Cuckoo Summer

JONATHAN TULLOCH



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As always for Shirley and Aidan

Westmorland Sheep Counting Numbers

Yan	1
Tan	2
Tethera	3
Methera	4
Pimp	5
Sethera	6
Lethera	7
Hovera	8
Dovera	9
Dick	10
Yan-a-dick	11
Tan-a-dick	12
Tethera-a-dick	13
Methera-a-dick	14
Bumfit	15
Yan-a-bumfit	16
Tan-a-bumfit	17
Tethera-a-bumfit	18
Methera-a-bumfit	19
Giggot	20

June 1940. Woundale,
the Lake District,
England

YAN . . .



1

It was Sally who found him. She came sprinting back down through the trees to tell me. 'Tommy! Tommy!' she cried. 'You'll never guess what.'

'What?'

'He's in the old oak,' she said breathlessly.

'Who is?'

'Just hanging there. Legs dangling doon.' Sally was an evacuee from Tyneside. She didn't speak like us. Especially when she was excited: 'Tommy man, his parachute's all tangled up in the branches.'

'Parachute?'

'That's what I'm telling you. It's a German airman. He must have jumped oot when that plane went over last night.'

Last night a German plane had flown low over Woundale. The first one we'd heard since the war began. By the roaring din, I'd guessed it was a Heinkel bomber.

I started running towards the tarn.

'Where you going, Tommy?' Sally cried.

'To tell someone,' I said. 'We've got to report him.'

'Divvent,' she called.

I'd known Sally long enough to understand most of her words by now. Divvent meant – don't. Even if I hadn't understood, the tone of her voice would have made me stop.

'Divvent report him,' she repeated. 'Not yet. Come and see him first.'

'But he's an enemy combatant,' I said. 'We have to inform the authorities.'

'Well, that's where you're wrong,' she replied.

'What do you mean?'

'He's neeone's enemy, Tommy. You see, he's dead.'

'How do you know?' I asked.

'I've seen dead ones and I've seen live ones,' Sally said. 'And that German gadgie's not climbing doon from that tree any time soon.'

Gadgie – a man.

'Want to come and see him, Tommy?' Sally asked.

I didn't, but Sally was never frightened of anything, so I followed her up into the woods that grew on the steep side of the dale. Sally was the sort of person you would follow – even when you didn't want to.

'Told you he was dead, didn't I?' she said when we reached the tree. 'Look at his heed hanging like a pit pony's after a double shift. Howay, Tom, come nearer; you cannet see him properly from back there.'

'I'm all right here,' I said, but I shuffled forward.

'Think he snuffed it when he hit the tree?' she whispered. 'Or was he already dead?'

I tried to speak, but my mouth was too dry. I'd never seen a dead person before. I looked up into the tree. All knobbly and gnarled, it was the oldest oak in Woundale. The first thing I saw was the dead man's boots. They were long and black, and reached up to his knees. I couldn't bring myself to look at the rest of him. From somewhere deeper in the wood, the cuckoo began to call.

'We'll still have to report it,' I managed to say. 'We'll have to—'

But Sally wasn't listening. She'd picked up a long branch and was walking towards the dangling airman.

'What you doing, Sal?' I gasped.

'Got to make sure,' she said. 'Got to see for certain he is a goner.'

I began to back away.

'Just a little poke,' I heard her murmur, as she lifted the branch into the tree.

I turned and started to run back down through the woods. I hadn't gone far when I heard Sally shriek. A moment later, she came crashing after me through the trees.

'He's not dead!' she shouted.

2

Hurtling down the steep dale side, we burst out of the woods and sprinted round the tarn to where I lived with my three aunties. My hobnailed boots kicked dust up from the path. Sally's thick, black hair flew out behind her like a galloping horse's tail as she overtook me. She turned and laughed, showing the gap between her two front teeth — the kind of gap that Sally said meant you were born lucky. She shot through the farmyard and was waiting at the door of our whitewashed stone farmhouse when I arrived.

Before I could get in the house though, the door was flung open in our faces, and Mr Scarcross came rushing out. He was carrying his shotgun. 'There's a Nazi on the loose,' he growled.

Auntie Gladys and Auntie Dolly dashed out of the farmhouse behind him. They were wearing their pinnies. It was baking day.

'That German bomber we heard fly over last night,' Auntie Dolly blurted, the thick curls of her ginger hair flecked with flour. 'It crash-landed in town.'

'Came down right in the middle of the churchyard,' Auntie Gladys explained breathlessly, her eyes a brilliant blue behind her round, wire-framed glasses. She was carrying Vi, my two-year-old cousin.

'Postman says there's supposed to be five in the crew,' Auntie Dolly went on.

'But they only found four bodies,' Auntie Gladys added. 'They're saying one of them must have parachuted out.'

'We've only just heard,' said Auntie Dolly, pointing to where the postman could be seen, pushing his bike up the steep road which climbs out of Woundale onto the fells.

I tried to speak, to tell them about the German airman, but they were talking so quickly I couldn't get a word in edgeways. Besides, you weren't allowed to interrupt grown-ups.

'Four of them in their seats,' said Scarcross. 'Burnt to—'

'Not in front of the children, Mr Scarcross,' said Auntie Annie, coming out behind the others.

Mr Scarcross grinned sourly. 'You know what they say, Miss Grisedale. The only good Jerry is a dead Jerry.'

None of us liked Mr Scarcross, but Auntie Annie said we had to get on with him. He was our only neighbour – there were just two farmhouses in Woundale, ours and his, with a few fields and the tarn between. Sally was Mr Scarcross's evacuee. Tall and very thin, his thick grey hair was always slicked back with barber's grease. Sally said it was pig's lard. One of his eyes was made out of glass. He'd lost the real one

in the last war. But you could never tell which was which, because neither eye ever blinked. When he looked at you, it felt like being stared at by a snake.

'They don't know where the missing one is,' Auntie Dolly said. 'But they think he was the navigator.'

'Postman said he might have landed here in Woundale,' continued Auntie Gladys.

'Postman said he might have parachuted into the tarn,' shivered Auntie Dolly.

'Or somewhere in the woods,' added Auntie Gladys.

'Stuff and nonsense,' said Auntie Annie, adjusting the topknot of her brown headscarf that she wore all day, every day, except Sundays. 'He could have come down anywhere for miles around.'

'Well,' snarled Mr Scarcross, tapping his shotgun grimly. 'If he is in Woundale, I'll catch him. Then he'll wish he'd gone down with the others.' He glared at Sally and me. 'What about you two? Not seen anything of him, have you?'

No sooner had I said 'Yes', Sally burst out 'No.'

I looked at her in confusion.

'Well, which is it?' Mr Scarcross demanded. 'Did you see the Jerry or not?'

'Thought we saw someone, didn't we?' said Sally quickly, before I could speak again. 'But it wasn't neeone. Just a deer. Wasn't it, Tommy man? Just a deer hiding in the trees.'

I felt her foot nudging mine. 'Just a deer,' I heard myself say.

'Chuffing hell,' spat Mr Scarcross. 'Bit of a difference between a Nazi and a flippin' deer.'

'We were playing,' Sally explained. 'We weren't looking for nee Nazis.'

'Where were you playing?' Auntie Annie asked, looking closely at me. She had the same blue eyes as my other aunties, but she always seemed to see more.

'By the tarn,' Sally said, just as I was saying, 'In the woods.'

'Ee, God,' said Mr Scarcross. 'Yon lass is such a liar; she'd fib to the devil himself.'

'We were playing in the woods first,' said Sally. 'Then we went by the tarn.'

'Well, I can't stand here blethering all day,' said Mr Scarcross. 'We've a Hun on the run.' He pointed his gun straight at Sally. 'Now, Missy Liar. Never mind playing, you get yourself back and feed my hens. Think I keep an evacuee so she can go larking about whenever she's a mind to?'

'But it's Saturday afternoon,' said Sally.

'Don't backchat me,' Mr Scarcross snapped. 'And once you've fed the hens, you can muck out the byre an' all. Or there'll be no tea for you.' Mr Scarcross's snake eyes turned to my aunties. 'I don't know why you let your Tommy play with that one. She's wilder than a weasel. You wouldn't believe what she gets up to. Any road, I'd best search the dale. Maybe you ladies should lock your doors tonight, just until Fritz the airman's been caught, wherever he is.'

And with that Mr Scarcross strode away along the tarn,

where Silent Simon was waiting. Silent Simon was Mr Scarcross's farm worker.

Sally headed off too. Taking the path round the other side of the tarn towards the Scarcross farm, she was doing that walk of hers that tells the whole world she doesn't care. Head up like a cockerel crowing on a byre roof, arms swinging and feet kicking high — as though she had just scored a penalty for Newcastle United in a cup final. Only I knew that when she walked like this, she felt more like someone who'd just missed one. I hated the fact that she was Mr Scarcross's evacuee, and so did Sally. He made her work all the time, and often kept her short of food. But there was nothing we could do about it. As everyone kept saying, there was a war on — the Germans might invade at any time.

The cuckoo was still calling. Its two-note song echoed from the woods where the airman was hanging by his parachute.

3

'Are you going to tell me what all that was about?' Auntie Annie asked me when Sally had gone.

'We saw a deer,' I replied.

'Tom-Tom deer!' babbled my young cousin Vi, wriggling to be free from Auntie Gladys's arm. Now that Mr Scarcross had gone, she was wasn't frightened any more. I forced myself to smile.

'Not got anything else to say, Tommy?' Auntie Annie said.

Staring at the bow of her headscarf topknot which stuck up like a pair of rabbit ears, I shook my head. Why had Sally wanted to keep the airman a secret? It felt wrong not to tell the truth. I'd never lied to my aunties before. Just as well Mr Scarcross would soon find the airman for himself, and no one would ever know that we'd seen him first.

'Come on then, young Tommy,' said Auntie Annie. 'Our hens need feeding as well.'

'What about the Nazi airman?' Auntie Dolly asked.

'What about him?' Auntie Annie replied.

'Is it safe to be outside?'

'Shouldn't we lock ourselves in until Mr Scarcross catches him?' put in Auntie Gladys.

'Oh, he could be anywhere in Westmorland, Cumberland or Lancashire,' said Auntie Annie. 'Come here a minute, Thomas. You've snagged your woolly.'

I looked at the arm of my pullover. I must have caught it in the trees when I was running from the airman.

'Give it to me tonight,' Auntie Annie said. 'I'll darn it. And I think it's about time I cut your hair as well.' Auntie Annie ruffled my ginger hair. 'Just like our Dolly's,' she said, then added quietly, 'and your dad's too.'

All three of my aunties looked at me sadly. They often looked at me like that — ever since we'd heard my dad was missing in action. His plane had gone down a few weeks ago over Dunkirk.

But there isn't much time to mope on a wartime farm. Auntie Annie thrust the hen feed bucket at me. 'And once you've fed the hens, don't forget to water Mavis,' she said. Mavis was our pig. 'And the tattie patch needs weeding, I've done a good half of it to start you off.'

We worked hard on our farm. Every day was the same. Rise with the sun and do your jobs. Go to school. Come home from school, and do more jobs. Sometimes miss school, to do even more jobs. Go to bed at sunset. Then begin it all again the next day. When Sally had arrived with the evacuation though, life had changed. She'd brought excitement and fun — lots of fun. It had been like spring

arriving after a long winter. We still had to work, but with Sally around there would always be adventures. You just never knew what was going to happen next. And since my dad had been missing in action, Sally was the only one who could make me laugh when I felt sad.

As my aunties and Vi disappeared back into the house, a delicious smell of baking bread wafted out. Not even the arrival of Hitler himself would keep my aunties from the kitchen on baking day.

'Chuck, chuck,' I called, clanking the metal feed bucket.

The hens came clucking over. Usually, you have to feed them carefully so that there's nothing left for the rats. But today as I scattered the potato skins and sprouted corn, I kept one eye on the woods — how long would it take Mr Scarcross to find the airman? Not long. The old oak grew above the footpath through the woods. Would he march him away, or was the airman injured? How would Mr Scarcross get him out of the tree? Would he send me to town to fetch the Home Guard while he guarded the oak?

A small flock of sparrows burst from the eaves of the house and joined the hens pecking for food at my feet. Still watching the woods, I took the empty bucket down to the tarn, close to where the bulrushes grew. It was easier than filling it at the pump. Back in the byre I poured the water into Mavis's trough. Mavis was a saddleback sow. She grunted happily. Lying in the shadows, she was suckling her piglets. It took four buckets to fill Mavis's water trough and I was going

back to the tarn for the second bucket when I heard the cuckoo call again. This time it was much closer. It had flown into the reeds. Only it wasn't the cuckoo — it was Sally.

Sally could imitate all sorts of sounds by whistling through the lucky gap in her teeth: trill like a thrush, hoot like an owl, call like a cuckoo. And I was the only one who could tell it was her. Sally was calling me.

Dropping the bucket, I pushed my way deep into the bulrushes where we'd cleared a space and made one of our dens.

'You took your time, bonny lad,' she said.

'Why did you tell them we hadn't seen him?' I shot back.

'Had to,' she replied. 'Anyway, howay, we haven't got a moment to lose.'

'What do you mean?'

'We've got to gan back to him.'

'Go back to who?'

'The airman.'

I couldn't believe my ears. 'What are you talking about? Mr Scarcross is looking for him.'

'That's what I'm worried aboot, man,' Sally said. 'If Snakecross finds him, he'll shoot him before he has a chance to surrender.'

'No, he won't,' I returned, shocked by her words. 'There are rules for dealing with captured enemy combatants.'

'He has his own rules, Tom.'

'The airman will surrender and Mr Scarcross will have to hand him over as a prisoner of war. Mr Scarcross was in the last war. And he's in the Home Guard. He'll know what you have to do.'

Sally's voice dropped low. 'The only good Jerry is a dead Jerry — that's what he said.'

'Lots of people say that.'

'Aye, but he means it. There's nowt he's not capable of.' All at once, Sally's voice grew small. 'You wouldn't believe the cruel things I've seen him dee, Tommy. And when he came oot of your hoose with his shotgun, I knew exactly what he'd do to the airman if he caught him — same thing that he does to every poor creature he catches in a trap. Well, this time I'm going to stop him.' Her voice rose: 'Howay, we've got to get to that airman before Scarecross. Are you with me, or do you want him to gun doon a defenceless gadgie hanging in a tree?'

'But even if Mr Scarcross does want to shoot him, how can we stop him?' I demanded.

Sally's dark eyes sparked like struck matches. 'I divvent kna. Let's gan and find oot. Are you with me?'

'Yes, I'm with you.'

'Champion.'

With that she burst out of the bulrushes and started running to the woods. And I followed. I always followed Sally.

‘Champion’ was one of my favourite Sally words. It meant that everything was tickety-boo. But I didn’t feel that everything was champion. Perhaps even then I sensed that this was the beginning of an adventure unlike any we’d had before — or would ever know again.