ANGEL OF GRASMERE

FROM DUNKIRK TO THE FELLS

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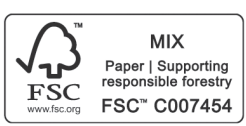
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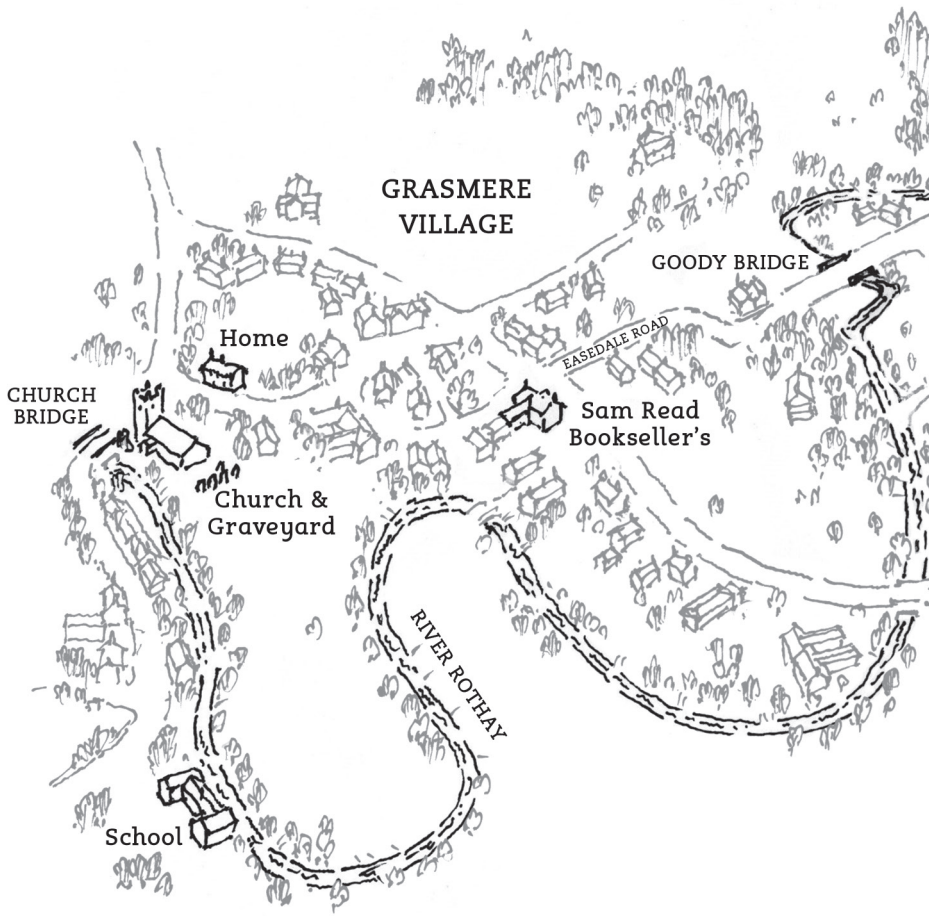


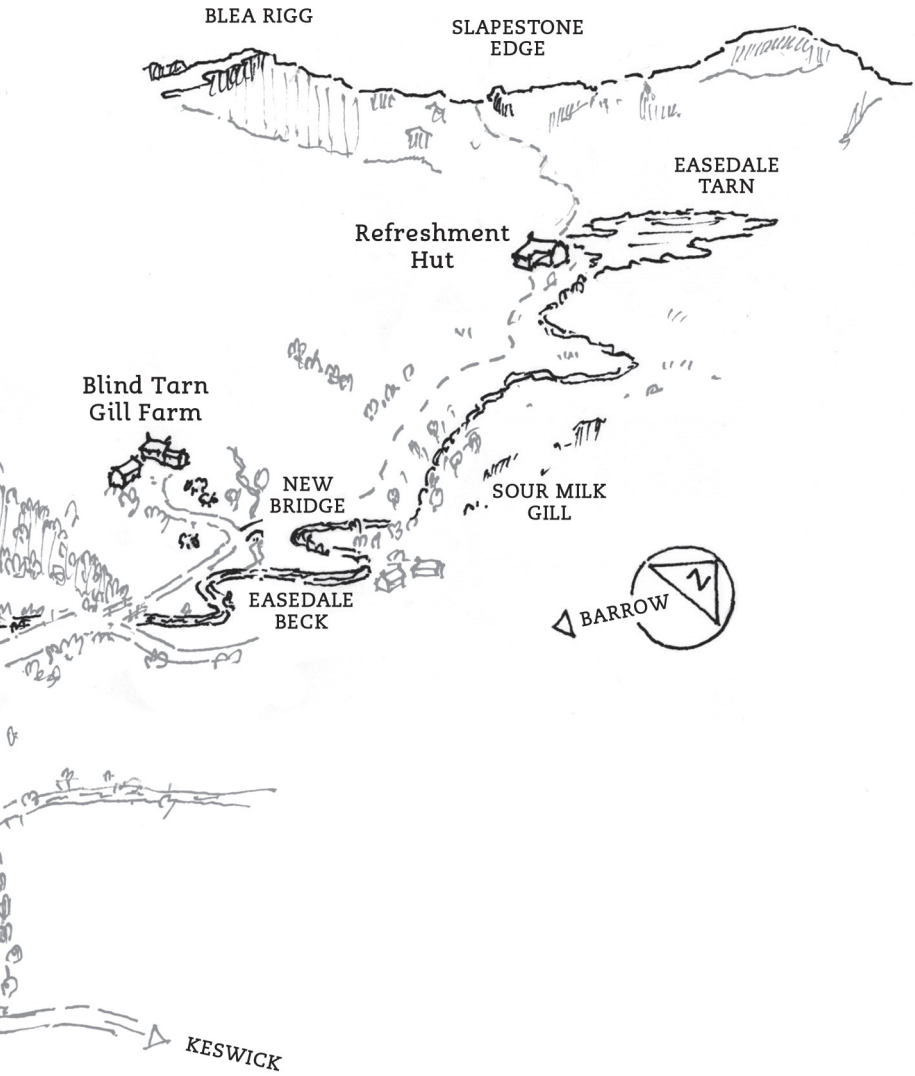
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For Grasmere School and its community,
with thanks

GRASMERE, 1940





Map illustration © James Innerdale



AUGUST
1940



ONE

Tarn Fothergill walked fast up the steep and rocky path that ran along the side of the waterfall. She used her anger to force herself higher and higher, until, gasping for breath, she reached the small lake at the top.

Alone, apart from a single Herdwick sheep with its grey body and white face, Tarn stood glaring at the water, then screamed, “They won’t let me in the CHURCH!”

Her voice skimmed over the surface, then echoed back off the steep side of the fell beyond.

Silence now. No footsteps. No birdsong. No



noises of the harvest being brought in down in the valley below. It seemed as if even the lapping of the water and the breath of the wind had paused.

Tarn looked back to see two figures labouring up the path behind her. She leant against the abandoned stone-built refreshment hut that stood at the top of the climb. Then she turned to face the dark water again.

Water as dark as her mood.

Tarn was angry because, right now, inside St Oswald's Church in Grasmere, a congregation of men were attending a memorial service. A service for her brother Joss, killed in action at Dunkirk. No women or girls were allowed to attend. Just men.

The first telegram from the Army had said that Joss was missing in action. But then one of the men he'd served with wrote to say they believed he was dead. They'd been with him on the deck of the ship



that had rescued them from the advancing German army at Dunkirk. The ship had been hit by a bomb from a diving Stuka aeroplane, and Joss had fallen overboard in the chaos that followed.

One line of the letter stuck in Tarn's mind: *"I am sorry to report that I saw Joss fall into the sea, then go under."*

After waiting for a period of time, the Army sent a second telegram to say that Joss had been confirmed dead.

Overwhelmed by another surge of anger, Tarn dropped into a squat to stare hard at the water, and as she did, she willed it to overflow and pour down the fellside, cascade through Grasmere into the churchyard, then the church. She was so filled with fury she felt like she might just be able to make that happen.

Tarn thought of the framed photograph of



her brother on the fireplace at home. In it, he was clean-shaven and square-jawed, smart in his uniform. His hair and eyes dark like hers, he stared into the camera lens with determination, but also showing the kindness that was the best part of him.

Coming here was her way of mourning him. This was their place.

Tarn was now aware of footsteps beside her. She looked up to see two boys. The first was her best friend, Peter, stocky from a childhood spent working on his dad's farm in the valley below. He was completely at ease among the towering crags and sweeps of mountain scree.

With Peter was Eric. A smaller boy – although most boys her age seemed small to Tarn since she had shot up several inches in the last few months. A new evacuee from Manchester, Eric had light hair and was thin and pale. Gazing around, he seemed



confused, even frightened, by the rocky heights.

Tarn stood and began to walk around the edge of the water. The two boys followed silently, and they were on the other side of the lake before she spoke again.

"None of the men Joss fought with are there to remember him," she complained. "Mum's in the house. I'm up here. Neither of us are at the church. Just Dad and a few other men who didn't know Joss like I do ... like I did."

No reply as a warm wind swept up the side of the fell.

"You could have gone to the service," Tarn said to Peter. "Seeing as you're a boy."

"I wanted to be with you," Peter replied quietly.

Tarn tried to smile, studying the water again as the wind wove patterns across its waves. Then she found herself focusing on the stone refreshment



hut, now on the opposite side of the water to them. Had she seen something? A movement in the rough brown bracken behind the hut? A figure? It could have been that sheep, of course, moving the foliage around. Or the wind doing the same.

Or a man?

There were stories about men hiding up on the fells. Cowards avoiding the war, too afraid to fight. Or German spies watching, sending messages home to Berlin. There were even rumours of men who'd fled to the fells to avoid the Great War in 1914 and had lived there wild ever since, unaware that war had ended over two decades ago.

Tarn sighed. Her imagination was running away with her. It was most likely she'd just seen a sheep.

She looked back out over the tarn – the local name for a small lake that Joss had named her after. Yes, this had been their place. Joss had taught her



to swim here, and on hot summer days they would float, heads back, staring at the clouds.

The water was dark away from the shore, and it had always made Tarn shiver when she thought about what might be down in its depths. Joss had known she was scared, but he had encouraged her to face her fears. He'd told her that Easedale Tarn was bottomless, and that if she could swim out into its centre, tread water and hold her nerve, she could cope with anything the world would throw at her.

But that was before her brother became the first man from Grasmere to enlist to join the British Army, volunteering even before the war broke out and then being sent to France with the British Expeditionary Force. It was before Dunkirk – that famous rescue of the retreating British Army by hundreds of little ships. Before her world stopped turning.

Eric interrupted Tarn's thoughts. "What is this



place? I don't understand. It doesn't make sense to have a lake on top of a mountain."

Sometimes, Eric annoyed Tarn, and at this moment she couldn't be bothered to hide it.

"It's a fell, not a mountain," she snapped. "And it's not a lake; it's a tarn."

The wind dropped, and Peter filled the silence.

"Lakes are normally found at the bottom of valleys, and they're larger," he explained to Eric, in such a kind voice that Tarn felt bad for snapping. "If they're up on the fells, and smaller, we call them tarns. We have different words for lots of things. Streams are becks. Mountains are fells. Waterfalls are forces."

Peter's explanation was interrupted by the drone of an engine sounding louder and louder above them, and, together with Peter and Eric, Tarn followed the flightpath of a lone fighter aircraft moving between



them and Eagle Crag. As she watched it, Tarn thought she heard someone cry out, then noticed a pair of wild ponies scramble up the fell, spooked.

"It's a Hurricane," Peter said, pointing. "One of ours on a training flight from Haverigg or Silloth. Don't worry."

"How can you tell?" Tarn asked.

"There was a whole page of British and German aircraft in the *Westmorland Gazette*. Look." Peter pulled a folded sheet from his pocket. Cut from a newspaper, it showed black silhouette images of aeroplanes. "It's to help us identify them."

Peter went on: "In a few months, maybe weeks, it's possible that the only aircraft we'll see up here will have black crosses on their wings. And the only soldiers we'll see on the fells and on our streets will be wearing swastikas."



When he realised that one of the children had spotted him, the man who had been hiding round the back of the stone refreshment hut scrambled into the network of tunnels he had crafted through the dense fellside bracken. Something he had learned to do while playing there as a child.

He had spent most of the day lower down the valley, watching the harvest. Women, children and men bringing in the sheaves. Everyone helping each other. And for a few minutes, he had relaxed, enjoying the sweet smell of the cut grass wafting up the fellside, the sun on his skin.



But this sense of peace hadn't lasted long. It was replaced quickly by guilt. For not helping with the harvest. For doing nothing.

For being nothing.

Now, back high on the fell, he tentatively put his head up through the bracken. He saw the three children stop suddenly. And even though they were so far away, he noticed that they were pointing.

Then he heard the noise. The roar. Saw the aeroplane. And his legs buckled underneath him, dumping him down into his bracken tunnel on his backside. He felt his knees reflex up to his chest, his arms snap tight around his head. And he heard himself cry out.

The noise of the plane, then the sight of it, had taken him back to France. To war.

Once he was over his initial shock, he scrambled



on all fours, wanting to get away from the stone hut, the only building on the fell. Could that be a bombing target?

Still under cover of the bracken, he pulled a length of wood and what looked like a small shovel from a brown pouch. Attaching the wood as a handle to the shovel to assemble his entrenching tool, he began to hack at the earth, creating a shell scrape – or shallow trench – where he lay, his face pressed into the soil.

He stayed there even after the aeroplane had gone, still listening for the scream of bombs coming down, his hands and arms and legs trembling uncontrollably.

