

ADVENTURES IN TIME TRAVEL

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Historical fiction by the winners of  
the Young Walter Scott Prize 2020





## TO DUST WE SHALL RETURN

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### Author's introduction

*I decided to focus on WWII for my story, partly because I felt familiar with it, studying it in school so much, but also because its complexity interests me. I wanted to look at a quieter side of the war, not involving the fighting on the battlefields, but people just living and doing their best to help and get by. I chose to focus on two women because I always thought how horrible it must have been for women back then to be left alone after the death of their husbands, left without even a body to mourn, struggling with their own isolation as well as the effects of war at home. I liked the idea of two such women finding comfort in each other, finding a sense of warmth in the midst of a pattern of tragedies.*

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“Bonnie, please!” The young woman tried her best to turn and face her friend, but the blanket wrapped around her caught on one of the shelter’s wires, cocooning her in place against one of its rabbit hutch sides.

The other woman freed the blanket and avoided her pitiful stare, looking out to what Marie wanted: the slices of cake that had settled down quite comfortably on the wooden side table on the other side of the room, which was admittedly on the small, verging on claustrophobic side; although at that point, it was not an unbearable problem for them. They lay next to each other in what was a hopeful silence for Marie and an anxious one for Bonnie.

Marie tried a different tactic, “I can’t hear them yet – listen. You’ll be fine I’m sure of it.”

Bonnie turned her head to the left, “Then why don’t you venture out there yourself?”

“Because you’re on the side that opens and most importantly it’s my birthday! As lovely as that dinner was there is no denying that the day has taken a turn for the worse – I think this would really boost our morale in this particularly trying time – ”

She had not needed to say any more as Bonnie was already lifting up her side of the shelter and crawling out, quickly grabbing the desired plates and swiftly returning, closing herself and Marie back in. “The birthday reasoning is one I will accept, but please do not start quoting the posters.”

“I shall accept these terms.” Marie smiled as she lay on her side facing Bonnie, both trying their best to eat without giving themselves indigestion.

It was then that Marie looked at the letters that she could see resting on the mantelpiece, just about visible on the other side of the room if she lifted her head up ever so slightly as to see over Bonnie’s.

She could still remember the first few lines of the one from her James:

“My darling Marie,

Last night I heard someone humming ‘Cheek to Cheek’ and it was like you were there, twirling around amongst the beds. I could almost see

myself next to you, despite me being the dead hooper that I am. You have always been the only one who could ever get me to dance.” It was a line near the end of his letter that stuck with her most, the unintentional lie of “I will see you soon, and we will one day dance together again.”

She was unsure what Robert had written to Bonnie in his last letter. She could have easily stolen a glance at it when Bonnie was out of the room, but she felt like this would have been a betrayal, as if this letter was his final breath and she would be snatching it away by reading it, especially since Bonnie was usually so private. The only thing Marie knew about Robert was that he was called Robert and that he bought Bonnie the green and white dotted dress that had one of those white collars that Marie loved. Her train of thought was interrupted by another siren. They reached out to each other and held hands tightly, abandoning the cake slices beside them.

It was dark, with the windows covered and the flickering light growing more and more feeble as the seconds played out adagio, but Bonnie could still read Marie’s face without trouble. She’d gotten rather good at it after this long. Besides, this was not the first time they had lain there together. She was hesitant to openly admit it, but she admired Marie’s ability to charm, as much as it annoyed her on occasion.

Convincing Bonnie to move in with her was possibly Marie’s greatest feat yet, for the young woman was overwhelmingly private. When they first started working together, Marie had always thought that she was a spy. Her eyes always seemed to be observing something that Marie could not comprehend. This did not bother Marie much, however, as an interesting character was just what she wanted, and so it was to her delight that on one particularly dull afternoon, she discovered that they both walked home the same way. At first, she tried to win her over with compliments, although she soon ran out and ended up trying so hard that she had said how wonderfully the boiler suit complemented her figure.

It was only when they both stopped to see a woman trying to claw her way through a huge mound of rubble on one of the streets they passed, screaming as she pounded her fists against the unmoving stone, that Bonnie first spoke. “Do you think this will ever stop?” she had said, her face easing from its usually rigid expression.

Marie had looked at her and then back at the woman, who had started crying, and spoke with honesty that surprised her, “I don’t know.”

Bonnie had seemed surprised by it too, turning to look at Marie properly for the first time, “We can only do what we can and hope that it is enough.”

Marie stood in silence for a moment and then smiled weakly, still looking forward, “Would you like to come to mine for tea?”

“What have you got in?” Bonnie responded, which was met with a look from Marie that she would grow to know well, one that said in a serious yet loving way, ‘Really?’ She looked down and adjusted her answer, “I would like that...very much.”

Marie nodded and they set off towards the floral-wallpapered flat she called home. It was after a minute of walking in calm silence that Bonnie said, “Thank you.” She had not yet gained the ability to express her emotion while being so vulnerable as to look someone in the eye, but Marie still knew that she meant this sincerely.

Back under the shelter, Bonnie looked into Marie’s eyes and saw that with every second she remained under there, her shiny exterior was being worn down more and more. She squeezed her hand.

“When all this is over, what do you want to do?” She knew Marie loved nothing more than the romanticised realities that she hoped the future would hold.

Marie smiled, “Well, I’d quite like to move to the countryside. I’ve heard things about the Women’s Land Army and, well – I know that they are there to help with the war effort but what if they keep hiring women to do farm work after the war as well? Think of that – days spent working in the fresh air, animals, a nice little cottage or something to retreat to.”

“You must be more soused than I thought you were! That work would involve intense physical labour and you getting severely sunburned – you would not last a day out there!”

Marie laughed a little, but Bonnie saw that she had just had her hopes dampened. Bonnie was furious at herself for not being able to show kindness without having to defend her use of it with some unhelpful and unnecessary remark.

“But –” she continued, trying to save things, “– it must be lovely to live in the country. You’d make a little cottage feel so cosy. I can just see it now. You’d lay out that flowery tablecloth that your mother made in the dining room and I’m sure it would be regularly covered over by large plates of pie.”

The pair smiled.

“How would we earn our way then?” Marie sat up a little, leaning on her elbow, invested.

Bonnie struggled to idealise the grim reality of labour, “Well...well I could cook? Maybe some village would need a bakery, and I can make great bread.”

“Really?”

“Yes, yes – I suppose that I could give you a free loaf before I open the bakery each morning so that you get the best of the bunch.”

“Well thank you very much!” Marie’s smile strengthened before she began momentarily contemplating her own answer. “I think I should like to be a poet.”

“A poet! Fascinating.” Bonnie did not mention that she had never seen Marie write a poem once in the time that she had known her, but she found joy in her expression and so she continued, “What would you write about?”

“Gosh, I don’t know. I haven’t written one in years, but I’m sure the countryside will inspire me somehow.”

They lay there for a moment, content in brewing over this idea, before they were interrupted by sounds in the distance that they knew too well. The whistling was the worst part. It was part of the wait as those instruments of death dived to the ground in a roar that latched onto the very core of their humanity, reminding them of their helpless, breakable bodies.

Marie’s grip on Bonnie’s hand tightened and she could hear her breaths quicken. Bonnie held her tighter too, and looked at her again, at how her hair draped over the side of her face, how her eyes were sealed shut, how her skin looked so fragile.

“Why don’t you write one now? Or rather say one now.” Bonnie added an optimistic, ‘Hmm?’ to the end of that to arouse Marie’s attention.

Marie opened her eyes, “Good idea. Yes, alright.”

Bonnie nodded for her to go on after Marie took a second to think.

“Well... I look forward to my absence from these... gutted? No – these hallowed streets.”

They heard them approach, each whistle like a nail into their skull.

“I pray it comes quick and that you might be with me, both on the road there and next to me, always.”

The floor shook slightly, and Marie began speaking quicker.

“And – and I feel guilty that the path to our heaven must be trodden over knotted bodies, unmarked and uncared for by the land that devours them, and –”

Marie was cut off by a sharp breath and the roaring grew louder and closer, the building shaking. Bonnie placed her other hand over Marie’s and looked into her as if making sure that Marie’s face was carved into her memory. Marie squeezed Bonnie’s hand tighter as she captured her face in the same way, her speech quickening yet again as she continued.

“And I hope we can reach our home and that – that we never have to worry that we... might die under the dinner table –” She choked on her words, “– and as we sit together in our home you will know that I... love you.”

Bonnie reached out and held Marie close as the building shook more. They stayed there, intertwined, for what felt like several lives over. Neither wanted to move, because tearing themselves away from the moment would involve deciding what to do next, and that was something that neither of them was ready for.