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Soldier Dog

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Lancashire

Twelve hours had passed. He'd last seen her at eight that morning. Faint with exhaustion and hunger, Stanley sank down. How on earth could he find a creature lighter and quieter than the wind? He called out to her but his voice was caught up and whisked away over the sedge grass. All day out searching he'd seen only five dogs. There were fewer dogs in Longridge now, just as there was less of everything, because of the War.

He rose and pushed his bicycle up, on beneath the tracery of a rowan, dizzyingly suffused and glowing with tarnished orange, on upward to Rocky Brow. Stanley called out again. A merlin rose and dashed away in alarm, but the sedge and the hawthorn gave no answer. Rocky Brow was Stanley's last hope. He'd said to himself he'd go all the way there and then turn back. When he got home, it would all depend on Da's mood. Stanley never knew what to expect any more. Living with Da was like living with a volcano.

As Stanley approached the brow, a magnificent hound, his head and neck strong enough to hold a stag, appeared from the other side and paused on the crest, his feathered hocks whipping like banners in the wind.

'Where is she? Where is Rocket?' The dog, a deerhound cross perhaps, lifted his handsome head, looking down, beyond Stanley, on the land below as though he owned it. Stanley raised his head too. 'Hey, boy, where's Rocket?'

The warrior dog responded with a defiant stare, then loped easily away in the direction of Gibbon. They bred cross-dogs, deerhound mixed with collie, at Gibbon, and that was Jake, the crack Laxton sire. Da didn't think much of the Laxtons – tinkers he called them, both them and their half-breed dogs – poachers, in his eyes.

Stanley closed his eyes and bit his lip. He'd looked everywhere. There were only three roads out of Longridge and he'd cycled three miles out on each of them, calling and calling to Rocket. Everyone in the village had said they'd look out for her, they all knew Rocket. She'd be stolen, someone had said, a dog that valuable, but she wouldn't be stolen, she was too fast for that. She'd come home, sooner or later, but until she did, Stanley had to face Da. He rocked himself, racked with guilt, remembering Rocket with the sash draped over her, the last time she'd won the Waterloo

Cup. Over a three-day knock-out competition, she'd beaten sixty-three dogs to the greatest prize a greyhound could win. He saw Da and Ma and Tom and himself, the crowd of thousands, and the tears in Da's eyes as he held the glinting cup and chain.

'And don't come back till she's found.' That's what Da had said. He couldn't have meant it, couldn't have meant Stanley to stay out all night. Miss Bird, his form teacher, had seen Stanley crossing and criss-crossing Longridge. The third time he'd passed her, she'd stopped him, and when he'd explained she'd said that of course Da would want him home, hadn't meant what he'd said, that Rocket would come home of her own accord, that she could look after herself. Wearily Stanley rose and turned for home.

By the empty gatehouse, he turned off the lane and passed beneath the gloomy spruce that clung to Thornley's north drive and the new lake. What should he say to Da? What would Tom say? This would never have happened to Tom. His brother would have known not to let Rocket out while she was still on heat. Stanley winced; it was all his own fault, he shouldn't have let her out.

Stanley paused at the arched entrance to the yard. He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders and turned the corner.

Across the yard, next to the iron bars of the kennels, stood Da, hunched, dangerous and explosive, white

hair bristling, fists swivelling in his pockets. At his feet was Rocket's bowl, put out for her as always on the dot of five. How long had Da been standing there? Stanley gathered his courage and brushed his hair clear of his forehead.

'I c-can't find . . .' His throat was prickling, his words shrivelling in his mouth. 'She'll c-come back . . .' If only Da would say something, look at him even.

Da's feet shifted, his shoulders collapsed and he tramped towards the cottage. Stanley abandoned his bicycle and followed. There was Da, already slumped in his chair, scowling into the unlit hearth. He looked so old. Da was the husk of a man, a man shrunken and emptied by grief. That hair had once been chestnut, like Stanley's own, before sorrow turned it white, before Mother died, but Da wasn't that old, or at any rate, he wasn't as old as he looked.

Da's hands fretted the edges of his green cardigan as he stared at the photographs of Tom and of Mother on the mantel. Da only ever thought about Da and about Tom. There was Tom in uniform, looking smart and brave, on his collar the red rose of the East Lancashires. Tom always had that smile in his eyes. To his right, in a separate frame, was Mother. They both had the same sandy hair, hazel eyes and steady gaze. There were six years between Stanley and Tom, Stanley was nearly fourteen to Tom's twenty. Since Mother had died, Tom had been brother, friend and

father to him. Then the day he'd turned seventeen, he'd enlisted and he'd come home, and with one hand on each of his brother's shoulders, he'd said, 'I'm off, Stanley. Tomorrow. Look after our da. And I'll come back for you.'

Da had at first grown silent. Then his grief turned to anger, his long, menacing silences interrupted by sudden violent rages as his love for Stanley changed to indifference, then to wounding scorn.

Stanley would remember the golden afternoons when he and Tom and Da had lain like hares in folds of soft brown grass as Da taught them to make reed whistles and sound the song of the curlew. They'd all been together that last afternoon before Ma's sudden death, sun-warmed and smiling, and Stanley had never imagined that all he'd thought so safe, so permanent, could fall apart.

A sudden shudder rattled Da's body and Stanley saw him pull his cardigan tighter round himself. Stanley sat at the table, still watching Da, waiting for a moment that might be less dangerous than any other. He took a deep breath and willed his words to come out whole, not splinter in his throat.

'Do you . . .'

Da's glare was turning, like the slow hand of a clock, across the room to fix on him. Stanley faltered and withdrew. Da exploded in a violent rush from his chair and launched himself at the mantel. He lunged

at Rocket's silver trophy and spun round to the table, sending the ceiling light swinging wildly to and fro as he pushed the great cup into Stanley's face. Da jerked it forward again, forcing Stanley's head back.

'Aye, she'll be back. But never the same again.' Da's hair stood in fierce tufts, his brows twitched like malevolent centipedes. He slammed the immense trophy down. 'A bitch never runs so fast after whelping.' Da rammed the iron bolt across the door and headed for the stairs.

Stanley looked through smarting eyes at the bolt. That door had never, ever been locked at night. Stanley took Tom's coat from the peg. He'd curl up in Mother's chair, with Tom's coat over him, so he'd hear Rocket if she pawed the door. If she didn't come during the night, he'd leave first thing tomorrow and go to the Laxtons at Gibbon.

Through the window, Stanley saw the empty yard, the chalked slots beside each box: Goliath, Milcroft, Warrior, Murphy. Those prized pure-blood horses Da had bred and broken in, every one of them gone. The yard had once been full, a dark-eyed head at each door. Da had been proud and busy, revered across the county for his shining, fine-skinned horses. Horses with bloodlines, he used to say, as pure as gods. How those horses had loved Da. How he'd loved them. Then each and every Thornley horse, twenty-three in all, had been requisitioned by the War

Office. Only Trumpet, the old cob, was left.

It was a fine thing for a horse to go to war – that was what the master, Lord Chorley had said – a fine thing for a horse to serve in a glorious cause, in the war to end all wars, and anyway, they'd be back by Christmas. But it was May 1917 now and the War To End All Wars still raged.

Stanley huddled into the chair. After a while he slept and in his dreams he saw flocks of velvety puppies swarming and tumbling over shining cups, saw Da's gloom lifting and floating away.

A whoosh of icy air woke Stanley. The door was open – Da outside, grim and grey as a standing stone, Rocket's bowl in his hand. On paws light as raindrops, Rocket furled and unfurled herself around his legs. Stanley stepped forward.

'Da, she's b-back, she's h-here and she's all right, isn't—'

Da spun round with breathtaking speed.

'Some farm dog's been at 'er. Half-breeds she'll be bringing us now. Gypsy dogs, thieving, mongrel dogs. No, no respectable family has one of them.' Stanley stood rooted in the doorway, hand still outstretched to his father.

'We're a gamekeeping family and there'll be no tinkers' dogs round here.' Da's right arm shot out. Rocket leaped aside, quivering as the china bowl

slammed into the stone wall, shattering into brilliant white shards. Da turned and left.

Stanley knelt by Rocket and hugged her close. She licked the boy's face and nuzzled him.

'Tom said the war would end quickly,' Stanley whispered, 'and when he comes back, Da will be better . . . Tom promised he'd come soon . . .'

Rocket blinked and turned to gaze into the house after her master.

School felt safer than home, though there were only two other boys, Joe and Arthur, in Stanley's class, most having left the minute they'd turned fourteen, taking work far away in the city factories to help their families. Stanley had been surrounded by friends once, but they probably wouldn't come back, even when the War ended.

Miss Bird's were Stanley's favourite classes – Biology and Chemistry, but especially Biology. Today Stanley was tired. The bench was harder than usual and his neck hurt because of the night in the chair. Miss Bird was teaching the respiratory system in humans but what Stanley wanted to learn was the reproductive cycle in dogs.

Miss Bird loved Tom, Stanley was sure of that, sure that she was waiting for Tom to marry her. It was awkward being only half awake in Miss Bird's classes because, being Tom's brother, she watched Stanley so

closely, but she was giving him an easier time today, perhaps because of yesterday's search for Rocket.

How soon would the extra weight show on Rocket? How long did puppies take to arrive? Stanley had so many questions. Nothing useful was ever taught at school. Miss Bird (Lara, as Tom called her) knew so many useful things – she knew that dogs couldn't see as far as humans, saw six times less detail, that they were colour-blind to red and green. She knew they had better night vision, greater peripheral vision, that horses' ears could turn a hundred and eighty degrees – she knew almost as much about animals as Da, that's what Tom used to say. Miss Bird would know about whelping and weaning.

Everyone was rushing out, cramming on coats. Biology was the last class and Stanley would have to go home now. He was always last to leave, he thought, as he picked up each coloured pencil from his desk, one by one. Miss Bird liked different colours for tubes and arteries. Joe grinned as he passed Stanley's desk, holding up a pack of scuffed playing cards.

'Tomorrow, Stan? Break-time? You won't win again.' Stanley nodded. He was lucky at cards, always beating Joe. Joe rammed on his cap and left. Stanley thought about Joe's home, the hot tea and warm kitchen. How would things be at Thornley?

A hand rested on Stanley's shoulder.

'Stanley, I found this in the library and thought it

might come in useful. For Rocket. Just in case, that is.' Miss Bird was smiling, 'It tells you everything you need to know.' She held out a book.

'She came home, Miss Bird, she's back now.'

It was a funny thing, but when he spoke to Miss Bird his words didn't dry and stick like needles – they came out as he wanted them to.

'How was your father? Was it all right when you went home?'

Stanley looked down at his desk. Miss Bird squeezed his shoulder and said quietly, 'Don't forget how much he's lost, Stanley. Give him time . . . He's lost so much. And he's scared. You'll understand when you're older. You see, when you're your age, you're not scared of anything.' Miss Bird was slipping something into his satchel: a jar of honey. She often gave him honey, knew Stanley liked honey, knew that his ma used to keep bees too. 'Don't forget how much he's lost,' Miss Bird repeated.

Stanley wanted to answer but there was something in his throat, not the dry stickiness but a lump, which wouldn't let any words out unless tears came with them. If he waited till he got to the door, he'd have his back to Miss Bird and he'd say it then; he must tell her what hurt so much.

'He hasn't lost me – Da hasn't lost me, I'm still here.'

*

Four weeks had passed since Rocket disappeared. Stanley's birthday had come and gone unmarked. Only Tom had remembered. On the thirtieth, he'd said on the card, he'd be back. That was eighteen days away. These three years had passed so slowly, thought Stanley as he cycled homeward. Da was growing worse, each lonely evening with him more strained and oppressive. When Tom came home, Stanley would talk to him about Da, ask for his help.

Stanley pedalled harder. He must hurry, needed to collect the rabbits from the traps he'd set. He didn't have much time, so today he'd just skin one and give it to her raw. Da never fed Rocket now. Since he'd smashed her bowl, that's more or less when he'd stopped, so in the mornings Stanley would leave early and, checking the direction of the wind, set his three traps where the gorse was patterned with the criss-crosses of rabbit runs, as Da had once taught him.

Rocket was waiting for him by the door to Stable Cottage. She'd be hungry. Stanley leaned his bicycle against the wall, unlatched the door gently and pushed. It only had to open a sliver to see if Da was there. Stanley released his breath; the room was empty. He listened. The house was empty. He slipped in, took a knife from the kitchen drawer and ran, Rocket at his heels, to the glasshouse.

It was warm there, and cosy and safe. Since Oaks, the last gardener, had joined up, Stanley maintained what he could on his own, but there was so much to do at this time of year. Lord Chorley had written from London just to keep up the vegetable garden and the cutting borders, but with the big house dark and shuttered and the Chorleys away it was thankless, pointless work.

Rocket reminded Stanley about her supper with a nuzzle. Stanley looked down and saw her new sturdiness, and remembered. It was Monday today. Every Monday he measured her girth with a piece of garden twine and knotted it. Three knots last week, today he'd tie the fourth. He kept Miss Bird's book, *A Layman's Guide to Mating, Whelping and Rearing*, in the glasshouse to hide it from Da. It was propped against the window and he'd read as he worked.

Stanley tipped the chopped rabbit into a terracotta pot and watched Rocket eat, smiling to himself with a mixture of guilt and excitement. Rocket raised her head to the boy, tail swishing in gratitude for the rabbit. Stanley put his hands on her flanks, feeling them, then slipping the twine under her belly. He tied a knot. A small but definite increase in her girth. Stanley had already calculated the date. If Rocket were to have puppies, she'd have them between the eighth and the sixteenth of July. More

days to count up to, the days till Rocket whelped and the days till Tom came home. Years could go by just counting down to the things Stanley wanted to happen.

'He won't mind . . . Da won't mind . . . not once he sees them. Once he sees them, he'll love them . . . I'll keep one for me, one for Tom – and Joe wants one . . .'

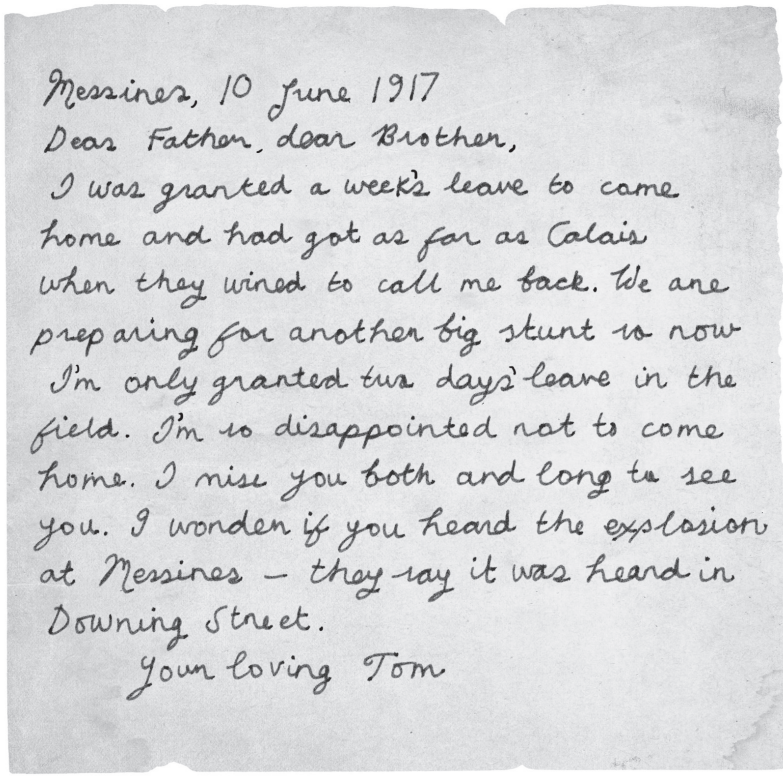
Rocket sat panting. She'd grown hungrier, sat more readily now, was more affectionate.

When the light ebbed and Stanley could no longer see, he stopped work. He'd go in and make himself a honey sandwich, then he'd do his homework.

As he approached the cottage, Stanley lowered a protective hand to Rocket's head. Da was in his chair, the back of his head to the window. Apprehensive, Stanley pulled a soft minky ear to and fro between his fingers, then his heart somersaulted – Da had a card in his hand. Was it from Tom? Why was Da not moving? What had happened? Was Tom all right? Stanley flung the door open.

'Da—'

Without rising or turning, Da grunted something incomprehensible. He tossed the card on to the table. Stanley vaulted forward and took it. 'Souvenir from France' was embroidered on it in yellow beneath a bower of flags. Stanley read:


Messines, 10 June 1917
Dear Father, dear Brother,
I was granted a week's leave to come home and had got as far as Calais when they wired to call me back. We are preparing for another big stunt so now I'm only granted two days' leave in the field. I'm so disappointed not to come home. I miss you both and long to see you. I wonder if you heard the explosion at Messines – they say it was heard in Downing Street.
Your loving Tom

Stanley stared at the thick cream card, blinking fiercely. Tom wasn't coming home. He was all right, but he wasn't coming. Stanley breathed slowly in and out; he must be brave or Da would lash out.

When Stanley looked up, he saw that Rocket had slipped in too when he'd come in. She sat at Da's feet, and he was glaring at her sturdy belly, her dull coat. Rocket's nose was tilted upward towards Da. Though Da no longer fed her, though he'd turned from her,

still she followed his every movement, still he was the sun around which her earth moved.

'Come the time, the tinkers' dogs'll go where they belong. Aye, the tinkers'll take 'em.' Da had risen and was standing by the opened door, his face to the night, Rocket at his side, immediate as a shadow, tail quivering. 'No one else'll have them, not with the Dog Tax set to rise again – from seven shillings and six to ten shillings it's due to rise, and who'll be paying that for bastard half-breeds?'

Da clamped the door shut behind him, grazing Rocket's nose. He always used to walk her at this time before putting her in the kennel for the night. Now he'd ignore her and wander out alone. Stanley looked at Rocket, hovering, nose to the crack of the door, keeping vigil for her master's return, and he blinked back the tears that rose. He knelt by Rocket, holding her, but his eyes strayed to the photograph on the mantel – Tom in his uniform, earning his own wage, free and far from here.

'Lucky Tom,' he whispered to Rocket, smiling sadly and tousling her ears. 'If it weren't for you –' he laid his head against her long neck – 'if it weren't for you and your puppies, I'd go away too . . .'