weapons are wonderful. Won't they strike terror into the hearts of the Germans? Your father was quite excited. We want this war to end. We want you both back. By investing in the tank we can do our bit, however small. I understand that tanks are being used at Cambrai. They say here that it is the battle that may end the war and we all hope that the church bells will ring out before Christmas. I must say that I have renewed optimism. To think that you and John have stayed safe for so long and that it may be a matter of weeks before you are home.

Please write as often as you can. I live for your letters. My beautiful daughter, we love you and are so very proud of you.

Your loving mother.

* * *

37, Park Road,
Islington.
N1

WAAC Camp 1,
Abbeville,
France
30th November 1917

Dear Mother,

I was interested to read about the tank in Trafalgar Square. You're certainly having a jollier time of it there. It can't be that cold in London if there were chorus girls. The temperature here is like nothing I've ever experienced.

I was involved in the preparations for the battle in Cambrai although I was not aware of it at the time. Involved is perhaps an exaggeration. I drove the Captain to Albert when the plans were developed. The battle is still ongoing but I too hope that this will mark a turning point in the war. Surely we have learnt from the Somme and Flanders and we will not make the same mistakes.

Cambrai may change our fortunes but I don't believe that John and I will be home in the very near future. I don't want to upset you but I need to be honest. The battle may turn the tide but not necessarily mean instant victory. Victory, or what I prefer to think of as the end of the war, will still require us to remain in France for a while. We cannot pack up the camp and leave within days.

I enjoy my work and you mustn't worry. I know that I said it's cold but we manage. If you could send some more gloves, though, it would be appreciated. The girls are looking forward to Christmas and hopefully we'll be able to do something special. Of course, I would sooner be at home with you.

All my love to you and father,

Edith.

Chapter Eighteen

December 1917

The bitter cold seeped into every aspect of the women's lives and it was a battle to keep warm. They had illegal fires with chopped wood that was hidden for them by the POWs. Alice made herself popular by asking train drivers for lumps of coal at a section of railway line where the trains slowed down. The weather had its benefits, the threat of typhoid prevented them from drinking tap water so they melted snow and icicles on the Tommy cookers.

On Christmas Eve morning, Edith stood in the open doorway of the garage with a tin mug of hot tea. A welcome thaw had set in. The thick white hoarfrost may have transformed the camp and fields into a place of beauty but it was a danger on the roads. It was a joy to watch the ice begin to melt and hear water trickle along the gutters.

Captain Bradshaw walked into the yard, his breath turned to mist in the air.

"Not disturbing you am I, Howard?" He smiled at her.

She drank the last dregs of tea. "No, no, I'm ready to go, sir. It's nice to see the sun again, however weak it is. It lifts the spirits."

"Yes, you've got a glow about you." He put his hand to his mouth and coughed. "Right, I want you to take me into Amiens to pick up some things for tomorrow."

"Yes, sir. I'll bring the motor car round." She ran into the garage, started the vehicle and climbed in. As she reversed, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, face flushed and eyes shining.

She drove into the yard, picked up the Captain and turned right at the gate on to the main road south east. He took out a sheaf of papers and started to read. There was very little traffic and she relaxed back in the seat, enjoying the drive.

A mile outside Amiens, he put the papers back into his folder and leaned forward. "Is this your first Christmas away from home, Howard?"

"Yes, sir. I had hoped to get back to England to see my parents but I couldn't get leave. Anyway, I'm quite happy here." She kept her eyes on the road.

"Have you got any plans for tomorrow?"

"Because it's much the same as any other day, it'll be difficult to organise things as we're all in and out at different times. I have to go to the church service but I'm

looking forward to Christmas lunch.” She looked in the rear-view mirror. “What will you do tomorrow, sir, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Get drunk.”

She returned her gaze to the road so that he couldn’t see her shocked expression. “I thought you might need me to take you to the hospital to visit some of your men.”

“No. I’ll be in the Officer’s mess all day with a bottle or two of good brandy. I need a release, Howard. It’s been a bloody awful few months.”

“Yes, of course sir. I suppose it’s easier for us. We don’t see what you see.”

They reached Amiens where the streets teemed with hundreds of people, hurrying back and forth with purpose in the sunshine. She parked on the Rue des Jacobins and Captain Bradshaw jumped out.

“Meet me back here in an hour. That should give me time to get everything I need. Feel free to do as you please.”

He set off along the pavement where a couple of women in cheap dresses stood and made eyes at him. He stopped but she couldn’t hear what he said to them. Whatever it was, he made them laugh. She got out of the motor car, slammed the door and walked off in the opposite direction.

Amiens was new to her but there wasn’t enough time to sightsee. She spotted a café. Condensation on the windows hid the interior but the outside was pleasant enough. She opened the door and stepped into a fug of heat, smoke and grease. A pretty young waitress directed her to a table in the middle of the packed room.

“Oui, Madame?” The waitress wiped the table down with a damp cloth.

“Un café, s’il vous plaît.”

She looked around at the other customers, cheered by their smiles and voluble conversations. The waitress returned with a pot of coffee and poured her a cup. It was strong and tasted better than the terrible stuff they served at the camp.

A middle aged woman sat alone at the next table, with pen in hand and a Christmas card open in front of her.

Edith sipped her coffee. There was no reason why she shouldn’t buy a card for the Captain. Where was the harm? All sorts of people gave each other cards at Christmas. He didn’t have to read anything into it but at least he would know that she had of thought of him.

She placed a neat pile of coins on the table and stood up. The clock over the counter read half past twelve, there was half an hour to go before she needed to meet him.

“Joyeux Noël, Madame.” The waitress called out.

“Joyeux Noël.” She hurried to the door and stepped outside.

The air was cold and fresh but the smell of grease clung to her clothes and hair. She walked back along the street and went into a small tobacconists. The old man by the cash register nodded and pushed his spectacles back on to the bridge of his nose.

A selection of Christmas cards was displayed on the counter. The art nouveau style was of Paris before the war. The delicate silks were evocative of her mother's favourite evening dress and the colours of the threads were delightful - beautiful deep reds and greens. She chose one embroidered with *Joyeux Noël 1917* and handed the correct money to the shopkeeper.

She returned to the motor car as the cathedral bells chimed one o'clock. She wrote a simple message in the card and tucked it inside her coat pocket.

The sun shone on the Captain as he walked along the pavement, his arms filled with packages wrapped in brown paper and string.

“Secure these for me.” He handed them over. “I thought we could go and have lunch. How does that sound?”

She smiled. “I'd like that very much.”

“I don't see the point of setting off from here without food.”

“No, of course not.” She turned away and put the packages under the back seat.

“We could go to Godbert's. Best food and wine in the town but as it's Christmas Eve everyone will be there. Let's find somewhere quieter.” He marched off along the pavement and she ran to catch up with him.

The quarter to the north of the Rue des Jacobins was less busy and the narrow streets were shaded by densely packed buildings. She reached into her pocket and felt the card safe in its envelope. Captain Bradshaw led her through a square planted with great plane trees, their branches were bare and majestic.

He pointed at a grand building with an ornate façade and wrought iron balconies. “Here we are. The hotel's out of the way but they do a very good meal.”

“I'm not supposed to mix with officers, sir. A café is one thing but a hotel...”

“I’ll make sure that nobody of any importance sees. Don’t worry, Howard, I’ll ask for a private room. All you need to do is meet me in the garden out the back.”

“Yes, sir.” Hannah had mentioned that she lunched that way with a number of officers. It was the only way to get round the ridiculous rules.

He leapt up the steps two at a time and disappeared into the gloom of the entrance hall. She turned and walked down the side of the building where a gate opened in on a small garden with a neglected lawn. The flowerbeds were bare except for the dead wood of a handful of rose bushes. Two officers stood on the veranda engaged in conversation. She paced up and down, hands behind her back until after a few minutes, he opened the conservatory door. She marched across the wet grass, past the officers and straight into the hotel.

“Why are you blushing, Howard?”

“I don’t want those men to get the wrong idea.”

He laughed. “I don’t think they care who you are or what you’re doing. Come on, it’s through here.”

She followed him up a flight of stairs covered by a strip of red carpet. He opened the first door on the left and they went into a large room with a high ceiling. Two windows hung with drapes looked out on the garden and the blue sky. How wonderful to be in a proper room with wallpaper and rugs on the floor.

“Let me take your coat.” The Captain stood at her side.

“Thank you, sir.”

She took it off and he laid it with his own on the bed that was pushed against the furthest wall.

There was a knock at the door and an old woman entered with a tray. She set down a bottle of wine, a jug of water and glasses on the table and left without saying a word.

“Come and sit down, Howard. I’ve ordered the food.” He picked up the bottle and began to pour wine into her glass.

She sat opposite him and shook her head. “I’m not allowed to drink.”

“Who’s going to know? Anyway, it is Christmas.”

“I’m not used to alcohol. The Forewoman will be able to tell if I have one glass. Really, I can’t, sir.” She shifted forwards in the seat.

“All right, I’ll just have to drink your share.” He sat back in his chair and crossed his legs. “You look decidedly uncomfortable. Anyone would think that you’d never been on your own with a man before?”

“Of course I have.” She remembered the night with William in the shelter.

“All those sensitive male art students. I expect you were very popular.”

She stared at the stained tablecloth. “I’m not sure about that.”

He swallowed down the remaining wine in his glass and poured himself another.

“Come on Edith, you need to relax. Have a drink.”

It was strange to hear her name come out of his mouth. She poured water into a glass smeared with fingerprints. “There we are. I’ve got one.”

“I think it’s a damn shame that they won’t let you women have a tippie. We all need to enjoy ourselves now and again.”

“We do get to go to concerts and dances.”

“Quite right.”

She sipped at the water and looked around the room. The paintwork near the door handle was greasy and the rugs were peppered with cigarette burns.

The door opened and Madam brought in two bowls of stew. Edith took out a handkerchief and rubbed at her spoon. The old woman muttered under her breath and left.

“You’ve upset her.” He laughed and plunged his spoon into the bowl.

“I don’t think it’s unreasonable to want clean cutlery.”

They ate in silence. The stew was full of tasteless gristle and goodness knew what meat. Captain Bradshaw bolted his food down and brown liquid dribbled from the corner of his mouth and on to his chin. He made no attempt to wipe it away.

The sky had become overcast and the corners of the room were dark. He poured himself more wine, emptied the bottle and studied her with glazed eyes. A log dropped in the fire and sent a shower of sparks up the chimney but he didn’t blink.

“When the woman comes back I’ll order coffee. I think I’ll have some brandy as well.”

She tried to stand up but the heavy chair pushed into the back of her knees and trapped her against the table.

“I think we ought to get back, sir. It’s not a long drive to Abbeville but I’ve got a lot to do at the garage.”

He stayed seated. “I think I’m the one that’s supposed to issue the orders.”

"I'm sorry, sir."

"All right, have it your way. Who am I to argue with a woman in uniform?" He stumbled across the room to the bed and held out her coat. "Come and get it."

She joined him and turned her back so that he could help her on with it. He put his arms around her waist.

She tried to pull away. "Come on, now, don't be silly."

He put his mouth to her ear. "I know you like to make out that you're a lady but you volunteered to come out to France. If you were a good girl you'd have stayed at home."

She took a few shallow breaths. "I'm sorry if that's what you think."

He kissed her neck and her stomach tightened. His right hand moved up to her breast.

"I thought this is what you wanted, all those looks that you've been giving me. You pretend to be demure but I know what girls like you are really like."

"This isn't what I want."

He turned her round and pulled her close against his body. His hot breath stank of wine.

"You were quite happy to come here with me."

"I thought that we were going to have a meal." Tears ran down her face.

He threw her down on the bed. "Stop bloody crying. For Christ sake why do women always cry? After everything that I've done for you, you owe me. All the help I gave you so that you could do your stupid sketches."

The cheap coverlet stank of sweat and urine. She sat up and wiped her eyes. "I owe you nothing. Don't you dare you speak to me like that. If you want a woman in that way then go to a brothel."

He pushed her back down on the bed. Acid rose into her mouth and she closed her eyes. His hand touched her leg above the top of her boot. He slid it up a little further. She whimpered and turned her face to the wall. The paper was peeling away to reveal damp grey plaster.

He stopped and the mattress shifted as he climbed off the bed. She slowly turned her head to look at him as he buttoned up his coat and pulled his gloves from the pocket.

"You're right. I should stick to the brothels. You're of no use to me. Get up and let's go back to Abbeville."

She moved to the edge of the bed and put her feet on the floor. The fire had died down and the room was cold.

“Don’t sit there looking so bloody miserable. I said we’re leaving.” He threw a handful of coins on to the table. “That’s what you want isn’t it?” He opened the door and waited.

She put on her coat and walked behind him on to the landing. A group of officers stood at the bottom of the stairs. They were drunk and their laughter dominated the small lobby.

“Ah, Bradshaw! Haven’t seen you in a while,” one of them shouted out. “I say, what have you got there?”

“My driver.” He took his cap from under his arm and put it on as they went down the stairs.

The young officer took a long drag on his cigarette and looked her up and down. “Lucky you Bradshaw, having something to keep you warm in the winter.”

“You know me,” he replied.

She lowered her head and followed him outside. The light was fading and few people were on the streets as they walked in silence to the Rue des Jacobins.

Chapter Nineteen

December 1917

“Edith you don’t look very happy. Didn’t you enjoy the church service this morning?” Bridget stood by the hut door and put her gloves on.

“I’m fine.” She attempted a weak smile. “Today’s a reminder of family, that’s all.”

“Well, we’re off to the recreation hut before lunch, why don’t you come with us?”

“I’d rather stay here. I want to write a quick letter to John.”

Hannah buttoned up her coat. “Does Captain Bradshaw need you this afternoon?”

“I doubt it.”

“Good, we’re free as well. You can come down to the YMCA and help with the children’s Christmas party.” Hannah and Bridget hurried out and slammed the door.

She sat on the bed and looked around the hut. Postcards and pictures cut from magazines were pinned on the walls above each bed. Curtains made of off cuts sent from England graced the tiny windows. Coloured paper chains stretched from each corner of the ceiling. It was home but he had spoiled it.

He was not as she believed him to be. In her day dreams she put kind words into his mouth but in reality he was cruel. During the night she had recalled each conversation and glance. Had she given him reason to think that she wanted...that?

She shivered and crawled under the blanket. The prospect of any man touching her again was dreadful. Would it be any different? She had hoped that in marriage with someone that she loved it would be pleasurable. She cursed her innocence, perhaps it was all her fault.

The rough blanket scratched her cheek. She pulled it away from her face, damp from tears. It was a release to cry, to be able to feel but it was self pity. For goodness sake there were others in a worse position.

She reached out and took her sketchbook from the top of the locker next to the bed. It held so many drawings and memories of the days before that hour in a seedy hotel in Amiens. She turned the pages with fingers stiff from the cold. Marie’s eyes looked out of sketch after sketch, empty, hurt, mistrustful. Was it the war that changed men and made them capable of terrible acts against women? But there had to be something rotten there to begin with. John would never behave in such a despicable way.

If Hannah and Bridget found out what the Captain had done they'd insist on reporting him but the authorities might blame her. She would be sent back to England in shame. Home seemed a very long way away. If only she could return of her own accord but she signed up for one year or the duration of the war. Health or compassionate grounds didn't apply and nobody was allowed leave. There was no choice other than to stay and remain silent. If he had any sense of decency he would request another driver.

The book fell open at the sketch of the Virgin. On that day in Albert, the statue had been a reminder of women who were significantly affected by the war. The Virgin was connected to them alone, her own experiences were nothing in comparison. Captain Bradshaw may have wounded her but she needed to be strong. She traced the pencil line of the Madonna's robes with a fingertip and smiled. It wasn't an epiphany, she hardly believed in God. It wasn't a delusion, no matter how depressed she was. It was an inspiration. As long as the Virgin of Albert clung to the basilica she could cope with whatever the war threw at her.

She flung the blanket off and got up from the bed. He wasn't going to ruin things. She tore out the drawing of the Virgin from the book and pinned it to the wall, next to the postcards of Richard Nevinson's paintings.

* * *

"Come on Edith, don't stand there. Help me move these out of the way." Hannah dragged a chair across the floor.

"I thought we were going to help out when the children arrived." She picked up a chair and stacked it against the wall. "Why are we setting things up? Not that I mind."

"I volunteered us. Bridget needs to keep herself occupied. This is her first Christmas without Jack."

"I know. It's heartbreaking. We need to look after her. She tries to put on a brave face but I still hear her cry at night."

A good strong fire burned in the grate and the room was warm. She took off her coat and hung it on a peg, reaching into the pocket for a handkerchief. The sharp corner of an envelope pushed against her palm. It was the card, the damned card that she'd bought for that man. She pulled it out, marched across the room and threw

the hateful thing in the fire. The flames licked at the edges and the blackened paper curled.

“I think we’re ready now,” Hannah called out. “It looks wonderful, doesn’t it?”

Edith turned round. The YMCA hut was transformed. The floor was swept clean and garlands of holly were twisted around the exposed ceiling beams. A Christmas tree stood in one corner decorated with a handful of pale glass baubles that had miraculously survived more than three years of war. A battered upright piano occupied another corner. Along the back wall, under the window, a trestle table was laden with sweets, nuts and buns. It was difficult not to get excited, although it was meant for the children.

The door opened and Bridget came in followed by a crowd of chattering boys and girls. They fell silent, their eyes wide in scrubbed faces. It was all for them, didn’t they like it? They moved across the room. Little hands reached out and touched the tree, whispers came from those near the table of food and there were giggles as a braver one pressed a piano key.

“Who wants cake?” Bridget laughed as they shouted and raised their hands. “This is like Christmas at home with all my nieces and nephews.”

How clever of Hannah to put Bridget in charge of the children. If it took her mind off of her grief for an hour or so it was worth it. She was so good with them and they loved her.

“Can I help, Bridget?”

“Yes, Edith. Here take this little one.” She put her arm around a girl at her side. “There’s no need to look so nervous. It’s all right, she won’t bite. She’s a bit quiet and doesn’t want to mix with the others.”

“I’ll find something for us to do.” She held out her hand and the child gripped it tightly as they walked to a corner of the room and sat on the wooden floor.

“What’s your name?” Her voice was gentle.

“Cecile.” Such a serious face and dark eyes. How old was she, four perhaps five?

“That’s a lovely name.” She took out a scrap of paper from her pocket and a pencil stub. “Why don’t we draw that together,” she said, pointing at the Christmas tree. “I’ll draw some dots and then you join them up.” She made a series of small marks on the paper and connected several together with thick lines. “Understand?”

Cecile nodded and solemnly took the pencil in her hand. She spent a few minutes joining the dots, her brow furrowed with concentration. She clapped her hands when

the tree was complete and added her own uneven star to the top. It was wonderful to see her settled and with a smile in her eyes.

The sound of carols drifted through the hut and Edith looked up. Bridget and Hannah were sitting on the floor, holding hands in a circle with the children. She took Cecile's hand and led her across the room to them. The child clambered on to her lap and wriggled until she was comfortable. Edith wrapped her arms around her and began to sing.

Part 3

War... calls forth the noblest and basest impulses of human nature. The painter should be careful to keep himself at a distance, lest the ignoble and vile details under his eyes should blind him irretrievably to the noble things that rise beyond.

*Lady Elizabeth Butler
An Autobiography
1922*

Chapter Twenty

March – April 1918

“You may be aware of the discussions last month in the House of Commons about the conduct of the WAAC.” Mrs Burleigh Leach, Chief Controller, addressed the large group of women crammed into the mess hut. She was tall and slender, dressed in a smart fitted uniform coat with a fur collar.

Edith sat up straight and listened intently, surprised that their new leader was young and quite beautiful.

“You will be pleased to hear that Mr MacPherson referred to you as gallant and devoted. The Archbishop of Canterbury, no less, has also issued a statement of support based on his visit to France last year when he met many of you. I would like to read you a little of that statement.”

Edith looked around at the women paying complete attention to the enigmatic lady stood in front of them. Mrs Burleigh Leach put on her glasses and read from a piece of paper on the makeshift lectern in front of her.

“He referred to the absolutely untrue statements which have been made as to alleged immoral results arising from the employment of women in khaki at the front. He went on to say the following. You will recollect the exaggerated stories about war babies, and you have heard stories about widespread immorality and harm in connection with the WAAC. They are absolutely untrue. I have gone into the matter right to the very bottom, and these allegations are entirely unfounded. One would think from the statements that have been made that whole boatloads of women connected with the WAAC and other organisations were coming home, having fallen grievously into evil ways.’

Many of the women whispered to each other. Edith muttered under her breath, “Hurrah for the Archbishop”. Mrs Burleigh Leach raised her hands to ask for quiet.

“It’s been announced that action will be taken against anyone who makes slanderous remarks about the WAAC. In addition, the Ministry of Labour has appointed a Commission to investigate the allegations of immorality. It will comprise a number of respected women, including Miss Violet Markham. Some of you may be interviewed by the Commission and I expect you to conduct yourselves well. But to

all of you I say, continue to uphold the highest standards and be proud of who you are.”

The women stood up and gave a hearty round of applause. Mrs Burleigh Leach smiled graciously as the women stood to attention. She left the hut accompanied by a protective knot of Administrators.

“That was an interesting pep talk,” Edith said to Hannah as they joined the queue to leave. “What on earth has been said about us back at home? I must say, it’s ironic.”

“Why?” Hannah held the door open for her and they stepped out into the crisp spring air.

A Captain of the British Army had tried to rape her, wasn’t that ironic enough? No Commission was ever going to question his morals. Thank goodness she hadn’t reported him at Christmas. If people at home believed that women in the WAAC were freely having relations with the men, her case would never have been met with sympathy.

She shook her head. “What I mean is we’ve all seen the queues of soldiers outside the brothels in town. I suppose their behaviour is the fault of the prostitutes. Whenever it comes to sins of the flesh it’s always the women that get the blame.”

“Calm down, Edith.” Hannah linked arms with her and they walked along the gravel path. “We’re all furious about the rumours but you mustn’t take it personally. I suppose there are some women who’ve got themselves into bother but that could’ve happened back at home. It has nothing to do with our being here. I’m sure the Commission will exonerate us.”

“I hope so. I’d like to know who started these rumours. They don’t understand what it’s like for us out here. Nobody does. When I get home, whenever that may be, I intend to show everyone what we women do for our country.”

* * *

One evening at the depot, she heard reports that the big offensive had begun and the Germans were breaking through field by field, village by village. The men told her that storm troopers had risen out of the trenches hidden by a thick fog.

In the following days, the army’s advance was slowed as they plundered and looted the towns. Soldiers apparently lay in the streets drunk on wine and loaded

down with spoils. The allies struggled to claw back territory and day and night she was aware of the steady stream of ambulances that made its way to Abbeville. The women drivers worked hour after hour, bringing casualties up from the railway to the British, South African and Australian hospitals. One of them told her how they tried to keep the men steady in the back of the vehicles as they navigated the rough roads but it was an impossible task. Many men died on the way, screaming and shouting in pain to the horror of their comrades.

Once their shifts were over, she and the others went to help in any way that they were able to. They rolled bandages, folded lint and patched rubber gloves. There were shrouds to be sewn and men who needed help to write letters home.

“Please can you go and sit with the men in marquee number two?” The doctor had blood on his sleeves. “They could do with the company, the gentle companionship of a woman.” He hurried away along the dimly lit corridor.

She put the clean white bandages in a pile on the table and left the main hospital building. She walked across the worn grass in the darkness. A young man sat in the entrance to the overflowing marquee. His arms were tightly wrapped in soiled dressings.

“Can you light me a cigarette, miss? They’re in my tunic pocket.” Sweat ran down his face.

She reached into his pocket for the matches and a battered packet of cigarettes. She pulled one out and placed it gently between his cracked lips. The match flared, he inhaled and closed his eyes.

Inside, the temporary ward was a terrible place. Most of the men were gas victims. Their faces were red as they threw their heads back gasping for air, necks and arms covered with blisters filled with yellow pus. Their unopened eyes were congealed with sticky mucus and she turned away as one man brought up sputum.

A young nurse sat by the bed of a soldier who was stripped to the waist. She bathed his skin with a damp swab held between forceps; he was denied the touch of her hand. Edith stepped away and walked through the ward. She wanted to help, to sit with them as the doctor had asked but what was there to say?

She reached the other end of the marquee. The man in the last bed looked at her but his disfigured face was impossible to read. Did he think that she was useless and wondered why she was there? Did she remind him of his wife or sweetheart who

may never see him in the same way again? Whatever the answer, there was no point in staying.

Outside, she walked around the marquee, putting her hands out to feel for the guy ropes in the dark. It was wonderful to be able to breathe in the cold night air and clean her lungs. A low moan came through the canvas wall. She sat on the grass and ignored the dampness. The moaning ceased and gave way to an eerie silence.

What if John was there at the British hospital? It was possible, thousands of injured men poured into the town each week. He might be injured but ready to be patched up and sent back to the line or he may be dying. If he was there he would need her. She had to go back and make sure that he wasn't one of them.

She stood up and brushed down her skirt before walking down to the next marquee. She lifted the door flap and stood still. Dear God, what was this place? It must be where the worst cases were sent, a waiting room for death. A doctor, accompanied by a nurse with a lamp, made his way from patient to patient. Each was illuminated in turn, bringing their wounds into sharp focus while everything else retreated into the shadows. The pair stopped by a man with part of his face blown away. Clean white bone glinted, an autopsy already begun. The doctor shook his head and the nurse pulled a sheet over the shattered face.

"What are you doing here?" A young nurse laid a hand on Edith's arm.

"I'm looking for my brother."

The girl's eyes were full of sympathy. "What's his name?"

"John Howard."

"There's no one of that name but most of the men are unidentified at the moment. Who told you that he was here?"

"No one." He wasn't there, of course he wasn't.

"I think you should leave. This isn't the place for you."

She nodded. "I know and I'm sorry. I can't help worrying that he's somewhere in the hospital and all alone."

She left the marquee but the smell of putrefied flesh clung to the back of her nose and throat. It was an effort to walk to the gate where the lorry was parked that would return them to the camp.

"You're the first one back." The driver smiled at her. "You all right, miss?"

"I'm tired." She yawned and rubbed her eyes.

"You get in and have a rest."

She hoisted herself into the back of the lorry and curled up on the bench seat.

The evening visits to the hospital continued for a week. She returned to the gas ward and realised that sitting with the men was enough to give them comfort. She made sketches from memory each night when she returned to camp. Strong lines brought out the men's twisted, contorted muscles and sinews, lifting their bodies off the page in pain. It wasn't only the men that she drew but the nurses. They worked with great strength and compassion but even they struggled to deal with the carnage. The last sketch she made at the hospital was of a nurse sitting at a table behind a screen at the end of the ward, holding her head in her hands while she sobbed.

* * *

*4 Downside Crescent,
Haverstock Hill,
Hampstead.
NW3*

*WAAC Camp 1,
Abbeville*

29th March 1918

Dear Mrs Nevinson,

I hope that my belated letter finds you well. As you can imagine, the recent push by the Germans has changed things somewhat. It's all hands to the pump. I spend my evenings at the hospital, as well as driving during the day. I will not write in detail of what I have seen, it is too disturbing. I'm sure that your experience of working with the injured Belgian soldiers in London means that you can imagine it to some degree. Of course, we see them as soon as they arrive from the casualty clearing stations. I know that it must sound foolish but I keep searching the faces of the men for John.

I'm not sure what is going to happen to us. By that I mean the WAAC. We heard a week ago that Paris had been shelled by a gun called Big Bertha. Really, who thinks of these names? Then Amiens was bombed and shelled. We were told to pack a bag with clothes and toiletries and to be ready to move out at a moment's notice. We're still here but refugees from Amiens fled into Abbeville and on past our camp. We stood by the gate and watched them. It was a pitiful sight. There were women, children and old men, swept past as flotsam on a human tide. Wheel barrows were

piled high with furniture, crockery, clothes and chickens. An old woman clutching a clock lay in a bed on the back of a cart. There are so many of them, where will they go?

I thought that I would be frightened if we had to retreat but the strangest thing is that I'm not. We all look after each other and there is so much to do that I simply don't get time to think about it. I know that I can write to you of my feelings. My letters to my parents are more closely guarded. I want to protect them, particularly mother.

Anyway, it seems that the WAAC is seen in a very different light back at home. I'm sure that you're aware of the Commission that has been sent out to check up on us. Mrs Burleigh Leach recently came to deliver a stirring lecture. She comes across as a good sort but it will take more than her to turn the tide of public opinion. Hopefully the Commission's report will help matters. Do you know if it has been published yet? It sickens me that while men fight and die and we try our best to help, we are condemned for something that we haven't done. I'd like to see some of them come out here and witness a fraction of what we've seen. They probably wouldn't have the stomach for it.

I must go now. Apologies for the short letter but I've run out of time. I just wanted to let you know that I am safe and well. Please find enclosed a small sketch. It's of my friend Bridget rolling bandages. We're quite proficient at it.

Kindest regards,

Edith.

** * **

*WAAC Camp 1,
Abbeville,
France*

*4 Downside Crescent,
Haverstock Hill,
Hampstead.
NW3*

6th April 1918

Dear Edith,

I hope that this letter finds you as I'm not sure if you will have moved on by now. From what we hear, the fighting is very near to Abbeville.

I want you to know that I think you're an incredibly brave young woman. Indeed, you all are. I cannot imagine the emotions that you're experiencing. As you're aware, I'm unhappy with the principle of women undertaking men's work overseas. However, I can in no way criticise you for what you do on a daily basis.

I have kept a page from the London Illustrated News for you. It's a sketch of WAAC gardeners tending graves in Flanders. Frederic de Haenen has drawn it from an official photograph. The accompanying quote from Mr. Kipling refers to the 'vast cloud of witnesses to freedom that lie on the Flanders front.' It's a very moving image and well timed in terms of countering the speculation about the morality of the WAAC.

The stories that have been circulating in recent months have angered me. I am pleased to say that the Commission has published its report and it's very positive. They have found no truth in the rumours, which appear to have been propagated by some men in their letters home. They have concluded that such men were hostile towards the WAAC because it meant they were forced to leave the bases and move further up the line. It's a manifestation of their fears rather than any negative reflection on you. I must say that Mrs Burleigh Leach is a great ambassador for you all. As soon as she took up her post in February she attended an exhibition at Harrods on the work of the various women's services and continues to work tirelessly.

Richard is another who is working far too hard. In fact, I am very worried about him. He spent the winter in a terribly run down studio off the Hampstead Road, a hand-me-down from Whistler and Sickert. He worked on a great many pieces for an exhibition at the Leicester Galleries, which opened last month. Not only was the work itself exhausting but he had to contend with the War Office censors. One of his paintings, 'Paths of Glory', was censored for depicting the dead bodies of two British soldiers. He thought that the authorities would see sense and pass it for the exhibition. He therefore hung it at the gallery. It was not passed and he ended up pasting brown paper across it on which the word censored was written. He was summoned to the Ministry and reprimanded, for even use of the word censored is forbidden!

I remember you wanting to be involved in the evolution of new artistic movements, the successors to Futurism and Vorticism. It may interest you to know that Richard's style has changed. Like you, he is interested in the individual and there is new emphasis on realism in his work.

Thank you for the sketch that you sent me. I look forward to seeing all your work when you return. I pray that it will be soon.

Fondest wishes,

Margaret Nevinson.

Chapter Twenty One

April - May 1918

On a misty morning, she had woken to the sound of guns nearer than ever before. The crash of bombs shook the hut, rattling the tin mugs that hung on the wall by the stove. The Germans were less than twenty miles away. Abbeville was out of bounds by the middle of April and many of the WAAC were moved to Calais. She and the other drivers were told to remain and were keen to show the men that they stood firm. She was put in a pool of drivers and dealt with a different officer each day.

“You’ve been told that you’re to take me to Amiens, have you?” A thin major climbed into the motor car and tapped her seat with his swagger stick. Dark eyes, shadowed by his peaked cap, engaged with hers in the rear-view mirror.

“Yes, sir.”

“Jolly good. Let’s get on with it.”

She pushed down the clutch, threw the hand lever forward and pulled away. The sky was overcast and the dull light strained her eyes as she drove along the main road south east. He persisted with a dreary monologue but she paid little heed as the congestion on the roads demanded concentration. Thousands of men, horses, carts, guns, ammunition and supplies pushed their way forwards to meet the German advance. The seething mass swarmed across the landscape like black soldier ants before a storm.

“...anyway it took a while but they finally got her. The Hun used the campanile to fire from. Bloody bullets flying everywhere. Well, they couldn’t have that. The Heavy Artillery Corps blew her to pieces. Bang. Loads of smoke and when it cleared, the old girl had dropped off her perch. What do you think of that, eh?”

She shook her head and looked in the mirror. “I’m sorry, sir, I didn’t quite catch the first part of that. Who did they get?”

The major brought his stick down hard on the seat beside him. “The Virgin, of course, the one that’s hung on for years to the church in Albert. As I said, they blew her to pieces.”

She gasped and lifted her foot off of the pedal. The vehicle slowed down.

“It’s meant to signify the end of the war,” he droned on, “and as it was us that knocked the old girl down then it’s us that are supposed to lose. Hokum.”

The man was a pompous idiot and the sooner she unloaded him in Amiens the better. She put her foot down and pulled out around a slow moving vehicle.

She sighed and gripped the steering wheel. It was irrational to believe that her strength was dependent upon the fate of a statue. It shouldn't matter that the Golden Virgin had been obliterated but it did. The Germans were close. Her chest tightened. What had happened to Madeline and Marie? Had they fled or stayed to face the enemy? Were they dead? If the allies didn't force the Germans back it would be the end for all of them. Did she have the strength to bear it?

"Hey, watch out!" the major shouted and hit the back of her seat.

Her eyes widened as she focussed through the windscreen. A horse drawn wagon piled high with railway sleepers had stopped in front of her. She slammed the brake pedal down hard and swerved. The engine died and the motor car was left beached on the soft earth bank at the side of the road. She slowly raised her eyes to look into the mirror. The major's cap had come off and revealed a shiny balding head.

"Sorry, sir," she shouted over her shoulder as the traffic roared past.

"What on earth's the matter with you? All you have to do is go in a straight line. I always had my doubts about letting women drive." He put his cap back on and folded his arms. "How do you intend to resolve this predicament? I'm damned if I'm going to get out and push."

She clenched her fists and climbed out of the vehicle. Two men had stopped their lorry a few hundred feet away on the other side of the road. They stood and watched, hands in their pockets. They would probably judge her in the same way that the major had but she couldn't push the motor car on her own.

"I say, can you help me get back on to the road?"

"Of course, miss," they said as they walked towards her. "You don't want to be there for too long."

"Thank you."

"Don't you recognise us? We're from the ASC based at Abbeville. We've come to the garage a few times to have our vehicles repaired."

"Oh, yes of course." She smiled and shook his hand.

"Bit of luck we're here. No one else is likely to stop. This lot's like one giant machine. They'll run you over soon as look at you. What happened?"

"I lost concentration. The major said something that upset me."

"Anything that we can help with?"

“I’m afraid not.” A battalion of men marched past. Their shoulders sagged and they dragged their feet along the road. “I’ve been foolish. I need to pull myself together.”

She turned round and led them to where the major sat on the back seat, stately as a king.

* * *

The shelter was dark and airless. Vibrations ran through her body and her teeth rattled. She clamped her jaw down. Someone was getting the hell bombed out of them. The Germans must be trying for the railway again. Surely they wouldn’t attack the camp, it was too near to the hospitals. The red crosses painted on the huts and tents should keep them away.

The drone of aircraft engines, angry bees in a disturbed hive, came closer. The floor quaked and crumbs of chalk fell from the encasing walls. Anti-aircraft guns started up and kicked to a metallic clattering rhythm. She remembered Nevinson’s *La Mitrailleuse*. This is what she had wanted, to experience Marinetti’s beloved machine guns. What had she done? She folded her hands in her lap and waited, what would be would be. The thought of her mother receiving a black edged telegram was distressing but better to die than be captured. Hannah and Bridget were in Calais. They would be safe but she missed them.

She flinched as hot shrapnel hailed down on to the sheet of metal inches from the top of her head. Explosions ripped through the air as bombs fell into the earth around the camp. A woman further down the trench started to scream and didn’t stop. Bright, white light reached into every corner of the shelter, a giant flashbulb that captured the pathetic scene. The other women sat with their hands over their eyes as the Germans dropped flares to lead the bombers straight to their targets. She was surprised by how calm she felt but there was nothing that she could do other than sit through it and hope that she would survive.

The distressed woman had ceased her screams and was trying to climb on to the shoulders of the others in order to push her way out into the night. “Stop her, stop her,” the Forewoman shouted.

Edith pulled herself up to see through the gap between the top of the trench and the sheet metal roof. Chalk dust caught in the back of her throat. Another flare burst

as it hit the ground and illuminated the huts. She blinked, chasing white shapes and shadows from under her eyelids.

The roof of the shelter lifted off and dropped back down. She was thrown against the opposite wall. Her ear drums throbbed and she covered her head with her arms. Was this it? Was she going to die? As the air rushed back to fill the vacuum, the breath was ripped out of her lungs.

“Is anyone injured?” the Forewoman called out. “Check those around you.”

Edith moved her legs and her arms, nothing was broken. She reached out to the woman next to her. “Are you hurt?”

“No. What about you?”

“I’m shaking from head to foot but we got through it.” She took a deep breath. “The worst thing yet and we got through it.”

The warm orange glow of firelight filled the trench. She dragged herself up to look once more through the gap. One side of a wooden hut was torn away, exposing beds and washstands. Blankets, clothes, books and photographs had been blown clear and were strewn across the ground. A second hut was on fire and mesmeric flames danced beneath the reddened sky. The heat tightened the skin of her cheeks. A few hundred yards away a figure emerged from the earth and stumbled around, her skirts silhouetted against fire.

She turned back and looked at the other women sitting motionless on the floor. “The shelter opposite has been hit. We must go across and see if there’s anything that we can do.”

“Maybe she’s right,” someone called out.

“What if there’s another bomb? We should stay put,” said another.

There wasn’t time to debate it. She pushed through the knot of women and reached the entrance to the shelter.

The Forewoman grabbed her arm. “It’s far too dangerous. What are you trying to prove?”

“I need to help them. I know I can do it.”

“I’ve got several new recruits here and I need experienced women to look after them. You’re not to leave this shelter. That’s an order.”

“The others may be in more need of help.” She forced her way past the Forewoman and scrambled up the steps.

The air was filled with the acrid smell of cordite and burnt wood. The scramble across to the other trench was treacherous. Debris littered the ground and pulverised glass glinted in the firelight. The bomb crater between the shelters was deep. It was a miracle that neither of them had taken a direct hit. How awful to be buried in a ready-made grave.

Two women sat by the entrance to the second trench. One coughed hard and the other's face was covered in blood from a gash over her eye.

She squatted beside them. "Is anyone else down there?"

"Yes. Three or four, I think."

"Do you know if they're alive?"

The women shook their heads. The heat from the burning hut was fierce and sweat ran down her face. She wiped it away with her sleeve. The sky glowed above the hospitals in Abbeville. It would be a while before help arrived at the camp.

She stepped nearer to the trench and glass crunched underfoot. The roof at one end had collapsed and was buried under shredded sandbags. She dropped down into the undamaged section and stood still. It was unlikely that anyone had survived. What would she find? She was used to the mutilated bodies of the men at the hospital but someone else found them and laid them on clean white sheets.

A hand grabbed her ankle and a woman covered in white dust looked up through the gloom, her long hair clouded around her tear streaked face. Edith reached down, put her arms around her and pulled her up.

"You're safe."

"Thank you. There are two women behind me who are able to move and they think there's a third. They've tried to speak to her but she hasn't responded."

"You get yourself to safety. I'll find the others." She bent down and moved along the trench. Two women crouched on the floor, lit by the weak light that reached in from the entrance.

A terrible grating sounded above and she put her arms over her head. The noise stopped and she looked up at a sliver of the night sky. The metal roof slid to one side until the crescent moon became visible.

"We're here." The Forewoman's head appeared over the lip of the trench.

"Thank goodness. Please can you get these three out? I'll go further in. It's possible that someone is trapped."

“No,” shouted the Forewoman. “We’ll move some of the debris first. It’s not safe. You’ve ignored one order tonight. Don’t disobey me again.”

“Until we know where the woman is you may do more harm than good. I have to go down and look.”

She got on to her hands and knees and felt her way in the dark, hard lumps of chalk pushed into her palms. It was cool and the smell of damp permeated the air. The others were a few feet away but it may as well have been a mile.

“Can you hear me?” Her voice was strained.

No one replied. She crawled forwards and was about to call out again when the soft sound of an exhalation of breath raised the hairs on the back of her neck.

“I’m coming. It’ll be all right.” She moved onward and touched the rough material of a coat dress. “Can you move?”

“My leg...it’s trapped. ” The woman moaned. “I think the side wall’s collapsed.”

Edith explored the rubble in front of her and found a boot. She moved her hand up and found an ankle but the rest of the leg was buried. She clawed frantically at the debris, grateful for the chalk of Picardy that disintegrated with ease.

“I’m almost done, there’s a little bit left. There, you’re free.”

The other woman reached out a hand for hers. The fingers were as cold as marble.

“Thank you.”

“The others won’t be long. They’re breaking in through the roof. Have you got any injuries?”

“My head’s bleeding a bit but otherwise I don’t think anything’s broken. Edith, is that you?”

“Alice?”

“I’m afraid so. I bet if you’d known it was me you wouldn’t have bothered. Can’t say I blame you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She kept hold of Alice’s hand.

“Now I understand what my brother must feel like. He’s a tunneller. My Mum calls him a ferret.” Her light heartedness was not convincing.

Thuds and scrapes echoed around them and the women above dragged back the metal sheet. Alice’s face was barely recognisable in the moonlight. Blood and chalk dust was smeared across her face but it was more than that. Her expression was different, the taunting, mocking air had gone.

The Forewoman shouted down, “What’s going on?”

“It’s Alice. We need to get her to the hospital if there’s anything left of it. Her leg may be damaged.”

“Hang on.” The Forewoman turned away and gave hurried instructions to the others.

Alice squeezed Edith’s hand. “I know I’ve already said it but thank you.”

“It’s nothing.”

“No it’s not. You didn’t have to come down here.”

“I did. Come on, let the others pull you out.”

Arms reached down into the shallow trench and pulled Alice up. The all clear sounded and Edith checked her watch, it was 6am. She made her own way out of the trench and sat down on a pile of sandbags to watch the commotion. Men had arrived to put out the fires and POWs set to work with shovels and barrows. The dawn light revealed that the camp was destroyed.

White specks covered the trees to her left. What on earth were they? She stood up and moved nearer. Sanitary towels hung from the branches. There must have been hundreds of them in boxes inside one of the store huts that caught the full force of the bomb. In all the time that she and the others had been in France they were encouraged to hide their femininity from the men, in their behaviour and behind the shapeless uniform. Now these most secretive of objects were strewn in the trees for all to see. She laughed until her face was wet with tears.

Chapter Twenty Two

May - June 1918

She sat in the back of a three tonne lorry on the short journey from Abbeville to Crécy Forest. The canvas tarpaulin was pulled back and the warm evening air tugged at her hat. Scarlet poppies danced in the grass verges by the side of the narrow road and an expanse of ploughed fields stretched out to the edges of the sky. She swayed from side to side and sang loudly with the others over the noise of the engine.

A smudge of sap green stained the low rise of hills to the north. "That must be the forest," she shouted.

The lorries rumbled on to the village of Forest - l'Abbaye and were chased by a dog until the fields met the first stands of oak and beech. It might have been England.

They stopped in a lay-by and the women were ordered to climb out. She walked along the tyre tracks carved into the soft mud. It was cool under the trees and the air was pure.

She breathed in deeply. "It's beautiful, untouched. The Somme must have looked like this once."

The Forewoman marched off along a track that led into the forest. Edith hoisted her haversack on to her back and followed the others. Fresh green leaves broke out on every branch. She tipped her head back and looked up at the collage of delicately veined foliage, backlit by the sun. She smiled to herself; the seasons had turned and spring was on its way. The scent of lily of the valley rose up from the shaded forest floor. It would be flowering in the garden at home.

The trees thinned out and broom covered the earth, its yellow flowers filled the air with the aroma of vanilla.

"Look up there." Bridget pointed.

A buzzard circled overhead and dropped through the sky after its prey.

"It makes a change from German planes," Edith replied and moved on.

The track stopped at the edge of a clearing and she was relieved to see rows of white bell tents. At least they were not expected to sleep under the stars.

The Forewoman raised her hands and shouted over the excited chatter. "Ladies, before you get settled in there are a few things that I need to tell you."

The women quietened down. "For the foreseeable future," she continued, "you'll be brought out here each evening by lorry from the camp in Abbeville once you have had supper. You will be returned each morning for breakfast. The forest is home to a POW camp so you'll be fairly safe from bombs and shells. The Hun won't want to kill their own. The Canadian Forestry Corps is based nearby and I'm sure that I don't need to tell you there will be no fraternising. Finally, the French hunt boar in the forest. Please stay out of their way. The last thing I need is for one of you to get shot. Any questions?"

"How do we wash?" a woman called out. "Is there a stream?"

"Ground sheets have been laid out to collect dew water. You will use that. Right, if that's all, you may go and settle in."

"Let's get a tent on the edge of camp near the gate." Hannah walked away. "That way we we'll be in one of the first lorries back in the morning."

Edith followed with Bridget. "It's very conscientious of you to want to get to work early. Unless this is about being first in the queue for breakfast."

"It might be."

They claimed a tent near the edge of the clearing and clambered in, dragging their haversacks with them. It smelt musty and yellow stains marked the white canvas walls. Straw filled biscuits were stacked to one side in an untidy pile.

They arranged the bedding so that their feet touched the centre pole and their heads were against the tent wall.

Hannah sat back on her heels. "It's not bad, I suppose."

"I know what it needs." Edith pulled the tartan rug out of her haversack and spread it over the biscuits. "That's better. We should get a good nights' sleep, what with no raids and all this fresh air."

"Why don't we go and get some wood for a fire?" Hannah scrambled out.

"You and Bridget go. I want to enjoy the peace and quiet."

She sat at the tent entrance and remembered a school history lesson on the Battle of Crécy. Edward the third and the Black Prince had camped amongst the trees with their men before the defeat of the greater French army. She imagined the knights and archers resting under the trees behind her. Did their bones still lie buried in the

fields beyond the forest, to be joined by those of their descendants? If only history could be repeated and the allies repel the German offensive.

"If you'd have told me a year ago that I'd be camping in a forest with you, I'd have laughed." Alice limped towards the tent.

"It's not that much of a leap of the imagination. What you mean to say is that you never expected me to come to France and give up my home comforts."

"I suppose I did underestimate you." She smiled. "You do look at home sat there. We never really know anyone, do we?"

"I suppose not." She smiled back. "They patched you up then."

"Yes. They said that it'll always be a bit stiff. I was bloody lucky that the wall fell where it did, that and the fact that you helped me." She turned to walk away.

"Anyway, I'll leave you in peace."

"No. Please stay."

"All right, if you're sure."

Alice carefully lowered herself down and sat on the grass. Edith left the tent and joined her. A gramophone played somewhere in the makeshift camp.

"This is pleasant, isn't it Alice? I'm so glad that we can continue with our work as well as be safer at night." She stretched her legs out in front of her. "It could be even better."

"What do you mean?"

"You and me, I want us to be friends."

"I want that too. Bloody hell, Edith you saved my life." Two women nearby turned their heads at her raised voice.

"I'm not sure that's true. In any case, I didn't want to assume that what did happen that night had changed anything between us."

"Of course it has," Alice said and shook her head. "The Germans are the enemy. We've got enough to deal with without fighting each other."

Edith twisted a piece of grass around her finger. "When we first met, I was afraid of you."

"You didn't show it. Came back at me as far as I remember."

"That's as may be but on the inside I was shaking. I'm not afraid of you any more."

"I'm sorry I've been such a bitch to you." Alice turned round, her eyes open wide. "I was intimidated by you and thought you were better than me."

“I’m sure I didn’t help matters. I was a bit standoffish but look around us.” She waved a hand at the clearing. “The war has changed everything. We’re equal here.”

Another gramophone record started to play and a woman’s alto crackled between the trees, calling to her sweetheart in France.

“Whatever happened with your Captain? I had high hopes for you two.”

“He wasn’t what he seemed.” She sighed and turned her head away. “I thought that he was a good, kind man but in the end, he only wanted one thing from me.”

“I was worried that might’ve been it.” Alice reached out and held her hand.

“For the most part I’ve enjoyed my time in Abbeville but him...well. Thankfully, I’ll never have to see him again.” She sat up straight and tucked her hair behind her ear. “How have you found it out here, Alice?”

“The work’s what I expected and what I wanted. I couldn’t wait to get away from London. But to be honest I’m lonely. I envy the three of you, you all get on so well.”

“Don’t forget that we trained together before we came out.”

“I know but I’ve been at the camp for months and I still eat on my own most days. I don’t help myself but once you’re a certain way it’s difficult to change. I push people away, that’s what I do.”

“Well, it doesn’t have to be that way any more.”

Hannah and Bridget arrived back with tin mugs of steaming liquid.

“No fires allowed, apparently.” Hannah shrugged her shoulders. “Though the Hun wouldn’t be able to tell if it was us or the POWs. Everything all right, Edith?”

“It’s fine. Alice has kept me company.”

“We brought you back a tea.” Bridget handed it across. “Sorry Alice, if I’d known you were joining us I’d have brought you one back as well.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be on my way.”

“No. You can share mine.” Edith passed her mug to Alice.

The four women sat together and listened to the gramophone until the sun had set beyond the trees.

* * *

Cptn. J. Howard
1st/28th Bn. London Regiment
(Artists Rifles)

QMAAC Camp,
Abbeville

7th June 1918

Dear John,

I'm so relieved to hear that you're safe. Your letter took a while to reach me because of all the upheaval that continues here. I don't know if you're aware but our camp was first attacked in the middle of May. It's a miracle that no one died as a bomb exploded very near to one of our shelters that night. A friend of mine was injured but I'll explain more when I see you, which will hopefully be soon.

You will, however, have heard about the second attack on the night of 29th to 30th May. Mother had a fit in her last letter after she learned of it. I'm sure that she has written to you of her concern but what can I do? I wasn't there that night as I had driven someone to Calais. I've tried to calm her and I'd be grateful if you could do the same.

By all accounts, it was a terrible night. Eight women were killed immediately and one died soon after of her wounds. They were sheltering in a trench which took a direct hit. It might have been worse but a female doctor happened to be at the camp. She treated many of the women as soon as it happened which must have saved lives. I didn't know any of them but that makes no difference as we are one family.

I attended the funerals which took place the next day. The coffins were covered with Union Jacks and carried on gun limbers. There were so many flowers: from the men at the camp and those stationed nearby, the nurses and ourselves. Four women marched alongside each limber and we formed up behind. I was sad for the women who died but proud of them.

The cortege stretched as far as I could see along the tree lined road to the cemetery. The route was packed with soldiers who saluted as the coffins went past. Civilians turned out and it touched me that the French women cried. The Royal Flying Corps flew overhead and I saw one of them salute. It seemed that everyone who could be released from duty was present.

We all went to the cemetery to attend the burials. A great deal of care had been taken in the short time after their deaths to ensure that they had the farewell that was due to them. A different service was held for each denomination and there was a

firing squad over each grave. The bugler played the Last Post and it was as if time stood still. There was a perfect silence when he finished and we were reluctant to move. The WAAC gardeners will care for the graves as they do for those of all the men that lie there.

There's no need to worry about me. Although I am often down near Abbeville, I am safe at night. I cannot tell you where but I'm sure you will have heard rumours. I feel alive and not frightened. You might understand that but no one at home will. Anyway, I have to believe that there will be a heroic push back by the allies. Without hope, there is nothing.

Due to our recent exploits, we have been 'adopted' by Queen Mary and are now referred to as the QMAAC. It has made a difference to some but most of us aren't fussed one way or the other. We'll always be the WAAC.

Write soon and let me know all your news.

All my love,

Edith.

* * *

*Miss E. Howard,
QMAAC Camp,
Abbeville*

*1st/28th Bn. London Regiment,
(Artists Rifles)*

15th June 1918

Dear Edith,

It was wonderful to receive your letter. Don't worry, I ensure that I don't write anything home that will unduly concern mother or father with regard to either of us.

There has been much talk of the fatal attack at Abbeville. Quite a few men here had a poor view of the WAAC. I'm sure that doesn't come as any surprise. Even though they knew that my sister was with them, they didn't refrain from expressing their opinions in front of me. Well, their attitude has changed and that is clearly a reflection of a greater change within the army itself. The fact that the women were given a full military funeral demonstrates that the WAAC are seen as fellow soldiers, obviously not as fighters but in that you are all exposed to the same dangers.

I've enclosed an article from The Times on the subject. You will see that it refers to the fact that recent events have 'confirmed their right to khaki,' and made them 'one in sympathy and sacrifice with the fighting forces'. It's wrong that it took their deaths to achieve it but that's just the way it is. I doubt, however, that they'll go as far as awarding decorations or medals.

Well that's enough of the serious stuff. All here is as well as can be expected. There's some good news from home. John Nash has married Christine at last. You must remember her, she was at The Slade with Dora. I'm sure that you came to one of her exhibitions with me.

Keep your chin up. There's a possibility that I may be able to see you soon. I'll write when I know more.

With much love,

John.

Chapter Twenty Three

July - August 1918

The doors to the garage were wide open but the air was still. The stifling midday heat intensified the smell of oil and petrol. A fat blue bottle crawled languidly on the bonnet of Edith's motor car. It rubbed its bristled legs together and flew down to settle on the back of her hand.

"Damn thing." She flicked it away and it buzzed across the garage.

"What's the matter?" Hannah popped her head up on the other side of her vehicle.

"A fly's taken a shine to me, disgusting creature." The buzzing grew louder as if it were inside her head. She sank down on to the running board and slumped forwards, overwhelmed by nausea.

"Edith, are you all right?"

"I...I'm not sure." The words that stuck in her mouth tasted of metal.

Her thoughts became smaller and smaller until a blanket of sleep and dream lay gently over her mind. Who was calling her, why wouldn't they let her sleep? She wanted to sleep.

"Edith! Edith!" Hannah's voice seemed to come from a great distance away.

It was hard to force back the fatigue but she opened her eyes. "What happened?"

"You fainted. Here, try and sit up. You've gone terribly pale." Hannah pulled her back until her head rested against the vehicle's side.

Sweat trickled down her face. "How long was I unconscious for?"

"Only a few seconds."

"I'm sorry. I'll be fine in a moment." Her fingers fumbled at her collar and the top buttons of her coat dress. What a relief to feel colder air against the skin on her neck and breasts.

Hannah shook her head. "I don't like it. I think we ought to get you to the hospital."

"There's no need for that. It's not what you think."

"How do you know it isn't? Even if you're not concerned about yourself and I don't believe that for one moment, I'm sure you don't want the rest of us to come down with influenza as well."

“Of course not but I’m sure I fainted because of the heat in here.” A wave of nausea rose up from her stomach and she shivered. “I might feel better if I drank some water.”

Hannah put her hand on Edith’s brow and frowned. “You’re burning up and it’s not because of the weather. Come on, let’s get you in the motor car.”

“I don’t want, I don’t...” The buzzing began again. She felt Hannah’s arms around her and allowed herself to be pulled up.

Hannah opened the passenger door. “In you go.”

“I can’t...Look...”

The Virgin was propped up on the seat, not the golden statue of Albert but a carved wooden figure that came alive as she watched with fascination. The varnished white paint on the serene face crackled in the shimmering heat. Dark eyes under questioning brows opened wide and stared, the painted eyes of a doll. The vivid cerulean blue robe rippled in a breeze that didn’t exist. Smooth carved lips, stained deep red, slowly parted and thousands of flies flew out of the open mouth.

“Get her away!” she screamed.

“Who? There’s no one there.”

“The Virgin. Can’t you see her?” Her voice rose in panic.

“Don’t be frightened. I think the fever has made you delirious. I’ll get you to the hospital as soon as I can.”

Edith climbed into the seat and closed her eyes. She took a few deep breaths, no longer caring if she lost consciousness.

Hannah reversed out into the heat of the afternoon. Clouds of dust lifted into the air as she turned the vehicle around and joined the road to Abbeville.

* * *

She lay in the WAAC hospital at Calais. Natural light poured in through the tall windows of the ward and illuminated the whitewashed walls and crisp clean sheets. The burnished parquet floor filled the air with an ecclesiastical aroma of polish. Matron, not unlike a Mother Superior in her veil, sat at a wooden table in the centre and surveyed her domain.

A young nurse, demure as a novice in her starched cap, came on to the ward. She spoke to Matron, who stood up and walked briskly across the room.

“You have a visitor, Miss Howard. I wouldn’t normally let him in at this time but he’s on a day’s leave and is quite insistent.”

Edith propped herself up against the soft pillows. The door opened and John stood with his cap in his hands. Matron beckoned him in and he strode towards the bed, a broad smile on his tanned face.

“You can stay for half an hour but if she gets tired you will need to go.” She turned on her heel and walked away.

“Yes, Matron,” he called after her and pulled up a chair. “Edith, you look terrible.”

“Thank you, brother, dearest.”

“I’m only playing.” He took her hand. “I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t think you weren’t better. They tell me that you’re not contagious any more.”

“Thankfully no, it hasn’t been much fun. I was confined to a ward with screens around each bed. It was like being in a cocoon. I couldn’t see anyone and I wasn’t well enough to even read a book. I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, they’ve looked after me very well but I miss the camp and my friends. I want to get out of here.” She squeezed his hand. “Anyway, why didn’t you write and tell me that you were coming?”

“I wasn’t sure that I’d be able to see you and I didn’t want to raise your hopes. I’ve been fighting in Picardy. A place called Aveluy, not far from Albert, so it wasn’t too far for me to come.”

“I went to Albert last winter.” She sighed and the deep breath hurt her lungs.

“Yes, you wrote to me about how you sketched the Virgin. Made quite a thing of it as I recall.”

“I’d almost forgotten. A great deal has happened since then. I don’t have the sketch any more. I sent it home with the others after the raids at Abbeville.”

He softened his voice. “And you will join them soon.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come on Edith, the Matron has explained it to me. You may be over the worst of it but you need to go home to England in order to recuperate.”

“I see. I expect that she instructed you to convince me of that.” She pulled her hand away. “I won’t go home. It’s bad enough that I’ve been trapped in here but I’ve focussed my attention on getting better so that I can return to the camp as soon as possible. Home is a world away.”

Her breaths were laboured. "I can't leave the others behind," she continued, "I'd never forgive myself if something happened to Hannah, Bridget or Alice while I was safely back in England."

He looked around at Matron but she was busy writing at her desk. "Please calm down. I knew you'd be like this but I'm afraid you have no choice in the matter. For heaven's sake, you need to rest. You haven't taken any leave since you've been in France."

"You haven't taken home leave either and knowing you, you don't intend to for a while."

"That's different." His voice was stern, the words clipped.

"Why? Because your work is more important than mine?" She shook her head. "I may not be fighting but that doesn't mean what I do isn't significant. I thought you appreciated that."

"There's no need to be so defensive, old thing." He reached for her hand but she pulled it away.

"I don't want to argue but you don't understand. They need experienced women like me. You should see the new ones that are coming out. They moan about everything. The huts aren't good enough or they want more freedom to do as they please. One of them actually said that she wouldn't do another stroke of work until she got more rations. She soon had that knocked out of her. She was hauled up in front of the Administrator and not allowed out for a fortnight. What do they expect? There are food shortages at home let alone here."

"Were you any different?" He raised his eyebrows.

"I'd like to think so. That's not to say that I didn't struggle when I first came out but I put up with it, we all did. We didn't dare moan when we had it better than our brothers."

He smiled. "You've come a long way, particularly when I remember why you came out in the first place."

"I know." She smiled back and relaxed against the pillows.

"Perhaps that's what you need to concentrate on now. I've said it before and I meant it. I really think that you could make something of yourself as a war artist."

"That all seems so long ago. I didn't envisage becoming a part of all this but that's what's happened. The danger hasn't frightened me away, if it had I'd be quite happy

to go home, wouldn't I? The truth is that I've grown used to the danger, it makes me feel alive. I told you that once."

"Yes you did and I understand it."

"I'm part of the military. Did you hear that the Administrator who died in the raid at Abbeville in May, Mrs Gibson, has posthumously been awarded the Military Medal for gallantry? It wasn't the Military Cross, they probably think that's a step too far but it shows that we've been accepted. There's a time and a place for my art but it's not now."

He looked away and when he turned back the smile had gone. "You're going home. You have to accept that. Being in the military means you have to follow orders and if they order you home then you have to go."

"Don't patronise me."

"I'm not." He pulled out a small notebook from his tunic pocket, removed a piece of folded newspaper and handed it to her. "I thought that if I reminded you of your artistic ambitions it might make the thought of going home easier to bear."

"The British Soldier, an exhibition by Eric Kennington," she read aloud, "has been met with critical acclaim. Robert Graves has described the artists' exceptional skill in capturing the trench point of view." She folded the paper back up and held it out to him. "Why are you showing this to me?"

"Do you know about Eric? He left on an honourable discharge. Shot in the foot or something. Rather suspicious if you ask me. He didn't serve one hundred days. Apparently he was terrified of coming back and jumped at the chance of being a war artist in order to save his skin. The point is, back home there is an appetite for war art. But it all refers to men's experience and you could address that."

She looked at the chrysanthemums on the table next to her, an exploding shell burst of waxy white petals. John was right, it was about the truth. This Eric Kennington may have been in the war but so had she and for a damned sight longer. She'd witnessed it firsthand. The subject matter may be different but her work was as authentic as that by any male war artist.

"I appreciate what you're saying, John, I really do. And yes, hearing of this Eric Kennington has goaded me somewhat. But I can't do it. Anyway, if I do go home you know what mother is like, she won't let me lift a finger."

“I’m just trying to find a way to encourage you to go back but you’re right about mother, she would fuss over you. Oh Edith, think of her if no one else. At least one of her children would be safe.”

She closed her eyes and imagined her mother’s arms around her. “You know that’s the one thing that might possibly make me change my mind. You could have saved a lot of time by cutting to the chase.”

“I’d rather hoped that I wouldn’t have to.”

She opened her eyes and smoothed a crease out of the sheet. “I don’t have a choice, do I?”

“No.”

“I’ll go back but only for as long as it takes to recover. But you need to promise me that you’ll also go home as soon as you can.”

“I promise.”

“Good. Now, we haven’t got long before Matron removes you and I want to hear all your news.”

Chapter Twenty Four

September 1918

A strong breeze pushed at the heavy bedroom curtains. The plush material ballooned and the wooden rings clacked along the curtain pole. The window had been open all night. After weeks spent in tents that cooled after sundown, it seemed the best way to adjust to sleeping behind brick walls that retained the heat of the day.

She had woken as usual at 5 o'clock but lain still and listened to the rest of the household perform the morning ritual. Cook – was it the same one as before or yet another? – had moved around in the attic room before heading down the back stairs. Later, her father walked with a heavy tread down the main stairs. It was a familiar rhythm; seven steps, across the smaller landing in three and ten steps more. As a child, she jumped down the last two while gripping the end of the handrail, coiled like an ammonite under her hand.

Soft footsteps sounded across the landing and stopped. The floorboards creaked on the other side of the door. She held her breath but her mother moved away. How long would they tiptoe around her? She would have to guide them, let them know how she wanted things to be but she was equally unsure.

The room was more outdated than she remembered, with its Victorian brass bed, flower patterned wallpaper and ornate gilt mirror over the fireplace. It was cluttered with ornaments and shelves of unread leather bound books. A porcelain faced doll that she hadn't been able to part with sat on the dresser. None of it was of use any more.

On a chair in the corner, a white cotton dress with lace at the collar and hem had been laid out, a sloughed skin of her former self. It belonged to distant innocent summers. She turned over and pressed the smooth satin eiderdown to her cheek. Hannah and the others would be at work while she lay in bed with lungs that turned to ice with each breath.

Her mother's footsteps stopped once again outside the door. She knocked and came into the room.

"Good morning, darling. I left it as long as possible. I knew you'd want a rest after the journey yesterday but I was worried you'd be hungry if I waited any longer."

"I am a little." She struggled to sit up in the bed.

"It's wonderful to have you home." Her mother reached behind her and fussed over the pillows and cushions. "I only wish that it wasn't because you've been unwell. But you're back where you belong and I'll look after you."

"You don't need to." Her voice was gentle. "I'm not a child any more."

"I know that but I'm still your mother. I'm meant to make a fuss of you. If you take that away what is there left for me to do?" She lowered her head, auburn hair shot through by white.

"I'm sorry. I'm used to my independence but I'm sure I can cope with being spoilt for a few weeks." She pulled the covers back and swung her legs to the edge of the bed. The carpet was soft underfoot. "I'd like to come down for breakfast. I need to make an effort if I'm going to get better."

"That's the spirit." Her mother clapped her hands.

Edith walked over to the chair and lifted off the white dress. "Where's my uniform?"

"That old thing? I've sent it to be laundered. I had to peel it off of you last night. You didn't intend wearing it in that condition, surely?" She pulled the curtains open and the roomed filled with light.

"No, of course not."

"Your father's in the garden. You could sit out with him and eat breakfast. The air will do you good."

"How is he, truthfully? It was always you who wrote. I can't help but wonder what he thinks of me." She sat on the chair and laid the dress across her knees, releasing the scent of lavender from its folds.

Her mother moved away from the open window. "I won't pretend that it wasn't difficult at first. It's because he loves you so very much that he didn't want you to go. He was afraid that you wouldn't come back. If it had been a case of him getting used to your decision I think that he'd have eventually come round to it. The trouble came when other people reacted to what you had done. Some of our friends stopped calling round or inviting us to dinner. Not all of them but enough to upset your father."

"We heard about the rumours and how people at home doubted our morality. I thought that your friends knew me well enough not to entertain any such ideas."

"I thought so too but I'm pleased to say that your father defended you. He was very clear that whatever you did in France, you wouldn't bring disgrace to yourself. You've

never given us any cause to worry. The hypocrisy of it all, when I remember what some of them have done.”

“I’m upset to think that I put you both in that position but I didn’t expect you’d be treated that way. I must thank him for defending me.”

She shook her head. “I think it’d be best if you didn’t refer to it. Be kind to him and patient. I understand that you need to adjust to being back but so do we. And it’s more difficult for him. God knows what would happen if you bring all that up again.”

Magpies chattered loudly in the tree outside the window, hidden in the green depths of the old oak.

“I’ll leave you to get dressed. Come down to the garden when you’re ready. There’s no hurry, you have nothing to do today and nowhere that you have to be.” She left the room and closed the door.

* * *

Edith stepped out of the doors and on to the patio. In France, the sun’s rays had appeared filtered through amber; a honeyed glow that deepened colour and lightened shadow. Sunday morning in Islington brought with it a brash, unflattering light contaminated with particles of dirt. Her father sat and read a newspaper at the white cast iron table. He shook his head, no doubt at more stories of loss of life.

Her mother walked out behind her. “I wish he wouldn’t put himself through it but he sees it as the only way to glean any information about John’s battalion. It’s not healthy. What if he reads of a terrible event that your brother is involved in? Do we all sit around and wait for a telegram? I can’t bear it.”

“You know you’ll never change him.”

They walked across the grass and dew seeped through her thin summer shoes.

“Look who’s awake, Robert.”

He removed his old straw hat and laid it on the table. “You look better than you did last night.”

“I was tired. The crossing was rough and it didn’t help that the train from Folkestone was late.”

“Quite.” He looked away and fiddled with his cufflinks.

“Never mind all that. You’re here now. Sit down, Edith and try to eat,” her mother said and began to pour the tea. “You’ve lost a lot of weight. That dress is hanging off of you.”

“I can manage.” She took the teapot from her and sensed her parents look at one another. “It’ll be nice to have a decent cup. The stuff at camp is all right but it’s not the same as at home.”

Her mother smiled. “When you feel better, dear, I’d like you to come out with me in your uniform. I want to show you off. It’s quite the thing.”

“Is it? I must say that I’m surprised.”

“It would seem that you’re in fashion.” He pointed at a small photograph of a policewoman in the newspaper. “If a young woman isn’t in a uniform, people want to know why. You and your friends are no longer considered as immoral but heralded as patriotic and doing your bit. Horrible phrase.”

“What do think, father?”

“It’s a temporary arrangement and I’m content as long as you don’t wear trousers. I’m aware that things have changed but that really would be a step too far.” He put his hat on and leaned back in the chair.

“God knows what the world is coming to. Take these women who leave domestic service in droves to work in factories,” he continued. “They’re not worried about the war. They’re greedy. Earn far too much money as far as I’m concerned. You hear of them parading in their fur coats and jewellery. Meanwhile, our men risk their lives out there. What for, if that’s what they’ve got to come home to? Hopefully when all this is over we can get back to the way that it should be, everyone in their proper place.”

She put her cup down and sighed. “I expect that stories of fur coats and that sort of thing are rumour. There are enough of those flying around. I think the changes are beneficial. Look at the women that I was with in France who I’ve written to you about - Bridget and Alice. A whole new world has opened up for them.”

“We’d be happy for them to visit, wouldn’t we Robert? You’ve all been very good to each other.”

“I suppose so.” He curled his fingers into a fist. The skin was dry and speckled with liver spots. There had probably been numerous whispered conversations on her return when he would have been made to promise not to start an argument for the sake of her health.

“Father, it’s not only Alice and Bridget but also women like me. I’ll be terribly bored if I have to go back to the way things were. I’m capable of a great deal more.”

He opened his mouth and her mother frowned at him. “While we’re on the subject of the future, Edith dear, how long do you think you’ll be with us?”

“I can go back as soon as I’m passed fit but they’ve told me I’m to take leave in addition as I haven’t had any yet.”

“Couldn’t you request a post in London or nearer home?” she pleaded.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible.” Edith looked away across the immaculate garden. The last of the roses were in bloom and each border had been weeded, turned and edged.

“Your mother would prefer you to stay here.” He leaned forward and stared at her. “Would you rather be in France than with us?”

“It’s not a case of what I want. Of course I’m happy to be home, I’ve missed you but I have to do what I’m ordered. They want me back in France because they need experienced drivers.”

“You never used to be keen to follow orders. You certainly never listened to me.”

“I know, father, but I’ve become used to it. I didn’t expect to but I didn’t imagine that I’d enjoy military life as much as I have.”

He nodded. “Your brother wrote that you had blossomed but I thought that it was his way of reassuring us, in the same way that he said you had found time to sketch.”

“I did for a while but the work took over.”

He laughed and brought his hand down on the table. “I told you that would happen but you knew better. Well, you learnt the hard way. I assume that you’ve reconsidered the idea of being a war artist.”

She sipped at her tea and put the cup on the table. “Not at all. In fact, John has encouraged me to use my convalescence to paint again, using the sketches that I made while I was out there.”

Her mother reached across the table for her hand. “We received your parcels but we didn’t open them. They’re all safe in your father’s study. I’d love to see your work.”

“We can look at them today. It would mean a great deal to me, they hold so many memories of my friends.”

He folded his paper and stood up. “I’ll leave you and your mother to it.”

The magpies burst from the tree and into the sky, sending leaves down on to the manicured lawn.

Chapter Twenty Five

October 1918

Whitechapel rejoiced beneath the dome of a perfect blue sky. Londoners walked with their heads held high and spoke with strangers. On every street corner the paper sellers bellowed the wonderful news that the Germans had been forced back in the Battle for the Hindenburg Line. For mile upon mile they were sent running with their tails between their legs.

Edith and her mother made their way arm in arm along the High Street.

“It’s wonderful to see you fully recovered, dear.”

“I promise that I’ll never take my health for granted again.” She walked with a light step, aware of the strength that had returned to her body.

“I’m glad that you’ll be well when your brother comes home. But please make sure that he doesn’t tire you out gallivanting around town.” Her voice was firm. “You both need to rest.”

“I can’t wait to see him. Three days and we’ll be back together again. And he’ll be able to escort me to France when our leave is over.” She turned to look at her mother. “That’ll stop you worrying, won’t it?”

“No. It’s not the travel that worries me but what happens when you get there. Must you go? It seems that the tide may be turning.”

“All the more reason to go back. If the war ends, I have to be in camp with the others. Anyway my convalescence is over and you know that I can’t stay at home much longer.”

They passed an old man playing a fiddle, his unshaven chin rasped against the instrument cradled on his shoulder. The irresistible beat of an Irish jig pulled at her energised muscles. Her mother threw a coin into the cap at the musicians’ feet and stopped to listen.

“Come along. We can’t stand here.” She pulled at her mother’s arm and steered her along the pavement. “*The Times* says that the exhibition is attracting huge crowds and I want to get there early. I hope there’s something on the WAAC, I want you to see what I’ve done for the last year and a half.”

The monastic stone building of the Whitechapel Gallery squatted between its brick neighbours. She assessed her reflection in the glass door at the entrance and adjusted her uniform.

“You’re Edith of the WAAC once more.” Her mother smiled and followed her into the gallery.

A woman with cropped hair and a short hemline stood in the foyer. “Please take your free guide.”

“Thank you.” She took the thin pamphlet titled *The Imperial War Museum’s Women at Work Exhibition* and flicked through the pages. What an eclectic mix, everything from hospitals and canteens to industry.

They followed the signs to the lower gallery and she gasped as they entered the room. Women had clearly rallied to the museum’s call to provide as many objects and photographs as possible.

“It’s all a bit haphazard isn’t it, Edith.”

“That may be so but it doesn’t detract from its value. Every single one of these items tells a story of such incredible change.”

“Yes, these pictures are commonplace now.” Her mother pointed at a display of photographs that showed women stitching the bodies of airships, working in munitions sheds surrounded by fat cigar-shaped shells, and salvaging bricks from bombed out buildings.

“Mother, look at this.” She paused in front of a bust of Edith Cavell, her white uniform cap tied under her chin. “Her expression is so serene.”

They moved on past a photograph of Sergeant Major Flora Sandes in uniform, wandering around Salonika with a walking stick as she recovered from her wounds.

“I wonder what their mothers think. I worry about you but these women are far more troublesome.” They stopped by the steel door from the Belgian cellar in which Baroness d T’Serclaes and her friend Mairi treated wounded Belgians right behind the line.

“They’re nothing of the kind.” She laughed. “They’re remarkable. They make me feel inadequate.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’ve done more than enough. Don’t get any ideas about following in their footsteps. I don’t understand what drives them to do it.”

“It’s different out there. You can’t imagine.” She reached out and touched the cold metal door.

“Well, I’ve come here to try.”

“I know and I’m grateful.”

The growing crowd of visitors seeped into every corner of the gallery but she refused to be rushed through the exhibition bays.

“There doesn’t appear to be a single area of work in which women aren’t employed. How inspirational they all are. No wonder that so many people pass through the gallery doors to see all of this.”

“It’s been a source of vexation for your father but I keep asking him what else he expects. The country cannot grind to a halt. They may not experience the same as their men but they’re certainly not shirking and they deserve this recognition.”

“But some of them do put their lives in danger. Look at this.”

At the end of the lower gallery, away from the chattering crowds, was a shrine to the fallen. Heavy curtains were tied back in front of a table dressed as an altar. It was heavy with vases of flowers and candles. A statue of the Virgin Mary held out her hands in supplication. Above the shrine were painted the words, *They lost their lovely youth facing the rough cloud of war.*

She sighed and pointed to a group of nine photographs in the top right-hand corner. Small, pale faces peered out, illuminated by the candlelight. “They’re the WAAC women who died on that terrible night at Abbeville. I didn’t know them but I recognise their faces from the press cuttings pinned up in the recreation hut at the Calais camp.”

“It makes me feel physically ill to see them. That could so easily have been your photograph up there.”

“But it isn’t.”

Her mother’s eyes welled with tears. “It’s brought it all a little too close to home.”

She put her arm around her. “Let’s move on. There’s no point dwelling on what may or may not happen.”

They climbed the stairs to the top gallery. The tempting smells from the canteen drifted up to the landing but she pushed on.

“The guide says that the next exhibitions have been organised by the Ministry of Labour to illustrate the work of the women’s organised services. That must include the WAAC.” She put her hand up to check that her collar was straight and led the way into the room.

“These exhibits are ambitious.” She marched to the first display cases. “Mother, come and see this model.” Two plaster Land Army girls ploughed a miniature field of dyed brown sand. It reminded her of the model that William had described of the countryside near the Messines Ridge. She didn’t want to think of him.

“Let’s find the WAAC. I can’t wait any longer.” She took her mother’s arm and pushed through a knot of people. “Ah, here it is.”

The simple display comprised a uniformed mannequin and photographs of workers taken as they tended graves, handed out meals to soldiers and waited tables in the Mess. Another showed two women cleaning a motor vehicle.

“Look, that’s what I do.” She jabbed her finger at the photograph.

Her mother leaned forward and carefully examined it. “Do you recognise them?”

“No but it’s wonderful to see that we’ve been included. I must write and tell the others.” She bent lower over the cabinet and her breath misted on the glass.

“You miss them, don’t you?”

“Very much. We’re so close. It’s hardly surprising when you consider what we’ve been through. In other circumstances we could have spent a lifetime together and yet not known each other as well as we do now.”

Her mother reached out and squeezed her arm. “I’m glad to have had the chance to see this. It’s a shame that your father didn’t want to come.”

The crowds filled the gallery and the long room echoed with conversation.

“Aren’t they brave? I couldn’t do that, be out in France. I’d rather be here,” said a young woman who clung to the arm of her man, looking up at him with adoration. Her skin was yellow.

“I might moan about the factory,” the woman continued, “but at least I’m safe. And I can see you.”

“Oh, they’re not that brave, Emmie. They never go near the Frontline. That wouldn’t be allowed. They stay in nice protected camps by the sea. Bit of a holiday by all accounts. Look, there’s a picture of some of them on the beach in their swimming costumes.”

The man glanced at Edith and led the girl away. A blush spread up the back of his neck.

“Ignore him, Edith. He’s probably ashamed because he isn’t in uniform and you are.”

“It’s either that or he didn’t want his girl tainted by being in close proximity to a WAAC. However much we’ve been officially exonerated, we’re still viewed with suspicion by many. Either way, I don’t care. He can think what he wants. I know the truth of it.”

“So do I. It makes me angry. Doesn’t he understand that you and many others risk your lives? Hasn’t he seen the shrine downstairs?”

“If he did it obviously hasn’t changed his mind.” More and more people gathered around the display and she didn’t want to hear what they had to say. “My feet ache. Why are exhibitions and museums so tiring? Let’s go and see what the canteen has to offer.”

She led the way out of the room and down the wide staircase. An impressive array of paintings, lithographs and drawings lined the walls.

She stopped and turned to her mother. “It’s ironic, isn’t it? We’re in an art gallery and yet in the exhibition that we’ve seen there was no art.”

“I hadn’t noticed but yes, you’re right.”

“It makes no sense. The Imperial War Museum is the very body that commissions war artists. You’d think there’d be art of some description depicting women’s war work, even if it were by men.” She shook her head and continued down the stairs. “It’s too much to hope that they’ve begun to commission women.”

“I wonder what they’d make of your sketches.”

“John said that people were interested in war art and that women’s experiences need to be illustrated. If the popularity of this exhibition is anything to go by then he’s right, there may be a place for me.”

“What will you do?”

She stopped at the bottom of the stairs. “My priority is to go back to France and my driving.”

“You can do both. I’m aware that you’re very busy but you found time before, didn’t you?”

“I suppose there’s no harm in writing to the museum to ask if they’d like to see my portfolio. I’ll need to work on it. If they’re interested, I can do more when I’m out there.” She hugged her mother. “I’ll start tomorrow.”

* * *

Edith ran up the steps, hugging a parcel of precious art materials to her body. She opened the front door; the sun's rays stretched into the hallway and across the tiles of golden ochre. She removed her hat and coat and put the parcel down on the hall table.

Low voices droned in the drawing room. The words were indistinguishable but she heard her father. He wasn't meant to be home. She walked through the hall and stood in the doorway. The curtains had been partially closed and no fire burned in the grate. Her parents stood side by side. They fell silent and stared at her through the gloom.

"Mother, what's the matter, what's wrong?"

Her mother reached for her husband's hand and gently pressed it, as if encouraging him to say whatever it was he couldn't seem to find the words for.

He covered his face with his hands. "A telegram came this afternoon. John's dead."

Warmth evaporated from her body and a spasm gripped her chest. Not John, not her beautiful brother. She hadn't thought about him that day. She had been absorbed in her own happiness when all the while he'd gone.

"Come here, Edith." Her mother stretched out her arms.

She remained still and bit her trembling lip. Her mother dropped her arms to her sides and turned away.

Her father's eyes were closed and his brow furrowed. He rubbed his face as if trying to wake himself. Was he going to cry? She had never seen him cry.

"Father, I..."

"I'm going to my study." He walked towards the door. She reached out to him but he pushed by without looking at her.

Her mother remained by the empty fireplace. John's face looked out from photographs in polished frames on the mantelpiece. "Let your father go, he needs time to take all of this in."

"What about you? He can't shut himself away and leave you...us..." The words tumbled out between shallow breaths. "I don't know what to do."

"It's all right, darling. I've expected this day for the last four years. I've seen it in my mind over and over again. And the strange thing is it's as I imagined it would be. A young woman in uniform knocked at the door. I saw from the expression on her face that she knew she was the bearer of bad news. It must be a terrible job these days,

delivering telegrams. Anyway, I thanked her and closed the door. For a while I stood in the hallway. I knew that once that telegram was opened nothing would ever be the same. I held it for a while. I'm not certain for how long. I remembered John as a child and as a young man. Then I took it in to your father and he opened it."

Edith shook her head. "How can you be so matter of fact?"

"I told you. I knew that it would happen. I fought it but the feeling wouldn't go away. Something to do with being a mother, I suppose." She put a hand to her breast. "I knew in here".

"Did the telegram say how he died?" Her breathing was calmer.

"Killed in action."

"I want to see it." She scanned the mantelpiece and side tables but it wasn't there.

"It won't tell you anything more than I already have. It's a standard telegram, impersonal, but I suppose with so many to write it makes it easier for them doesn't it?"

"His Commanding Officer will write to you in time. His friends may do too. I want to know what happened. I need to understand."

Her mother sat down and took one of the long cushion tassels, twisting it round and round her finger. "In some ways I dread those letters more. I won't know whether to believe what they write. I'm not a fool. They'll exaggerate the part he played, however much it may be based in fact. All I want are my memories. I don't want the detail of his death. It won't mean anything to me. I can't imagine it, can I? I can't put it into any context the way that you can. No. I want my memories and his body to be returned home."

She sat on the sofa and took her mother's hand. "He'll be buried out there for now and I don't know if we'll be able to bring him home. The WAAC women, women like me, they'll look after his grave." She remembered the cemetery near Abbeville and began to cry. "It's not fair, he was meant to come home on leave. We were going to be a family for a few days. We'll never be that again."

She reached for her mother's arms and was grateful for the warmth of her body in the cold, dark room.

* * *

*QMAAC Camp,
Calais.*

*37 Park Road,
Islington.*

N1

20th October 1918

Dear Hannah,

It's with great sadness that I write to you. John has been killed. I've been granted a short amount of compassionate leave. I thought that with all that time spent at the hospital with those poor men I'd become more accustomed to what this war can do. It sounds terrible but when they died in front of me I felt sadness but not grief. How could I, I didn't know them. But John's death has affected me more than I could ever have imagined. My mother has coped well. I wish that I was as strong as her.

I was angry at first that it should be him. Then the anger turned to grief, an ache that nothing can take away. Everything seemed dislocated, somehow. Have you ever returned home after being away and it looks the same and yet different and it takes a while to feel right again. Well, that's how I've felt. It's just that it hasn't come right yet.

I didn't go out of the house for a while afterwards. It was difficult to see other people go about their daily lives as if nothing had happened. If I heard someone laugh, I disliked them for it. Everything was measured against my own loss.

Today I've been able to put pen to paper. My grief has turned to pride in what John has done. I suppose it is a way to make sense of his death. I can bear it a little easier if I believe that he didn't die in vain and that he sacrificed himself for good.

I want to come back to France as soon as possible. I can't sit here and do nothing when he gave his life. It isn't right. Mother doesn't want me to leave and I can understand that, I'm her only living child now. But she says that she will not stand in my way if it helps me deal with my grief.

I know that it's asking a lot but please can you arrange to have some flowers laid on John's grave. He's buried in Étaples. It would be of great consolation, particularly for mother.

I hope that all is well with you. Do tell me what's been happening and if there's anything you want me to bring back with me.

All my love,

Edith.

Chapter Twenty Six

November - December 1918

The kitchen was in shadow. She sat on a chair in front of the blackened range. The fire was dying but she couldn't be bothered to feed it, though the wood was within reach. She seldom went into the room as it was cook's domain but tonight she had gone to join the crowds on the Mall.

Earlier that day cook had knocked at the drawing room door, her face flustered. She wanted to take the evening off and go with the crowds into town. Her boy was coming home and she wanted to celebrate, as long as the Mistress didn't mind. Her mother graciously agreed and said that they could manage supper themselves. The church bells sounded beyond the closed doors and windows. People ran out of their homes and down the street, waving their hats and flags in the air. Her mother retired to her room and Edith was certain that she heard her crying. Her father was in his study. He was rarely anywhere else these days.

Edith had gone to the kitchen to make supper but half an hour later the meat sat untouched in the larder. She yawned and rubbed her eyes. It was too much effort to make a cup of tea. The rumours of the Armistice had circulated for weeks but when it came it was an anti-climax. She understood cook's excitement but did not share it. While the war continued, it was possible to pretend that John was away fighting. Now all those who were still alive would return: cook's son and thousands of others' husbands, brothers and cousins but not him.

The fire died out. She didn't light the lamp, preferring to withdraw into the darkness. She remembered what she had written to her mother the year before when everyone believed that the tanks at Cambrai would win the war - it might mean the end but not a victory. To think of all those people out singing, flag waving, drinking and heaven knew what else. Let them have their party but when the country woke up in the morning, there would be more than sore heads and flags trampled into the dirt. There would be memory, grief and fear of the future.

John's face appeared out of the darkness. Her memory of him was so clear that the image hung before her in a waking dream. He wouldn't want this of her, sat in the dark in self pity. She wasn't the only one that had lost someone or who knew that difficult times lay ahead. She stood up and lit the lamp. Soft yellow light spread

through the kitchen and she stared at her reflection in the window. Her face looked back at her, older and more serious. She fancied that it was her future self encouraging her to move forwards.

She went through the hall to the sitting room at the front of the house. The curtains were open and as she went to draw them she stopped and peered out at the streetlamps that shone out for the first time in years. The blue tint of the covered lamps had been replaced by a bright light that reached around and into the sky, joining the orange glow of thousands of lamps and bonfires across London. She didn't want to shut out that glorious sight and left the curtains open.

She moved across to the gramophone and flipped through the dusty record covers. She found Chopin's Nocturne, one of her brother's favourites. He had often played it to her but she found it melancholic. She lifted the gramophone lid and placed the record carefully on the table. The needle dropped with a clunk once the handle was wound and the familiar melody filled the room. She closed her eyes and sensed that John stood by her side and waited to see what she would do next.

* * *

"We do have a letter opener, Edith." Her father peered over his glasses. "Why the haste?"

She ignored him and dropped the jagged edged envelope on to the table next to her plate of half eaten breakfast. After a two week wait she would find out what the Ministry of War had in mind for her. She read the brief letter, re-folded it and placed it back in the envelope with a sigh.

Her father raised his eyebrows. "I presume that at some point you will tell me what has made you weary."

He'd be thrilled at the news. She wanted to hold it back for a while in order to delay his delight and the inevitable argument that would follow. However, it was better to get it over with, especially as her mother wasn't in the room.

"It's my Dispersal Notice. I've served more than my full year and as the war is over, my services are no longer required. I have twenty eight days furlough on full pay." She prodded her fork at the congealed egg on her plate. "Oh, and I can wear my uniform for the next four weeks. I don't see the point, though."

“What will you do?” He asked the question in a mild enough manner but it was clear that he wasn’t upset by the news.

“The Labour Exchange will help me to find a job but it’s down to me. They’ve let me go so soon because the Ministry believes I have a trade that’s useful during demobilisation.”

“You don’t need to work.” He laid his knife and fork down. “Besides, John has gone and there’s no one to carry on the family name. You need to marry and give your mother and me grandchildren. It’s what all women your age should be doing. How else can we replace the men that have been lost? It’s your duty.”

“Until a few months ago my duty was to drive officers around France, comfort the maimed and dying and do my best not to be killed in air raids. How quickly that’s forgotten.” She shook her head and pushed her plate to one side. “Even if there hadn’t been a war, let’s not pretend that you’d have wanted anything different for me than marriage and children. But the difficulty is father, there has been a war, I have done my duty and I want to work.”

He stared out of the window. The lawn was smothered in a thin white frost. He appeared subdued, whether still mourning for John or adjusting to the change in her she wasn’t sure.

He turned back. “Why do you need a job? I don’t understand you. The war is over and everything can go back as it was.”

“I can’t return to the normal routine after all I’ve done and I’m not sure that routine exists any more. I don’t want to be trapped inside this house. If you’re embarrassed about me driving motor cars, don’t worry, I can always find clerical work.”

“Edith, think of the men who will come home. They need work. It’s not right that you take their place.”

“I know and I agree. After what they’ve experienced I won’t stand in their way. They must come first. But you said it yourself, the country has lost many men and we need to build the country now. We cannot wait for the next generation. Indeed, how will we pay for the new one as it grows up? Women have proved they can work as well as men and we should be allowed to. I agree that married women should step down but not women like me.”

She rested against the hard straight-backed chair and glared down the table at him.

“You sound like a suffragette. They’re encouraging women to hang on to their jobs. Have you become one of them?”

“No. I just want to continue with the opportunities that were afforded me during the war.”

Her mother could be heard talking with cook in the hallway.

“It always comes down to what you want. Don’t forget that’s why you ended up in the WAAC in the first place. You wanted to be the great war artist. Well that never happened. You’re fickle and you’re not getting any younger. The few eligible men that are left will be snapped up.”

Soft footsteps hastened towards the dining room. Her mother mustn’t hear any of this but she was damned if her father was going to have the last word.

“That’s not fair. I was serious about my art but since John died I haven’t had the heart for it. I will paint again but in the meantime I want my independence. As you said I may not find a husband and I’m in no hurry to.” She pressed a hand to her chest. “Who will keep me when I’m older? I must pay my own way.”

Her mother walked into the room with a weary smile on her face. “The two of you seem very serious, what can you have been discussing?”

He stood up and pulled out his wife’s chair, making more of a fuss than was necessary. “You’ll be glad to hear that Edith has received her Dispersal Certificate. We were contemplating what she’ll do next.”

“How wonderful and have you decided?”

“She intends to look for work, Muriel. I’ve made my feelings known.” He sat down and poured himself and his wife a cup of tea.

“Excuse me, I must get on.” She snatched up the letter from the Ministry and left the room.

* * *

37 Park Road,
Islington.
N1

QMAAC Camp,
Calais

5th December 1918

Dear Edith,

I miss you terribly, we all do. There it is; I wanted to let you know. But I don't begrudge you being at home. It must be good to be back although it's not in the happiest of circumstances.

We were allowed a brief moment of celebration for the Armistice. A few of us went into Calais where the streets teemed with people. There was an impromptu procession but after that everyone went crazy. The French women handed out wine and kisses in equal measure. Our boys enjoyed it all. Some were still caked in mud and blood but to see them smile and laugh was enough to make even me cry. We were allowed out quite late and in the morning my throat was sore from singing.

Life returned to normal the next day as there's so much work to be done. Thousands of wounded men need transport home. The terrible thing is that although the fighting may be over, hundreds of men die every day.

Not only does the war machine need to be dismantled but the battlefields need to be cleared of ordnance and bodies buried. I spend my days driving officers further and further east as they plan what's to be done. I've seen for myself the devastated landscape at what was the Front. It's another world. Can it ever be the same again? I can't imagine it returned to fields. I shouldn't think any crop could ever grow in that awful place. If it did, surely the plough will continue to drag unspeakable things to the surface for years. But the people here need to be fed and the land will have to be coaxed into life.

I've been as far as Ypres. There's nothing left of it other than the Chief of Police's house and the crumbling stump of the Cloth Hall. Hundreds of refugees are returning after three years. They stand around in the bitter cold and refuse to leave. They live in cellars like animals and are fed by a soup kitchen. The end of the war is a very different matter there, misery of one sort replaced by another. I know it's wrong of me but I was glad to get back to Calais.

I'll spend another Christmas at Camp but it should be a jollier affair. I hope to take leave in the New Year in order to go to Paris. Do write soon and tell me how you are.

I often wonder what you're up to. I'm sure that whatever it is, it's more exciting than being here.

All my love,

Hannah.

* * *

*QMAAC Camp,
Calais.*

*37 Park Road,
Islington.*

N1

10th December 1918

Dear Hannah,

Thank you for your letter. I miss all of you, too. I must admit that I'm quite jealous that you've stayed in France to do such useful work. I received my Dispersal Notice shortly after the 11th and my Discharge Certificate arrived this morning. I was sad at the finality of it.

I wouldn't wish yourself home too quickly. It may not be quite as you imagine it to be. I'm having the devil's own job trying to find work. It doesn't help that I'm ex WAAC. Many people still think badly of us.

My relationship with my father is strained. He had accepted that I was in the WAAC but as soon as the war ended that was it. I'm expected to sit at home and wait to be married off. He asked if I was a suffragette. Me! Well, I can tell you that I am quickly becoming sympathetic to the cause. I hadn't appreciated how much independence I had in the WAAC. We had to follow rules but I earned my own money and was a person in my own right.

I understand that others are in a worse position than me. When I read of those poor refugees in Ypres I was ashamed at how selfish I was, going on and on about employment. But why shouldn't I want to help re-build my own country. I've given it a great deal of thought in recent days. Initially, yes, I wanted my independence but more and more I want to do something useful. No matter how hard I try I cannot find anything. Hopefully the situation will change but I'm not certain that it will.

Have a wonderful Christmas. I'll be thinking of you. You're so lucky to be going to Paris and all those wonderful art galleries. If it hadn't been for the war, I might have gone there to continue my studies.

All my love,

Edith.

Chapter Twenty Seven

December 1918

"I lost one of my trees last month. It's a shame but it's a treat to have a fire." Mrs Nevinson tried to move a log with the poker.

"Let me do that." Edith stood and took over from her. The log fell back with a hiss and golden sparks flew up into the chimney.

"Thank you, dear." Mrs Nevinson sat back down. "From what you've told me today, you've had the same difficulty adjusting to life after the war as most other women."

"My parents, particularly my father, find it difficult to understand but I knew that you would."

"I'm not sure that's a good thing. After your last visit you joined the WAAC. That reminds me, there's a present for you on the table over there."

Edith walked across the luxurious Oriental rug, a geometric mosaic of cadmium red and burnt sienna. On the table lay the sketch that Mrs Nevinson had promised to give to her, of the WAAC tending graves. She picked it up and ran her fingers lightly over the paper.

"I'm glad that at least one positive image of us was published."

"For me it's one of the most poignant pictures of the war. I made no secret of the fact that I didn't approve of your joining the WAAC but my views have changed in recent months. The work that you and your friends have done is commendable. And I may not like it but I have to admit that what women have done at home and overseas has made some difference to the suffrage cause. I wish that war hadn't been the catalyst. I still maintain that it was wrong."

"I think we'll have to agree to differ on that." She shook her head. "We were right to defend France and Belgium and I will not believe that my brother died in vain. They call this the war to end all wars and surely no one who has been through this hell can ever want it to happen again. I may not agree with you as to the legitimacy of this war but I, too, desire a peaceful future."

Mrs Nevinson bowed her head. "I'm sorry about John and I would never want to denigrate his part in the war. You must miss him terribly."

"I can't believe he's gone." She sighed and looked out of the window. Dull white clouds hung low in the sky. "I find it hard to talk of him in the past tense so I tend not to talk about him at all."

She sat back down and held out her hands to the fire. The sweet smell of burning apple wood lingered in the air. "I'm sorry to be gloomy. Tell me all your news. You must be pleased that you finally have the vote."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you but when the bill was passed the war was waging and I felt no joy. It was a hollow victory and it doesn't go far enough." She leaned forward, the firelight reflected in her eyes. "Women should be allowed the vote at the same age as men. It makes me angry to think that most of those women who worked in shipyards, munitions factories and goodness knows where else couldn't vote in last week's election because they were too young."

"I do feel rather overlooked. I may be twenty four but I'm entitled to a vote for risking my life in France. I made sure that mother used hers, though she was a little reluctant at first."

"Good. And it isn't only the vote." Mrs Nevinson moved forward until she was on the edge of her seat. "All trades and professions should be open to women and for equal pay."

The door opened and the charlady, an old woman in an apron, brought in a fresh pot of tea. The nervous Bella must have moved on to pastures new.

"Thousands of women have shown," continued Mrs Nevinson, "that they can take on the most varied and often strenuous jobs and perform them well. What more proof does the Government need? We mustn't go backwards but maintain the momentum. It's difficult to change the landscape. The majority of women are ready to go back to where they were, believing that it's the right course of action. But there are women who want more and we must make sure that they are given the opportunity."

The old woman put the teapot down and left the room without a word.

"I couldn't agree with you more. It's difficult to find work but at least I'm in a position where I can stay at home with my parents. I wonder what will happen to women who aren't as fortunate as me. The thought wouldn't have crossed my mind before the war but I made a number of friends in France who I might not have met in any other circumstances. Bridget and Alice, they need to work in order to feed themselves. I

had a letter from Bridget last week. She's still in France and sends her pay to her mother, who struggles to feed herself and the family. It brought me to tears."

"Oh, Edith, I'm so pleased that you understand. Emmeline and Christabel have changed their colours. They want equality with men but for their own class. Who will speak for the poor amongst us? Of course, it's not only women we need to consider but all the poor. Before the war we made headway in pushing for reform but now it's all in limbo. I'm trying to reignite the flame."

Mrs Nevinson reached down to the low table at the side of her chair and picked up a small maroon book. "Over the years I've written a number of articles for the Westminster Gazette; vignettes of people that I came across when I lived in Whitechapel. Well, I've managed to get them published in a volume. I have to raise consciousness of the work ahead of us in this country and our responsibility to those who have nothing."

"It sounds as if you mean to change the world." She took the book and flicked through it. "Equality for women, helping the poor, promoting peace amongst nations, is there anything that you're not working for?" It was overwhelming how one woman was prepared to work selflessly for what she believed in.

"I suppose it must sound like that." Mrs Nevinson picked up the sleek silver teapot and poured the tea. "A great deal needs to be done. A few of the WFL stood in the election. It would obviously have been a great advantage to get a foothold in the House of Commons. They didn't get in. Pacifists you see, didn't have a chance."

"Didn't you want to stand? I can see you stood up in the House, arguing with the opposition. You'd be magnificent."

"It's kind of you to say so but no I didn't want to stand. I went to help Captain Sitwell with his canvassing in Scarborough and Whitby. He stood as a Squiffite, a follower of the old liberals. He isn't a natural public speaker. I am of course but I'd always refused to canvass before because I didn't have the right to vote. It was wonderful, although we were both getting over influenza."

"Did Captain Sitwell win?" She picked up her tea cup and sat back in the chair.

"He lost by two thousand votes. It was a bitter disappointment."

"At least you tried. I'm not sure that I had the strength to do something like that when I was getting over influenza." She sipped the unsweetened tea.

“My recovery was very much aided by my time at Wood End. The family showed me such lavish hospitality. Osbert took me on long motor drives over the moor to Whitby and the surrounding villages. The bracing air was a great restorative.”

“Perhaps I should have come with you. I still feel breathless at times.”

“You’d have been most welcome. As I get older I find the society of the young to be a tonic. It keeps the heart young but also means that I understand their point of view. Our lives are changing quicker than ever before and it’s the young who are pushing up from behind to build a new world.”

“I’ve never thought of it in that way but I suppose it’s true. The sad part of it is that there are thousands of young men who won’t be alive to help cast the future.”

“The country is in a terrible state and difficult times lay ahead.” Her eyes were solemn. “Richard and Kathleen are expecting their first child and I wonder what the future will be like for him or her. We all have a role to play and that includes you, Edith.”

“I’m very keen to.” She put her cup and saucer down on the table and rested her hands in her lap. “In all honesty, I came here today in the hope that you’d help me to find a way to make a useful contribution. I have no idea what I can do. I have no experience, aside from driving and that won’t make a difference in the grand scheme of things.”

“Aren’t you forgetting that you do have a talent? You’re an artist. Art is a valuable medium. You can breathe life into our emerging society and communicate its new direction.”

“I’m not sure. It’s hardly the same as standing for Parliament or pushing for law reform.”

“You say that but art can reach the masses. Look at Richard. There’s to be a national Hall of Remembrance. It will be a permanent exhibition to celebrate heroism and sacrifice. All very classical, I suppose. Well, you and I both know that’s in great contrast to Richard’s beliefs but he’s accepted a commission to produce one of seventeen large canvasses. He’s called it the *Harvest of Battle* and is clear that it will not glorify war. He’ll probably end up in another row with the censors. But you see, he is able to communicate so much to so many with one canvass. You mustn’t underestimate what you could achieve.”

“I’m surprised that he’s taken the commission. I thought he would have had enough of the war.” She looked at the wall behind Mrs Nevinson. A new lithograph

by Richard had been added since her last visit; angular shards of shaded grey that burst from an exploding grenade.

“It will be his last. As soon as the war ended he informed his agent that he intends to hold a Peace Exhibition next year and he’s already started to prepare for it.”

“It will be interesting to see what he does next, what subjects he covers and what methods he uses. He can’t go back to the world before the war. There’s no place for Futurism any more. And no one wants to think about the last four years. Whatever it is, it will need to be innovative. If anyone can do that, it’s Richard.”

“Yes, that’s right. You said all those months ago that you wanted to be at the forefront of what happens in the world of art. This is your chance.”

“I haven’t wanted to paint since John’s death.” She ran her hand back and forth over the smooth yellow chintz of the chair arm. “A part of me thinks that it’s wrong to do something that I enjoy.”

“You can’t be in mourning for the rest of your life.”

“But what would I paint?”

“Oh Edith.” She laughed. “Go out, experience what’s happening in the world and figure out where you fit in. That’s what we all have to do. Inspiration will come to you. Open your heart and mind.”

Chapter Twenty Eight

January 1919

She stood in front of Augustus John's vast charcoal drawing and scanned it slowly from right to left. A soldier lay on a stretcher, his tunic stripped from him either by the blast of a shell or the men that knelt around him and dressed his wounds. His eyes were open but he was slipping away into unconsciousness. Another soldier looked down on them, his shoulders sagged as though he had decided that there was little point trying to save a man who was lost. A couple of feet away a corpulent officer sat astride a horse. He was too busy giving orders to notice or care about yet another death. Refugees trudged along the road past a battalion taking a brief rest. Old men and women looked at them with expressions of resignation. Allies or Germans, it no longer mattered, the consequences were the same. In the background, black smoke rose from the burning buildings of the village and Christ looked down at them from his crucifix at the crossroads.

"This is what it was like. I could never have described it in words."

The young man that stood next to her spoke to an older couple whom she presumed were his parents. The son sounded eager to show them what was for him an everyday sight. They stared at the drawing, their faces incredulous as they explored every inch of the panorama. Its impact was in no way diminished by the lack of colour but there was no denying that its addition to the life sized figures would make it more powerful. The mother reached out and laid a hand on her son's arm.

Edith looked away and moved on through the gallery. She couldn't expose her parents to this, it would be unfair on them, too painful. They had lost their only son. However much the exhibition was meant to be a memorial, the memories were too fresh.

She walked through the classical octagonal hall and into the next room. Garlands of laurel embellished with gold leaf adorned the white coved ceilings. The paintings on each wall evoked a mixed palette of emotion - fear, pride, sadness, wonder. This was the skilfulness of the artist, the ability not merely to paint a facsimile of what was in front of them but to get under the skin of their subjects and connect them to their audience. Was she able to paint to this standard? There was no doubt. She'd met

the subjects of her sketches and shared their lives. She could imbue each brush stroke with life and dimension.

They were exceptional paintings but their content was unoriginal. The usual subjects of desecrated landscapes, eulogised battles and portraits of the generals were rendered in traditional style. They did not inspire.

She entered a smaller gallery where daylight flooded through the ceiling windows and illuminated Richard Nevinson's aircraft paintings. They had attracted a number of unfavourable reviews and she was keen to see what all the fuss was about. The critics accused him of being too conservative. The irony of it; at the start of the war they had vilified him for being too radical.

She joined the crowd in front of *War in the Air*. The land filled a third of the canvas but it was obscured by cloud. It gave the impression that one had a pilot's eye view of the dogfight. The way in which the great banks of cloud were lit created a wonderful sense of space and movement above a static frontline. The style was conventional and a significant difference from his Futurist approach of previous years. But the subject was innovative in an exhibition dominated by the green, khaki and brown of a war fought mainly on the ground.

Whatever the reviews, he had experimented with a new approach. It was no accident that the viewer was encouraged to believe that they were in the air themselves. Richard had gone to great lengths to achieve it, taking to the skies himself regardless of the risk.

This was where she belonged, surrounded by great works that fed her creativity and on the very subject that meant the most to her: the experience of war. But it wasn't her experience portrayed in the hundreds of paintings, lithographs, prints and sculptures. There were a few bronzes of women in Canadian munitions factories but it wasn't an image that she was able to relate to. As she moved through the rooms she sought out the few works by female artists to see if they redressed the balance. But with the exception of a portrait of Lady Drummond, their work was of men awarded the Victoria Cross, men in French hospitals or men at training camps in England. One would think that women had not existed during the war.

* * *

The hotel lounge had revived its pre-war splendour but the guests appeared ill at ease. A woman in black pecked at her small slice of cake and cast furtive glances at the neighbouring tables. A middle aged man in uniform stared out of the window and flinched each time his companion set their tea cup back on its saucer.

“When we last met, you encouraged me to seek inspiration and make a decision about my future.” Edith flicked out the napkin and laid it across her lap.

Mrs Nevinson smiled. “And have you come to a conclusion?”

“I went to the Canadian War Memorials Exhibition at Burlington House last week and haven’t stopped plotting ever since. I’ve had an idea. Heaven knows how I’ll pull it off but I’ll find a way.”

“Excellent. Go on.” Mrs Nevinson’s eyes sparkled over the rim of the cup as she sipped her tea.

“I felt invisible as I walked round that exhibition. None of the artwork showed what women have done in the last four years. I had to remind myself that I’d been in the army.” She took a delicate hand cut sandwich from the tiered stand. “As we discussed at the time in our letters, the war should be recorded from all angles. Women, like me, worked in France. More than that, French and Belgian women lived and worked right behind the lines. They’re part of the allied experience, they fed and billeted our men but they’re forgotten.”

Mrs Nevinson nodded. “I agree and it’s shameful.”

“I didn’t sketch those women for the sake of it or for want of anything better. I wanted to give those women a voice. I still do. That’s why I’ve decided to have my own exhibition. My visit to Burlington House has provided me with the impetus and although the grief of John’s death overwhelms me at times, I’m ready to move forwards.”

“I’m sure that he’d be thrilled at the idea.”

The string quartet resumed their seats on the raised dais at the far end of the lounge. They whispered to each other, nodded and began to play. Crisp, clean notes cut through the air, countered by a swell in the current of conversation. The man in uniform at the next table relaxed back into his chair and lit a cigarette.

“Yes he would. He told me once that he wanted to come to my first exhibition and tell everybody how proud he was of me. That’s another reason why I want to do this.” She chewed on a small bite of her sandwich and swallowed. “There’s one final reason but I’m not sure what you’ll make of it.”

Mrs Nevinson leaned forwards. "I'm intrigued. What is it?"

"My sketches stress what British women are capable of and therefore strengthen the argument for equality. Those of the French and Belgian women are a reminder of the impact that war can have and therefore the need to build a peaceful future. Both of those are causes that you support and I want to help you."

"If the exhibition were set up along those lines then indeed it would raise awareness. This is very thoughtful of you, Edith."

"There's something more." She sat up straight and took a deep breath. "I want any proceeds that I make to go to you."

Mrs Nevinson reached out across the table and took her hand. "You really don't have to."

"It wasn't long ago that I ate army biscuits and drank terrible coffee. Now I can sit here and have afternoon tea. I'm in a fortunate position."

"I won't say no. All funds are welcome." She let go of Edith's hand and picked up her tea cup. "Tell me, why do you want to exhibit your sketches rather than use them as the basis for paintings?"

"I love the fact that my sketches were for the most part contemporaneous. They're documentary drawings, as close to the truth as I could get them. They may have been done quickly and not with the best materials but there's an element of realism that I couldn't have captured in any other way. That would be lost if I worked on a canvas in the studio. I'm also aware that when I sit at my easel I will begin to experiment. The subject matter is controversial enough without me taking risks and potentially alienating my audience." The string quartet took up a new melody and she tapped her fingers on the table.

"I wish you could see how alive you look when you speak of your work. It's what makes you happy above all else, isn't it?"

"Yes it is. Life in the WAAC seems a long time ago and art has reclaimed my time and thoughts. It's different to when I was at the Slade, when I loved the idea of being an artist but lacked direction. Now I have a clear purpose."

A weak shaft of sunlight crept into the room. Reflections from the silverware danced and played on the white linen tablecloth.

"Edith, this won't be easy. As you quite rightly say, the WAAC sketches may be a little contentious. There's not a great deal of public support at the moment for the employment of women. You will need help from the right people."

“I know what you’re going to say, that I should apply to the Imperial War Museum. I don’t want to do that. I wouldn’t cope very well with yet another rejection from the establishment. And if they were interested they may offer me a commission. I would find that restrictive. It would also be time consuming and I want my exhibition now while there’s still interest in the war and before people put it behind them.”

“I understand that and yes I was going to suggest the museum but not necessarily in terms of a commission. They may be interested in purchasing the work that you’ve already done or advise you on how to progress with your own exhibition.”

“I’m grateful for your thoughts but I’m not sure that the backing will be there.” She folded her napkin and laid it on the table.

Mrs Nevinson poured the last of the tea into her cup without looking up. “Have you ever heard of Lady Priscilla Norman?”

“Vaguely but I can’t remember why. Who is she?”

“At the very start of the war, she went out to France to help run a hospital in Wimereux. She’s on the museum’s Women’s Work Sub-committee.” Mrs Nevinson sat back in her chair. “They were the ones that organised the Whitechapel Gallery exhibition.”

“I was impressed by the breadth of employment that was represented. And it was wonderful to see the WAAC exhibit. Why do you mention her?”

“She happens to be a friend of mine. There’s something else that may have a bearing. She’s the Honorary Treasurer of the Liberal Women’s Suffrage Union and on the committee of the Women’s Liberal Federation. You may find her very sympathetic if you were to explain to her the aim of your exhibition.”

“It does sound promising. Do you think that she would mind if I wrote to her directly?”

“Not at all, my dear.” She shook her head and laughed.

“Then that is what I shall do.”

Chapter Twenty Nine

February - March 1919

*37 Park Road,
Islington.
N1*

*Imperial War Museum,
WWS,
Sydenham Hill,
SE20*

10th February 1919

Dear Miss Howard,

Thank you once again for meeting members of the Women's Work Sub-committee last week. We were very impressed not only by your work but also the way in which you conducted yourself. We felt that your approach was very professional and your knowledge and enthusiasm were apparent.

As you are aware, the focus of the WWS is women's employment in wartime and not the Home Front. We want to record women's work for posterity. I expect that women will not be required to do this type of work again but we must remember their contribution. We are keen to ensure that women's work overseas is also incorporated into our collection. In terms of art, this has proved difficult as the majority of women artists, amateur and professional, have remained in Britain. Indeed, I am so eager to ensure that the work of women's organisations in France is recorded before they disband, that I have offered a commission to the artist John Lavery. Further, Miss Conway and I are to escort the photographer Olive Edis to France and Belgium next month with the same aim in mind. You will be interested to know that this will include the WAAC. However the work, as important as it is, can never capture the war experience. So you see, we are most excited by the fact that you were an eyewitness to events that are gone and never to be repeated.

I am pleased to inform you that the WWS would like to purchase your sketches of the WAAC and agree to loan them to you for exhibition in April. We are not able to purchase your sketches of French and Belgian women. Although we consider these to be extremely interesting in their own right, they do not fulfil the WWS criteria. I do, however, encourage you to exhibit these.

I wish you every success in your forthcoming exhibition. I understand the reasons why you do not wish to apply for a commission from the WWS but we will continue to follow your progress with interest.

Yours Sincerely,

Lady Priscilla Norman.

* * *

Edith stood in the small gallery space. Its walls were solely hers. She looked out of the window at the constant flow of people walking by in the wintry afternoon. They didn't know her secret. To them it was an empty room but she would transform it into a temporary archive of memories and stories.

A sharp tap woke her from her reverie. She opened the door to a young boy whose face was hidden by a woollen muffler.

"Packet for you, miss." He hopped from one foot to the other. "The boss said to tell you they're your posters and he hopes you're happy with 'em."

"Thank you." She placed a coin into his hand, took the packet and shut the door.

She ripped away the brown paper and traced the printed words with a fingertip: *Women at War – An Exhibition of Sketches by Miss Edith Howard*. Beneath it was a bold drawing of a woman in a khaki uniform, sat at an easel. They were as striking as she had imagined and with any luck they would attract a wide audience.

Posters did not make an exhibition. She put them to one side and rolled her sleeves to the elbow, ready to look at the sketches for the first time since they had been framed. She took a hammer and prised the lid off of a crate. The pictures were nestled in a bed of pine scented shavings. She hesitated before reaching in and removing the first one. The pale oak frame was comprised of clean lines and the sketch was within an ivory mount that complemented the colour of the paper. It was perfect; nothing detracted from the image of Bridget at work on her motor vehicle. The moment was captured forever by delicate pencilled lines and preserved behind glass. It was such a long time ago and she couldn't wait to be reunited with her friends.

She leant the frame against the crate and pulled out another. Watercolour had been laid down on a drawing of a group of WAAC, working together as an efficient

chain to empty supplies from a lorry. Their outlines were shapeless and unfeminine. Her eye was drawn to the two central figures, who smiled at each other. It was a pregnant moment that reached beyond the immediate scene, to what the eye could not see.

She spent a contented hour unpacking the pictures before Mrs Nevinson swept into the gallery.

“Goodness, it’s cold in here. I think I’ll keep my coat on.” She held the fur collar to her throat with a gloved hand.

“I hadn’t noticed. I’ve been so absorbed in all the preparations. I realise that this is a considerable responsibility and I want it to be just right. I don’t know how to thank you for finding this place for me.”

“I’ve told you that it’s nothing. There’s no point in having connections if you don’t use them.” Mrs Nevinson tried to bend down to look at a sketch propped against a crate. “These do look wonderful. Have you decided the order in which you’ll hang them?”

“Let me lift it for you.” She held the picture up against the wall. “I’ve planned it meticulously but it may change a little now that I’m here. Do you have a view?”

“Oh goodness me, no. I wouldn’t begin to try and pretend that I have any knowledge of the subject. It’s your exhibition and you should organise it as you see fit.” She stepped back and looked around the room. “Can you manage all this by yourself? It’s a very physical job.”

“I can cope. I don’t mind getting my hands dirty.” She put the frame back down by her feet. “Oh, I must let you see the cards that I’ve had printed to go with each sketch.”

She removed an envelope from one of the crates, pulled out an ivory card and read aloud. “Madeline Bringing in the Harvest, 1917. You see, I’ve used the women’s names wherever possible in order to emphasise that the subjects are individuals.”

Mrs Nevinson took off her gloves and reached for the envelope. She read each card in turn. “I think it’s a wonderful idea.”

“I haven’t told Hannah or the others. I’ve invited them to come to the opening and I hope they’ll be pleased that their names are there for all to see. Hannah will doubtless be embarrassed but Bridget will love it. It’s sad that the others, those in France and Belgium, will never be aware of this. I still think of them. For all I know they aren’t alive.”

“This must bring back many difficult memories.”

“I always wanted the exhibition to be about remembering them but I feel guilty.” She took back the envelope and gripped it in both hands. “It’s as if I’m using them for my own gain.”

“You mustn’t think that way. If you don’t exhibit these sketches you’ll only tell half of the story. As for using them for your own gain, don’t forget that any money that you make from the sales will go to a good cause.”

“But it won’t go to them,” she whispered.

“You can’t help everybody, Edith. I remember a certain person who said I wanted to change the world but I understand that it isn’t possible.”

“I suppose.” She sighed and slipped the envelope into her pocket. “The sketches of the WAAC are a different matter. However difficult life is for many of them when they return home, they have better prospects than Madeline, Marie and the others.”

Mrs Nevinson stepped closer and laid a hand on her arm. “Come along, now. The opening of this exhibition, your exhibition, should be one of the happiest moments of your life.”

“I am happy. But seeing these again has stirred up so many emotions.”

“It isn’t only the women in the sketches that you’re thinking of but also John.” Mrs Nevinson squeezed her arm. “Am I right?”

“It hurts so much. He should be alive not me.” She turned her head and looked out of the window at the passersby. “He was the brave one. He was the one that went out there for the right reasons, to defend the country and protect us. I went out because of my own selfish ambition.”

“It’s ridiculous to suggest that you have less of a right to live than your brother. What’s clear is that you have a duty to ensure that you live the rest of your life as well as you can. As far as I can see, you’ve made a good beginning. It’s very easy in these times to indulge in self pity but you must move forwards.”

“I’ll do the best I can to make a difference.” She waved an arm at the framed sketches stacked against the walls. “It starts with this exhibition. By the end of the week it’ll be ready and I’m determined that it’ll be a success.”

“I’m certain that it will. Now, I shall leave you in peace for today. Don’t stay here too late tonight on your own.” She strode across the gallery and opened the door, pausing to wave before she stepped into the street.

* * *

She hummed to herself as she hung the sketch of the Virgin of Notre Dame de Brebières on the wall. The gallery door opened and she felt a cold breeze against the back of her neck.

“Did you forget something, Mrs Nevinson?” She turned and gasped. Captain Bradshaw closed the door and stood facing her, anger in his eyes.

She wrapped her arms around her body and moved slowly backwards towards the rear of the gallery and the only other exit.

“If you mean the old lady, she’s long gone. I thought that she’d never leave.” He leaned against the door jamb and watched her.

She stood still, unable to look at his face, and stared at his hands. She remembered how he had touched her in that horrible hotel room in Amiens. Acid rose in her throat and her breaths were shallow. “How long have you been outside, spying on me?”

“Long enough to see that you’ve settled back into life in blighty. Congratulations. I haven’t.” His suit hung loose from his shoulders and waist; it was less intimidating than his smart uniform.

She raised her face and stuck out her chin. “How did you know where I was?”

“My brother exhibits in this gallery and was booked in here for the next fortnight. He came home last week spitting feathers because he had been supplanted by some woman. When I heard the name, I knew it must be you.”

“Why did you come? Did your brother send you to complain?”

“No and I have no desire to fight his battles.” He walked across the gallery and stood in front of her. “But I am here to tell you to cancel your little exhibition.”

She stood with her feet apart and hands on her hips. “That will not happen, I can assure you. It’s taken a long time for me to reach this position. No one, especially you, is going to take it away from me.”

“No one’s interested in what women did during the war. And what’s more, you’re showing complete disrespect to the men whose war it was.” He raised his voice and spittle flew from his lips. “It’s men who suffered unimaginable hell. It’s men that were mutilated and who died.”

“What about the suffering of those women who lived right behind the lines?” she shouted. “Is that insignificant? You remember the farmers that I visited. One of them,

Marie, was molested, her innocence was taken away from her, left with a child that will be shunned.”

He narrowed his eyes. “No one asked them to stay on their farm.”

“Do you mean to say that it was their fault, that they brought it on themselves?”

She lowered her voice. “You callous bastard.”

“My God, you’ve changed. You never showed that much spirit when you were under me. I never thought I’d hear such language from your lips. I suppose you picked it up from your WAAC friends.”

“I have never said that word aloud in my life and don’t ever want to again. But I can’t think of a better way to express what I feel about you. And my friends never used such language but of course, you’d be content to believe in our unwarranted bad reputation.”

He picked up a sketch of Hannah and looked at it. “Ah yes, the WAAC. It’s your sketches of them that I don’t want shown.”

“Why?” She snatched the framed sketch from him and held it tightly to her chest. “The men weren’t the only ones out there, we were too. Why shouldn’t our contribution be recognised? I don’t want to detract from the terrible experience of the men but you can’t ignore the women who risked their lives, the ambulance drivers, the WAAC, nurses. A soldier doesn’t see everything and my sketches will illustrate other experiences that complement, not oppose, those of the men. I don’t want this to be a half-painted war. And it’s not as if all men were in the trenches. As I recall, you spent your time in the camp or behind the line.”

He laughed and shook his head. “Let’s not forget that you weren’t doing your bit. You wanted one thing and that was to be a war artist.”

“That may have been true at the beginning but you saw how hard I worked. Whatever my reasons, you cannot deny the patriotism and sheer pluck of all the other women who were in France. There is plenty of interest in what they did and I have the backing of the Imperial War Museum.”

“I’m sure you have. But I am also concerned that people will believe that the army allowed the WAAC to potter around drawing pretty pictures.”

“That hardly matters now. The war is over.”

“This concerns the army’s reputation and my reputation.” He looked away and clenched his fists.

“Ah, that’s what this is all about.” She smiled. “You’re worried that I may tell someone what you tried to do to me.”

He turned back and took a step towards her, his face red. “If anyone who might usually attend one of my brother’s exhibitions and who knows me were to come here, they may make the connection between us. So you see,” he said, waving his arms at the walls, “this can’t happen and I will see to it that it doesn’t. You may be well connected but so am I.”

“You’re thinking of yourself. Have you considered this from my point of view?” She shook her head. “No, of course you haven’t. I don’t want anyone to know what a fool I was.” Her cheeks burned.

He lowered his head. “I thought that you would relish the opportunity to blacken my name. I can’t say I’d blame you.”

“I’d prefer to forget that you exist at all.” She spoke slowly and watched with pleasure as he closed his eyes and shook his head.

“My behaviour was unacceptable,” he whispered. “But after what I had seen and the endless days, the lack of sleep...”

“I’ll take that as an apology but there’s no excuse for what you did. And don’t think that I’ll ever forgive you. This exhibition will go ahead. If you try and stop me, I will speak out about you, however much I don’t want to. I may not be believed but we are both aware of the truth. I’m not afraid of you.”

He opened his eyes. “I see that, now.”

“I’d like you to leave.”

He nodded and began to walk towards the door. “I’ll stay out of your way.”

He stepped out on to the busy street. The sun had gone down and everyone seemed in a hurry to get home. She put down the sketch of Hannah and locked the door behind him. Her hands were shaking but she felt triumphant.

Chapter Thirty

April 1919

On opening night, the gallery was filled with a cacophony of sound and condensation ran down the inside of the windows. The sketches were grouped on opposite walls; charcoal and pencil stark against the white backdrop. The Virgin of Notre Dame de Brebières hung alone on the central wall, uniting the women in the WAAC camps with those of the fields behind the frontline.

A young waitress carried a tray of glasses filled with champagne. Edith followed her through the crowd, enveloped in a haze of heady perfume and cigarette smoke. The older women wore silks, satins and furs that had been the height of fashion before the war. The girls sported short skirts and bobbed hair. Costume jewellery of glass and paste, not diamonds and pearls, adorned their necks.

She approached her parents who stood out of the way in a corner of the room, observing the other guests in silence. Her mother forced a nervous smile and her father tapped his foot on the parquet floor.

"Sorry I haven't spent much time with you tonight but I need to speak to everyone at least once." She analysed their faces. "I hope that you're enjoying yourselves."

"Of course we are, darling but more importantly, are you?" Her mother's brown eyes were full of concern.

"Yes. Most people have been complimentary and a lady wants to purchase a sketch of Madeline. But I need a rest for a few minutes." She lowered her voice. "I feel as if I'm one of the exhibits. Everyone wants to hear more about my time in France. It would seem that I'm a bit of an oddity. They've all known a VAD but never a WAAC."

"I suppose sufficient time has passed for you to be a novelty rather than an embarrassment. It doesn't seem that long ago that your mother and I were shunned." He took a sip of champagne and looked indignantly around the room.

Her mother's face reddened. "Don't drag all that up again Robert. Please let Edith have her evening."

"I was merely pointing out the irony of the situation."

"I'm not sure that I want to be a novelty. I hoped that people might look at my sketches and think in more depth about what life was like for us out there."

Her mother kissed her forehead. "We're very proud of you."

"Is that true father?" Her voice wavered.

He sighed and looked away across the room. "I didn't expect that this would ever happen. I doubted you and I was wrong." He turned back to face her. "Yes I'm proud and I wish that your brother was here to witness what you've achieved."

A hand pressed against her back, warm through the flimsy fabric of her dress. She looked round into the shining eyes of Mrs Nevinson.

"Don't look so serious." Her face was flushed. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your parents?"

"Yes, of course." She held out a hand to them. "Mother, father, this is Mrs Nevinson. Without her, none of this would have been possible."

"Nonsense. I helped here and there but it's your talent that's made this a success."

Her father shook Mrs Nevinson warmly by the hand. "You've been very kind to our daughter. I'm glad that she had someone who believed in her from the beginning."

"I wish that Richard could've come tonight. He's in New York, quite the place to be apparently. He's painting skyscrapers, refers to them as otherworldly. I'm glad that he's gone, even though he's left Kathleen behind who's due to give birth any day now. I've been very worried about him. Our children have lost their youth, haven't they, and we should encourage them to follow their dreams and enjoy their lives."

Her father nodded and gulped down the remainder of the champagne in his glass.

Edith looked across the gallery. Hannah stood alone with her back to the room, examining the sketch of herself at the wheel of a motor car.

"Excuse me. I need to speak to someone that I've been waiting to see all evening. I'll leave you both in the capable hands of Mrs Nevinson."

She made her way across the room and politely excused herself as people tried to talk to her.

"Thank goodness I'm not the only WAAC here tonight." She put a hand to her chest and her heart beat fast.

Hannah turned around. "Edith! I've missed you." She embraced her stiffly and stepped back with her arms by her sides.

"What you think of the exhibition?"

"I didn't realise that there'd be so many sketches of me. I feel quite famous."

"You may be more famous in the near future. The Imperial War Museum has bought them and I hope they'll exhibit them more widely. I'm frustrated that some of

the people here tonight aren't paying them much attention. They seem more interested in the champagne and each other."

"I'm sure that's not the case." Deep lines were etched into the soft skin around her eyes.

"You look tired. Are they working you too hard?"

"It's exhausting and we've made slow progress. The conditions on camp have improved a little but the villages are still in a terrible state. At least we aren't under the constant fear of attack but the sickness that has swept through the place has substituted it with a different kind of fear." She looked around the room. "Anyway, you don't want to hear about all that tonight."

"Oh but I do, though it makes me feel guilty to think of you out there while I'm living in comfort. I hope that some good comes of my exhibition and whatever may follow but it will never be as important as the work that you do."

"As ever you underestimate yourself. I believe that you'll achieve a great deal."

"I'm not sure of that." She blushed and shook her head. "What about you, what will you do?"

Hannah paused and stared into her champagne glass. "I'm on leave and then I go back to France for a few months. After that I'm going to take my chances in Australia."

"Oh, I see. I thought that you'd come home."

"I spent time with some of the Australian men at camp. The way that they talked of their country stirred my soul. I think it's the sense of freedom and those wide open spaces that I most like the sound of. And it's a new country, a place for new beginnings. I refuse to analyse it too closely. It's a gut reaction and I intend to follow it. I can't go back to where and who I was before the war."

"You've clearly made up your mind. I won't pretend that I'm not upset at the thought of you travelling to the other side of the world. But it's your happiness that matters. Just promise that you'll come and spend some time with me before you go. I won't take no for an answer. Perhaps we could meet up with Bridget? I invited her tonight but she wrote back and told me that she wasn't able to come because of her mother." She shrugged her shoulders.

"Yes. She told me a vague story but I'm not sure that it's the truth."

"Is something the matter with her?"

"No, she probably didn't want to come tonight because she'd feel uneasy."

“I didn’t think. I doubt she’s been to an art exhibition in her life. Perhaps the prospect was intimidating. She would likely as not imagine it to be a grander event than it is.” She shook her head. “I should have made an effort to reassure her.”

“That’s not quite what I meant. Bridget has gone back into service. She didn’t want to but there was no other work. Somehow I don’t believe that she’d consider it appropriate to spend an evening with these sorts of people.”

“But that’s ridiculous. She shouldn’t have to feel that way.”

“I’m afraid not everything in this country has been changed by the war. It’s another reason to go to Australia. From what I understand no one questions where you’ve come from. You’re judged on your own merit. Anyway, I’m sure Bridget wouldn’t want you to worry about her. This is your night.”

“I know that’s what she’d say but it upsets me.” She looked at her watch. “I’m supposed to make a speech. I’d better get it out of the way before people start to leave. Wish me luck.” She turned to face the room and clapped her hands, grateful that Hannah remained at her side. She smiled at her parents and Mrs Nevinson before taking a deep breath.

“Please may I have your attention everyone?” The buzz of conversation ebbed away. “I want to thank you all for coming and I’d be grateful if you could bear with me while I say a few words. This evening has been a long time in the making. A couple of years ago, as many of you are aware, I naively decided to go out to France to be a war artist. Of course, I quickly realised that it’s not as easy as all that.” A few of the guests laughed.

“But I wasn’t deterred and I managed it in the only way that I could at the time: I joined the WAAC. In all honesty I was naive. In the following years, I was to learn about myself, friendship and the need to put others first. I also discovered how much strength we can all find in ourselves.” Her throat was dry and she coughed. “I sketched when possible but for a time I put my art to one side, there were greater priorities. But I’ve returned to it once again. I particularly want to thank my parents for their love and support, as well as Mrs Nevinson who encouraged me to follow my heart. I would also like to dedicate this exhibition to the memory of my brother.”

“As you know, the Women’s Work Subcommittee of the Imperial War Museum has purchased a number of the pieces that you see here. It’s important that we remember what women did throughout the war, both at home and overseas. That contribution must surely affect the way that women are viewed as we move forward.

You and I are the fortunate ones but many women and indeed men, find it difficult to adjust to the new world that we find ourselves in. We all have our own personal stories of the war, we've all lost someone or something. But we need to look beyond ourselves and think about what we can do to make a better future. We must work to help those around us and to ensure that such a war can never happen again. I hope that my work has given you cause to reflect on these matters."

Most of the guests applauded but a few smiled politely and continued to talk and drink their champagne.

Postscript

There are approximately one hundred and fifty works by forty nine women artists compared to four and a half thousand works by male artists in the First World War Collection of the Imperial War Museum's art department. Most of the commissioned works amongst these, with the exception of pieces by Anna Airy, were commissioned by the WWS.

Katy Deepwell