

ANGEL OF GRASMERE

FROM DUNKIRK TO THE FELS

TOM PALMER



SIX

When Tarn removed the blackout blinds from her bedroom window on Christmas morning, she saw St Oswald's churchyard blanketed in snow, some of it sculpted up against the gravestones in strange twisted shapes. The Grasmere gingerbread shop at the church gates was invisible, a snowdrift reaching almost to its roof. The fells were white with snow and the skies were blue.

Tarn climbed out of bed fully aware that she had to try her hardest today. Her parents would be low. This was the first Christmas without Joss. How would they cope with that?



She knew that they would put on brave faces and try to hide their pain so that she could enjoy the day. And that she had to do the same. Hearing them in the kitchen, Tarn grabbed the stocking that had been filled at the bottom of her bed and bounded loudly down the wooden stairs.

Her mum and dad looked dishevelled but smiled when they saw her.

“Merry Christmas,” Tarn said, faking excitement, trying to be what she had always been on Christmas morning. The child. The thing that gave her parents’ lives meaning. After hugging them both hard, she showed them what she had found in the stocking at the end of her bed.

An apple. A thruppenny bit. A small packet of crayons.

Smiling, her parents gave her three wrapped presents. A thick notebook. A new set of pencils.



And a reading book that she could feel through the wrapping paper. Tarn ripped at the paper, her heart beating with excitement. Could it be?

She held a blue hardback book in her hands.

The Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth.

“My own copy,” she beamed. “Thank you.”

Mum smiled but said nothing.

Dad said, “I picked it up from Sam Read’s yesterday. Early.”

Tarn could not speak now. She stood and went to hug each of her parents. Long, tight hugs. She squeezed extra hard to try to convey the feelings she knew she had no chance of putting into words.

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After enjoying an early Christmas lunch with her parents, Tarn helped wash up, then she was off to join her friends at Blind Tarn Gill Farm. She stuffed two



small parcels into her pocket before she left her house, pulling on her coat, gloves and Wellington boots.

Tarn's parents had been happy their daughter had plans. "Go," they said. "Go and enjoy yourself with your friends."

And she would. The snow was deep on College Street, but she made it to Sam Read Bookseller's by lifting her boots high. Glancing in the bookshop window, she saw a gap in the window display. The blue hardback copy of Dorothy Wordsworth's diaries was hers now, she thought, and smiled.

Skirting snowdrifts that reached up to her waist, she headed up Easedale Road alongside the meadows that were now just great expanses of white. Over Goody Bridge, then alongside Easedale Beck and up the track to the farm. The track was hidden under the snow, so she had to follow the walls to avoid falling in the beck. The whole scene



reminded Tarn of photographs Peter had shown her of Shackleton's journey across Antarctica.

Approaching the farm, Tarn saw Peter's father, Peter, Eric and the two Land Girls – Margaret and Kathleen – studying a huge snowdrift that had built up in the corner of the field.

Why are they just staring at a snowdrift? she wondered. And then, putting her hand to her mouth, Tarn understood. This was the place where the flock of sixty Herdwick sheep would always gather when weather came down off the fells.

Were the sheep under the snowdrift? Had they suffocated in the snow? If so, it would be a devastating blow to the farm.

Tarn saw Peter talking intensely with his dad as she approached. What was going on? Why were they not digging the sheep out? Some might have survived, surely? Was it not worth trying?



“What’s happened?” Tarn shouted. “Are the sheep under there?”

Grinning, Peter explained, “They’re already in the barn.”

“What?”

Peter was pointing at the barn. They walked towards it, and Tarn saw the whole flock safe, eating hay that had been strewn on the ground for them, an empty feedbag on the floor.

“We all slept through the snow,” Peter added. “Didn’t even smell it. But someone must have moved them. The sheep couldn’t have got in themselves as the barn door is always shut at night.”

“A miracle,” Peter’s father muttered.

“Another miracle,” Eric added. “How could this happen in the night while we all slept if it wasn’t a miracle? We’ve been blessed again.”

Tarn smiled. “Maybe it was the angel,” she



said. "Saved the whole flock. Wanted to help you. Wanted ..." Tarn felt her voice fail her, her eyes hot with tears. She looked down and swallowed. Because she really wanted there to be an angel now. Someone that was watching over them, protecting the village.

A little while later, a cold wind whipped up around the bottoms of the fells and some meltwater leaked in through the barn roof. The three friends, along with Kathleen and Margaret in their Women's Land Army dungarees and boots, sat in the barn, bales of straw set out like armchairs.

They exchanged stories of Christmases they'd had before the war. Margaret and Kathleen, whom Tarn had not known were sisters, talked about their home town of Warrington, Eric about Manchester. Then Peter mentioned that he'd heard on the wireless that a town in the north-west had been bombed early on Christmas Eve.



“They never say where was hit,” he explained, “in case the Germans are listening. They’d know they’d been successful then.”

Tarn glanced at Kathleen and Margaret and saw both of them looking at the floor of the barn.

“Oh, it’s not Warrington, is it?” Tarn asked.

“No, love,” Margaret replied.

“But you know what town was bombed?” Peter asked.

“One of the Army lads told us last night at the Christmas Eve dance in Ambleside,” Kathleen said.

“So where?” Eric asked. “Where got bombed?”

No words of reply from Margaret or Kathleen. They both just looked at Eric.

“It was Manchester, wasn’t it?” Eric pressed.

Another silence.

Tarn knew the truth from the reaction of the two young women. Kathleen went to sit next to Eric



and put her arm around him. "I'm sorry. Yes. It was Manchester. But it's a huge place. I'm sure your mum is fine."

The air hung heavy with gloom, and any warmth seemed to waft out of the barn. Kathleen moved back next to her sister, leaving a spare place next to Eric on the straw bale. Tarn walked across to sit with him, putting her hand on his hand.

"I'm sorry, Eric," she whispered.

"It's OK." Eric forced a smile. "I'll just write to my mum. Then she'll write back. And we'll know she's all right."

"Is there anything we can do?" Tarn asked.

Eric shook his head.

No one had a clue what to say now. Recognising this, and attempting to lighten the mood, Eric took a deep breath.

"You can do something, actually," he grinned.



“The three of us, anyway. Let’s go up to the tarn and get some fresh air. Will you come?”

“Yes.” Tarn nodded without hesitating.

Peter looked up at the fell, seeing the snow piled up against walls and obscuring Sour Milk Gill.

“It might be dangerous,” he warned.

Tarn watched Eric’s face drop with disappointment, and she stood up, hands on hips. She wanted to do something to cheer Eric up.

“If I were Hitler, I’d invade on Christmas Day,” she said, “when he thinks everyone is celebrating in front of the fire with their families. There’ll be no one on the fells after all this snow. Perfect for the Germans.”

Peter stood up.

“Then we don’t have any choice,” he said. “As long as we’re careful.”

