

opening extract from

peace weavers

written by

julia jarman

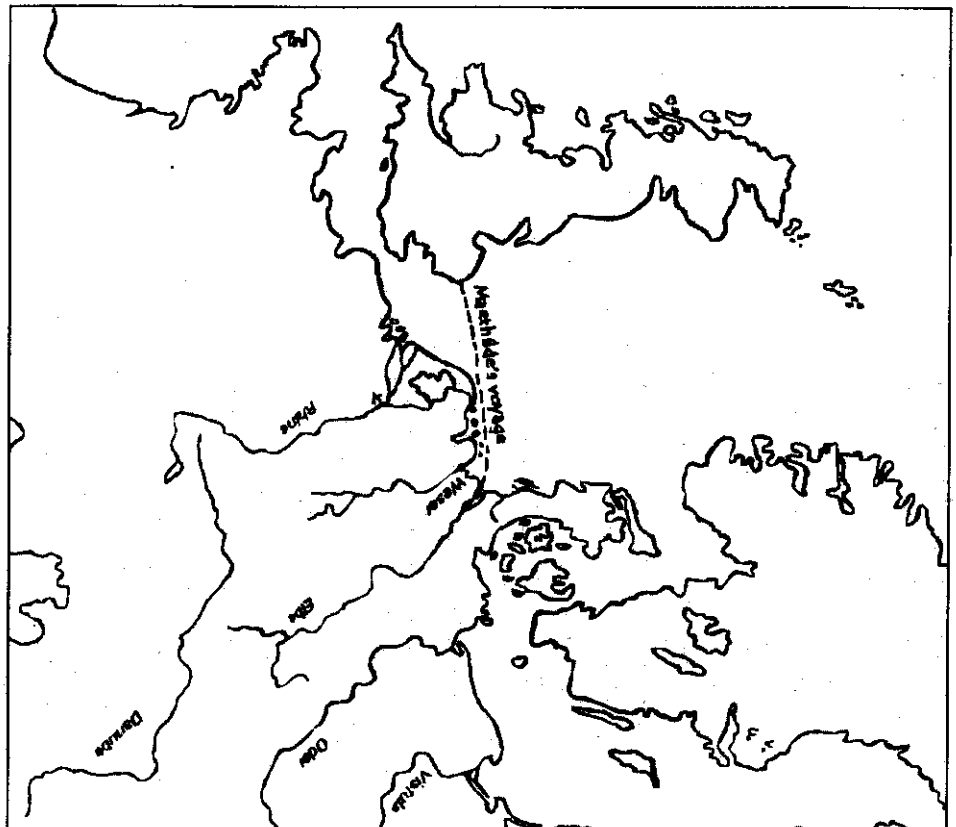
published by scholastic

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

Before Words

My story begins in northern Europe fifteen hundred years ago, when a young woman sailed across the sea to "peace weave" between two warring tribes. She landed in England in what is now Suffolk, where another strand of my story takes place – in the twenty-first century. War is again an issue, for a modern young woman, since the region has become home to a United States Air Force base. In March 2003 planes flew from this base to attack Iraq, provoking a debate – that still goes on – about the legality, the morality and the practical consequences of that war. An archaeological dig, a piece of jewellery and an unusual idea, link the two strands of my story.


Marshall's voyage
Rhine
Weser
Elbe
Oder
Vistula

The girl sat by the fire with the jewellery in her hand. As she looked up at the messenger, flames cast flickering shadows on the wattle walls, and smoke spiralled to the beams above their heads.

"A sleeve clasp you say?' She glanced at her sleeve, which was blue like the sky roof on a summer day, then again at the clasp. There were three gold pieces, each one engraved with a pattern of scrolls. 'But how does it work?'

'It is one of a pair, lady. Sleeve clasps are the latest fashion in the land of my lord. The square pieces join the cuff edges at the wrist. The three-sided brooch is for ornament.'

The brooch was exquisite. Gold inlaid with a single garnet gleamed in the firelight. She had never seen anything so fine.

The messenger took the other clasp to the doorway, where the girl's mother stood by a loom, catching the last of the light. As the woman took the clasp she glanced at her daughter with pride. The red in the braid borders of her dress was the exact colour of the garnets. Had she conjured this moment as she dyed the thread? But now the mother chided herself.

'Be not proud, lady. You did not choose the colour. Wyrd alone weaves the pattern of our lives together, crossing, twisting and breaking the threads as she sees fit. Wyrd chose the colours and shot the shuttle back and forth, just as she carried this messenger across the waves."

The evening sun slanted through the door, lighting the girl's red-gold hair.

"Maethilde, if you keep the clasps, we shall need to unpick the sleeve seams."

"May it please the gods that your daughter keeps them," said the messenger. "They are a pledge of troth and peace between our two peoples."

"Two peoples now," said the mother, "though one before."

She didn't say – before your lord's fathers left this land to fetch food for their kin, and never came back from the island on the other side of the North Sea. Anglia some called it and others Engleland.

"And could be one again," said the messenger, and didn't add – if your weapon-men would stop raiding my lord's lands for food which is not theirs. He didn't ask where the father was now or the sons.

"Engles both, we from the mainland, you from the island, we should be friends not foe," said the mother.

"That is my lord's wish too."

The girl kept quiet, letting her mother weave words with the messenger as the shuttle clicked back and forth.

"Maethilde's father is an Engle, I a Saxon. Our wedding brought peace to our tribes."

"My lord is a New Engle, his wife-man a Mercian. Their wedding brought peace to their tribes."

"A wedding is a weaving, and now your lord..."

"Wishes that your daughter should wed his son – to weave peace between Old Engle and New. He has heard of her word-wisdom and her cheerful heart."

There were more treasures in the casket at Maethilde's feet – rings and brooches and goblets of copper and bronze, and combs of walrus tusk for her hair, but the gold clasps set with

garnets were what won her heart. She had never seen anything so comely and surely there was meaning there for eyes to read? For was not that a face hidden among the curved lines, of a deer hiding in tangled branches?

A deer for my dear?

My hart for your heart?

Was that the message from her would-be husband?

"Who sent my daughter these gifts?"

"My lord, though the clasps she seems to like so well are from Manfried, his son. They are his special gift from him to her."

My lord, Manfried. My lady Maethilde. The girl sounded the words in her head.

The mother said, "He must be a fine young man to choose so sweet a gift."

Manfried and Maethilde.

Maethilde and Manfried. They went well together.

"He made the gift himself, my lady."

The mother raised a brow. "I trust he bears a sword as surely as he bears a goldsmith's file?"

"He lacks no desirable asset, lady – or will not he says – if he may have your daughter's hand."

"A word-weaver too?" The mother turned to her daughter. "Maethilde must have her say. She is fourteen years old, but it is no small thing to leave the hall of her kinsmen and cross the sea to weave peace between our lands."

No small thing indeed, for words could make peace or break it, and in some hearts old hatreds died hard. It would not be

easy living in another hall, finding words to turn loathing to love. But the girl had no doubts. She would weave peace as surely as she would weave the cloth to clothe her family. So she stood up – and up – till her red-gold curls brushed the roof beam. The messenger, tall like all the Engles, had never seen a girl so tall.

"Tell Manfried, I accept his gifts." Her voice was husky but clear. Her eyes, blue as the bluebell woods in springtime, shone as she spoke. "Tell him I will come as Peace Weaver to his hall."

"You will plight your troth before the Earth Mother?" said the mother.

"I will," said the girl, "today, for it is Freya's day and that is good."

Chapter 1

Friday, not the 13th but it felt like it. Hunched in the back of the car, Hilde covered her ears as the jets took off in V formation. Ugly mottled creatures with sweptback wings, farting filth and flames, their engines screaming as they scored the sky with thick black lines.

"Those F-15s heading for the Gulf, Dad?" Tom was in the front being matey with Frank. Dad! Tom's dark hair – like their mum's – flopped forward as he nodded towards the vanishing aircraft. Don't think of Mum.

"Yeah." Frank nodded. "Putting pressure on Saddam the Insane."

Hilde eyed the back of Frank's head. Why was she ginger like him?

Angrily she read the board at the roadside as the stink of kerosene seeped into the car.

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

WHISTON RAF BASE.

PRIVATE PROPERTY.

STRICTLY NO ENTRANCE WITHOUT PRIOR CONSENT.

SHOW IDENTITY AND WAIT FOR CLEARANCE

That's what they'd been doing for ten minutes, waiting to get permission to enter a foreign airbase on British land!

"Sorry, kids." Frank Browne's fingers drummed the dashboard as the barrier ahead rose and fell once more. "Used to drive straight through – before 9/11."

Silence. Tom bowed his head reverentially. Frank looked tense as well he might. If he thought she was going to act lovey-dovey just because he'd started playing daddy, he was very wrong. She noted the razor wire on the perimeter fence, the watchtowers disappearing into the distance, spiking the dreary, flat as a pancake landscape. Home sweet home. More jets took off, blackening the sky, which had been half decent, blue and white as if it were a summer day, not a freezing cold one in January. Now she noticed a cluster of white spheres near the horizon.

"Radomes," said Frank, who must be spying on her in the rear view mirror. "Golf balls, the locals call them. They detect incoming aircraft."

"In case of invasion." Tom nodded sagely.

"No no!" Frank was quick to correct. "Invaders

would be spotted way before they got this far. Those things help guide our own aircraft."

"Haven't we been invaded already?"

Tom glared at her. "You're sounding like Mum, Hild."

"So?"

But she wished he hadn't mentioned their mother. How could she, how could she, a pacifist for heaven's sake, have sent them to live here? With an American father they hardly knew, while she... But best not to think about what she was doing. Dangerously near tears, Hilde focused on a weed thrusting its head through the wire, half expecting a soldier to yell at it to get back inside, but the military were busy up the road checking vehicles. She ought to try and see exactly what they were doing.

"Increased alert. Sorry, kids, since..." But more jets drowned Frank's words.

Hilde guessed what they were. Frank put on a CD and closed his eyes as a soprano screeched – till Tom nudged him a few minutes later. "Moving, Dad."

There was only a white van between them and the barrier now, and two soldiers were moving in on it.

"Are those M16 carbines?" Tom was showing off.

"Think so. Oh no. This is gonna take longer."

Most drivers had been allowed to stay in their cars, but White Van Man was getting out. A heavily armed soldier was taking him to the guardhouse, just outside the barrier, and another was opening the van's tailgates. A black labrador jumped inside.

"Why choose him for a going-over?" Tom wondered aloud.

"Why not?" said Frank. "Anyone of them could be a terrorist."

"Looks like a painter and decorator."

"Could have Semtex in his paint cans."

"And you expect us to live here?" Hilde snapped at Frank's reflection, saw him open his mouth, and think better of it. Good. Then he got out of the car to talk to someone in the truck behind and Tom attacked.

"Why are you so negative? Mum's gone and that's that – without you. Accept it. And she asked Frank to have us – remember? While she went to Scotland to stop the war. Ha ha ha."

If only she were in Scotland.

"At least she's trying to stop a bloody war! And he left, for your information, though you're too young to remember."

"At least Frank's got a house and a decent car."

Maeve – their mum preferred Maeve to Mum – had a caravan and a beaten-up Volvo.

"You care about these things?"

"So do you, hypocrite. You've been longing for a mobile and I didn't hear you turn down Frank's offer to get you one. Living on base is gonna be great. You'd know if you hadn't refused all his invites."

Tom had come back from weekends with Frank full of it. He said living on base was like going to America once you got groundside – as opposed to airside where

munitions were kept. He'd come back with all the jargon too. Shops, no stores, movies – everything was American, even the currency. His mates had been dead impressed with the gear he'd brought back – jeans half the price of British ones and better quality. He'd supplied half the school.

"Frank's OK," he insisted. "Pity about his job – but you ought to like that – and his music, but think positive," he laughed. "We'll get him a headset!"

She didn't answer and he switched to his favourite topic, the brilliant sports facilities on base. And how he'd played American football when he was here, and proved to be good. Was he really as unworried as he seemed? What would he say if he knew where their mum had really gone?

As White Van Man moved onto the base Frank got back into the car and drove up to the barrier. No one had opened the paint cans, she noticed. So much for high security. But she wished she hadn't rowed with Tom. Wished she were more like him in some ways. Wished she didn't care or know so much. It was stressing her out. Now a black soldier in camouflage gear was peering in at Tom, who straightened up. Was he going to salute? On the other side Frank was showing his ID to a white girl soldier who stared into the back at Hilde.

"My two kids," Frank said. "They're coming to live on base."

"They got ID?"

"Not yet."

Frank pulled into the side, and they all piled out and into the guardhouse, where Frank told everyone their business again. Guardhouse. She expected bars, but it was just a reception area with a counter. One wall was covered with cutesie posters with uplifting messages. Another had a huge TV showing American football.

"Look this way," said a pasty-faced boy soldier and flash – their photos were taken, by a tiny camera on the end of what looked like an angle poise lamp. Maeve would have gone mad about invasion of privacy. He hadn't even asked. Seconds later, Pasty Face was handing them ID cards with shots of their faces.

"Excuse me," she managed to say. "You didn't..." But then Tom nudged her, and nodded towards a poster of an eagle flying high. DARE TO SOAR it urged. YOUR ATTITUDE DETERMINES YOUR ALTITUDE IN LIFE.

"So?"

But Tom didn't answer. An officer in airforce blue had just walked in and was talking to Frank. Tom joined them and Frank made introductions.

"Lieutenant-Colonel Karl van Jennions, my son Tom and..." He nodded in her direction. "My daughter, Hilde."

"Hi, Tom. Hi, Hilde. And it's just Karl, OK?" He took off his cap and folded it up. "I'm off duty. Tom, didn't you play American football with my boy Friedman when you were here last? And weren't you pretty good? He'll be real glad to see you. He's trying to

get a team together, doing a bit of coaching in fact, but a lotta American kids are more into soccer now. I'll give him a buzz. What's your address now, Frank? I guess you've changed billet."

Hilde listened as Frank said yes, he'd moved from single to family quarters, but Tom seemed tongue-tied. Hilde guessed why. Hero worship. The officer was everything he admired, tall, dark and good-looking in an obvious sort of way – and he probably dropped bombs on people. And – it was clear from the conversation – he knew Frank as the base librarian. So Tom's little secret was out. He wouldn't be able to pretend his dad was a fighter pilot as he had back at Crosby Upper. He didn't know that she knew that.

Tom recovered when they were on their own again, driving into the residential area. Just like America? Well it wasn't exactly Hollywood, or New York. It looked more like an English council estate in fact, with an out-of-town shopping centre attached. The sight of a McDonalds next to a KFC next to a Pizzahut revived Tom's spirits, but he went into shock again, when they stopped for traffic lights by a motor pool where residents were filling their gas-guzzling cars. But it was the building site next to it which upset him.

"What are they doing? That's where the football field was!"

"Yeah, but don't worry." Frank was reassuring. "There's another field near the Junior High. And that's

not a building site, by the way, not yet, though it's gonna be another accommodation block. But right now it's a dig." He looked to see if Tom had understood. "Those guys in hard hats, they're archaeologists, hoping to find an Anglo-Saxon cemetery. See how they've stripped and levelled the surface. Might even have started digging. Excuse me?" He leaned across Tom. "Yeah. See that trench near the sidewalk? Might be an old grave!"

Hilde watched Tom trying to look interested. Frank sounded like those hairy men in jumpers who got excited about bits of old pot. An old grave – so what? There'd be tons of new ones if the war with Iraq went ahead. If? More planes screamed overhead and she couldn't help thinking about Maeve. The date for war was obviously in someone's diary. Maeve was kidding herself if she thought she and her Quaker friends were going to stop it. Those F-15s carried bombs. She'd sat outside enough airfields herself to know that.

Deep in thought, she didn't notice the lights change. Didn't notice Frank driving on, or that he'd pulled up in front of a house – till she saw his pale face peering into the car through the rear door.

"Hilde honey, we're here." He sounded as if he was in a crummy sit com. "You were miles away. Here, pass me your bag."

"Thanks. I'll carry it myself."

Tom was already halfway up the concrete path of 281B Washington Street, the middle house in a block of three. It was the last in a long line of identical blocks, on

the corner with another street, which looked just the same. Frank said they'd soon get the hang of the layout. It was a grid system and all the roads were named after American presidents.

Hilde followed Tom to the grey front door. Even when it was closed you could hear the whine of aircraft. Outside smelled of kerosene. Inside smelled of fresh paint.

Frank showed them the ground floor – entrance hall, kitchen-diner and lounge, not much bigger than Maeve's caravan, and all very beige. "Just one thing, kids," Frank hesitated at the foot of the stairs. "It's probably best to keep quiet here, about what your mom's doing."

And he thought she was sitting outside a submarine base in Scotland, making her usual protest against war and nuclear weapons.

Hilde carried her bag upstairs. One bag. She hadn't brought much stuff because she didn't intend to stay long. As soon as her best friend Ruthie got back from the school skiing trip, she was going to go and stay with her.

"My own room? Great!" Tom flung open the door with his name and a picture of an American footballer on it. Hers had a nameplate but no picture, because Frank Browne hadn't seen her since she was five, so he'd had no idea what she was like. But, she smiled as she lugged her bag into the bedroom, he was beginning to find out.