

WHEN *the* WAR CAME HOME

LESLEY PARR

BLOOMSBURY

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Books by Lesley Parr

The Valley of Lost Secrets
When the War Came Home

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CHAPTER ONE

FRIDAYS ARE THE BEST DAYS

The trouble with a good chip shop is there's always a queue. Chippy Gaynor smiles from behind the counter, her cheeks round and red.

'The usual, Natty, love?'

I nod.

'With a few extra on top.' She winks. 'Feeding you up, I am.'

She scoops a big portion. I reach over the counter and nick one, fanning my open mouth as the hot chip burns my tongue.

‘Duw, now there’s a swish coat. New, is it?’ she says, using tongs to pick up the cod in batter and plonk it on top of the steaming chips.

‘Yes,’ I say, smoothing my hand over the collar, careful not to touch it with the greasy fingers that picked up the chip. ‘For my birthday.’

‘Well you’re a lucky dab.’ She smiles. ‘How’s your mam?’

‘Busy,’ I say, thinking of all the extra hours she’s worked to buy this coat.

‘I know that feeling!’ She grins, nodding at the queue. ‘Fourpence please, love.’ She holds out her plump hand. Chippy Gaynor’s whole family is plump; you never go hungry if you have a chip shop. ‘Your poor mam though. Gets his money’s worth out of those factory girls, Litton does. Slave driver, he is.’

I pay, thank her and rush home, holding the fat, hot packet under my nose, breathing in newspaper and salt and vinegar. Fridays are the best days.

They don’t have time to get cold – two doors down, above the ironmonger’s and up some narrow stairs, I push open the door to our flat.



Mam's laying the table. There's three plates, one with bread and margarine on, and two glasses. Dandelion and burdock for me, stout for her. Friday night is for treats. No matter how bad things get, it's a tradition in our family. There are flowers in the bud vase in the middle of the table; they're only dog daisies picked from the lane, but they're pretty. Mam says Dad used to do it for her, but I was too small when he died to remember things like that. So now she does it for me and she always makes it nice.

'Chippy Gaynor gave us extra,' I say, kissing Mam's cheek and taking off my coat.

'Lovely.'

'I got the best bit of cod too.'

'Good girl.'

She's not looking at me, but I can see her eyes are red. She sighs as she shares out the chips. She must be tired. Like Gaynor said, Litton is a slave driver. I cut the fish not quite in half and give her the biggest end. She swaps it for the one on my plate as soon as I sit down.

'You're a growing girl. Now, tell me ... how was school?'



‘Good,’ I say. ‘We had boiled ham with potatoes and peas.’

She smiles. ‘Funny how lessons are never the first thing you tell me about.’

I shrug. ‘I’m a growing girl! Arithmetic was hard, singing was easy. We had jam roly-poly for pudding. I had seconds.’

Mam laughs but it looks a bit forced. She folds a piece of bread round some chips and licks the dripping margarine off her hand. ‘Natty?’ I look up. ‘You know how, on Monday, Lorraine Marshall had to go to the doctor?’

I nod.

‘Well, as if that didn’t cost her enough, Litton docked her wages for the half-hour she was gone. Half an hour! Even after I made up her quota in my dinner break.’

‘You never told me that.’

She takes a big bite of her butty so she doesn’t have to answer.

‘Why are you telling me this now?’ I ask. ‘You haven’t done something, have you?’



‘Why do you think I did something?’

‘Because you always do, Mam.’ She’ll have stuck her nose in, gone on about workers’ rights and fairness and, if she can manage to fit it in, votes for women too. Champion of the underdog, that’s my mother.

‘Well, Natty, people need to see a doctor if they’re ill without the fear of losing money.’ She looks at her plate. ‘So I called a meeting today, to see what can be done about Litton ... and ... he sacked me.’

‘He *what*?’

She puts down her knife and fork, and rubs her forehead. ‘It’s just not right how he treats people. He needs to understand how it is for us. For the workers.’

‘But you always say he’s never had to struggle for anything in his life! He inherited that factory, so why would he listen now? It’s pointless.’

‘Standing up for what you believe in is never pointless. Especially now. The war is over. It’s the twenties, things are changing.’

‘But the only thing that changed was you getting the sack.’



‘Eat your tea before it gets cold.’

I slowly peel the batter off my fish, not looking at her.

‘There’s something else,’ Mam says. ‘But it’s going to be all right because I have a plan.’ She takes a big breath. ‘If we can’t find the rent this week, Mr Tipton will throw us out ... I ... I got a bit behind, see.’

Oh no, not again. I don’t want to move *again*.

‘How? How can you get behind? You always say a roof over our heads is more important than anything!’ I point to the fish and chips. ‘Why would you give me money for this if we didn’t have the rent?’

Mam’s quiet. She’s looking at her and Dad’s wedding photograph on the cabinet. Friday night supper was something else Dad used to do. That’s why. But things have been tight before – why is it so bad this time? Her eyes move to my coat hanging on the hook by the door.

And suddenly I’m furious. But not with her, with myself. If I hadn’t stopped outside Nicholls every time we passed, looking up at that coat in the window, if I hadn’t grown so fast and always had extra helpings



of school dinners, I'd still be in my old coat. It would have patched. We could have let the seams out again.

'We can take it back,' I whisper, the words scratching over the lump in my throat. 'My coat, we can take it back.'

'It won't be enough, sweetheart.'

'So you picked a fight with Litton, when it wasn't even your fight to have, when you knew we were behind on the rent?'

'Lorraine Marshall's got her girl home with the babies, her being a war widow. But, Natty –' she leans across the table – 'Like I said, I have a plan. We won't be out on the street. I wrote to your Aunty Mary and Uncle Dewi last week.'

'Why?'

'When your dad died, they were good to us. They've always said if we need anything, I only have to ask.'

'Ask for what? Not money! Mam, that's shaming!'

'No, no. Not money. Just a place to stay until I can find a new job—'

'*But don't they live in Ynysfach?*' I drop my fork and it clatters on the plate. Mam winces.



‘Yes, love, that’s where we’re going. I got a letter back this morning.’

I frown. ‘And you wrote to them *last week*? But you lost your job today?’

Mam shuffles in her seat. ‘I knew it was coming. Litton was just looking for a way to get rid of me.’

‘And you gave him one. You knew we were behind on the rent and you still had to make trouble!’

Mam looks at her plate for a few seconds, then pushes her chair back. ‘I’m going for a walk.’

‘But your food!’

‘I’ll have it after.’

‘Cold?’ I say. ‘Because there’s not enough coal to heat the oven. Lorraine Marshall can look after herself, Mam. What about us?’

She doesn’t look at me, just leaves me at the table.

‘What about *us*?’ I shout after her, but she’s gone.

So much for Fridays being the best days.



CHAPTER TWO

LEAVING LIBANWY

No, I don't remember Uncle Dewi's smallholding. I don't even know what a smallholding is.'

Mam sighs. 'Well, you were very young – but you did like the pigs!'

'He's got pigs?' I say, stuffing my best Sunday dress into a small suitcase.

'Yes. And chickens. And a goat, I think. A smallholding is like a farm, only –' she takes the dress out and folds it neatly, pressing it back into the case – 'smaller.'

Aunty Mary said we must come as soon as possible. So here we are, four days after Mam got the sack, packing up our things. Again. But this time we're moving away from Libanwy – and my school and my friends – and going to live with smelly animals and some relatives I don't even know.

'It's very kind of them to allow us to stay while we get back on our feet, and it won't be for long. I promise.'

'Like you promised not to cause problems at the factory?'

She goes stiff for a second, then carries on in an even jollier voice. 'You won't get to see your cousin Sara though, she's a maid in Cardiff now, but Huw's at home still, and Nerys is your age – that'll be nice, won't it?'

Why do grown-ups always think you'll get on with people just because they're the same age as you?

Mam sighs again and closes the lid of the case. 'Sit on this, will you? It'll never close otherwise.'

I thud down on it, extra hard.

*



I wish we didn't have to walk past the factory to get to the bus stop. And that the bus wasn't going at the end of the factory dinner break, because there are all Mam's old workmates, standing on the steps waiting to go back in.

We try to hurry past but it's no use. A woman in a blue headscarf steps out of the little crowd, pointing at our suitcases. It's Lorraine Marshall.

'Ffion, is this because of me?' she asks.

Mam slows but keeps walking.

'No, Lorraine. It was a long time coming.'

The factory doors open and there's Dennis Litton, looking like a smug cockerel. He scans the crowd until his eyes rest on Mam. 'You no longer work here, Mrs Lydiate. You need to remove yourself from my premises.'

'I'm not on your premises,' Mam says, stepping forward so her toe is right on the edge of where the steps start.

Oh Mam, what are you doing?

'If *this lot* want to put up with your tyranny –' she nods towards the factory girls but keeps her eyes on



him – ‘more fool them. Me? I’m glad to see the back of you.’

The bus is pulling up, so I run and get the driver to wait. Mam strolls across the road, her head held high.

‘She won’t be a minute now,’ I say.

The driver turns around in his seat. ‘What’s going on there then?’

‘Nothing.’

I climb the steps, annoyed with myself for feeling a little bit proud of her when I’m supposed to be cross.

I stare out of the window as we bounce along the long road to Ynysfach. The tree-covered drop into the valley is so deep I can’t see the river at the bottom. And then we’re climbing even higher, the driver forcing his bus up and up over the mountain. Up and down, up and down, all the way to Uncle Dewi’s.

Mam offers me a crumpled paper bag. ‘Mint humbug?’

I take one. ‘Thanks.’

‘Oh, you’re speaking to me then?’



I look away and roll my eyes. She keeps on. 'It's a nice afternoon for a bus ride.'

She's trying to make the best of it, but I'm not going to join in and treat this like some sort of jaunt. We've just left the nicest flat we've ever lived in and the only village I know. And it's all her fault.

'I remember Nerys now,' I say, glancing at her. Before she can answer I add, 'She was annoying.'

I pop the humbug in my mouth, fold my arms and look out of the window again.

Two more humbugs later, the bus pulls up opposite some bushes and flowerbeds set behind railings. There's a sign saying *Ynysfach Park*.

'Must be our stop,' Mam says. We shuffle along the aisle with our cases and step down on to the pavement, just as a nurse and two soldiers in Hospital Blues and khaki caps come towards us. The nurse is pushing one in a wheelchair; the other is really young, not much older than me. Almost too young to have fought in the war. And too young to look so sad. He's very fair, in a gingery-blond sort of way, even his eyelashes are pale. I realise my suitcase is in the way

of the wheelchair so I go to move it just as the younger soldier reaches out as if to help. But his hand shakes and shakes, so he pulls it back. We lock eyes for a second that feels like forever; like we're both unsure what to do next. There's something about the way he is. It's like how I feel.

Lost.

'It's all right, I've got it,' I say as the others and Mam say hello, then the soldiers and nurse cross the road over to the park.

A passenger calls out for the bus to get a move on, and the driver leans out of his seat and glowers up the aisle. 'Have some respect, mun!' Then he faces the road again and makes a salute before pulling off.

Mam looks around. 'I don't think this is right, there are meant to be shops. We must have got off too early.'

I huff, but say nothing, just pick up my suitcase and trudge down the hill.

