

The Lost Girls

Eve Naden

Runner up

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Young Walter Scott Prize 2021*

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8 minutes

I promised myself I wouldn't think of them. But my hands trace the shadows of that old room, where the four of us would curl up on Papa's bed, telling ghost stories. I draw his eyes – but they blur with the eyes of the soldiers in front of me. So young – each one of them. Younger than I am.

They tie rope around my wrists – because rope burns, and shackles don't.

I find myself seeing Papa's boots instead of theirs. Those boots, peppered with holes, which I helped to glue after a long day. The potatoes boiling on the stove. *Maman* darning stockings though my sister, Leone, refused to wear them. *Maman* scolding us when we came to dinner with our smocks caked in mud.

Instead of their open mouths, barking orders, I see those rounded wheels, the chain on my first bike, which I rode until the brakes split.

I close my eyes, hoping for a gunshot.

Instead, my hands are untied.

7 minutes

We take a walk – all four of us. Each sunken face trudging through the mud. I force myself to look at them – us girls. We've been sharing a room for the past few months, watching each other wither. Passing cigarettes back and forth and hiding them when the guards come to say good night – it's the only fun we get. Giggling as we blow smoke rings behind their backs.

We take a walk and beneath me, the mud bleeds into *Canet-plage* blue. My toes curl in the sand. He's here, kicking up salt. Dufour, hiding rations in his jacket. Dufour – he must be forty now. We swapped kisses for corn on that beach. That villa we rented; it filled up quicker than a cloud in a storm. People crawl over the tiles – I can see them as they cry. Pure relief. They're free.

We take a walk across the yard, but I'm still in that villa, checking rooms, laughing as I swap stories about my first job.

“A dress maker's assistant!” they shriek. “You? A dress maker's assistant?” I laugh.

“I'm surprise you lasted a week,” says Dufour.

“I'm surprised I wasn't strangled with a stocking.” All laughing.

And the back of my head is white-hot. Pain flashes. I turn to find the butt of a gun being raised to hit me again. The guard doesn't look at me. He only snaps, “This is important. Be quiet”.

We reach a small building – the four of us – and for a moment, I can pretend we're entering a boarding house to rent or going to the movies, or to a ball.

But the building is grey and shaped like a scalp.

6 minutes

They call him a doctor. He has a white coat. He has a calm smile. He has a stethoscope. But he's no doctor to us.

“Quiet down,” one guard says. His left eye is twitching. Blue eyes, like Dufour. I wonder if he's still alive.

The doctor is short, with a rotund belly. Spectacles frame his bald head. He cracks a few jokes – for the guards, not for us. No one laughs.

“Strip,” says Dr Straub. “If you don’t want typhus, you’ll do as I say.” Shaking hands. Those hands reach for my uniform. A white smock and rags to stop the blood each month. These hands can’t be mine. They look as small as they did back then – when we crossed the Pat Line to flee Hitler’s men, and my fingers almost froze to stumps. All of us, dressed in week-old sweat, stumbling across the rocky paths. Our feet swelling, bursting out of our boots as we reached the copse of trees. The excitement – getting on a plane. Dufour staying behind. He kisses my hand, saying we’ll meet again. He was always more of a romantic. Our hands slip away. I grab the handle, pull myself up, up and into the plane. Sitting with boxes of rations and guns, I shiver my way to England.

As I’m shivering now, stripped bare. I follow the others. We lay our clothes on benches. We line-up naked, form a queue.

“Got to get your vaccinations,” says Dr Straub. “There’s a harsh winter ahead.”

5 minutes

The needle looks longer than it is. I go last. The other girls don’t look afraid, but I know bile is rising. My throat is filled with moths and my stomach is growling.

Dr Straub hums to himself. I want to tell him to cork it. The man can’t carry a tune. But then I catch the shadow of a guard.

“I had typhus last year,” said Dr Straub. “Believe me, you don’t want it.”

I’ve had typhus twice, but I say nothing.

As the needle slips in, I slip from a plane onto English soil. Landing at Plymouth, right in a field. Hands covered in dirt. But I'm laughing because the sky is so blue, and I can wear the sun like a crown. I'm laughing because there's nothing else to do.

To London. We are picked up in dark green trucks. I cling to the benches as we jolt over country roads. To London – where it's even uglier than I imagined. Where the black smoke waltzes with jaundiced light from the windows. Where everyone dresses like the sky – grey – as if they hope to achieve some medal from Mother Nature.

That school – we were brought there. Barely twenty-one. Grand stone, and grander faces – that MI5 recruitment form. I wish I could say it was a mistake to sign on.

The plunger depresses, and something floods my veins.

4 minutes

Something enters my bloodstream. We risk glances at each other – for a half-second. We know these injections aren't for typhus; the people here want us dead. But we didn't think it would feel like this.

Like hanging over the ocean, wrapped in thorns. Like the parachute I was wrapped in once, tangling as I fell to earth. We jumped from a plane, you know. Back home, on father's lap, never would have I thought of jumping from a plane. I remember wanting to scream, like I want to scream now.

Landing on the freshly cut grass. The girls around me: Lise de Baissac and Vera Leigh. Crowding me, wide-eyed faces looking on.

“Did you break anything?”

“Holy Mary – are you well?” And I look up. Grin.

“Can we do it again?”

Their faces blur and I’m lying on a cold bench, hand outstretched.

3 minutes

I see the other girls go down – the four of us, dropping like flies. We look like one giant painting, lying together, pale flesh riddled with goosebumps. To tell you truth, I’d rather be here than in a gallery, smothered by oils, showing myself to the world.

Someone lifts me up. Their hands are calloused. For a moment, I think my father is here.

2 minutes

He thinks we are dead. But I can feel the flames licking at my feet. It should burn but it doesn’t. And his hands on my shoulders – Dr Straub. I reach up, clawing. He swears as my nails rake across his face. I hope it scars.

It’s so warm here.

I lie back.

Satisfied.

1 minute

I can taste the hyacinths in our neighbour’s garden, where I fell and scraped my knees. Where I got up and limped home. Where *Maman* smeared butter on the open wound and father held me to his chest.

And now, I see my sister. She is smiling.

“Andree?” she laughs, dressed in Papa’s over-sized jumper. “Where have you been?”

I stand to greet her.

Andrée Raymonde Borrel (18 November 1919 – 6 July 1944)

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