



The Barnbow Lasses by Tom Palmer

Two

Jas ran home as fast as she could. Away from the flames and screams and the stench of smoke. She stumbled over rocks and ignored the greetings of the other dog walkers that she usually said hello to.

She was in shock.

People even called after her. Was she okay?

Jas blanked them, trying to process what had just happened.

What she had seen on the fields... in what seemed like a bomb site... was appalling. The screams. The smell of burning. Women staggering from the buildings covered in blood and soot. And then the girl – Edith – asking her for help.

Had it been real? The other dog walkers had seemed to see nothing.

Back home, still not even seven in the morning, Jas grabbed her mum's laptop and keyed Barnbow Lasses into Google. That's what Edith had called them, wasn't it? She still had plenty of time before she had to head out to school, until her dreaded assembly. And she had to know what was happening.

The dog crashed on the sofa next to her as she worked.

Jas searched for images first. She wanted to find a photo of Edith. The girl. What was her second name? It took Jas a few seconds to remember.

Then her heart stopped.

Sykes.

That was her name. Edith Sykes. Is that really what she'd said?

Jas looked outside at the road sign to her street. Edith Sykes Drive.

She swallowed.

Everything was starting to feel like a dream again. But, no, this wasn't *Alice in Wonderland*: it was Jasminder in Leeds. And it was real. It had happened.

Hadn't it?

The few years since they had lived here Jas had never wondered why her road was called Edith Sykes Drive, or even who Edith Sykes was. Now she stared at her computer, wide-eyed and typed the words Edith Sykes.

The first thing she found was a blog by someone called Louise Birch, who worked at the Leeds local history library. It was called *Remembering the Barnbow Tragedy*.

Jas read on and could hardly believe the words in front of her. There had been a factory right here where she lived over 100 years ago. Here! Where her estate was and the fields beyond. The factory had made shells for the First World War. Shells was the name for the bombs that were fired at the enemy.

And – Jas read – in 1916 there had been an explosion in the factory because one of the shells that the Barnbow Lasses had been filling with explosives had gone off.

Thirty-five women had been killed.

Thirty-five.

Jas put her hand to her mouth. She felt sick, dizzy. What was this?

Jas's mind flashed back to what she had seen when she was walking the dog, what she had witnessed. She shuddered. She never wanted to see anything like that again and started to wonder why this girl had come from nowhere and made her watch it.

Needing answers, Jas scrolled down and found a list of names. She knew what she would find and she could feel her heart hammering as she studied the list.

Maggie Barker.

Olive Yeates.

Ethel Jackson.

Names Jas saw every day. The names of the streets on her estate. From this list of women who had died making shells for the First World War.

And then – towards the end of the list – this:

Edith Sykes of Leeds, died aged 15: Edith's older sister Agnes also worked in Barnbow's Room 42 but the night of the explosion Agnes was home sick with flu. Edith was injured in the explosion and taken to Leeds Infirmary where she died several weeks later. It is possible that Edith lied about her age to work at Barnbow as birth records indicate she was 15 at the time of her death.

Fifteen? Edith Sykes hadn't even been a woman: she'd been a girl. A girl only two years older than Jas.

Jas frowned. She understood now what was happening: Edith Sykes was haunting her.

Jas swallowed and – desperate to know more – she read on.

'Due to government censorship and fears over morale, the explosion and location of Barnbow were kept out of the national press, and the obituaries of the women who died carried ambiguous references to "killed in accident" or "died suddenly".'

Jas was horrified. So, even after Edith had been killed her family had not been able to say she had died making bombs to help win the war. No one had been allowed to remember her and what she had done.

How would that have felt?

No wonder she was a ghost, Jas thought. She had unfinished business.

Jas longed to speak to Edith Sykes again. She looked out onto the street to see if she was there at the top of the road, waiting, like she had been that

morning. But the street light she had been under was off and there was no trace now of Edith Sykes, other than a street sign bearing her name.

‘I need to see you again,’ Jas muttered, scrolling through the pages of information about the Barnbow Lasses, learning more and more. ‘Where are you?’

And then – as she talked to herself – a photograph appeared on screen. Jas recognised it immediately.

The memorial. In the park. Just up the road. She had walked past it thousands of times going to play tennis or football or to have a picnic. Her mum had even told her about it. That the memorial was there to remember the Barnbow Lasses. How could she have forgotten that?

Jas stood up. ‘Come on,’ she said to the dog. ‘Walk.’

The dog eyed Jas, unmoving.

‘You’re coming,’ Jas said firmly, glancing at the clock. Half-past seven. An hour before school. ‘We still have time.’

Manston Lane was busy with cars and bikes and lorries and buses. And with children walking to schools in their different coloured uniforms, when Jas arrived at the park.

The memorial was right next to the main gate. Jas stopped and read the words written on the large piece of stone.

THE BARNBOW LASSES

THEIR COURAGE AND SACRIFICE WILL NOT BE FORGOTTEN

Courage?

Sacrifice?

Jas nodded. That was right. This memorial said it. And yet, even though she had lived here for years and had even been told about the Barnbow Lasses,

she had forgotten these women, just like everyone walking to school or driving to work were forgetting them.

And on today of all days, November 11th, when loads of them would stop and remember soldiers and airmen and sailors at 11 a.m. In silence.

But would they remember the Barnbow Lasses too?

Jas understood that the words courage and sacrifice that were etched in front of her were important for the soldiers in her assembly today. They had all shown huge courage. They had sacrificed their freedom, even their lives.

But she knew that the women at Barnbow had done that too. What Jas had seen in those sheds came back to her. The terrible scenes. Women dead or dying, screaming out in pain. Appalling visions she would never forget.

And now Jas felt like she had shown no courage. Because, when Edith Sykes had taken her to witness the scenes in Room 42, she had run away. Even after Edith had asked her directly for help.

Jas felt moisture on her face. It wasn't raining.

She turned to walk away, glancing back to see if the ghost of Edith Sykes was there – where she had hoped to see her, hoped to say she was sorry, that she wanted to help – but she was not.

Jas heard a church bell chiming eight times.

Eight o'clock already. She needed to get the dog home and then on to school.

Two-and-a-half hours later Jas stood facing the rest of her year group. Two-hundred-and-nine year eights sat watching her. In her hands she held the notes for her project about the soldiers in the trenches, the one that had kept her awake half the night. But in her mind she was still reeling from what she had seen and read and felt that morning. She had longed to see Edith Sykes again at the memorial. Why had she not been there?

'Go on, Jas,' Mrs Milner, her head of year, urged.

Jas nodded, swallowed, looked at her notes and opened her mouth to speak about the soldiers.

And then she noticed that she was not alone at the front of the assembly, that someone was standing alongside her. Jas looked into the eyes of the other person who was there with her.

It was then that she made a decision to take a risk. To show a tiny bit of courage herself.

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