



The Barnbow Lasses by Tom Palmer

One

Jas woke up just after six a.m., wondering if she'd heard thunder.

She wasn't sure what it was exactly that had broken her sleep. Not really. But *something* had woken her up.

And now she found that the thing that had kept her awake until after midnight the night before was back in her head. The terrifying prospect that she had to give an assembly to year eight. All of year eight. An assembly about the soldiers who fought in the trenches and died in No Man's Land during the First World War. Those dozens, hundreds, thousands of them marching towards a fiery orange sky. All wearing uniforms. All hunched as they went.

And that she had to give the talk on Remembrance Day itself.

Because today was 11th November.

Jas was more than worried: she was terrified.

Her eyes fully open now, Jas saw two more eyes staring back at her. Next she heard a low, friendly growl.

'Shhh,' she said.

Another growl. This time louder.

Jas sighed. The dog knew that she was awake and would keep on grumbling until she got what she wanted.

Jas threw back the bed covers.

Time for a walk.

Outside it was surprisingly mild for November. There was no frost. The air didn't feel cold against Jas's skin. The sky to the east was beginning to glow with light. And there were no clouds.

As Jas and the dog emerged out of the back garden, they saw their neighbour, Mrs Yousafzai, who was a doctor at St James' Hospital, climb wearily out of her car, then the flash as she locked it behind her.

Mrs Yousafzai noticed Jas and smiled.

'Morning Jasminder. You okay?'

'Yes, thanks, Mrs Y. How was work?'

Mrs Yousafzai rolled her eyes. 'Busy. I'm ready for bed.'

Jas smiled and glancing up their street – Edith Sykes Drive – she caught a glimpse of a figure dressed in a cap and baggy clothes under the street light just as it flickered off.

'Sleep well, Mrs Y,' Jas said.

'I will. Thanks, love,' the doctor replied, disappearing behind her front door.

Jas made her way up Edith Sykes Drive, checking to make sure she didn't still have her PJs and slippers on. It was one of her big fears: going out in her bedclothes.

The figure she'd seen had gone. But its appearance was playing on Jas's mind. She had looked sort of familiar. Not her face. It was her clothes: the cap covering up all her hair and the baggy overalls, like working gear. What was it?

As usual the dog dragged Jas up Edith Sykes Drive, along Maggie Barker Avenue, via Olive Yeates Way. It was just as they came up Ethel Jackson Road that Jas saw the figure again, walking rapidly along Manston Lane. The distinctive cap that looked like something from a hundred years ago and now – in the improved light – a strange yellow colour to the figure, almost as if she was glowing.

Jas began to walk faster in pursuit. This felt like a mystery now. First the thunder with no clouds. Now the strange figure rushing away like the rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*.

The sky was lighter, bright even, trees in silhouette against the clear morning to the east.

There were several other dog-walkers about, even though it was early. Two women with cocker spaniels said good morning. Another older lady with a Labrador smiled. Jas liked that about the area where she lived. It was friendly. It felt safe.

Once they were off the road, Jas let the dog off her lead, into the fields.

Except the fields were not all fields any more.

Not up ahead.

Another mystery. What was going on?

Where Jas had seen trees and grasslands on previous walks, there were buildings, low wooden huts. And now Jas could hear the rumble of trucks or something. She wondered if the huts were farm buildings that she had not noticed before and if the sound of trucks was coming from the M1 motorway which ran close to where she lived. But no, it wasn't that. There was something else. Things just didn't sound or look right today.

As she walked across the fields, Jas saw women, lots of women, walking along a lane. Thousands of them, hunched over as they walked towards wherever they were going. Almost as if they were marching.

Now Jas heard a piercing whistle. It reminded her of something from the railway museum in York that she'd visited with her mum.

Suddenly Jas realised her dog was right there, leaning against her, not running wild in the fields like she normally did.

Jas understood well that something was wrong for a second or two before she heard the boom. A boom just like the thunder she'd heard from her bed.

But louder.

Ear-splittingly louder.

She staggered backwards, hit by a blast of heat like wind on the hottest of days. Instinctively she squatted to keep her balance and grabbed the dog, fixing its lead onto its collar.

What was that?

A crash on the M1?

An aeroplane coming down on its way into Leeds-Bradford Airport?

An earthquake?

Squatting with the dog, lead tight in her hand, Jas heard more noise.

Banging.

Screaming.

The thunder of feet.

And now she understood that the women that she had seen walking before were running towards the source of the explosion. Because it *was* an explosion. Jas saw what looked like a huge orange yellow wound on the horizon, as if someone had ripped a piece of the sky away. And the heat was still coming. The dog was cowering, still leaning into Jas, who looked up to see the figure – the girl from the top of her street – standing nearby.

The girl was not much older than Jas. The cap over her head kept all of her hair off her face. She had rubber boots and gloves. Her overalls looked dark, like they had been burned. She smelled of fire and smoke. And her skin was a striking yellow. Her face, her hands, her neck the colour of lemon.

Jas's mind was scrambling to make sense of what was going on. Half wanting to run away, half wanting to call for help, she stood so that she was face to face with the girl.

Was she hurt? Had she been caught up in the accident? If there had been an accident.

Jas wanted to ask, but found she couldn't speak.

And now, as she looked across the fields to the burning horizon, the girl spoke.

'I'm Edith,' she said in a croaky voice. 'Edith Sykes. I'm one of the Barnbow Lassies. And there's been a terrible accident. Can I show you, Miss? Please? Can you help us?'

As if in a dream, Jas let herself be led by the ghostly figure called Edith towards the mass of burning buildings. She could smell smoke and fireworks and metal. She could hear cracks and booms and screams. And then – once inside, stooping under a sign that said ROOM 42 – she saw things that were like a scene from a horror movie or a terrorist attack. She was surrounded by blood and suffering and death and it was all too much. Jas pulled at the dog's lead and began to run.

Away from it all. Like you'd run from horror in a nightmare. Except Jas knew this was no nightmare. What she'd heard and felt, what she'd smelled and tasted, and, most strikingly, what she had seen, had been real. She was sure of it. But why? Why had she seen it?

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