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Opening extract from

Whistling in the Dark

Written by

Shirley Hughes

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Walker Books Ltd

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WHISTLING IN THE DARK



A NOVEL BY

Shirley Hughes



WALKER
BOOKS

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On the endpapers of this book is a photograph of a vertical aerial view from 1,800 feet of the waterfront from the Pier Head to the Albert Dock, and of the city east to Derby Square, showing the extensive bomb damage to the commercial centre of Liverpool. The shell of the burnt out customs shed is visible left centre.

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FOREWORD

Like my earlier novel, *Hero on a Bicycle*, this story is set in the Second World War, but in a very different place: a suburb of Liverpool during the terrifying winter of 1940–41, when the city was relentlessly bombarded almost every night by Hitler's Nazi airforce, the Luftwaffe.

I was living there then, aged thirteen, so it was very easy for me to imagine what it was like for Joan, my fictional heroine, her mum, her older sister, Audrey, her brother, Brian, and her younger sister, Judy (who, like all younger sisters, can be a bit of a pain at times!). Their father was lost at sea while serving in the Merchant Navy, and the family are struggling on as best they can.

Wartime, when it was not frightening, could be very boring. There were no holidays – the seaside was covered with barbed wire and gun emplacements. Travel was discouraged unless absolutely necessary, and endless time was spent queuing for food. The rationing system was very fair but restrictive – just enough to keep everyone healthy. Luxuries like sweets were a rarity. Nice clothes and, worst of all, nylon stockings, were almost unobtainable. Except, of course, on the black market, which no patriotic person would have stooped to using.

All troublesome enough, but in *Whistling in the Dark*, everything is further complicated because Joan's mum is being courted by the pompous bore Captain Ronnie Harper Jones. None of the children, except Judy, can stand him. He is stationed locally and never seems to be short of much-coveted luxury food supplies.

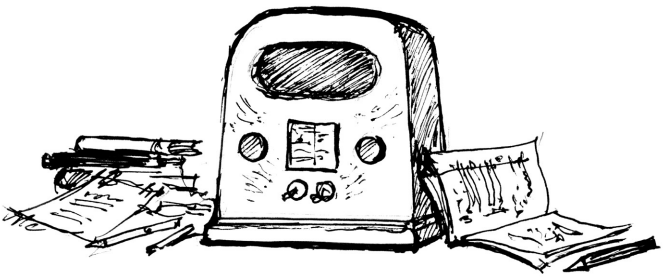
Despite the war and trouble at home, Joan and her friends somehow manage to have a good time, going to the cinema (Blitz-allowing), collecting salvage with a handcart and listening to the radio.

It is into this scene that a mysterious man appears – first seen by Joan as a face at the window.

And a series of events unfold which emanate from Nazi-occupied Europe, where conditions make life in war-torn Britain look like a bed of roses.

But the real heroes of this story are the men of the Merchant Navy, who, like Joan's dad and Audrey's boyfriend, Dai, risked their lives to bring food and vital supplies across the icy U-boat-infested Atlantic Ocean and saved Britain from starvation and defeat. They were poorly paid and ill-armed to retaliate when they were attacked, and their bravery is one of the great heroic achievements of the Second World War.

Shirley Hughes



CHAPTER 1

North-west England, autumn 1940

"There'll always be an England
While there's a country lane,
Wherever there's a cottage small
Beside a field of grain.
There'll—"

Joan Armitage snapped the radio off, bringing Vera Lynn's famous voice to an abrupt stop. That song was definitely *not* one of her favourites. She preferred the big American swing bands like Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw and Glenn Miller, which played really hot dance music. Anyway, it was especially irritating

to hear Vera going on about cottages and fields of grain when there wasn't anything like that here in their suburb, near Liverpool, in north-west England. Now, in wartime, even the beach was full of barbed wire and heavy artillery gun emplacements.

Joan was supposed to be concentrating on her French homework. Mum was always telling her that you couldn't do school work properly with the radio on. But if you were the one who actually had to *do* the work, you knew better. Music lightened the load a bit.

Joan sighed and picked up the grammar book. No one else was home yet, so this was as good a time as any to get on with it. Her big sister, Audrey, was staying the night with her best friend, Pat, and Mum had taken Judy – the most annoying six-year-old on the planet – to a jumble sale in aid of the war effort. Joan's brother, Brian, who had a half hour bicycle ride back from the grammar school, wasn't in yet.

The sitting room at the back of the house was freezing cold, as usual. Mum might light the fire when she came in, but you weren't supposed to have any heating on until evening because coal was in short supply.

It was late in the afternoon, but Joan did not want to close the blackout curtains yet. Instead, she pulled her chair over to the window to catch the last of the daylight. It was very still outside. She could hear the gulls crying as they swooped and wheeled over the miles of shining estuary mud out beyond the golf course. It was a sad, insistent sound, like someone calling and calling and never being answered.

Joan's attention wandered. She found herself looking at her legs. She stuck them out straight in front of her. Clad in grey socks, pulled up to the knee, they looked as discouraging as ever. Audrey had lovely legs, which made Joan rather jealous. It was a huge advantage when you got called up for military service and wore uniform, as Audrey, who was seventeen, soon would be.

Audrey wanted to join the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) because they wore those nifty double-breasted jackets with gold buttons, black stockings and jaunty sailor hats. Brian wanted to go into the Royal Navy too, when he was called up, although that wouldn't be for two more years. Mum, of course, was dead against it. She said the war would be over by then, anyway, but if he had to

go, he should opt for something that offered a safe desk job – ordnance, or something like that.

Their dad had been a sailor – a wireless operator on a Merchant Navy oil tanker – and had travelled to and fro across the Atlantic to Canada and America. "Sparks" everyone had called him. "Sparky by name, sparky by nature," Mum used to say. She had often grumbled about him always coming and going, leaving the hard, boring job of looking after everything at home to her – and she had hated the permanent suitcase in the hall. But Joan could remember how there was always a bit of a party atmosphere when their dad was around. He made them all laugh, gave her rides on his back, and brought presents back for her – often things you couldn't buy in England.

He had been due on leave, and they had all been half expecting him to walk in through the front door on that terrible day when the telegram arrived. It said that the oil tanker he was on had caught fire in the mid-Atlantic and had gone down with all hands lost. The company sent its sincere sympathy.

After that day, Joan had sort of blanked out for quite a while. She could hardly remember anything

about all those relatives dressed in black who turned up and sat in the front room to "pay their respects", whatever that meant. Or the lady none of them liked very much who came to look after them for a bit while Mum was too ill with sadness to manage. There remained only a few sharply defined pictures in Joan's head – such as when she ran out into the back garden, blocking her ears, so that she didn't have to hear the awful muffled gulping noise Mum made when she was crying. The sky then had been flushed with fiery red, menacing and cruel. In Joan's mind, it fused with a picture she had seen on a postcard – a painting of a ship on fire at sea – which had terrified her. It was by an artist called J. M. W. Turner. She had a good memory for paintings that impressed her. They stayed in her head.

If she was being really honest, she didn't miss Dad so much now. He had been like a nice extra in her life, all fun and excitement when he was on leave, but there had usually been a tinge of relief when he set off again and they all settled back into their peacefully humdrum routine. She still thought about him, of course, especially when she was in the front room, where there was the photograph of him

looking handsome in his uniform on the mantelpiece.

Judy, who was only a baby when he was killed, could hardly remember him, and Audrey was good at getting on with her own life. Next to Mum, it was Brian who missed him the most.

It is a pity, Joan thought, *that Mum never wants to talk about Dad*. It was as though it gave her pain whenever his name was mentioned. They all would have liked to talk about things they'd done with him, and what he had been like when he was young, and all that stuff. But as soon as they brought up the subject, Mum's face settled into a sad expression and she fell silent.

All this had been before the war against Hitler had started. Now quite a few local families and girls Joan knew at school had lost a father or brother, killed in action. There was a bond between people who had also suffered that first sickening moment of opening the telegram and the long drawn-out misery that followed as the reality of their loss began to sink in.

The war news since the German occupation of France and the evacuation of the British forces at Dunkirk had been very bad. And then the bombing had begun in earnest. Almost every night when it got

dark, the air-raid siren began its warning wail, telling everyone to take cover.

Mum said that if Britain was ever occupied by the Nazis, they would have to leave their home and everything in it, and try to get to Ireland. In the meantime, they would just have to get on with it, as everybody these days was being urged to do. "Your courage, your cheerfulness, your resolution will bring us victory!" as the slogan on the poster said, although this was easier said than done.

Joan stared hard at her grammar book, stretching her eyes wide in a futile attempt to force herself to concentrate. The light was getting too bad now to see properly. She was just wondering when Mum and Judy would come home so they could have tea when she heard a gentle sound coming from outside, quite close to the window. A faint, low whistle.

Joan sat very still, listening. The hairs on the back of her neck began to prickle. She had that feeling you get when you know someone is watching you. Slowly, Joan turned her head. Over her shoulder, very near to the glass, she saw the dark shape of a man looking in at her.