A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book is not intended to be about a World War. It is, first and foremost, about a group of friends during two or three years in a small piece of England. Here and there, I have changed the true date: the Invicta bombing for instance, happened earlier, the prisoner-of-war camp later. (Sometimes Story asks for a little leeway, so please humour me.)

My dad, Lesley Jones, was a young fireman before and during the Blitz. He didn't talk to us about what awful sights he saw – but firemen rarely do. (An ancient newspaper revealed to me that one Lesley Jones got fined in court for driving an ambulance recklessly. Ooh, Dad! You never told us that!)

Some young firemen were scorned as "call-up dodgers" and were spat at because they did not join the Army nor fly a plane when "better men" were going off to War. The firemen were welcome enough when the bombs began to fall on Britain.

A great many firemen died during the War. Many more – even those who seemed safe – died within a couple of years of retirement because of the amount of smoke and fumes they had breathed in. My father was no exception.

Seeing the pictures of London's final Blitz devastation, it is almost impossible to believe the city could recover its splendour… and yet it did. Only the thousands of dead could not be restored to life and should never be forgotten.

It does seem that, every few years, there is an insane need, by powerful men, to indulge in slaughter. Another century, but here are all the same stirrings. Pieces of peace are shattering yet again.

Who will put it right? Who will ever write a solution to War?

Geraldine McCaughrean

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GERALDINE McCAUGHREAN

UNDER A FIRE-RED SKY



USBORNE

BEFORE THE WAR

Olive

The June sky was so ferociously blue that it had stunned the landscape below it into silence. The air wavered into ripples. In the far corner of the sky – high, high up – a pretty little aeroplane rose and dipped laboriously through the blueness. Lying on the grass, Olive watched it pass overhead. Even then, its engine seemed to be flagging in the heat. She jumped up and waved to the pilot – couldn't see him, of course, but there was bound to be a pilot, so she always waved to planes.

From her hilltop vantage point she watched a child riding a pony and a man walking his dog. A train scattered sparks from under its wheels then disappeared into a tunnel. But it was the distant sound of a clanging bell that sent Olive running down the hill. The crew was "out on a shout". Her father wasn't aboard the fire engine, but Bunny Hare spotted her and waved – even offered her a lift back to Invicta Road.

"Hop in quick. Where's your dad today?" asked Jenkins.

"Dentist," she said. "He got permission. Where you going?"

"I'd rather fight fires than have my teeth fixed," said Bunny.

"Plane down! Crash landing. Near One Tree Hill," called Spring-Heel Jack from the driving seat.

Olive sat between two pairs of boots, her fingers tightly crossed. It wouldn't be; it mustn't be. But, when they arrived, she saw the plane. It looked no bigger than it had in the sky and she knew at once that it was the same one. This time she didn't wave. The figure in the cockpit could not have waved back.

"Don't look, darlin'," called Bunny Hare.

Flames licked at the smashed wings and cockpit, like rabid dogs. Still sitting at the controls, and with flames for hair, the pilot sat perfectly upright. The sight would never leave her. She could no more forget it than forget her name.

"*Get the tail numbers before the tank explodes,*" shouted someone.

"*We need to know where he took off from,*" said another. "*To notify them!*"

"His name's Johnny," said Olive to the empty cab of the fire engine. The engine's hoses were pointing at the plane, but spitting only useless dribbles of water; earlier the crew

had nigh emptied the tanks fighting a grass fire. After a few useless minutes, the men came back to the fire engine and raced it backwards – in case the plane exploded and took them with it. "Anyone think they know him? No?"

The others shook their heads. "He's some mother's son, poor lad."

"No examiner in there with him: he must have known how to fly."

He would always be "Johnny", Olive told herself. That way, she could talk to him and he would continue to exist. People still need names even when they're dead, don't they? Or else they might be forgotten and not get remembered.

Months and months later, "Johnny" was still safe in her head, living an intricate life peopled with all the friends, villains and princes her imagination came up with. No one knew but her. Only "Johnny" would ever know that she had rescued him from non-existence. Perhaps he would even be waiting for her at the gates of Heaven.

At home, she wrote to him in a notebook – cheerfully, telling him interesting news. She intended never to say anything sad.

But, out in the street, people and newspapers were starting to talk about scary things that Olive didn't want to be

true. They had begun talking about war breaking out in other countries, across the sea. The old men in the pub had gone back to talking about *their* war – The Great War – the war to end all wars. They refused to believe that another such war was even possible…and Olive was all in favour of that.

WHEN SCHOOL ENDED

LAWRENCE

Britain was "Preparing for the Worst". Now, in school, the pupils practised sitting under their desks or walking single file to the bomb shelters. Those scary "alien faces" marching across the quad were classmates trying out their gas masks. Some pupils had already been sent away to somewhere safer, in case a war really happened.

Lawrence's parents wanted him to go, too. He told them it would rob him of a good education, and that Invicta School was still open to dozens and dozens of older pupils. That wasn't strictly true, but he had far too much to do to get evacuated.

Then, just as the new term had got underway, Invicta School was suddenly full of men hanging their helmets on the coat hooks in the corridors, their long boots facing the walls. The term was over before it had even begun. Pupils of Invicta were to collect swiftly written reports then go home

and pack, ready to be evacuated. Their school had been handed over to the fire brigade.

Lawrence would have liked to tear up his report.

Lawrence can be rather intense, it said.

His mother asked, "What does it mean?"

"It means he's a pain to teach," said his father, and cracked his newspaper irritably – which was the signal to leave him alone.

Lawrence was indeed *intensely* annoyed at being called "intense". And by his favourite teacher, as well! What did it mean? Would his teacher Miss Conty prefer him *lukewarm? Lackadaisical? Lazy?* If Miss Conty had said, *Lose yourself, Lawrence*, that would have suited him just fine. He could get on with his Project.

The Project was pinned up on ten drawings taped to his bedroom wall. If his days were free of school, he would be able to get on and build it: his secret. His masterpiece of invention. His flying machine. His "aviette".

But, all at once, there *was* no school. To his rage and bewilderment, Invicta School had been given to the Fire Service in readiness for a war that hadn't even begun. Pupils were to evacuate to somewhere "safer than Blackheath". If Lawrence resented his report, he resented far more being

pushed out of his school simply to convenience a bunch of *firemen*. Worst of all was the thought of his invention never getting built at all.

THE WOULD-BE FIREFIGHTER

Franklin

There was a bell on every landing of every house in Trinity Street, where Franklin lived. It summoned the firemen from their houses, to run to the nearby fire station. If their bells rang during the night, every man in the terrace rolled out of bed and ran like blazes, red braces hanging down, leaped their garden walls and ran up the hill. They were local men, all with wives and families, all living in the same street in Enfield.

That bell was a noise fit to wake the dead – but Franklin didn't mind the clamour. At the sound of the bell, he was out of bed and running – well ahead of his father. The garage doors across the front of the station unfolded in zigzags to reveal the waiting engines. Somewhere a fire had broken out. There might be children – pets – old people needing to be rescued. (Soon, there might even be bombing…or so people were saying.) Franklin sprinted right up to the doors.

But no further.

He wasn't allowed to fight fires. He was in school, with more than a year to go before he could apply to join up. Even now, when everyone was saying there might be a war, the Auxiliary Fire Service *wouldn't let him join up*! If his father caught him hanging about the station, he would slap Franklin and tell him to stop making a nuisance of himself – tell him he would never make a fireman in a month of Sundays – tell him it took more than a milksop to fight fires…

So, after seeing the men report for duty, Franklin traipsed back home, still listening to the sound of the engine's bell jangling into the distance. A bright moon showed him the cricket wicket he had chalked on the fire-station wall, so as to practise his bowling.

But Franklin wanted most of all to be on the *other side* of that wall – unreeling hoses or sliding down the silver pole, pulling on boots – to do battle with battalions of flame.

His mother wasn't in bed. "Isn't it bad enough your father risks his life without you wanting to do it, too?" she said. Then she hesitated. Plainly she had been waiting for him to come back before breaking some piece of news he wouldn't want to hear.

"Your father and I are going to evacuate you to the

countryside: keep you safe. Keep you out of trouble. There's lots of children going. No arguments."

Franklin said nothing; it wasn't worth arguing. A distant fire engine was ringing its bell and it felt like a summons to follow his dreams… But what could he do but let himself be transported, like some olde-worlde convict shipped out to Australia for a crime he hadn't committed?

Next day, Franklin scrubbed the cricket wicket off the fire-station wall, so no one else could use it. He left behind the chalk dust and his dashed hopes, to be swept clean away.

THE RUNAWAY

Gremlin

Susan Rowe meant to own a van one day. On her way to the railway station, she had walked through the woods and seen a van leaning against a tree, its back door hanging open. Nothing important to a girl on her way to Elsewhere.

But one day – in the future some time – she *might* own a van. Not in Greenwich, of course. She intended to go somewhere far away from Pops and his horrible girlfriend Lizzy Lala. Her father had often threatened to evacuate Susan to "somewhere they would knock seven bells out of her". But why not catch one of the school-evacuee trains? "Operation Pied Piper", they were calling it. It would be worthwhile just to be anywhere that her father wasn't.

Besides, it would be a laugh, since she didn't even *go* to school these days. (Her father had called school a waste of time, and forbidden her to go any more.)

Now, while lying in the luggage rack on board the train,

she kept thinking of that van and whether she could have fixed it up – made it into a den – even got it moving – learned to drive it! She knew the area. She knew her way around. Why go to a strange place when you can stay on familiar turf? Should she *abandon* the train and let it carry away all trace of "Susan Rowe"? That name weighed her down like a sea anchor, pinning her to rock bottom. From now on, she planned to be "the Gremlin"… But she just couldn't make up her mind about that old van in the wood… Should she stay or should she go?

CHAPTER ONE

PIED PIPERS

The train was in no hurry to set off. Parents on the platform and the children in the carriages had done all the waving they could. All over the country, similar children were being evacuated aboard trains to places that might keep them safer than the big towns. In one particular coach, four older passengers had been fortunate enough to join the evacuation.

"Why must we wear these?" said a twin, holding the tag round her neck.

"So they know who we are," said the other twin.

"I already know who I am! I won't forget. Can I take it off now?"

"No," said her twin.

The person lying in the train's overhead luggage-rack gave a grisly laugh. "It's so when you die, they'll know where to send your bodies back to."

The twins turned a matching shade of pale.

"Don't," said Olive. "They're only little. They don't need scaring. Isn't that right, Lawrence?" She knew the boy opposite from school – recalled him as stand-offish, distinctly posh – but hoped he would back her up.

"Your labels prove you are Very Important Passengers," said Lawrence. "I am honoured to meet you." The twins were delighted.

"We shouldn't be here," said the lad sitting by the carriage door. "This train's meant for the little ones. It's embarrassing. My father bribed the guard to put me on here."

"Funny what money can do," said Lawrence wryly.

"They'll probably throw us off. I wish they would," said Franklin.

"Oh, I'm sure your dad meant well," said Olive. "And there *was* room for a few more passengers. Mother just sent me away because she wanted me to be safe. That's all." (In fact, Olive was bound for somewhere in Wales – somewhere she couldn't pronounce – and she was dreading the strange language and hated the idea of leaving home.)

For some time, children had been being sent hither and yon, to places of safety. But neither Lawrence nor Olive nor Franklin considered themselves "children" any more. Lawrence had business in hand. Olive feared leaving her dad

if there was going to be a war. School had turfed them both out, so they felt entitled to call themselves "adults"… Almost.

Franklin, on the other hand, was willing to go anywhere that had a fire station – and *anywhere* but home.

The Gremlin swung down from the luggage rack, boots narrowly missing ducked heads below. Short and grimy, she put on a cocky grin that showed off yellow teeth. Her clothes were a mixture of too large and too small and were all due a needle and thread to mend them. "Well, I'm going nowhere, folks. Catch me slaving for some farmer, feeding his pigs, digging his fields – sleeping in a barn full of rats…"

The twins look appalled.

"Take no notice," Olive told them. "We're all just going on a holiday."

But the Gremlin *wanted* to be noticed, so she opened the track-side door and jumped down onto the rails.

The twins gasped. Franklin stood up and watched the creature climb onto the far platform, duck under the fence, and run. "Who *is* that clown? Anyone know?" he asked, trying to note which way the Gremlin was heading. He pulled on a lumber-jacket and took his backpack down from the luggage rack.

"I've seen it around," said Lawrence. "Stealing from outside the greengrocer. I think it may be a girl." He rolled up

the notebook he had been sketching in, and tucked it into a briefcase.

"Whatever it is, I think it sleeps in its clothes," said Olive. "It smelled as if it sleeps in its clothes."

There was a murmur of agreement.

"He might not have a mummy or daddy," said a twin, generously.

The open door continued to gape; their eyes couldn't stray from it. Doors banged along the length of the train, and every bang made the passengers flinch. The parents and teachers on the platforms were told to step away.

"Is your mother on the platform, Olive?" said Lawrence sharply. "Should you be waving goodbye?"

"She was still in her dressing gown this morning. Said she didn't like 'goodbyes'. I think she had a hair appointment."

"I have things to do," said Lawrence to himself. "I'm not going either. Not for Miss Conty nor anyone else."

And it was as if almost everyone in the carriage had been swallowing down the same words to keep from saying them.

"I want to not go, as well!" declared a twin.

"We *have* to," said the other. "Daddy said."

"Yes, he's right, you must," said Olive, "but some of us…" And she found she was pulling on her coat, tugging her bag from under the seat.

It simply hadn't occurred to her before that she had an

option – had a choice! Lawrence had known, but then Lawrence Doyle was famous for cleverness; she wasn't in his class, but she knew he was all-round clever. She didn't know the other boy, but he too seemed to know that there *was* a choice.

And what say something happened to her dad when she wasn't there? Firemen…well, they were forever in danger, taking risks. Mother had been *certain* she should send Olive away. But then Mother was *certain* about everything, and didn't *really* know how other people felt: what they were thinking inside. Mother wouldn't know what to do if, say, something happened to Dad… And something *might*! What if a letter came saying: "Your dad has been…" It could happen! Every time he went to work, Olive said a prayer that he would come home safe. Besides…just because there was a war – possibly – maybe – probably – going to happen, why should she have to leave Blackheath? Or home.

Franklin, standing in the open doorway, felt the view like a splash of tears, and kept his back turned. His father had brought him all the way from Enfield to here, just to make sure his son was far enough from home, and westward bound for nowhere.

Some force was dragging them, one by one, off the train. The Gremlin's escape had mesmerized them, and now – like the story-book Pied Piper – it was making them follow. One

by one, they helped each other – down onto the gravel – over the rails – onto the far platform – over the fence, luggage and all.

Then they ran.

The twins waved from the train window as the train moved off.

CHAPTER TWO

UNLIKELY FRIENDS

"What are we *doing*?" said Olive, coming to a stop, resting her hands on her knees. "What are they going to say when we turn up at the door?"

Lawrence shrugged. "Nothing much. I'm guessing there'll be mild annoyance. I'll plunder the larder a bit, I suppose, but Mother has been stockpiling food, so I dare say she'll spare me the odd tin of peaches and a lump of lard."

"Lucky you," said Franklin. "I've gotta get taken on before Dad finds out I got off the train. He'd put me on some other train and send me to Wales or somewhere they don't have Fire Stations."

"How's he going to do that, lad?" said Lawrence, resting a consoling hand on Franklin's shoulder. "You're somewhere in Wales, but 'the paperwork went adrift'. Of course, your mother might like a postcard now and then, with a smudged address on it. But you're a free man now."

"My dad's a fireman," said Olive.

Franklin was thrilled: "He is? Local to here? Where's his station? I'll try anywhere!"

"Invicta Station," said Olive. "It's over that way."

"Invicta! What's it like?"

"School," said Lawrence bitterly. "It still resembles our erstwhile school, except that now it's full of *firemen*."

The strange creature they had been following had disappeared. There was no reason not to go their separate ways. But, somehow, the three stayed together – chiefly because Franklin needed guiding in the direction of Invicta Station, and Olive and Lawrence lived only two streets apart.

The three harboured their thoughts as they walked. It was a long way from the railway station to Blackheath.

Olive was asking her invisible friend "Johnny" (up in Heaven) to put her parents in a good mood when she turned up, back on the doorstep.

Franklin was polishing his lie about being eighteen, for when he reached Invicta.

Lawrence was wondering where he could find a bike chassis, so he could continue work on his Project.

Meanwhile, all around, the trees and parks and church spires and houses of Blackheath watched the sky above. Foxes came out in broad daylight and trotted past, bold as brass. The few dogs still around paused to scent a wrongness,

an invisible fear flowing along the gutters, the strange slowing of time that happens just before a crack of lightning. Shape-shifting smoke floated above the chimney tops.

"Invicta is across there and turn right," said Olive.

Franklin smiled and thanked her…but didn't move. Nerves. Just nerves. "Maybe – when your dad's home – I could ask *him* if he thinks they'll take me."

Olive said, "Mmm."

It was midday but dark, thanks to thick, black clumps of cloud. The distant houses disappeared, one by one. For a little while, they sat in their coats on a damp bench-seat, feeling their way towards liking each other.

"You got somewhere I could sleep?" asked Franklin. "Then I could maybe ask your dad to recommend me. Could I?"

Olive thought of her mother's face if, on top of her daughter reappearing unexpectedly, that daughter had brought home a boy.

"My dad *might* be on duty at Invicta tonight, so you might be able to ask him," she said.

"Right! Yes! Good! I'll go there! To the station! I'll say I'm a friend of yours. It might help. Might it? Must remember. Invicta, Invicta, Invicta… Should I get a haircut before I go there?"

"There's always the Gorilla," said Lawrence with a wry smile.

Olive took up the thought. "Yes! There is! People call him the Gorilla because he shears scalps shorter than shearers shear sheep. I mean, he's a barber. Lives only two doors up from me… Can't imagine anyone going there twice, 'cos he's a brute of a beast when he's cutting hair, hence the name, but…"

A moment later they were lying flat in the grass. Air Raid Precautions Warden Bantum was on his rounds. "You don't want to be lectured by Bossy Bantum," Lawrence whispered. "The man's gloomier than a coal cellar. Perhaps he craves a proper war so that he can win a medal."

There was the sound of a single aircraft high in the sky. Bossy Bantum blew his whistle. There'd been no siren...but an ARP warden like Bossy took his duties seriously. He only stopped blowing his whistle when the plane had crossed the sky and disappeared.

"I'm off to your station," whispered Franklin, regaining his nerve.

"That way. Good luck! Whatever happens, they'll probably give you a bed to sleep on… Shall we three meet up tomorrow – see if you got the job?" said Olive. "Corner of Invicta Road and Charlton Road?"

Lawrence looked startled but, to his own surprise, agreed.

Franklin took it for a marvellous omen – to have two new friends rooting for his career – and set off cheerfully for Invicta Fire Station.

Olive felt outrageously wicked *not* to be indoors, defying regulations *and* Bossy Bantum. It felt grown up, as if she were breaking taboos, doing daring things!

Not far in the distance, there was a flash of white and, half a second later, a sound so loud that it hurt their ears. The two ran, lugging their bags and cursing them for being so heavy. The rain was heavy, too.

Lawrence ran faster and found the shelter of a bus stop.

When she caught up, Olive gasped: "*Has it started? Are they coming?*"

He only laughed. "Who? The Valkyries brandishing bolts of lightning?"

Another roar of thunder spat out another lightning flash. And Olive instantly felt foolish – angry with herself for imagining planes full of bombs were roaring overhead. "Sorry."

"Don't be," said Lawrence. "Shakespeare said it all: '*If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come*'."

"'*The readiness is all*'," said Olive, finishing his quote.

But, inwardly, she knew she wasn't. Ready. Not for war.

Lawrence always felt awkward visiting other people's houses, but courtesy demanded it. When the rain finally stopped, he walked Olive home and watched, from a distance, as she

ducked inside the family's new Anderson shelter. (The street prided itself on having many Andersons – even though, with luck, they would only ever serve as play-dens or garden sheds). He could think of no reason whatever to cower in an Anderson when there was a perfectly pleasant house a few yards away. Andersons weren't exactly pretty.

He heard someone inside say, "What on earth are *you* doing here, girl!"

Olive's mother came to shut the Anderson door and saw, at the corner of the house, a tall dark figure. "Who are you?" she snapped, as if he were trespassing. Lawrence turned and walked away.

Then came all the questions. Why was Olive not in Wales? Had she missed the train on purpose? Why not come straight home from the station? Had "that boy" put her up to it? "Your father paid good money for that train ticket! Good money down the drain…"

Her mother didn't mean any of it; it was just talk. Talking to keep from hearing bad news. She left Olive no time to reply, and Olive was too weary for questions. In the end, she got up and crawled out of the awkward Anderson door.

"And where do you think you're going, young lady?"

"Look at me: I'm very wet. And it's cold in here. I don't

know why you're here. You could have waited until there was a war on. I don't think it's even going to happen. I'm going to get changed and sleep in the house. It's more sensible when there's lightning, isn't it? That's why I'm late. I was sheltering from the storm. I'll explain everything tomorrow."

Olive craved her bed. She needed to fill her head with cheerful things like gold mining and prancing horses and acrobats standing on the wings of planes… Dreams, too… But not war planes. Anything but war.