

## **A Bag of Cherries**

This story begins a long time ago before any of you were born – before even myself, your teachers, or any of your Mums and Dads were born in fact. It's about a little girl who lived on a farm with her mother and her older brother. This farm was surrounded by beautiful countryside of dark forests and lakes that shone like crystal in the morning sun, and she and her brother loved going off into the dark forests to play or skating on the lakes in winter when they were frozen solid with ice. But best of all she liked to play in the orchard of cherry trees and smell their blossom in the spring.

Every day she stood at the edge of the cherry orchard by the farm gate, looking down the long and winding lane into the distance. Watching, waiting and hoping. Hoping to see the lone figure of her Dad making his way down the lane back to her.

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You see, she'd never actually met her Dad. He was a soldier and he'd gone off to fight just before she was born. Because far away from the forests and meadows that she knew, there was a war raging. It had been a long war and one that involved all the countries of the world.

Her mother told her that it had been started by an angry, hateful, bitter man called Adolf Hitler. In the years before the war began, this man Hitler and his followers used to march past their farm in noisy processions. They all wore a brown uniform and on their arms had a red armband with a white circle in the middle. At the centre of the circle was a twisted black cross with crooked arms. It was a strange, ugly shape, but as time went on, more and more

people had begun to wear it. Hitler had told all the people of the country that whatever problems they had – not enough money, or enough food, or a nice enough house were all the fault of other people, people who were different. But he would solve this problem. He would get rid of these different people and lead the country to glory. Soon, so many people were so eager to believe him that the whole country seemed to be marching behind him.

Just like that twisted shape, all Hitler's words and promises were nothing more than twisted, ugly lies. But with the people too scared, too weak or just not willing to question the lies they were being told, like a hate filled version of the pied piper, Hitler led them - and the rest of the world - into the disaster of that terrible war.

But now at last, the news had reached the farm that the war was finally over. And the little girl was happy because she knew that soon her Dad would be home. Her Dad had been a carpenter and loved carving furniture from wood. She didn't think that he had really liked Hitler and certainly hadn't wanted to go off and fight for him. But Hitler had attracted a big crowd of bullies who scared a lot of people - and when people are scared they can do terrible things.

But Hitler and his bullies were gone now, and so everything would be alright again, she told herself as she stood watching at the farm gate.

Finally, the day came that she had longed for. There in the distance she spotted a lone figure. And he was wearing a soldier's uniform. Her heart leapt. But as he came further down the lane, she saw that he was not alone. There were more soldiers behind him. And

further still behind them, she heard the distant rumble of tanks. Above her she heard the drone of engines and looking up, she saw the sky full of planes.

As the soldiers came closer, she saw that they were wearing a different uniform. On it was a red flag with a golden hammer and sickle, and they spoke a strange language that she did not recognise.

Bursting out of the farmhouse, her older brother grabbed her by the arm and pulled her inside while her mother bolted the door shut and held them both close. These were soldiers from far off Russia she warned them, her voice trembling – a savage merciless enemy who would not spare them.

Suddenly the door flew off its hinges and the soldiers burst in, shouting and waving their guns at them to get out of the house.

If you had to suddenly leave your house – what would you take with you? Xbox? Phone? Your favourite teddy? The girl, her Mum and brother grabbed whatever they could fit - and it wasn't much - onto a small handcart. There was no room for any toys but the girl found one lonely doll and clutched it close to her. Then, with heavy hearts, they left the home that they had loved forever.

As they began to push their cart down the lane, one of the Russian soldiers suddenly called out to them to stop. Terrified, they turned around fearing for their lives. But to their surprise, the young Russian soldier threw his rifle to the ground and climbed up into one of

the cherry trees. Quickly, he began picking the fruit. Then, dropping from the tree he walked over and, with a smile, gave the girl and her brother each a bag of fat, juicy, ripe cherries.

They waved goodbye to him and, with their mother pushing the cart, they set off with heavy hearts. Along the way they were joined by people from the village who had all been driven out of their homes. Old people hobbling on crutches, hungry children, women clutching crying babies. The further they walked, more people joined them. Hundreds more, then thousands more. A sad, long, ragged procession, of people all driven out of the place they had called home, the place of dark forests and shining lakes. None of them would ever see that homeland again. In the years to come even its very name would be rubbed off the map and forgotten as it became home to someone else.

So this long, sad procession of ragged people stumbled West with their heads bowed, hoping to escape the tanks, planes and Russian soldiers who were always not far behind.

And never daring to stop because if they did, they would be caught.

Being hunted by enemy soldiers wasn't their only worry. They were always hungry and the best their mother could do to feed them was to steal potatoes from fields on farms long abandoned.

Eventually, after fleeing across a frozen sea called the Baltic, they reached the capital city, the city of Berlin. Or what was left of it. Because now it lay all in ruins, all its buildings reduced to charred, jagged wreckage jutting up like broken old teeth.

Cold and hungry, the girl and her brother huddled together to keep warm amidst the rubble. And all their mother could give them to fill the gnawing hunger in their bellies was some cold grey soup served in an old tin can that she had found lying among the shattered bricks.

I thought of that little girl and her brother, last May when, in the middle of the first lockdown, we remembered the anniversary of VE day - that 75 years ago the Second World War had come to an end in Europe. It was a good thing that we remembered this but sadly, for that little girl and her brother and hundreds of thousands more like them, the end of the war didn't mean that their troubles were over.

Maybe you're wondering what happened to this little girl and her brother. Maybe you're worrying whether they ever made it to safety. Well, if that's the case, I can tell you not to worry - they did eventually find a new home where they could live safely. And when the little girl grew up, she moved to England and eventually became Matthew's grandma.

The place where she came from, the land of forests and lakes is gone now. You won't find it on a map. All that remains of that place are memories. We still think of her a lot and remember her story. I also like to remember the kind Russian soldier who wasn't at all savage or merciless, but instead climbed up into a tree to give two frightened children a bag of cherries each. He may have spoken a different language, worn a different uniform, and come from a far away country but none of that mattered. What really matters was his simple act of kindness. What made him be so kind? Perhaps he too remembered that somewhere far, far away in Russia he too had a little son and daughter who missed their Dad and wanted him to come home. Whatever his reasons, I wish I could thank him for

doing what he did. Who knows, perhaps, by telling you all this story, I can do that. You see that kind Russian soldier may have given my mother, Matthew's grandma, a bag of cherries, but he gave me something too. He gave me hope for the future of us all.

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