

# *Digging* FOR *Victory*

Cathy Faulkner



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To Duncan Fraser, an inspirational teacher who first sowed  
the seed.



**Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1940**

Ralph's going off to be a hero.

It's official.

He got his papers this morning –

Two-Six-Six squadron are expecting him.

Ralph's my brother, just in case you didn't know.

Ralph,

who, until not so long ago,

would sometimes play hide

and

seek.

Not that it would ever take me long to find him

(and then he'd pretend he wasn't even playing

and that made me feel daft).

Ralph,

who told me the difference

between Spitfires and Hurricanes,

Wellingtons and Halifaxes,

but missed the very first actual Spitfire

*flying over*

the village

(and then claimed he was the first to see it).

Ralph,

who's won the heart

of practically every girl in the village

(apart from Mary Smith

who will always hate him),

but who's never once won a school prize.

(The ones *I've* won for coming first in tests  
don't count, he says,  
since he gave me all the answers –  
which isn't true anyway.)

Ralph,  
who's always made me look second best,  
even though I'm not.

Ralph, Mother says  
(whilst brushing away a tear),  
wouldn't want us to be sad –  
we're to learn to be strong,  
keep our chins up  
and most of all,  
**FEEL PROUD.**

The thing is,  
if I'm honest,  
I don't actually feel sad and,  
even though I'm just his little sister,  
I'm already strong.

And there's no way I'm  
ever  
EVER  
putting my chin up  
and feeling proud  
until

*I*

am the hero.

**Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> December 1940**

*Can you help me carry Ralph's things down to the cellar,*

Mother says,

in her that's-what-you're-going-to-do-anyway kind of way.

*Why?* I ask. *He'll be back before long –*

*he said he'll visit us as soon as he's got leave,*

*didn't he?*

Mother sighs.

*We don't know when that'll be,*

*and now that he's really flown the nest*

*for the good of the country,*

*it's time that we play our part too.*

I wrinkle my face up.

*What do you mean?*

*I mean, Bonnie,*

*that Father and I*

*have applied to have someone billeted here,*

*so now we can all look forward to someone else coming to stay.*

So Ralph gets to fly away on an adventure

and we have a stranger coming to stay

(not that I was ever asked about it).

How exactly is that us playing a part in the war effort?

Boxing up Ralph's childhood –



his hard-won marbles  
    (that he never let me play with),  
the prize conker  
    (which I know *I* found),  
and badly-painted tin soldiers  
    (in all the wrong colours) –  
is the only part I get to play.

I dig out Grandfather's old zoetrope from under Ralph's bed –  
so that's where it's been!  
It's been years since we've played with it –  
Ralph told Mother I'd lost it  
(and as usual, I took the blame).  
I'm taking this to *my* room.

I place it in the middle of my windowsill.  
Rising from its polished wooden base,  
the round metal drum looks almost  
lamp – like, but upside – down with  
slits cut round the side.  
I spin it really hard,  
looking  
through  
one  
of  
the  
gaps

and wonder (as I've always done) exactly how the drawings on  
the inside seem to merge into one moving picture.

I watch them as they chase each other  
round  
and  
round  
and  
round.

They're faded now and covered in dust,  
but they're just as I remember them:

the eagle  
takes off  
and soars  
time and  
time again,  
leaving the chicken  
always  
scratching  
pathetically  
at the ground  
below.

As I carry  
the boxes and trunks  
down to their new home  
in the cold, cobwebbed cellar,  
I wonder who might soon be moving their things in.

I hope it's someone nice  
like Barbara Robinson  
who arrived from Bristol  
with her gas mask and trunk  
and was billeted with Carol  
(my best friend in the whole world)  
last September.

Another Nancy Edwards  
(who arrived on the same train  
in her pigtails and pinafore)  
would be all right too  
(although I still don't believe  
what she said about  
never having seen a cow before.  
I'm sure she's lying).

Even a Betty Sanders  
(who talks for all three of them)  
wouldn't be too bad,  
just as long as  
she doesn't EVER say  
that things are backward here.  
I've heard that far too much already.

Or perhaps –  
now here's an idea –  
it might be one of those land girls  
who helps out on farms.

Mr Brown

(that's our closest neighbour)

has requested some, you know,

now that his farmhands have gone off to fight

(he's got a lot on his plate at the moment,

what with being in the Home Guard and all).

I bet their trunks would be full of lipstick and pretty dresses,

stockings and high heels.

A land girl might curl my hair

and give me lovely things

just like a kind big sister.

How jealous the girls at school would be!

Yes, by the time Ralph's room is empty,

the memories boxed up

and the dust swept away,

*I realise that I'm actually looking forward*

*to someone else coming to stay.*

Just so long as that someone

isn't a boy.

## Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1941

*No, it's not a boy,*  
Mother says  
as I fix the newspaper paper chain  
that's given up decorating our sitting room.

Thank goodness for that.  
I don't want someone who'll tease me  
and call me names  
and snigger like they do at school.  
I want someone like Carol:  
    a girl I can talk to at midnight  
who'll understand me,  
who'll share secrets  
    (and lemon sherbets),  
be like the sister I never had  
and who won't ever go off and join in the action,  
leaving me feeling  
second best.

*No, it's not a boy,*  
Mother repeats.  
    *It's a Mr Fisher.*

The chain comes apart in my hands.  
*That can't be right!* I cry.  
*Why on earth would a Mr Fisher  
need to stay on a dairy farm  
in the middle of nowhere?*

He can't be a farm hand –

they've already left to fight, and only land girls are sent to help now.

And if he were a farmer and allowed to stay,

why, he'd have his own farm and wouldn't be billeted here.

We don't need another doctor –

Dr Bovington's busy but I'm sure he can manage now that half the village have gone.

A teacher perhaps?

But the evacuees brought their own Miss Jones with them when they came on the train from Bristol.

Someone from the Home Guard?

Mr Brown has that all covered what with his whole team of grandfathers who watch out for invaders (and they've hardly been run off their feet).

Maybe a new warden?

But Mr Collins, our vicar, loves that job, and although he's almost as ancient as the church itself, I don't think anything will stop him shouting, *Put that light out!*

And if he were in the military—

he'd either be fighting abroad or based at RAF Oakmoor just ten miles from here.

What I hope more than anything

is that he isn't another conchie like Mr Howard,

sent here to do the jobs that no one else wants to do all because he has some strange belief and refuses to help our boys fight.

Having one of those in the house just doesn't bear

thinking about –  
the boys at school would actually have a reason to call me  
names then.

I scrunch the remains of the paper chain  
tightly into a ball  
and throw it into the wastepaper basket.

But Mr Howard wasn't billeted with anyone  
even though he's working for Mr Brown.  
He lives in his own caravan.  
Thank goodness.  
Maybe all conchies do.

Mother turns the letter  
over  
and  
over  
in her hands  
as if looking for the answer to my question.

It must be a mistake.