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Opening extract from

My Friend the Enemy

Written by

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CRASH

I was in the far corner of the woods, setting snares, when the siren started.

I stopped.

Crouched low with my arms out, my fingers laying the wire in the right position, I stopped *dead*.

I was quite far from the village – over the fields and deep in the trees – but that terrible noise reached right across to me. As if it was looking for me. Just me. It started as a single tone, a sound so frightening it almost made my heart freeze. Then it grew louder as it warmed up, the tone falling and rising. Falling and rising. A second siren joined it a few moments later, then a third, so all the village sirens were screaming at the sky.

This was the signal for us to run for our shelters.

To run for our lives.

I'd never been caught out like this before. The warning had never sounded during the afternoon. The Germans liked to come on clear nights, filling the air with the buzz and groan of their planes, like angry monsters coming to turn everything to dust. And then it was a fast and scary rush to the Anderson shelter, to sit in the half-dark, waiting for a bomb to land on top of you and blow you into a million pieces.

All the way out here, though, I wasn't sure what to do. I didn't know if I could make it home across the fields to Hawthorn Lodge, to the tin shelter at the bottom of our garden. Or maybe I didn't need to. Maybe I was *already* in the safest place, right there in the trees.

But I didn't want to be on my own. I wanted to be with Mam. I wanted to know she was safe, and she'd want to know I was safe. I imagined her sick with worry, wondering where I was. She wouldn't know whether to run out and call for me or take cover in the shelter. Her heart would be thumping just like mine was. Thump, thump, thump. Her mouth would be dry. Her muscles tingling and shaking. She'd be standing in the garden as the planes came over; wave after wave of them, raining their bombs on her, all because she was out looking for me.

I shook my head once and squeezed my eyes, straining to get rid of the images. Then I stood and began to run.

Sprinting past the pheasant pens, I hardly noticed the stinging brush of the nettles that caught my bare knees. The twigs crunched and snapped under my feet. The tops

of my wellies paddled against my bruised shins. I jumped fallen logs and scraped my legs against brambles. I splashed through the burn and weaved around the trees, throwing myself to the ground when I came to the barbed wire fence and scrambling through the low gap that was made just for me. The skin tore on my knees as I crawled on the dry soil, but I ignored the pain.

I was moving as quickly as I could, clambering from all fours back onto my feet, rushing through the final line of the woods before I burst out into the field. I ran out into the early evening just as another sound broke from behind the terrible cry of the sirens. It was as if this noise smashed through the solid wall, cutting through and drowning it out. And this sound was worse. Much worse.

It was the angry buzz of German bombers filling the sky.

Panic swelled in my chest. I had to get home. I had to find Mam.

I sprinted further out into the field, wishing I could make one great big jump and be there. I wished my feet would move faster. I wished our house was closer. I wished there was no war. I wished . . . I wished so *many* things.

But for that moment, it felt like there was nothing else in the world except for me, my need to get home, and the planes. That noise. The sound of engines was so loud, as if the planes were following me, chasing me, whining and coughing like dirty giants. My head was filled with their growling, my whole body shook. I could feel their breath on my neck. Smell their darkness.

But then they stuttered.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

The engine caught and died, caught and died, and then cut out completely. No more droning, no more coughing, no more stuttering. All I could hear was the scream of the siren in the village and the rush of air behind me, as if an enormous bird of prey was arcing down to take me. In those seconds I knew how a rabbit must feel at that last moment by the hedgerow, when the hawk swoops down to carry it away.

And that's when I risked a look back. Stumbling on the loose soil of the furrowed field, I turned to look over my shoulder and saw the plane coming towards me.

Not a mob of hungry giants, but a single plane. Just one.

A giant metal beast falling, gliding, faster and faster, coming right at me.

I saw the gunner sitting in the glazed front section. He was staring dead ahead, seeing nothing. His eyes were so wide I could see the whites. Both hands were gripped around the machine gun's handle as if it would save him. The gun barrel was sticking out from the plane's glass nose cap, pointing to the exact place where the plane was going to crash.

Behind and above him, I could just about make out the top of the pilot's head, and then I ducked as it went over, no more than thirty feet above me, the wind in its wake ruffling my hair.

I heard the metallic rattle of its parts as it went. I saw the pale grey underbelly of the monster. And then I turned to watch it smash into Mr Bennett's field.

The ground shook when the German bomber hit the soil. It went down nose first, the glazed nose cap shattering into a thousand pieces, filling the air with splinters of glass. The gunner was crushed in his seat as the nose crumpled, forcing him up and back into the pilot, squashing the two bodies together, mashing them into a mess of blood and bone.

With a deafening screech of metal, both propellers were ripped from the wings. They spun off to either side, slamming into the field several feet from the plane, bouncing away at different angles. Twirling blades of destruction, they tore through the potato plants, throwing thick clouds of dry dirt into the air as they went. If anybody had been in their way, they would have been shredded.

The plane gouged an ugly furrow through the field, ploughing the soil in front of it, lifting into the air so it was standing on its nose for a moment. It hung like that for a split second, and I saw the size of the monster, raised up, the tail section painted with the symbol we'd been taught to fear and hate. The Nazi swastika.

Then the plane twisted, its whole weight moving to one side, shearing the right wing with a horrible squeal of tearing metal that was followed by an instant of silence – barely the blink of an eye – and then a tremendous explosion as the first of the fuel tanks erupted with deafening fury.

An orangey-yellow fireball burst from the right side of the plane, belching outwards and upwards. It spat across the field, reached up to the sky, ripped the wing away and blew the fuselage in two. Shards of glowing metal spewed into the air, pattering on the soil like heavy raindrops, and then a second explosion broke the larger pieces apart and hurled them aside as if they weighed nothing.

The blast raced at me over the field as a solid wall of sound and heat and stink. It hit me like a demonic fist, forcing me backwards, slamming me down into the soil and knocking my breath away. Oven-hot air raced around me, thick with the smell of burning fuel and rubber.

And then everything went dark.

I had an odd light-headed feeling, like I had sometimes when I stood up too quickly. My head spun, my thoughts were muddled. Then it was as if someone reached down, dragged me out of my body and threw me up into the air. Everything felt numb and I wondered if I was dead. I was far above myself, looking down at my small twelve-year-old body lying in the dirt among the dark green leaves of the potato plants. I was bathed in thick smoke and surrounded by a hundred tiny fires in the places where shrapnel and splashes of fuel burnt. But then sounds began to creep in and the smell filled my nostrils. My mouth was thick with the bitter taste of burning. The orange light behind my eyelids darkened and brightened.

When I opened my eyes, I stayed as I was, lying on my back. The smoke circled overhead like a living thing and I stared at it, but I didn't watch it because my mind could hardly concentrate as things slowly came back into focus.

I don't know how long I was unconscious, but when I sat up, coughing and shaking my head to rid it of the awful sound that rang in my ears, I saw the plane, a hundred feet away, swallowed by an angry fireball. Black smoke was streaming into the sky, blocking the evening sun, and all around me, small fires flickered among the furrows.

For a moment I thought I heard cries of pain, maybe the death throes of the crew as they burnt inside the wreckage, but the explosion was still singing in my ears and the sounds were drowned by the crackling of flames. I tried to stand, but was disorientated, and I looked around, seeing movement from somewhere to the right of the main crash site.

Something caught my eye, making me look up and back towards the trees. The breeze shifted and black smoke swirled, but somewhere through the foul-smelling clouds, I saw the bright white of a silk parachute beyond the woods. It was small. A long way off and no bigger than the size of a marble. Then the smoke thickened as it rose and circled over the treetops, blocking everything from sight.

It was the summer of 1941 and the weather was good over Northumberland, but it felt as if the world was dying. So many things were coming to an end. That day, though, something was just beginning.