

*Maria Walks Among the Thorns*

By Jessye Holmgren-Sidell

I don't know why everyone strains to see in the air raid shelter. It's black as night, we have no lights, the ceilings are domed like a whale's mouth and people weep. Cry and sob like little babies. Whimper in corners. And these are all people I know. Meg Durrow and her children from down the street, who owns the clothing store in the centre. Her husband is away in the air force, flying in London. Mr. and Mrs. Hudson are here too, hidden in the dark; I can tell Mrs. Hudson is holding her dog, who most people say she likes better than Mr. Hudson. A few of my schoolmates from the neighborhood are bundled in as well. We're used to being packed in a school, desk to desk, so none of them are crying. But they're holding hands, sitting on each other, braiding hair to keep busy and distracted.

And I'm here too, alone, of course. Certainly not crying. My dad used to work in an automobile factory, but now, as most have been converted to aeroplane and munitions buildings, he's transferred to doing work out of town. I'm alone because Mum and I got separated. It happens a lot, these days. I'm gone, she's gone. We miss each other, talk in passing. You'll think it's sad, of course, but not for me.

"Water, dear?" Meg Durrow asks. She is only a few feet away from me and her voice is cheery and forced. I can tell there's a sob underneath the smile, even though it's too dark to see her face. She's offering me the water jug, which we always keep down here, and which always seems to be filled. Or in the beginning it is. Men, women, children—they all drink from the jug; the parents sip, to keep most of the water for their

kids, my schoolmates swallow quickly. Meg Durrow's children, Susie and Billy, they lap from the jug like dogs.

Me? I take the water from Meg and gulp. I'm a gulper. Two long drinks and I pass it back to where I think her hands are and wipe my mouth on my sleeve.

"Where's your Mum, dear?" she says as her fingers close around my hands quickly. "Is she in the shelter?"

I shake my head. I realize Meg can't see me, and repeat my answer out loud. "No, we were separated on the way down."

"She'll be in the shelter cross the street, I suspect, then," Meg clears her throat, "Or maybe on the other side of this one, resting. She works quite a lot. I know it—I tell her every day, 'Molly, you work yourself too much, what with Fred away and Emory to feed, clothe, and...' Well, I expect you're all grown up now, Emory. Quite a lady, I shouldn't say. Always were older than your set." She tries to give me a quick pat on the arm, but hits my knee instead.

My set. One of the boys has lit a candle that is sputtering black smoke and casting shadows of elongated noses and chins across the tiled walls. A hand puts out the flame with a pinch of fingers.

"Don't be so ignorant, Bartle!" snaps a voice I recognize as our neighbor and teacher, Mr. Hinkle. "No fire! You want to set something alight? You're bound to in corridors this small and cramped! We have absolutely no leg room, none whatsoever. I can barely stretch my knees, which ache—terribly right now, as a matter of fact! I was sitting in front of the wireless, tuning in to the six o'clock news, resting my feet when—well, this happened! Can you imagine? No, you can't Bartle, because you have no

appreciation for people who suffer from what the Greeks call ‘claustrophobia’. I certainly hope you pay more attention in your other subjects...”

I rest my eyes. The candle’s out. It’s dark again. My set—my class—is no doubt trying to exchange angry looks as Mr. Hinkle rambles on to Bub Bartle and silence. One of Meg’s children—I believe it’s Susie—is weaving between bodies, giggling. And there’s still weeping and whimpering in corners.

Then, BOOM, BOOM, BOOM. It’s like my eardrums are splitting open, like my whole body’s jumped out of its skin. BOOM, BOOM, BOOM. Shaking, Susie collapses on the floor, frozen, caught, and Meg’s there, holding her in her big arms. There’s room for Billy too. A few women gasp; some start praying quietly. A man, a grocer who used to sell produce at the market where the Rex Theater now stands, remembers that he brought a torch down here before the raid started, flicks it on, fumbles and drops it. It’s suddenly much brighter in the shelter. The light hits Mr. Hinkle in the eye, who shrieks out, “Oh, God! It’s come!” and bumps into Mrs. Hudson, whose dog starts yelping like mad, while she screams, “Can’t you see he’s terrified?”

And still, BOOM, BOOM. I slump against the wall, close my eyes and hold my own hand until I can feel my knuckles turn white. I bite my lip and try to think deeply of the smell of open fields and gasoline; the sound of cars turning on and the bells of Saint Michael’s. That’s better. I picture a scene and think of my mum and dad sitting in the parlor which is even better. Then my mum alone, sitting in my dad’s chair—worse. Then me, all alone, sitting in the parlor, but the walls have faded to dark grey and the light is yellow. Me, sitting deep underground, listening to bombs fall. Well, that’s not better or worse, that’s now.

My trick sometimes works, it sometimes doesn't. It does calm me for a minute, though, and those minutes add up. I hear Meg whisper to a woman near her, "This is going to be a long one. All night, I suspect."

Meg turns to look at me, but I close my eyes quickly. I need to be calm. Open fields and gasoline, the sound of cars and the bells of Saint Michael's. I turn it into a song:

*Open fields and gasoline,*

*The sound of cars and the bells of Saint Michael's*

I hum quietly for a while, until even the praying has subsided and all that's left is the constant BOOMing and occasional exhales.

*Open fields and gasoline,*

*The sound of cars and the—*

There's a shuffling noise next to me. I turn to my left and see a new face and a new body, sitting cross-legged. His head—I can tell it's a man from the curve of his chin and jaw line—is hanging down and his hands are clasped behind his neck. The torch the grocer brought sends yellow light quivering down his shoulders and into his lap.

There's something nestled in there, a little balled-up egg. The egg has brown hair—a little girl, then, and her father.

The man looks up. He's young—my age or a little older—though he has dark circles under his eyes and wrinkles on his brow, which make him look worn and tired. Near about everyone is worn and tired these days, my dad says. He wrote us in his last letter that his boss looks like he's aged ten years in the past six months. I can see what he means.

I realize I'm staring. I realize, also, that I can't help it; I feel sorry for this boy and this little girl. They look as though they have only each other in the whole world.

Quickly, I reach back for the water jug. Meg still has it by her and I'm careful not to frighten either of her children when I pick it up. Her eyes are closed, but she's murmuring what sounds like a bedtime story. I wonder if the little girl in the boy's lap is asleep.

BOOM. BOOM.

"Water?" I ask the boy. Some people stir nearby, so I lower my voice to a whisper.

He nods, "Yes, thank you." He first hands the jug to the little girl, who I see is wide awake, then takes it from her gently and drinks from it himself. He gasps as he swallows. The little girl shivers in his arms.

"She's not frightened of you," he explains, passing the water back to me. "It's—"

BOOM.

"The bombs?" I ask.

"Yes," he whispers while she shakes. "I've been talking to her—to calm her down, you know? But I haven't slept, not for days, really, and I'm not sure how much longer I can keep it up. She's come in from the countryside to visit me and I worked this past week for all hours to spend time with her when she came. This is her first, you know..."

I nod and a cold spreads from heart to my toes. You never get used to being in the shelter.

"Could you look out for her? While I'm asleep? It'll be just a few minutes—an hour at most, I promise. Her name's Mary and she's my sister."

BOOM.

I want to twist away, but I feel like my stomach's fallen to my toes. I won't know what to say. I've never had a sister. Or a brother who holds me when I'm scared.

"Just for a few minutes," he repeats. "I'm so tired I can sleep through this."

I swallow, "What should I say to her?"

He smiles and replies softly, "Just tell her what she wants to hear."

"What's your name, in case I need to wake you?" I ask quickly

"Brown, Stuart Brown."

"I'm Emory Brandt. I'll do my best."

Stuart Brown whispers in the little girl's ear. Then she looks at me with round eyes that are orange in the torch light. I don't know how to respond. Should I smile? Reach for her hand? And what should I tell her? I wonder what her brother tells her; I do wish he'd talk louder.

I try to pay more attention and squint to see a little better. Stuart Brown is resting against the tiled wall. The little girl, Mary, is resting on his knee and he has his arm around her and his other hand is holding her hand. I look closer and notice her fingers can only wrap around his thumb.

Then I hear my name. "Go over and sit with Emory," he says. "I'm just going to rest for a minute, I promise. She'll take care of you."

I want to slip into the wall. Why put so much faith in me? I can barely manage myself during air raids.

I can't even find my mum.

But I've made a promise. "C'mere," I wave her over, trying to smile over the din of bombs. *Open fields and gasoline, the sound of cars and the bells of Saint Michael's.*

She crawls on her knees. I have a brief instinct to pull her socks up, her knees look so bony and easy to bruise, but instead, I awkwardly pat her shoulder. I look over quickly at Stuart and see that he looks worried. He notices me and smiles and nods, then closes his eyes. If he's worried, I'm terrified, but I decide I need to speak to Mary Brown.

"How are you?" I ask.

BOOM.

That's the wrong question. She's still shaking and I want to say something comforting, but my mind is full of the bells of Saint Michael's, ringing over and over again.

I turn to Stuart; his eyes are opened again and his fingertips are white from where he's pressing them to the floor.

"Your name's Mary, right?" The little girl looks at me. She has straight brown hair, the kind of hair that I would have liked to have when I was younger. I wonder if I can calm her for a few minutes at a time. I want everyone to know she's in good hands.

"Mary," I whisper, "Do you want to know a secret?"

Mary nods her head.

"Whenever it's a night like tonight, I think of all my favourite smells. Can you do that? What are some of your favourite smells?"

She practically glares. "*There are other nights like tonight?*" she seems to be asking me. "*Are you trying to scare me? My brother, where is he?*"

But I continue, bloody fool that I am. “I like the smell of gasoline, because that’s the fuel they use to fill the aeroplanes that my friend Meg’s husband flies,” I tell her. “And the smell of fresh fields, because my dad used to take me to the countryside and it’s always so nice and clean there. I like it best when things are clean and neat and pressed. My mum, she always used to iron my school clothes and when I would put them on, they’d be warm and crisp, so even when it rained, I wouldn’t be cold. But she doesn’t do that anymore. Nobody has time anymore, really.”

BOOM.

“Where are we?”

Mary speaks and I’m so surprised I almost tip the water jug. I look to see if maybe her voice has woken her brother, but he’s fast asleep.

“We’re underground in a safe place,” I tell her.

“What do you mean safe?” she asks.

I think for a moment, “It’s like we’re inside an empty tube tunnel, except there are no lights, really, and the entrance is closed off so no one can find us.” I was about to say “so no one can come and hurt us,” but I held my tongue.

She looks around the shelter, at the lumps that are people and the single torch glowing in the middle of the narrow room, casting everything in pale yellow light.

BOOM. BOOM. Dust crumbles from the thick ceiling.

“What’s that?”

“I don’t know,” I admit.

“It’s scary,” she tells me. “I’m scared.”

Again I feel the urge to comfort her, to keep her knees from getting bruised. I wonder if I should tell her to make up a song, but that only works for minutes at a time and I feel like she'll get distracted easily by the BOOMs and shakes. What did my parents do to comfort me when I was little and afraid? And I see a quick image: my mum's there by my bed, speaking soothingly, telling me the story of the Princess of Canterbury, and I'm wrapped in the covers, shivering, but not afraid.

I know what I'll do.

"Do you want to hear the story of the Princess of Canterbury?" I ask.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

She thinks for a moment then shakes her head. "No," she says, "I want to know what's going on."

I can't tell her. I can't. I don't even know, and what I do know, I sometimes wish I didn't.

"Giants," I say suddenly. "Big, foul, hairy giants—taller than trees—with arms like wild windmills and noses as round and bulbous as thirty ton pumpkins."

Mary's eyes widen and I notice, for the first time, how small her face is. She still looks terrified.

"Actually," I say, frantically shaking my head, "That's not true. You see, there's a story behind that, which I can tell you if you sit quietly."

She's already sitting quietly, but she nods her head. "Please tell me."

I cross my legs and Mary does the same. Her brother is still slumped against the wall, breathing heavily.

BOOM.

I begin, “Well, the trouble with giants, everyone thinks they’re mean and angry, bitter and spiteful. Like the one from Jack and the Bean Stalk, you know, ‘Fee, fie, fo, fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman’—I suppose your mum’s told you that. But in reality, giants are actually quite peaceful. You see, there’s a world where all giants live and it’s far away, in the middle of a fresh field of grass. And in that grass, there are flowers, millions and millions of little purple flowers—as many flowers as there are people in England. The giants who live in the field, they stomp around all day and sometimes, when they land, it feels like they’re shaking the whole Earth. And other times, when they land, they crush the little purple flowers.”

There’s a resounding BOOM, louder than before, that make both me and Mary jump. I hear Billy Durrow scream and two girls from my class bury their heads in their arms.

“Like that?” Mary asks, pointing to the room at large. “Is that what it feels like when the giants leap, like the whole world is shaking?”

I’m shaking myself and manage to sing *open fields and gasoline, the sounds of cars and the bells of Saint Michael’s* before answering her. “Yes,” I say, “yes, this is exactly what it feels like.”

“Do the giants mean to crush the purple flowers?”

I pause and think of the aeroplanes flying overhead, bombing. Then I think of Meg’s husband, Fred, dogfighting above the channel. “No, they don’t,” I tell her.

“Actually, they just have very bad eyesight.”

Mary giggles -- a series of short little hiccups. It makes me want to smile with her. "Tell me more," she says. "This isn't really a story; there are no kings or queens, no princesses or anything."

"There's a princess," I respond quickly. "Her name is...Maria, and she is very brave. Strong, too. She can lift a cow with her pinkie finger. Better still though, she can talk to the giants and tell them that they are crushing the little flowers. They speak the same language, you see, so, one day, she decided it was time to have a word with her big-boned brethren."

"What's that?" asks Mary.

I know that I know the word. But I can't think of the right way to describe it. "Her fellows," I say, "Her kinsman, outer family, her friends, maybe."

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

Mary crawls closer to me on her knees. "Isn't she frightened they'll step on her, too, if she tries to talk to them?"

I start to answer her when, suddenly, a huge sound rips through the room like someone tearing a curtain as big and wide as the sky. Mrs. Hudson lets out one long wail and then another, and clutches her dog, while Mr. Hudson tries to clutch her. In between cries, she heaves dry sobs to get her breath back. Mr. Hinkle wheels on both of them.

"Can't you control your wife, man!" he bellows.

Mr. Hudson stares at Mr. Hinkle and answers quietly, "She's afraid of fire. She thinks there are fires above. Can't you hear the bells?"

The bells of Saint Michael's. There's a moment when both Mr. Hinkle and I notice the ringing sirens. My mum used to volunteer as nurse in the firehouse. I wonder where she is.

I wheel back on Mary. "That sound," I tell her, "That ripping and crackling sound you hear right now, that's how Maria will avoid the giants' stomping feet. When the sun sets, great big birds awake, birds with gun-metal grey feathers as stiff and strong as steel—"

"I don't like grey," Mary interrupts, "I like red."

My dad has a red shirt, but it's not his uniform. I've seen the one Fred Durrow wears and it's blue with brass gold buttons. Meg has a picture of him on the desk in their shop.

"Red's not the right color," I reply slowly, "In this world, red is a bad color. But the birds can be blue with golden wing tips. And there is one bird that is bigger than all the rest, practically the size of an elephant, only lighter than air. It hovers above the clouds and flaps its wings and all the other birds follow its example and beat their wings, too. And all those wings beating together make the strongest wind you can ever imagine, so strong it blows the sunset across the sky in great waves of orange, like," I pause, "almost like fire."

"So Maria, she also speaks the language of the birds and she can call them down from the sky."

"How?" asks Mary.

How do birds talk? They whistle, I think. My dad whistles. He whistled all the time when he was home -- stupid songs from the wireless, "The Blue Danube,"

sometimes Beethoven before the war. My mum, she always told him it distracted her, but then he'd whistle in her ear and she'd laugh and laugh. Later, before he left, she said it sounded like an air raid siren.

I clear my throat, "They whistle—sometimes songs, sometimes warnings, sometimes nonsense. Like most people. Maria, she can whistle and, on the day she tried to speak to the giants, she called a bird to her. The bird's name was Da and he had a family at home, who he wrote to sometimes, and his family missed him quite a lot when he went away, even though they knew he would come back. Maria—I almost forgot about Maria—she climbed on the bird and told him, 'I need to speak to my big brethren, to tell them about the purple flowers.'

"And the bird, Da, well, he had also seen how the waves of sun made the purple flowers dry and wither. He knew that the sunset was unpreventable, but he couldn't help feeling guilty. So he told Princess Maria to climb aboard and promised he would take her to the giants."

"Is she scared?" Mary demands suddenly.

"Well, if she's flying with the birds, the giants' feet can't crush her—"

"No, not that!" She takes a deep breath. "Isn't she afraid of flying? Whenever she climbs up high—or flies—doesn't she have someone to help her?"

"Someone like a brother?" I ask, glancing over at Stuart Brown. His right shoulder is turned away from us and his arms are folded so that they cover his chest.

"Yes," she agrees, "Maria should have a brother."

“Okay, then, Maria does not like heights. So she calls her brother, the prince, from their castle and he helps her board Da. He also holds her hand when they take off into the big, orange sky.”

“As they’re flying up to meet the giants, the big bird calls over the roaring wind and tells Da and all the other birds that they need to report back for duty—I mean, whatever birds do when the sun finishes setting. So Da, he has no choice but to drop Em—I mean Maria and her brother.” I chew my lip, waiting for the words to come to me.

“Da isn’t a very nice bird!” cries Mary. “Why does he have no choice?”

“Because when the big bird gives out orders, all the other birds must obey,” I cry back, “No matter what! Even if it means abandoning the people you were trying to help.”

We sit in silence for a moment; Mary glares at me, her eyes narrowed. “I don’t like that bird,” she tells me.

“You don’t have to,” I say coldly, “It’s only a story, after all.” Then I glare right back at her.

BOOM. BOOM. Whshhhh.

She looks at the ceiling of the shelter then folds her arms. “What’s that?”

“It’s the sound Maria and her brother make as they fall towards the ground,” I answer calmly.

“I don’t want to hear about it!” She covers her ears with her hands and screams loudly, “I’m scared! I’m scared of falling! I hate this, I hate this! I hate you!”

“Oh hush!” I snap. I feel angry and miserable, like I want to smack her upside the head. I’ve been trying, haven’t I? I wonder if Stuart Brown has ever felt like this before. I wonder if he ever *did* smack her upside the head. Then I feel guilty for thinking that.

I hope I never made my mum feel this way. Is never talking a way of saying I hate you?

I take a deep breath and try to calm down. “Mary, you didn’t let me finish. As they fall, Maria’s skirt billows out like a great balloon and her brother uses his coat as a cape. Slowly, the siblings float through the sky and, as they get closer to the ground, the wind separates them.”

Mary looks at me, then looks over to her brother. She wrinkles her nose and shifts uncomfortably on the floor. “I’m sorry,” she says slowly, “Are you mad?”

“No,” I shake my head.

“Do you have any brothers?”

I shake my head again. “No,” I say. “I don’t have any sisters either.”

“You mean you’re all alone?”

“Yes and no; I always thought I never wanted to share my parents with anyone. Now, I’m not so sure.”

“I always wanted a sister,” she tells me, “Because then I would have one of each and I thought it would be nice. But my mum, she wasn’t able to have another baby. She died after I was born.”

My heart drops, “I’m so sorry,” I whisper. BOOM, BOOM, BOOM. Even the bombs seem distant.

“It’s alright,” Mary pats my arm. “Where’s your mum?” she asks suddenly, her chin perched on her knees.

My heart is now level with stomach. “Excuse me?”

“Where’s your mum?” she repeats. “Why isn’t she with you?”

I swallow. I chew my lip. I try to sing about the open fields and gasoline, but the bells of Saint Michael's are still ringing in my head. And then I imagine my mum, working in the hospital, working alongside Meg Durrow and Mrs. Peterson, who helps with the clothing exchange. I see her with my dad and then with me, waving good bye when he drove away in the old motor car we used to have. And I see her, sitting in the air raid shelter across the street, legs crossed, arms folded, wondering where her daughter, Emory, is. Where I am.

“We were separated on the way down through the centre,” I begin. “She had just got back from her shift when the sirens went off and we had to pile out onto the streets. I walked one way, she the other, and I...I was supposed to stay close behind, but, for some reason, I didn't. I walked right on ahead of her and raced down the steps along with everyone else in town, because...” Because I was frightened. I was so scared of being out and exposed in the centre. By the time I was in the shelter, I had lost sight of Mum. It would have been too dark to check to make sure she had come down after me, anyway, but I didn't even try. I didn't even think about her until the doors above had shut.

What if Mum was frightened—what if she is frightened, right now? I haven't been around her long enough recently to realize she even has the potential to be scared. If I had stayed with her, I could have comforted her. Not Mary Brown. I could have been a daughter instead of a sister. Guilt racks my body and the bells of Saint Michael's ring in my head.

But without me, what would have happened to Mary?

BOOOM. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. Whsshhh. WHSSHHH.

WHSSHHHH.

Suddenly, the world is breaking. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Meg Durrow grab both her children. Mr. Hinkle and Mr. Hudson are clinging to each other. The grocer, whose name I now remember is Tom, bellows to his wife, Hester, across the room. Two girls from my class, who I have never seen cry, are sobbing. But all these I barely notice, because I have scooped up Mary in my arms and we are rocking together on the floor of the shelter.

BOOOOOM. WHHHSSSHHHHHH.

And we rock like we're riding over a wave of purple flowers, like we are perched on Da's back and soaring over the heads of giants. I look over to where Stuart Brown is sleeping, but he's wide awake. His eyes are wide, too,

Stuart crawls over on his hands and knees. When he reaches us, he lays Mary's head in his lap; I wrap my arms around her waist.

"Can the flowers be red?" Mary whispers under the noise.

I hold her tighter. "Yes," I say, "yes, they can be red."

And, together, Stuart and I hoist Mary onto Da's back again and we soar through the sky, listening to the sound of cars and the bells of Saint Michael's, and passing over fresh fields of little red flowers.