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opening extract from

# Fire Mask

written by

## Franzeska G. Ewart

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Fire Mask

By

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Barrington Stoke 9-12

Day 1

The Story So Far ...

Hi. I'm Joshua. Josh to my friends, Squirt to my enemies.

Not that I've *got* any friends. Not any more. All I've got is Dexter.

Dexter, and this stupid diary.

Carol-Ann said I should keep the diary. Carol-Ann's a counsellor at the hospital, and she's supposed to be helping me with my problems.

Fat chance.

"Write down anything you like," she told me. "Your thoughts. How you're feeling. What's happening at school. At home. At the hospital. That sort of thing."

No way do I want to keep a diary. *So* not my thing. But I've decided I will. Because writing's easier than talking to Carol-Ann.

*Anything's* easier than talking to Carol-Ann.

So, here's the story so far:

My dad was a soldier, in Iraq. He was really brave. He won a medal, and when the war was over he was going to come home, to a hero's welcome.

I couldn't wait. Neither could Mum, or Gran, or Larry. (My little brother Larry's also known as Larry the Demolition Man. He's six, and hell-bent on destroying our house and everything in it.)

All we wanted was to see Dad again. The "Dad" we missed like anything.

And Dad did come home. But not the way we expected. Two days before he was due to leave Iraq, he stepped on a mine that no one knew was there.

That someone *should* have known was there.

They brought my dad home in an air ambulance, with his face burned and ripped to pieces. He's still in the hospital. They're trying to fix his face. You can't see it though, because it's covered in a white mask. All you can see's his eyes. His pale blue eyes.

No one knows what's going on under that mask. They've done loads of skin grafts, but they can't tell us if they'll work. No one can tell us what Dad's going to look like.

It scares me stupid, thinking about it.

It's funny, though – just writing about Dad and his mask, I've suddenly realised that what bothers me most is the *eyes*.

They're not injured or anything. You can see they're all right. But somehow they're not Dad's eyes any more.

I've got his photo by my bed. The last photo he sent me from Iraq. He's sitting up on a tank, grinning down at the camera.

In that photo, it's not Dad's *lips* that are smiling. It's his *eyes*. They're all crinkled up at the sides, and twinkling. It looks as if *they*'re laughing.

These days, though, Dad's eyes never laugh. They stare up at me, through the holes in his mask, and there's no light in them. No life.

When we go to visit Dad, I can hardly say anything to him. My mind just goes blank. It's easier not to speak, anyway. In case he notices how upset I am.

I *am* upset. But I'm angry too. *Raging*.

Because it shouldn't have happened. Not to my dad. Not to anyone.

"Don't bottle it up, Josh," Carol-Ann keeps saying. "*Talk* about it."

That's easy enough for her to say. *She* hasn't tried talking to Mum or Gran.

Mum keeps saying she's "worried sick". She goes on and on about it, as if we don't already know. She's on tablets from the doctor, and most nights she and Gran sit in front of the TV, smoking cigarettes and drinking vodka.

And Gran knits. Terrible jumpers that I'm supposed to wear. Jumpers that don't fit, and reek of smoke.

As for Larry the Demolition Man, there's no way on God's earth I can talk to *him*. I can hardly get him to sit still long enough to force his dinner down him. All he wants to do is find things to rip, and smash, and tear, and all *I* seem to do is try and stop him.

Sometimes, mind you, I wish he'd put his foot through the TV.

There's no one at school I can talk to either. I haven't even told Sandy, and she's my best friend.

*Was* my best friend.

I'm scared to tell anyone. I'm the joker, see? Squirt, the joker. Squirt, the good laugh.

If I tried to tell, I might start crying. And there is no way I'm letting anyone see me cry.

Of course, I can always talk to Dexter. Not that “Sit, boy!” and “Walkies!” is *that* great a conversation, but he always sticks his wee tongue out, and wags his wee tail, which is Dexter’s way of cheering you up.

OK. That’s enough for today. I’m going to bed now . . .

I wouldn’t admit this to Carol-Ann, but I’m feeling a bit better about keeping the diary now. Maybe it’s not so bad. Maybe it helps. Makes things clearer.

Maybe that’s because I’m telling my life like a story. As if it was happening to someone else. Which is a w-h-o-l-e lot better than it happening to *me*.