THE GOOSE ROAD

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ROWENA HOUSE



WALKER
BOOKS

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In remembrance of Private Thomas Clarke, 19th King's Liverpool Regiment, who died near Trone's Wood on the Somme, July 30th, 1916. Also his beautiful niece, Muriel, my mother. Rest in peace.

One

I'm turning hay in the top meadow when I hear the squeak of rusty wheels and look up to see Monsieur Nicolas, the postman, pedalling up the lane. I stiffen, suddenly afraid that I know the reason why he's here.

Please God, let it not be Pascal.

Soft summer sounds surround me now that I'm still. Grasshoppers. Distant birds. The eternal hum of bees. The creaking of the bicycle is like some infernal machine, let loose in the Garden of Eden.

Please God, not my brother Pascal.

I think about that other August day two years ago, when the jangling of church bells shattered the peace of the valley. Pascal and I dropped our pitchforks and ran to the village square just in time to hear the mayor announce, "Men of France! To arms!"

Father left straightaway, but Pascal stayed long enough to

show me how to gather the harvest, how to scythe and how to plough. I was twelve years old and so excited. Now my hands are calloused and my back aches like an old woman's.

Monsieur Nicolas clatters slowly past the orchard, waking the geese. They flap and hiss as they waddle towards the fence. Mother appears at the kitchen door, wiping her hands on her apron. Her back is very straight.

Monsieur Nicolas clambers awkwardly off the saddle and pushes his bicycle up the hill towards our gate. I hold my breath. My legs shake. My vision blurs with tears.

Please God. Not Pascal.

Monsieur Nicolas stops again. He rests his bike against our fence. The geese clamour and shriek as he opens the gate to our yard. Stifling a cry, I pick up my skirts and run.

It's Father, *Mort pour la France* on some distant battlefield. The letter telling us is crushed in Mother's hand. I bow my head and make the sign of the cross, then ask, "Who's the letter from? May I read it?"

She turns hollow eyes on me. "It's from your brother, my angel."

"*Pascal!* Is he safe? Is he well? Oh, Maman, does he say when he's coming home?"

Relief bubbles inside me. I'm torn between laughter and tears. But when I reach out for the letter, Mother's knuckles whiten as she tightens her grip on it.

"Your father is *dead*, Angélique. Have you no feelings at all?"

I hang my head, the pain in her voice cutting through me. For her sake, I try to remember something nice about him. One small thing. But I can't. All I recall are his fists and his belt and his leather razor strop. Pascal got the worst of it, but sometimes late at night I'd hear Mother whimpering as well.

"Well?" she asks, sounding weary now rather than angry.

My gaze remains fixed on the earthen floor and the dust-flecked shaft of sunlight falling across it, while the ticking of the kitchen clock grows louder between us.

Am I wicked, I wonder, a heartless, unforgivable child because I'm not sad he's dead?

I try to squeeze out a tear, but inside my head I can hear the *thwack, thwack, thwack* of his drunken anger, and Pascal's sobs as he rushed up to his room, and Mother's muffled voice through his closed door, hushing him, telling him not to fuss.

"I am sorry," I say at last.

"Are you?"

I give a tiny shrug. "For you, yes."

She sighs, then turns her back on me and takes her apron off.

"See to the animals," she says, "then come in to change. We'll go to Mass this evening."

My mourning dress is stiff and tight, a laced-up hand-me-down. Mother is almost invisible behind her long black

veil. As we walk down the lane to the village through the warm, rosy dusk, I half expect a bat to blunder into her or a fox to stop and sniff the air as we pass.

Outside the church the village widows flock around Mother like crows. There are Madame Villiard and Madame Arnauld, and poor young Madame Besançon, whose husband was just nineteen when both his legs were blown off at Verdun.

Old Madame Malpas draws me aside, wringing her bony hands and crying, "What's to become of you, Angélique? You'll very likely starve! La Mordue will go to rack and ruin without Monsieur Lacroix!"

"Pascal will be home soon," I say. "Maman and I can manage till then."

"Manage, child? When your corn's still in the ground in August?"

"The farm men have been promised leave."

"And you expect the generals to keep their promises?"

She sniffs loudly, then stumps off, calling to Mother, "Madame Lacroix! What terrible news! Tell me, did he suffer?"

My best friend, Béatrice Lamy, hurries over to me.

"That woman!" she says, rolling her eyes. Then she kisses me on both cheeks and hugs me tightly. "This is unbearable, Angie. I can't begin to imagine how you feel."

Guilt prickles me because, just then, I'd been thinking how much I hate wearing black and having to pretend to be sad. I wish I'd told her the truth before, but Mother

always said the beatings would get worse if Father suspected we talked about him behind his back.

And now it's too late. I can't speak ill of the dead, condemn a brave soldier *Mort pour la France*. What would Madame Malpas say?

"I'm fine, Bee," I say. "Really, I am."

She cups my cheek in her hand. "You're so brave, Angie. I'd be in pieces if I'd lost Papa. How did you hear the news?"

I lean forward, hiding a smile, and whisper, "Pascal wrote."

"*Pascal!*"

"Shhh, Bee. Not so loud." I glance around, but the village women are too busy comforting Mother to take any notice of us. "Come on. Let's talk inside."

The cold stone church is empty. We sit in the front pew, the one allotted to the newly bereaved. Béatrice takes both my hands.

"Is Pascal safe?" she asks. "Is he hurt?"

"I don't know. Mother wouldn't let me see his letter."

"Why not?"

"Oh, you know. She's upset."

"Of course. Silly question. I'm sorry."

Her eyes brim again with sympathy.

Quickly I say, "Do you want to hear the good news?"

"*Good* news?" Her eyes widen.

I smile conspiratorially. "The farm belongs to Pascal now – the house, the land. Everything! It's *his*."

"Oh."

"Bee! Don't you see what this means?"

She shakes her head.

"He can get married whenever he wants!"

"Oh!" Her eyes widen further. "But … Papa won't let me. I'm too young."

"Pascal will wait, I know he will. And when you're both ready you'll live with us, and we'll be sisters, a real family. Won't that be wonderful?"

Her eyes shine, then she blushes. "I do love him so much."

We start to hug, but just then the door opens and the village widows seep inside like shadows, a horde of veiled and silent wraiths.

"I should go," Béatrice says.

"No. Please stay."

"But your mother—"

"She won't mind."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

I slip my arm through hers while we wait, each looking up at the brightly painted statue of Saint Joan of Arc, high on her pedestal. She's wearing a full suit of armour, and spearing the devil through his blackened heart.

"I hate that statue," Béatrice whispers.

"I don't know," I reply. "I rather like it."