



PART ONE

PUTTING THINGS TOGETHER

1.

NORFOLK, EARLY MARCH, 1945

RUTH ACKROYD WAS in the garden checking the rhubarb when the RAF Spitfire accidentally shot her chimney pot to bits. The shock of it brought the baby on three weeks early.

“I was expectun,” she’d often say, over the years. “But I wunt expectun *that*.”

She’d had cravings throughout her pregnancy, ambitious ones: tinned ham, chocolate, potted shrimp, her husband’s touch, rhubarb. Rhubarb was possible, though. Ruth and her mother, Win, grew it in the cottage garden. They forced it, which is to say, they covered the plants with upended buckets so that when new tendrils poked through the soil, they found themselves in the dark and grew like mad, groping for light. Stalks of forced rhubarb were soft, blushed, and stringless. You could eat them without sugar, which was rationed, and Ruth wanted to. So she’d waddled out into the garden on a rare day of early-spring sunshine to lift the buckets and see how things were doing. See if there was any chance of a nibble.

Win had said, “You put that ole coat on, if yer gorn out. There’s a wind’d cut yer jacksy in half.”

Ruth hadn’t seen George since his last leave, when, silently (because Win was sleeping, or listening, a thin wall away), he’d got her pregnant. Now he was in Africa. Or Italy, or somewhere. There was no way she could imagine his life. He might even be dead. The last letter had come in January:

The last push, or so they say . . . Cold as hell here in the nights . . . Hope you and the little passenger are well.

Love, George

Probably not dead, because there’d have been a telegram. Like Brenda Cushion had got, six months ago.

Ruth had gone down the garden path with her huge belly in front of her. She was frightened of it. She had little idea what giving birth might involve. Win had told her almost nothing; she was against the whole thing. Knocked up by a soldier: history repeating itself. Nothing good could come of it. The baby had grown in Ruth, struggling and undiscussed. An unspeakable thing. A wartime mishap. The two women had sat the winter out in front of dying fires of scrounged fuel, listening to the wireless, grimly knitting, not talking about it.

Washing blew on the line: tea towels, Ruth’s yellowish vests, her mother’s bloomers ballooned by the wind, their elasticated leg holes pouting.

There were two rhubarb clumps, a rusty-lipped bucket inverted over each. Ruth had leaned, grunting, to lift the first one when all hell broke loose above her head.

The air-raid siren had not gone off. The air-raid siren was a big gray thing the shape of a surprised mouth, mounted on a wooden tower behind the Black Cat Garage, more than a mile away. It made a moan that turned hysterical, then stopped, then started over again, rising in pitch, driving the local dogs mad. Throughout the summer of 1940, it had wailed day and night as the German planes came over, and Ruth and Win had spent terrible long hours in the darkness under the stairs, waiting for it to stop. Or for the riot in the skies to fall upon them and kill them. (Sometimes Ruth couldn't stand it and had gone outside, despite her mother's prayerful begging, to watch and listen to the dogfights in the sky, the white vapor trails scratched against the blue, the black trails of planes falling, the awful hesitations of engine noise that meant one of ours or one of theirs was falling, a man in a machine was burning down.) But on this occasion, the siren remained silent. There had been no German air raids for eighteen months, after all. The war was over, bar the shouting.

So Ruth was terribly surprised when the chimney pot exploded and the German plane came from behind the elms and filled the garden with savage noise. The machine was so low that she was certain it would plunge into the cottage. She fell backwards with her knees in the air and saw, with absolute clarity, the rivets that held the bomber together and its vulnerable glass nose and the black cross on its fuselage and the banner

of fire that trailed from its wing. One of the Spitfires in pursuit was pulling out of a dive. Its underbelly was the same blue as the heavy old pram that Chrissie Slender had lent her. The sound of the planes was so all-consuming that the fragments of the chimney tumbled silently into the yard. Inside their wire run, the hens frenzied.

2.

THE HEARTBROKEN NAZI

YOU'LL THINK IT fanciful, I suppose, but I blame that German plane for my lifelong dislike of surprises and loud noises. It's an unfortunate dislike, really, because the world, during my long stay in it, has got noisier and noisier. And more and more surprising.

It so happens that I know who flew that Junkers 88 over Bratton Morley, at little more than tree height, on March 9, 1945. Forty years after his suicidal flight, I was in Holland, doing research for a picture book about what were called doodlebugs, the German rocket bombs launched upon England during the last year of the Second World War. In Amsterdam I spent almost a week in a thin and lovely old building full of books and maps and documents and photographs. It was like being in an immensely tall bookcase. On my last day, one of the librarians brought me a book entitled *Our Last Days*. It was a collection of first-person accounts by German servicemen and civilians of their experiences during the final

desperate stage of the war they knew they had lost. I flicked through it and saw the words *RAF Beckford*, which was the name of the Norfolk air base four miles from where, in an untimely and messy fashion, I was born. I licked my finger and turned the pages back. The piece was a badly written (or poorly translated) story by a former Luftwaffe sergeant called Ottmar Sammer.

I struggle to tell you how I felt when I read it. A bit like looking in a mirror for the first time in years, perhaps.

Here, in my own words, is Sammer's story.

He'd spent the last two years of the war in charge of the ground crew of a squadron commanded by Oberst Karlheinz Metz. Metz was, as a pilot, both brilliant and fearless. He'd joined the Luftwaffe at the age of eighteen, and by the time he was twenty, he was dropping bombs on Spanish democrats, thus helping to inspire Picasso's *Guernica*. During the blitzkrieg on Britain, he'd flown more raids than any other officer. Once, he'd flown his crippled bomber back from Plymouth with all his crew dead. He'd won so many medals that if he'd worn them all at once, the sheer weight of them would have made him fall flat on his face. (That was the nearest that Sammer came to making a joke.) Metz was also a passionate Nazi. There was a photograph of him in the book. The odd thing was that no matter how long I studied it, I forgot what he looked like as soon as I turned the page. He was weirdly ordinary-looking.

In March 1945, Metz's squadron was stationed in western Holland. His situation was quite hopeless. American and Canadian forces were less than fifty miles from his airfield.

He had not flown, nor received any orders, for more than two weeks. Of the twenty-two planes he'd originally commanded, only seven still existed. Of those, only three were airworthy. He had, despite his demands, only enough fuel to get one plane to England and maybe back. On March 7 he received a signal from Berlin telling him to destroy his aircraft and retreat his squadron eastward to the German border.

Metz did as he was told, almost. On the morning of March 9, he assembled the surviving members of his squadron and made an inspirational speech about the defense of the Fatherland. His men raised their hats and cheered him; then they put explosives in all the aircraft except one and blew them up. Imagine that: a row of machines, which had known the inside of clouds, going bang and slumping their flaming arms to the ground. Sammer said that Metz kept his face straight while he supervised it but that tears ran down his face. (I suspect that Ottmar was gilding the lily there.) Metz then ordered his men into trucks and watched them drive away. Not all the men, though. He'd kept Sammer and the armorer and another man behind. Metz got them to fuel up the surviving 88. He also got them to load the belt-fed machine guns, despite the fact that there were no gunners. At this point Sammer realized what the Oberst was intending to do. He claims that he tried to talk Metz out of it but was ignored.

When the plane was ready, Metz led the others to the squadron headquarters, which was a low building made of concrete blocks, its curved corrugated-iron roof covered with camouflage netting. Most of the floor space was the operations room,

in which metal chairs were arranged in front of a blackboard and a map easel. Metz instructed his men to bring four chairs through into his personal quarters, which was not much more than a dimly lit cubbyhole containing his camp bed, a wardrobe, and a chest of drawers. A slightly garish color-tinted photograph of Adolf Hitler hung on the end wall. On the chest were an almost-full bottle of Cognac, six glasses, a framed photograph of a handsome young Luftwaffe pilot with dark hair flopping almost to his eyes, and a windup gramophone with a horn like a huge brass daffodil. Metz told the others to sit, then served them generous measures of brandy. He cranked the gramophone and lowered the needle onto the disc. The four men sat and listened to a piano sonata by Beethoven, the *Appassionata*. During its quieter passages, the gasping and collapsing of burning aircraft was clearly audible. During its turbulent finale, Metz, his eyes closed, made vaguely musical gestures with his fists. When it was over, he remained in his chair for several long moments, seemingly mesmerized by the blip and hiss of the gramophone. At last he got to his feet and deliberately dragged the needle across the surface of the disc, ruining it. The brass daffodil screeched in agony. Metz then stood to attention in front of the Führer's portrait, jabbed his right arm out, and said, or rather yelled, "*Heil Hitler!*" The other men hastily, if less enthusiastically, followed suit.

The Oberst picked up the photograph from the chest, tucked it under one arm, and led Sammer and the others briskly out to his plane. The radiance from the white-hot aircraft carcasses wobbled the air. He shook hands with each of the men

in turn, wished them good luck, and climbed up into the cockpit. When the engines were firing steadily, Sammer pulled the chocks away from the wheels and Metz taxied bumpily onto the runway.

Metz's last orders to Sammer had been to take his—Metz's—staff car and catch up with the rest of the evacuated squadron. Sammer disobeyed. As soon as the Junkers was airborne, the sergeant returned to the Oberst's room and stripped the sheet from the bed. He attached it to a tent pole, and with this white flag of truce sticking out of the front passenger window, he and his colleagues drove south, not east. They surrendered to the first Canadian troops they came across, who apparently treated them as a bit of a nuisance. I was a little surprised that Sammer jovially admitted to all this in his memoir, which ends at this point. I've patched together the end of Metz's story from other sources, one of which is my imagination.

Metz flew extremely low over the North Sea in an effort to sneak under British radar. At first the weather was on his side: it was very murky. It cleared, however, just before he reached the coast of East Anglia, and he was spotted by a coast-guard station just north of Great Yarmouth. (He could hardly have been missed; he nearly took the station's radio mast off.) Seven minutes from his target, he came under attack by three Spitfires.

That target was RAF Beckford, and Metz's plan was simple: he would dive his plane onto the damned place and purge it with fire. That he himself would die was no matter. To all intents and purposes, he'd been dead for almost two years already. This

had to do with the photograph that he'd propped up in the copilot's seat, the beautiful young flier with the tumbling hair. The boy had joined the squadron in the autumn of 1942, and for six months Metz had experienced an agonizing happiness. He'd felt a need to nurture and protect that went against the grain of himself. The friction had been delicious.

Then, in May 1943, the boy had been killed. Metz, frozen at the controls of his own plane, with his flight engineer screaming in his headphones, had watched it happen. Had watched the two British Hurricanes following his darling's smoking machine down like frenzied sharks following a blood leak, triangulating the bullets in as if there were an infinity of bullets. Had watched the boy's plane do a half cartwheel into the sea and simply cease to exist. Joy and love gone, bang, just like that, swallowed into the crinkled gray texture of the English sea. The Hurricanes were from RAF Beckford; Metz intended to end his war with a vengeance.

Flying solo, he had no way of defending himself from the Spitfires. Flying at so ridiculously low a height, he had very limited options for evasive action. So he stuck grimly to his course, watching the Norfolk landscape race toward and under him while his plane took an absurd number of hits and disintegrated around him. Just before he overflew a hamlet called Bratton Morley (did he glimpse a bulbous woman lifting her shocked face and falling over?), his starboard engine caught fire.

Metz didn't make it to Beckford, although he got close. Two miles from the air base, he plunged, burning, into a sizable

tract of forest known locally as Abbots Wood. He had almost certainly died by the time the ancient and heavy English trees ripped the wings from his fuselage. Jolting in the smoking cockpit, he tobogganed through the woods and plunged into a stretch of water called Perch Lake.

The woods were wet and sullen after the long winter. It didn't take long for the crews from Beckford and Borstead to hose and beat the smoldering out. They hadn't the equipment to lift the remains of the plane from the lake, so Metz was left sitting next to the shattered photograph of his lover under fifteen feet of silty water. Four months later, a courting couple were put off their stroke when his black and gassy body parts bobbed to the surface.

3.

LABOR

THE VIOLENT OUTRAGE overhead went away and was replaced by human noise: Win, howling Ruth's name, punctuated by the various aliases of God. Ruth tried to call back, tried to say that she was all right, but found that she had no voice. The next thing was the banging of the gate and young Tommy Slender running to the back door, going, "Gor, bogger! Missus? Ruthie? You seen that? That Jerry? Come over just now? That near on took our chimbley off!"

Ruth got her elbows under her and looked down the garden path. The boy was running circles on the rough concrete between the kitchen door and the outside lavatory. He had his arms stretched out and was making shooting noises; they mixed strangely with Win's howling.

"Fadda fadda fadda!"

"Ruth! Dear God, Jesus Christ!"

"Brahahaaa! You seen our boys come arter him? Bogger!"

"Sweet Lord! Ruth!"

Then Chrissie Slender was looking down at her.

"You all right?"

"Yeah."

"You dunt look it. Can you get yerself up?"

"I dunno," Ruth said.

"Wait you there, then," Chrissie said, and went away.

She came back with Win, who was white-faced and fluttery, and Tommy, who had one ear pinker than the other because it had just been slapped. They pulled and pushed Ruth to her feet. The moment she was upright, a pain the shape of lightning went through her and she cried out. She thought it might be the pain of the child dying; for all she knew, violent noise might kill babies in the womb.

After a moment or two she could walk.

In the kitchen, she perched her backside on a high stool; for some time now she'd been unable to sit comfortably on a chair. Win was useless. She walked in and out of the room, clapping her hands together, looking up at the ceiling, and mumbling stuff from the Bible. Chrissie put the kettle on the stove and made a pot of tea. She found a damp residue of sugar in a crumpled blue paper bag and spooned it all into Ruth's cup.

"Drink it," she told Ruth. "Yer've had a shock. That'll settle you."

Ruth took a couple of sips.

"Thas it," Chrissie said. "Thas brought the color back to yer cheeks already."

Ruth had, in fact, gone quite red in the face. But it wasn't

recovery. It was shame. For some reason she'd let go of herself. Her lower parts were a hot flood.

Tommy said, "Mum, she're wet herself!"

"No, she hent," Chrissie said. "And mind yer bleddy manners. Ruthie, I reckon yer waters hev broke. D'you know what that mean?"

Ruth shook her head. She had a hot wet cup and hot wet legs and didn't know what to do with any of them.

"That mean baby's ready to come," Chrissie said. "You got to get upstairs. Tommy, get you home and get the bike and fetch Nurse Salmon up here. Thomas! You hear what I say?"

"Yeah."

"Then dunt stand there lookun like a bleddy fish. Do what I told yer."

Tommy ran the thirty yards home pretending that the sky was full of Nazis and that he was dodging their bombs. His mother's bike was leaning against the wall of the outside lav. It was a woman's bike, without a crossbar. Tommy was too short to sit on the seat and reach the pedals, so he rode it standing up with his face almost level with the handlebars, machine-gunning everything that crossed his path.

District Nurse Salmon had retired in the summer of 1939. Bad timing. Ten months later, the Cottage Hospital outside Borstead started to fill up with damaged soldiers and airmen, and she found herself called upon to tender to the needs of the civilian population. The local doctor, a depressed and alcoholic

Scot, steadfastly refused to visit civilian patients who could not pay his fees (in guineas). So instead of gardening and reading and walking her fat little terrier, Miss Salmon spent the first six years of her retirement cycling hither and yon, dealing with fevers and earaches, tweezering gravel out of boys' knees, dressing ulcers, lancing boils, strapping up broken wrists and fingers, dabbing antiseptic on dog bites, stitching cuts, blitzing head lice, and, very occasionally, delivering babies. When she was paid for her services, it was usually in kind: a dozen eggs, half a week's ration of tea, a rabbit (unskinned), a bundle of carrots, a bottle of parsnip wine. She lived in a tidy little Victorian house a mile and a half from Bratton Morley, set back from the Cromer road. The house suited her; it was plain but slightly posh, as she was. She was in the kitchen frying a slice of belly pork for her lunch when Tommy Slender pounded on her door. She didn't get to eat it until ten hours later.

Ruth had imagined any number of fearful things about what they called labor. Chrissie had told her it would hurt. ("Thas like havun yer top lip pulled up over yer head.") But she'd had no idea that it would go on for hours and hours, the pain rolling through her time after time. Even so, it was not the physical agony that almost unhinged her brain; it was the embarrassment. Lying there, spraddled and heaving, with Chrissie holding her down, and old Nurse Salmon peering and poking at the parts of her that not even George had ever had a close look at. Her own language shocked her. When the pain roiled in, she swore and blasphemed in a voice that didn't seem hers. It

was like she was possessed by some raging, goaty old Satan.

Her mother used this as a pretext to excuse herself from the proceedings.

“I ent gonna stay here an lissun to any more of yer language, Ruth,” Win said. “If you can’t get ahold of yerself, I’m off downstairs.”

In truth, Win was more frightened than offended. She noisily cleared up the soot and shards of chimney pot that had spilled from the fireplace, then busied herself in the garden. When it got dark, she sat in the living room with her fingers in her ears, humming hymns. At eleven o’clock, she was shaken awake by Chrissie Slender, who said, “Win? Come you upstairs an say hello to yer grandson. He’re had a helluva struggle gettun here.”

Win followed Chrissie up the stairs. Ruth’s bedroom smelled of sweat and disinfectant. Nurse Salmon was putting things into her leather bag. A stained sheet was bundled at the foot of the bed. It would need a salt-and-soda soak, Win thought, and even that probably wouldn’t do the job. Ruth’s face was yellow and slick in the lamplight. The child lay on her chest, wrapped in a towel. From where she stood, Win could not see its face.

“So. How’re yer doing, Ruth?”

“Dear God,” Ruth said, “I ent gorn through that again.”

“I should hope not,” Win said.

In accordance with George’s wishes, Ruth named the baby boy Clement, after Clement Attlee, the leader of the Labour Party. Win thought it was absurd.

4.

WIN LITTLE

AS FAR AS Win was concerned, men were coarse and troublesome when you didn't need them and gone when you did.

She was the youngest of five children. The others were all boys.

John, the eldest, died of diphtheria before she was born.

James—Jimmy—was a dark-haired unruly boy. His love for his little sister, which was awkward but genuine, took the form of teasing, of comedic tormenting. He would carry her to the top of the dark staircase and leave her there. Then he would creep into the understairs cupboard and make spooky noises while scratching his nails against the underside of the treads. Not long after Win had started to sob in terror, he would emerge and bound up to her, saying, "Blas' me, Winnie, if there ent a big old wolf come and et up mother! But dunt yer worry;

I'll save yer." He'd scoop her up and leap, whooping, down to where lamplight and safety and a scolding awaited.

Jimmy fought with their father. Verbally and then physically. One night in 1902, when Win was four and fast asleep, Jimmy kissed her good-bye. He had blood on his teeth, which left a smear on her chin. Then he walked all the way to Lowestoft and got work on a trawler. He was fourteen years old. Five years later, he wrote a short letter to his family from Nova Scotia, in Canada. They never heard from him again.

The next boy was Albert, who was born with his brain askew. As a baby, Win would be laid for her daytime naps in a pulled-out drawer of a chest in her parents' bedroom. Albert would go up there and watch her sleeping. Then he would put something he'd found outdoors—a snail, a special stone, the part-rotted corpse of a bird—next to her and push the drawer back in. He'd coffin her. Death interested him. Not long after Jimmy set off for the coast, Albert did something to another little girl and got taken off to an institution the other side of Norwich.

Then there was Stanley. He was a year and a half older than Win. She wore his hand-me-down nappies and jumpers. Later, she walked with him to school, holding his hand until they met up with other children along the lane. Then he'd let go of her and join the other whooping boys, throwing stones at gateposts or stamping on horse-chestnut shells to expose the unready conkers nested within.

School was a room behind the church. The teacher was Miss Draper, who had a mustache and was usually angry about nothing that Win could understand. Once or twice a week, the

vicar came in and talked to them until he was as angry as Miss Draper, then blessed them and went out in a swirl of coattails.

Strangely—unnaturally, almost—Win quickly learned to read. She helped her elder brother with his lessons, which were mostly passages from the Bible. She moved her finger along the text while he stumbled across words that had no meaning for either of them: epistle, foreskin, Jericho, abomination, deliverance.

Stanley looked like his mother: soft and pale and worried.

The father of these ill-starred children was a small, hard, bearded patriarch called John Sparling. He was the head stockman for the Mortimers, who owned that part of the world, including the cottage the family lived in. Sparling wore brown leather boots and gaiters, which his wife cleaned and oiled every night before going to bed. He smelled of cow. (Until she died, Win would picture him whenever she got a whiff of manure.) The death, disappearance, and madness of his first three sons shamed and angered him. The gentleness of the fourth dismayed him. He blamed his wife: some wrongness in her bloodline or a crookedness of her womb. The late birth of a daughter was a sort of irrelevance, a mishap. But, surprising himself, he came to love her. Winifred was sharp and watchful, like himself. By the time she was four, she was standing on a stool alongside her mother, peeling potatoes at the sink with the second-best knife. She ran to greet him on his homecoming, asking after the sick calf he'd spoken of the night before. In the parlor, after dinner, Stanley would say, "Tell that rhyme we learned at school terday, Win."

And she would recite it, word-perfect, and Sparling would take her on his knee and say, "Yer smart as a whip, gal. Smart as a whip."

But Win grew away from him. She got older before he wanted her to, before he'd noticed. By the time she was ten, she had outgrown his rough advances. She had sided with her mother, had come to regard men as A Cross to Be Borne. She was keen on chapel, singing clearly and accurately the hymns her father mumbled.

In 1914 John Sparling died of what was then called farmer's lung. His persistent light cough had deepened during the autumn of the preceding year. By Christmas he was spitting blood into his handkerchiefs, and he died just before Easter.

His wife's fear was greater than her grief. The cottage was tied, which is to say that it came with her late husband's job. The possibility—the very real possibility—of becoming homeless made her sick with dread. So when she saw Edmund Mortimer awaiting her at the cemetery gate, she faltered and gripped Stanley's arm.

Mortimer removed his black hat and held it in front of him by its brim. Win observed the nervous way his fingers toyed with the sleek fabric. It meant that he was embarrassed to be giving them notice, and she was glad.

"I'm deeply sorry for your loss, Mrs. Sparling."

"Thank you, sir."

"And I share it," Mortimer said. "John was as good a man

with livestock as any in the county. I scarce know what I shall do without him.”

Win’s mother kept her head lowered. “Nor dunt I,” she said.

It was as bold a thing as Win had ever heard her say.

“No. I . . .” Mortimer cleared his throat. “What I wanted to say, Mrs. Sparling, is that I don’t want you worrying yourself about the cottage. I’m putting Sam Eldon in charge of the stock, and he and Mrs. Eldon are well settled where they are. So I’ve no need of your place. It’s yours for as long as you want to stay. The rent is something we might talk about some other time.”

At this point Mrs. Sparling wept for the first time in a week. She snuffled her gratitude, almost choked on her relief. Stanley made an awkward humming noise that was perhaps meant to be consoling.

Edmund Mortimer looked discomfited and tried to be jocular. He glanced a smile in Win’s direction.

“Besides,” he said, “from what I hear, your lovely daughter might not be single for that much longer. It wouldn’t do for her to be without a place.”

Win was not such a fool as to be unable to read the message in that remark. The family would not be homeless, but it would need a man, a breadwinner. And that would not be Stanley. Still working out his apprenticeship to a baker in Borstead, his pay was a pittance. Bread maker, yes, almost. Breadwinner, no. Mr. Mortimer was referring, slyly and benignly, to Percy Little.

Percy was a year older than Win and had been a nuisance

for most of her life. As a boy, he'd been a ringleader of the small mob who'd pelted acorns and snowballs at her. He'd put a toad in her school desk. He'd darted sticky arrowgrass at her skirts, untugged her hair ribbons. Over the years, Win's tormentors had dwindled away, attracted by younger, softer targets or repulsed by her icy disdain and wicked tongue. But Percy had persevered in his pursuit of her. Gradually his harassment had softened into a rough courtship. When he was thirteen, he'd persuaded Win to kiss him on the mouth. She'd thought the experience peculiar and not worth repeating. Later Win had started to fill her clothes in a way that she found troubling and Percy found interesting. He wanted to touch her in particular places and she wouldn't let him.

When he left school, Percy had gone to be a stable-lad for the Mortimers. He discovered he had an affinity with the huge, placid cart horses and plow horses. He loved the careful way they placed their feathery, iron-shod feet on the earth. When they were not working and needed exercise, he led them past the Sparling cottage and hoisted squealing Win up onto their backs. She found it thrilling to be so high off the ground, perched atop half a ton of warm and muscular architecture.

During the winter, when her father was dying, Percy made repeated efforts to put his hands inside her clothes. She wouldn't let him.

He'd said, "If we was married, Win, yer'd hev to."

Walking with Stanley and her mother back from the graveyard, thinking about what Mortimer had said, Win understood—

or thought she understood—what the framework of her life had to be.

So the next time Percy put his hand on her leg, she said, “Not till we’re married, Percy.”

“Yer’ll hev me, then?”

“If yer behave yerself,” she said.

Afterward she realized that she’d be called Win Little. A foolish name.

Their engagement was accelerated by the First World War. Magnificent recruiting sergeants addressed gatherings on village greens and in church halls, speaking of Heroism and Duty and the Vileness of the Huns. From behind them, vicars and squires and chairmen of parish councils glared into the audience, daring cowards to meet their gaze. Men started vanishing from the countryside, marching away accompanied by faltering music. On one Saturday afternoon, six of Mortimer’s men went off and joined up; they came back from the recruiting office beery, puffed up, and boastful.

Win thought that Percy might not go if he was married.

The wedding took place five days after her eighteenth birthday. Stanley gave her away, fumbling it. Percy moved into the cottage, sleeping with Win in the bedroom that Jimmy and Albert had shared.

She kept him safe for a whole year. He showed no sign of wanting to fight, and because he was a newlywed, he was not condemned for it. No one handed him a white feather, that soft and silent accusation of cowardice.

Two days after their first wedding anniversary, Percy was conscripted. He went to Thetford for six weeks' basic training, then came back to her, a stranger in a manure-colored uniform, his eyes unfamiliar beneath the peak of his cap. He insisted that they have their photograph taken before he went to France. They walked to Borstead, from where they took the train to Norwich. The photographer's studio was on Prince of Wales Road. They had to queue; other men in uniform with their wives and fiancées were there ahead of them. They posed in front of a painted backdrop of a garden with a fountain. Afterward they had tea and cake at a café in Tombland, in the shadow of the cathedral.

He came home once more after that. Then in 1918 he was shot in the belly and drowned facedown in a Belgian meadow that battle had turned into a smoking and bloody swamp.

Win was very angry. She was angry with him for getting killed. She was angry with Edmund Mortimer, who could've told the Conscription Board that Percy was an essential agricultural worker. She was angry because she was pregnant. She was angry because there'd been no pleasure in getting that way. (How would there have been? She was a prig; he was unsubtle.)

When the baby was born, she called it Ruth. A biblical name. Also a word that meant sorrow and regret.