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A World Between Us

Written by

Lydia Syson

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A WORLD BETWEEN US

LYDIA SYSON

HOT KEY BOOKS

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Heart of the heartless world,
Dear heart, the thought of you
Is the pain at my side,
The shadow that chills my view.

The wind rises in the evening,
Reminds that autumn is near.
I am afraid to lose you,
I am afraid of my fear.

On the last mile to Huesca,
The last fence for our pride,
Think so kindly, dear, that I
Sense you at my side.

And if bad luck should lay my strength
Into the shallow grave,
Remember all the good you can;
Don't forget my love.

'To Margot Heinemann'
John Cornford 1915–1936

Her fever lifts and Felix finds herself in an open truck. A swaying muddle of people; no one she knows. There are soldiers with trench beards and filthy bandages, and civilians too. She is crammed between an old woman with emaciated fingers which feel like ice against her arm, and a mother with a baby who cries and cries.

She hasn't felt so alone since she came to Spain. From where she sits, knees to her chin, hard metal bars at her back, she can't see the driver, but she knows it can't be George. If only. What wouldn't she give to surrender herself to him now.

Over the church bells' urgent ringing comes the roar of engines up above. Nuestras? *Are they ours?*

Felix squints into the sun, and the light knifes her eyes. The planes are diving towards them, then levelling out, and there's no sign of Republican red on their wingtips. These are German fighters. You can almost see the airmen's faces – goggles over guns. The truck brakes, screeching, and the people pour out. Felix reaches a ditch by instinct, rolls up like a foetus, bracing herself. The planes swoop back over and over and don't stop firing. A few feet away someone has lost control of their bowels. The smell is slightly sweet and acrid and familiar.

The silence after the planes have gone is worse than the noise. Felix thinks again of the silence in the snow. It only took one shot. And then there was nothing Nat could say or do to make things better. But how could she have left without meeting his eyes? Why had she denied herself a last look at his face?

Felix watches the others – the old woman, and the mother with

the child in her shawl – as they move back towards the truck. The baby is quiet now, because he is dead. Felix watches and can't speak. Her mouth is dry. She is burning up.

SPANISH CIVIL WAR
OCTOBER 1936
N
BILBAO
MADRID
BARCELONA
VALENCIA
GRANADA
MÁLAGA
SPANISH
MOROCCO
NATIONALIST
ADVANCE

OCTOBER 1936

LONDON

1

Crowds had never bothered Felix before, so she was surprised to find herself shaking. She really shouldn't have come this way, not when the Fascists were marching. She realised that now. Stuck in the thick of the protest, she wasn't even sure why she'd persisted. Curiosity, perhaps, or something about the singing. Or just her stubborn streak. Anyway, it was far too late to turn back. She'd never get through all these people.

The closer she came to the police line, the louder the chanting grew.

'One . . . two . . . three, four, five. We want Mosley, dead or alive!'

A new cry went up, less familiar.

'No pasarán! No pasarán! No pasarán!'

'Excuse me. Excuse me.' Nobody could hear her through this racket. All she could smell was overcoats and sweat. Unease turned to fear, and she began to struggle for air. A battered homburg and then a bald head shifted, giving Felix another breathless glimpse of the row of helmets ahead. Not far now. Such a relief. She could explain to the police. *I'm not meant to be here. My tram, you see . . . I was just trying. The station . . .* They'd let her through, wouldn't they? She didn't exactly look like a demonstrator, not in her uniform. Everyone loves a nurse.

She stuck out her elbows and pushed. A few steps further

and she saw the policemen's faces. Set and grim, they might have been rounding up wild animals, not protecting people. Behind the line, a mounted policeman made a show of holding his nose, acting out his disgust at the stink of the East End. No point in trying to catch *his* eye.

And then the wall of police officers parted, and Felix knew she'd made a terrible mistake. The horses were coming straight at them. They weren't going to stop. The police hadn't come to defend the crowds from the Fascists. They were clearing a path so the Blackshirts could march.

Felix tried to turn and run, but lost her footing at once. Hurtling into a stranger, she was rammed against three more. Everyone was falling over each other in their efforts to get away, but there was nowhere to go. Hooves thundered on cobbles. Batons slashed through the air. Her head filled with screaming, and the icy smash of plate-glass windows shattering, and loud Yiddish curses, and the high-pitched keening of a weeping woman.

Felix glanced back to see a huge brown horse skittering towards her, skidding and sliding on marbles thrown in its path. Foam from its muzzle hit her face, and then she felt a shove in her back, pushing her away from the animal's iron shoes and rolling white eye.

The truncheon came down like a sledgehammer. The horse ploughed on and Felix saw a dark-haired young man stumble back, dazed. He clutched his head and blood flowered from beneath his hands.

'Nurse! Nurse! Help him. Quick.'

People started pushing her towards him. *They think I'm a first aid post*. She wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. He saw Felix's uniform, looked her straight in the eye and grinned.

'Hello, nurse. Will I live?' he yelled. Then his knees gave way, and he collapsed against her, and she staggered, held up only by the crowds behind.

'You're all right, love, I'll give you a hand.' An Irishman, built like a bull, stuck his head under the boy's shoulder. 'Get him out the way before they charge again.'

She gulped back a sour taste, and nodded, and they pushed back through the crowd together. Missiles kept flying overhead – saucepans, bottles, rotten vegetables, God knows what. It was like a tide on the turn, with banners and placards dipping and rearing. There were all sorts here, not just East Enders. Even the side streets were packed with protestors. Most gave way to her uniform though. By the time they found an empty doorway, the young man was walking without support, though Felix couldn't quite stop trembling. With a clenched fist salute, the Irishman left.

They were on their own. After a fashion. Something inside her hammered so hard that Felix thought it must show. She swallowed, and got her brisk voice working.

'Let's get you sitting down.'

He was very pale now, grey and obedient. He looked up at her, eyes expectant, trusting. She wondered if she could get him inside somehow, somewhere clean and safe, but this shop front was boarded up like all the others. You could just make out some old graffiti: *Kill the Jews*. It was covered over now with another whitewashed slogan. *No Pasarán! They shall not pass!*

Felix sat on the doorstep next to him.

'Put your head between your knees. That's right.' Now she could get a better look at the wound. She began to clean it up with her hanky. 'It's not too bad. Is it throbbing?'

'Bit.' She dipped down to catch his reply and their hair touched.

'You have to be careful with head injuries,' she said. *Keep calm. Do what you'd normally do. This is what you're good at.* 'They make a lot of fuss. Lots of blood. But it's what you can't see that's the problem. You may be concussed. What's your name?'

He rolled his eyes vacantly, then smiled at her frown. 'I get it. Don't worry. I'm all here. Nat Kaplan's my name. Mr Stanley Baldwin is our Prime Minister, God help us, and it's October 4th 1936.'

The loudspeakers of a slowly moving van began to blare out a message.

'What are they saying?' Nat screwed up his eyes as if it would help him hear, while he peered through the forest of moving legs. 'Not sure. Hang on. Wait. Cable Street! Mosley's going to Cable Street.'

There was a surge towards the docks, and the singing started up again.

Arise, ye starvelings from your slumbers . . .

It is just like a hymn, thought Felix.

All at once Nat pulled her to her feet, and began to bellow out the words. His singing voice was very deep. He stood so close she could feel it vibrating through her.

And the last fight let us face.

The Internationale unites the human race.

There was something about the tune, and the words, and the way everyone sang them together: Felix felt herself brimming over and light-headed. It was like nothing she'd ever known before.

'Let's see if we can make it to Cable Street. They might need help there,' said Nat, and before she could answer he had stepped out of the doorway. She followed without thinking and they were both swept right back into the current of people.

'Hold on to me,' he shouted, sticking out his elbow for her, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. 'You'll be all right.'

This time she was. It was the same crowd, but it felt completely different now. Felix didn't mind the jostling any more, or the press of bodies against hers. The force was just as determined, but no longer threatening. She was breathless again, but not afraid. They weren't really getting anywhere though. She couldn't see how they could hope to get across Whitechapel Road.

'Best stick where we are, eh?' Nat grinned at her. And then he said it again, closer to her ear, so she could hear properly this time.

'Don't think we've got a choice.' Felix smiled back, absorbing the warmth of his breath and worrying about his wound. At least the bleeding had definitely stopped. This wasn't very responsible nursing, but she didn't have much of a choice about that either. Singing and chanting, the two of them held their position with the others. Until the news finally erupted, shouted from voice to voice.

'He's called them off! The Blackshirts have given up! We've won!'

Felix looked at Nat, and saw the excitement in his eyes. He picked her up without a thought and whirled her round, while her cape flew out like a matador's, flashing its red lining. Suddenly there was space. They could all breathe again. Fists punched the air, and hats went flying. In the explosion of back-slapping, she was enveloped by stranger after stranger, passed from embrace to embrace. Felix finally careened away from the immense bosom of an old lady whose black shawl reeked of pickled herring, and turned to laugh with Nat.

He's gone, she realised instantly, her laughter freezing. In all

this giddy rapture, he had vanished. With mounting panic, Felix ducked under the joined hands of a line of young men. They were all singing loudly, and made a move to encircle her, but she darted away in time. Weaving in and out of the crowd, looking out for Nat's face, she kept imagining the relief of finding him. She had to find him. Surely she would see him, any moment now, and he would smile at her again.

But it was hopeless. There were so many people still milling around, and it was getting so late. Oh, what was she thinking? She knew she'd pushed her luck already, and she had quite a walk ahead of her still. Well, that was that then. She had to be sensible about it. Just one of those things. Heading for the station, Felix braced herself for her monthly visit home. Disappointment settled in her stomach.

The sun was beginning to go, but there was a lingering street party feel in the air. Happy groups kept stumbling by, half-drunk with the wonder of it all. Snatches of song and coal smoke and the noise of traffic starting up again. Felix saw a father walking with his arm round his son's shoulders and imagined him telling the boy how they had just saved the East End from the Fascists.

The crowds were thinning when she felt Nat's hand on her arm again.

'Don't go yet. We never said goodbye,' he said. 'I thought I'd lost you.'

Felix tried to keep her smile under control, and felt dizzy with the effort. It wasn't a problem she was used to.

'I thought . . .' she began to say, not knowing how to finish. 'I'm glad you found me.'

'Me too. I might not get a chance to see you again.'

'Look . . . there's a café I know, just by the station,' Felix said quickly. She didn't have a chance to wonder what he had meant. She just knew she couldn't let him go again, not right

away. She couldn't quite believe her own daring. 'Do you have time for a coffee or something?'

Nat smiled again, and took her arm to cross the road.

'I reckon I've got time.'

2

While he held the café door open for her, she ducked under his arm, and his elbow knocked her starched cap askew again. He looked down at her. Felix was already looking up at him, and noticing more and more. A jacket that was old but well-cut. Blood on his collar. The length of his eyelashes. Their gazes were afraid to hold each other for long.

There was an empty booth near the counter, so they squeezed along the benches opposite each other, knees briefly touching under the white marble table. The windows were clouded with steam from the huge urn.

'Thought I was about to be arrested back there. Just before I got clobbered. That would have scuppered everything. A mate from the YCL's in prison right now. Wormwood Scrubs. Four months. He was heckling at a Fascist meeting in Victoria Park. The police carted him off to the station and planted a brick in his pocket. That I didn't need.'

C*riminal elements.* Felix heard her brother's voice in her head.

'The YCL?' She knew she ought to know.

'Young Communist League. Stepney branch.' As if it was obvious.

'Oh.'

'Don't look like that. It's not what you think. You should

come to our meetings. They're dead lively, very mixed, you know. And plenty of girls come.'

As Nat talked, a dart of jealousy surprised Felix and she lost concentration for a moment. She imagined him at the centre of a crowd of girls. In a hall? A bar?

'It's changed my life really. I can see everything more clearly now. It gives you hope, doesn't it? When you realise how things could be so much better, so much fairer? And that you can do something about it.'

'I suppose it must.' *Life isn't fair*, thought Felix. But she'd never met anyone before who thought you could change the fact.

And then he just blurted it out. 'That's why I'm going to Spain.'

The word 'Spain' came out as a croak, so he repeated it quickly, with too much emphasis.

'Spain?' said Felix, uselessly.

He nodded.

'To fight. *No pasarán*. You know,' he said. And watched for a reaction.

'Spain. That's . . .' She fumbled with her thoughts. 'That's brave. Very brave.'

'You're not going to try and talk me out of going?'

'Should I?' she said, wishing she knew more. *Is that what he wants me to do?*

Spain always seemed so far away. She had never really thought about its civil war till she saw the banners today. 'Surely you're not going right now, are you?'

'A few weeks, I reckon. But nobody knows yet . . . Not even my sister. It's best that way. Believe me, my parents would kill me if they knew.' He laughed and shook his head and Felix found herself laughing too, though she wanted to

cry. 'I don't even know why I'm telling you. I just wanted you to know. Because if I wasn't going, I'd want to see you again. I really would. I can tell you that for nothing. I knew it right away.'

Felix thanked God she wasn't the blushing type.

'You really are feeling better?' she asked. 'Sometimes a blow to the head can—'

'Yes, yes, don't worry. I am in my right mind, honest I am. Never felt clearer about anything, in fact.' He shook his head. He started his speech. It was as if he had to tell someone. 'The thing is I've had it with demonstrations and petitions and collecting tins. I've done what I can but it's not enough, not any more. You can see it coming, all over Europe . . . it'll be here too before you know it.'

Nat's voice was low and urgent and he rocked slightly as he spoke. It frightened and fascinated Felix.

'Germany and Italy do what they like,' he went on. 'But when the Spanish government turns to us for help, what do we do? Oh dear! Oh no!' (He affected a posh accent.) 'We can't possibly sell arms to the wicked Reds. Not in our interests to encourage the Bolshies, is it?' That's what our government really thinks about democracy.'

She had never had a conversation like this before. She thought about what she'd seen today.

'It makes me sick.' Nat's voice began to shake. 'And now the Fascists in Spain are nearly at Madrid. But the bastards would be nowhere without Hitler and Mussolini. Anyone can see that!'

Felix was hypnotised by the gleam in his eyes and the tension in his throat. She looked at his white shirt, undone at the neck, and showing a fragile glimpse of hair. She thought about the hands that would scrub at the bloodstained collar, and iron it crisp again.

I must learn this face, before it's too late, she thought. *Learn it by heart*.

Heavy eyebrows sloped in a way that gave a hint of irony to everything he said, and made his strong high cheekbones less formidable. Dark hair, pale skin. She could hardly be the first to fall for a face like that. Yet he didn't seem very aware of his charm. Hadn't he noticed the way the waitress looked at him when they came in? Maybe that was part of the attraction, this indifference.

'Does your boss know you're leaving?' she asked. *Did he even have a job?*

'Does my boss know? God forbid! But he won't miss me.'

A troublemaker then. And proud of it. And what was he . . . seventeen? Eighteen? He couldn't be much older than her.

'And you? You're a probationer?' He was looking at her uniform. The kind of person who just knows things: one of those boys who absorbs facts like air. She liked that.

'Yes, I've been training since January. I'm hoping to be a theatre nurse. I really want to be a surgeon. One day, maybe.'

'You never know.'

Nat kept shifting in his seat, apologising when his foot brushed hers. He didn't take his eyes off her. It was as if he found her own stillness compelling.

'Shame you're not qualified. Spain needs surgeons. And nurses of course.'

'Well, I don't think . . . I couldn't possibly . . .'

'Never mind.' Nat put a hand on hers and shook his head, and let go too soon. Then he took a book and a pencil from his pocket. At first Felix thought he wanted to give her a reading list. The latest history of Spain. The Communist Manifesto? Well, it would make a change from anatomy text books, and general hygiene, and dressing techniques. Though what Neville would think if he knew . . .

'Look, how about I write to you?' he said. She wasn't expecting that. 'It won't be too often, mind you. I'm not so good with words, so don't get your hopes up. But just to know I can, if I get the chance . . . It'll make a difference.'

'To have a girl at home?' The words escaped with a self-mocking smile she hadn't intended. But Nat looked at her so seriously that her heart began to beat faster. And then she thought of the bundles of letters from her father that her mother still kept from the Great War. She stared back at him with a sober face.

'If you like.'

He pushed the book towards her, and offered her a flyleaf to write on. It was Jack London. *The Iron Heel*. A well-read copy. Felix decided Tredegar House was safer than her mother's address in Sydenham. Fewer questions at the nurses' home.

Her writing was rounded, smooth, clear and young.

'So nurses aren't like doctors then,' Nat joked.

'What do you mean?'

'I can read this.'

'Good.'

'Felix?'

'Felicity really, but my friends call me Felix. Always have. I've no idea why, really.'

'I like it . . . Felix Rose . . . I like it a lot. Now, don't move.'

Nat stared at Felix intently, eyes moving over her features. Then he licked the pencil stub and in a few swift lines he caught her heart-shaped face and her calm smile and the straightness of her nose. A strand of hair had escaped from its grip, she saw. She tucked it back behind her ear.

'Very clever. Very nice. You're good. Really,' she said. She meant it.

It crossed her mind that he might have a whole bookshelf

of paperbacks like this – a different girl's name, address and portrait in each. When she met his gaze again, she decided it couldn't be true.

'You don't mind, then?' he said quietly. 'Was that a liberty?'

'No. Of course not. Not at all.'

They talked a little longer, until Felix became too anxious about the time, and then they both rose from the banquette at the same time, and nearly bumped heads. Nat paid for the coffees. Outside they stood and shivered for a moment, uncertain what came next. Then Felix clenched her fist, and held it awkwardly, up by her ear.

'*No pasarán*?'

'*No pasarán*,' he replied firmly, returning her salute.

3

Neville answered the door. He looked her up and down.

'About time.'

Her brother stomped off down the hall. Felix sighed and followed. Home from home. The nurses-in-training were always treated like children at the hospital too. Pausing in front of the mahogany-framed mirror, she patted her hair automatically. At the coat stand she hung up her cape. Nat's blood had dried to brown on her apron, so she took that off too.

'We're in the kitchen, dear. I'll just put the kettle back on.' Her mother didn't sound cross, but that just made Felix feel more guilty.

Mrs Rose was still bending over the gas when Felix walked in. Its hiss stuttered into a roar and Neville stared pointedly at a plate of sandwiches. The crusts were drawing back to reveal ham darkening as it dried along its edges.

'I'll take that through now, shall I?' said Felix quickly. *Why didn't he put a damp tea towel over them?* she wondered crossly. *Did he want them to spoil?*

'In a minute, my dear.' Her mother offered a cheek which smelled of Pond's cold cream. 'Was it a very long operation? Or was it the trains? Sunday services aren't what they were, I'm afraid.'

'Actually I ran into . . .' Felix still couldn't quite work out

what had just happened. A battle or a carnival? A victory celebration? Definitely an awakening.

Neville's tight lips alerted Mrs Rose.

'Felicity, your stocking is torn! And where's your apron? What would the Hospital think!'

Her mother didn't often reproach her out loud. Why would she need to, with Neville around? They exchanged glances, which Felix pretended not to notice. That didn't work.

'What on earth have you been doing?' he said, on cue.

A shadow darkened the frosted glass in the back door. George's entrance crowded the kitchen, and changed the mood.

'Hello, George,' said Felix, extra cheerily. 'Not at the race-track? Don't tell me the paper's actually given you a day off!'

Neville's friend laughed obligingly.

'Sort of. But no rest for the wicked.' He was in his shirtsleeves, wiping his hands on a black-smeared rag.

'So what's Neville got you doing this time?' Felix asked. She took the rag from him, ran the tap and offered George the soap dish, still carefully avoiding Neville's question. Good old George. Perfect timing.

'Just that blessed lawnmower. Neville was hoping to manage a final mow of the season, but it's been up to its old tricks, I'm afraid.'

She passed him the hand towel.

'Nothing you can't fix, though?' she said lightly.

'You know me!' said George. 'Take more than a machine to defeat me! But it's too dark now to get the mowing done. Let's hope the weather holds till next weekend.'

'We may be lucky, dear. It's been a lovely afternoon,' said Mrs Rose, locking the back door.

'Good thing Felix didn't get here earlier really. It was more of a job than I'd imagined. But isn't she looking in fine fettle?'

George quickly straightened his own hair, fair and dishevelled, with damp fingers. 'Different, somehow . . .'

He looked at her, as if he were trying to work something out.

'I'm so sorry, Mother,' said Felix. 'I honestly didn't mean to . . .'

'What a fool I am!' George struck his forehead with his hand, and went for another save. 'I should have warned you! Don't tell me you got caught up in that demonstration? The British Union of Fascists were marching today.'

'In the East End? Oh dear,' said Mrs Rose. 'I wish I'd known.'

'There was a lot of talk about it at the paper on Friday. I *am* sorry, Felix. I assumed you'd be safely back home by the time things got going.'

'Kettle's boiling, Mother,' said Neville.

'Mosley and his biff boys were promising quite a display, I heard,' George went on. 'A pretty provocative plan, wasn't it? Fascists marching through the East End like that. Asking for bloodshed.'

'Well, they didn't in the end. The Blackshirts had to turn back. They didn't have a hope of getting through. Far too many people. It was wonderful. And everyone was singing, and chanting like mad – *No pasarán! No pasarán!* You know: 'They shall not pass.' Like the Republicans in Spain. That's what people were saying. We won't let the Fascists through. Not in Madrid. Not in London. At first I thought—'

They were all staring at her.

'Never mind . . .' Her voice trailed away. 'I'll warm the teapot, Mother.'

Her back turned, she stood at the sink, swirling the water round thoughtfully.

After all that, she hadn't set eyes on a Blackshirt this

afternoon. They hadn't even got close. Usually you couldn't miss them. They were always hanging round Whitechapel these days: thuggish-looking men with brass-buckled belts and black boots. She saw their victims in the hospital often enough. When they weren't using their fists, the Fascists brandished their newspapers like weapons. 'Read all about the alien menace! European ghettoes pouring their dregs into our country!' Or simply: 'The Yids! The Yids! We've got to get rid of the Yids!'

Yids like Nat. Nat Kaplan.

Would he really write to her? And what on earth would she write back?

'The other business, George.' Neville interrupted her thoughts. 'Shall we talk about it next door? Felicity? Mother?'

'Just coming, dear.' Mrs Rose gently commandeered the teapot. 'You two go on through. Neville, isn't the sugar bowl a bit low? Could you possibly . . . ?'

In the sitting room, the table was set with the best china, and the coal in the hearth was made up, but not lit. George's jacket and tie were back on, his nails clean. Felix stood and fiddled with saucers and spoons, distracted.

'So. How are the "gee-gees", George? Keeping you busy?'

'Very, as a matter of fact.'

Felix still wasn't really listening. George's job as a racing correspondent didn't much interest her.

'Why don't you sit down?' he added, gently, moving a chair for her. 'You must be exhausted.'

'I am rather, now I come to think about it. And gasping for tea, aren't you?' Felix collapsed, and looked up at George, behind her. 'Oh, don't hover like that. You know you're at home here. I expect you could do with a rest yourself.'

George considered the options, and sat in the armchair opposite.

'Well, I'm awfully glad you're all right,' he said, and Felix wondered if he was checking her over for damage. A moment later they heard the rattle of the tray at the door and George sprang back to his feet. 'Here comes the tea now! Thank you so much, Mrs Rose, yes, just one sugar please. Ham? Lovely! Don't mind if I do.'

'Yes, please, Mother.' Felix took two sandwiches at once. 'I'm starving.'

Finally everyone had a cup and saucer in their hand and George looked at Neville, who nodded briefly.

'Well, as I was just saying, work is quite frantic.' George took another sip of tea. Coughed. 'Though something rather fun's just come up. I've been talking to Neville about it.'

Felix raised her eyebrows politely. He always saw the jolly side of things. You could say that for George.

'There's a French filly I've been following all season. Corrida, she's called. Beautiful chestnut. Quite stunning. A three-year-old.'

'Oh yes?' Felix stretched out her legs and battled a yawn. She tried to concentrate on George, but into the brief silence in her head crept the thought of Nat, and her exhaustion changed into a secretly buzzing excitement.

'She took the Hardwicke Stakes at Ascot, the Grand International at Ostend, Prix de President de la Republique . . . oh, all the big ones! Well, the long and the short of it is that her owner – Marcel Boussac – the textile millionaire . . .' He glanced at Neville. 'He promised me a story on her if she bagged the l'Arc de Triomphe, and what do you know? She's done it! This afternoon. Only just heard.'

'Really?' Why were they all looking at her?

'So now you can go to France to interview this horse?'

George flushed.

'Well, yes, in a manner of speaking. And Boussac of course. But wouldn't it be rather jolly if the three of us went across? The stables are just outside Paris. We can make a long weekend of it. Next month. After the Grand Prix de Marseille.'

'Paris?' That took her by surprise. Paris.

'You deserve a break, dear.' Mrs Rose nodded encouragingly. 'They work you so hard. Sister Macpherson is such a task-mistress.'

But I love my work, thought Felix. Hadn't it allowed her to escape from all this? And then she thought, *Paris! I'm going to Paris!*

'So you'll come?' George beamed at her.

'Of course she'll come!' said Neville.

4

One last chance. Nat counted the chimes from St Mary's and walked more briskly. He was earlier this time: he'd left the print shop a full hour before the whistle, without a word to his boss. What did it matter now? Whatever lecture Mr Williams might have waiting for him in the morning, Nat wouldn't be there to hear it.

Outside the London Hospital he stationed himself under a lamp post, stuck his satchel between his feet, and shook out his copy of the *Daily Worker*. He settled down to watch and wait.

When a gaggle of nurses came down the steps about ten minutes later, he stiffened, and tried not to stare. They didn't give him so much as a glance though. They were like a little flock of birds, he thought, as they swept by in formation, giggling and shrieking, capes swinging and white caps bobbing with the movements of their heads. They wore the same uniform as Felix, but she wasn't among them.

Nat stared at the newspaper again, but he couldn't read a line of it. Everything around him seemed magnified this evening. Every detail stood out. He couldn't concentrate on words.

He was due at Victoria in two hours' time. He'd put on his best suit for the journey, the one his father made for him for starting work. *Klaider machen dem mentshen*, his dad had

muttered through the pins in his mouth as he knelt on the floor sorting out the trouser hem. Clothes make the man.

Three more probationers soon followed, more quietly. One looked over her shoulder, hesitating.

'Come on,' said her friend. 'She said not to wait. We'll keep her tea.'

Then they disappeared too.

He should have sent a note to the nurses' home. He was a fool to have left it to chance like this. If there'd been a YCL dance last Saturday . . . something he could have invited her to . . . He should have been braver. She'd given her address, hadn't she? That must mean something.

Tell no one, they'd instructed him. But he'd let the cat out of the bag already with her. It couldn't do any more harm to say goodbye. He had to say goodbye to *someone*.

Nat straightened his jacket and wondered if there was another way out. Maybe she'd slipped out through a side door. He walked across to the next corner, peered down the side of the hospital without success, and turned quickly back to his first sentry post.

And there she was by the railings, looking neater and crisper than before. Her face more guarded. Concentrating, and hurrying. He didn't move for a breath or two. He wanted to savour this. If she turned away, or was angry, or laughed at him, at least he'd still have this moment. Then he gathered his courage and stepped into her path.

'What are you thinking about?'

Felix stopped so abruptly that she almost overbalanced. She seemed shocked at first, and a little angry – like a girl getting ready to shake off a stranger. But then she looked around quickly and said softly, 'I thought you'd gone. Have you changed your mind?' And instantly he caught the hope in her voice.

'No. Tonight.' He watched her face freeze over.

'Oh.'

'Sorry,' he said. 'I've got to. It's all arranged.'

'I know. I know.' This time he thought perhaps she really did. No good going through it all over again. That wasn't how he wanted to spend these precious minutes. He touched her arm gently. 'So, what *were* you thinking about just then?'

'Do you really want to know?'

'Of course I do,' said Nat. He shifted slightly, so he could protect her from the jostle of passers-by. His shadow fell across her face.

'Well, as it happens, I'd just left my notebook in Histology and I went back to get it and I noticed a poster in the lab and how pretty the muscle fibres looked in cross-section – sort of pale pink and green and seaweedy – and the blood cells were rather lovely too . . .' An embarrassed smile twitched her lips, and she finished defiantly, looking right at him. 'And I was actually thinking they'd make rather a nice print for a summer frock.'

He laughed. He knew it. She wasn't half as serious as she looked. How he'd love to see her in something other than that old-fashioned uniform. He was right to come looking for her again.

'I'll be back from Spain soon, you know,' he said firmly. 'You'll see.'

'It'll be over by Christmas?' she said, stepping back, one hand gripping the railings behind her through her cloak. 'Isn't that what they always used to say?'

She kept surprising him with her worldliness. Such a slip of a thing, as his mother would say, but something about her was so sharp.

'Course it won't be Christmas, but it can't be too long. How

can it be? They say there are volunteers coming to help Spain from all over the world.'

Felix didn't say anything. She just kept looking over his face in that searching way she had. Then she reached up with cool fingers and ran them gently across the fading bruise above his eyebrow, softly tracing the edges of the scab in the middle. Tentatively, Nat closed his hand over hers.

'Sorry,' she said. 'Too cold? Or does it still hurt? I can't see how well it's healed in this light.'

Nat shook his head. He couldn't speak so he pressed her lovely fingers to his lips, and breathed in the lingering smell of disinfectant as though it were nectar. The scent of her skin, under the Lysol, was just as he'd remembered it too, though he hardly knew what exactly it was he remembered so well. A smell of humanity. A sweetness. It made his chest swell with an incredible and overwhelming warmth. He felt even taller than usual, but perhaps that was because he had to bend his head so far to reach her upturned face. He couldn't think how he dared but neither could he stop himself. His arms were round her now, and he could feel her softness under the stiff crackle of starched apron. She still clutched the railings behind, giving strength to both of them.

They stood like that for a few long seconds, Nat labouring for breath, fighting his panic about everything that lay ahead. He wanted to ask her. Did she mind? He couldn't. He kissed her lips, as softly and as hard as he could.

And, almost immediately, Felix's head whipped round, and she shrank away.

'Nurse! Nurse Rose, is it?' The voice was harsh and Scottish and it was practised in humiliation. 'For shame! I thought better of *you*.'

Nat turned to confront a stout woman with a face like lard

and the long dark dress and gleaming white cuffs of a hospital sister. Looking through him and his protests as if he were invisible, she addressed herself entirely to Felix.

'In my office. Fifteen minutes.'

What have I done?

What else could *I do?*

He can't look down. Nat walks away from the ravine with two questions repeating themselves in turn. No answers. His ears are still ringing, and his limbs feel leaden, as if gravity has increased its force. Numbly, he kicks at the tracks, scuffing up the compressed snow, spreading the stains further when he meant to cover them up. Alizarin crimson. Titanium white. He's making everything worse, he thinks.

He doesn't know it's pointless. The flat grey sky above has begun to release a new fall of snow, and nature will soon have done this work for him. Another hour, and there will be little left to betray him. And he will be far away. But all Nat can see is the hatred in Felix's face before she turned her back. The memory of her eyes grinds into him more piercingly than any shard or shrapnel could.