

Windfall

by Paul Mason

The crowd went up together, arms stretched, mouths wide, caps tumbling like fruit blown from a tree. Try! Right under the posts. Anna cheered at the top of her voice. There was more clapping, more yelling.

Then she noticed her father.

His hands were balled, eyes fixed on something far off beyond the field ... something that lurked in the charcoal clouds rolling in. Something that had come home with him from the war.

Her mother had seen, too. "Come on, love," she said. "I left washing on the line."

"But the game ...," Anna protested.

"I don't like the look of those clouds."

Anna's mother touched her husband's elbow. At first, he flinched. But then, seeing where he was, he began pushing through the crowd, desperate to be away. Anna trailed behind. "It's not fair," she grumbled, just loud enough for her mother to hear. She didn't remember any washing on the line.



“How about a cuppa?” Anna’s mother suggested back at the farm.

Father nodded. “It was a good game.”

“We didn’t win the whole time you were away,” Anna said, getting down the tea cups.

Her father didn’t seem to hear her. “I’ll take mine in the other room if it’s all the same,” he said.

Anna heard the creak of the armchair in the front room. Her father would sit there for hours, like a ghost, not saying a word until teatime. After that, he’d retreat to bed. And in the middle of the night, the nightmares and the shouting would come, along with her mother’s soothing voice. Even with a feather pillow pressed against her ears, Anna couldn’t escape it.

The doctor had said her father wasn’t the only soldier like this. He just needed time. But Anna wanted her father now. She had longed for him to come home. For months, all they’d had was a few letters to share around the kitchen table. When her mother wasn’t looking, Anna would run her fingers over the paper, imagining her father’s hand touching it. Now he was back – but trying to get close was just as hopeless. Hadn’t she waited long enough?

At church the next day, everyone trooped outside in their Sunday best. Her father avoided the crowd. Instead, he went and stood among the graves, next to the one where the flowers were always fresh. Anna watched him, his shoulders hunched inside an ill-fitting jacket. His eyes were fixed on the name of their neighbour, wounded at Messines. He had died five months later.

Anna went over and took her father’s hand. He tried to smile, to say something, but then Mr Bedford came over.

“I’d have done my bit ... if I’d been younger,” the old man said. “You lads did a fine thing, James. A fine thing.”

“You reckon he would agree?” Anna’s father said in a dark voice, nodding down at the grave. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” He dropped Anna’s hand and walked off.

Anna looked at her boots. Had her father forgotten that Mr Bedford used to be her headmaster? Her mother had seen and came rushing over. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “Ever since he’s come back ...” Her voice faded away.

Mr Bedford smiled kindly. “No need to apologise,” he said. “I understand.” But Anna could see he was hurt, and she avoided his eye.

“We’d better go,” said Mother.





The storm came at teatime. Hard rain made the roof clatter like a train. Her father was quiet. "I think I'll turn in," he said. "I've got a fearful headache."

He stopped briefly to brush cold lips against Anna's forehead. She wondered whether he knew how ashamed she'd been at church. Perhaps he didn't care.

"Do you think the sheep in the back paddock will be all right?" her mother asked wearily once he'd gone.

"I suppose," said Anna.

"Then let's get an early night, too."



Anna was woken by a lantern in the hallway. Her mother had pulled on gumboots and an oilskin and Father's wide hat. Then she saw that Anna was awake. "I'm worried about the stream," she said. "I'm going to check the flock."

"Are you going on your own?" asked Anna. Her mother nodded.

Anna pushed off the eiderdown. "Then I'm coming, too."

They made their way across the paddock, the rain driving hard at their faces. Mother did a quick count. "There's some missing," she shouted. They stumbled over to the ravine and dangled their lanterns into the blackness. Dark water rushed past. But was that a smudge of white below?

Anna's mother led the way down the slippery slope. They trudged along the water's edge, mud sucking at their boots, until the river cut them off. There was nothing.

"We'd better get back," Mother shouted. She tried to clamber back up the bank – but couldn't get a foothold. So Anna tried, her useless boots clogged with dirt. But the incline was too steep, too muddy – like the wall of a trench.

In the weakening light, Anna's eyes fixed on the rising water. Not long now and the torrent would be at their feet. They were trapped.

Anna felt fear rise like stormwater, flooding her head. She felt so weak, and the water was so strong. Suddenly she caught a flash of her father at the rugby game. In the cemetery. Was this how he had felt? Was this the feeling he'd lived with, month after month on the Western Front?

"It'll be all right," said Anna's mother, and she pulled Anna close.





A shout ... definitely a shout came from above. It came again. On the ridge, a lantern glowed. It was her father, a length of rope slung over his shoulder.

“James!” Mother yelled.

Father waved. “Hold on!” he shouted. He disappeared, then was back and tossed one end of the rope to them.

“You first,” said Mother. Leaning back on the rope, Anna started carefully pulling herself up. At the top, her father grasped her. Finally she was in his arms, strong and solid in the storm.

“You two chose a funny time for a picnic,” he said. He held Anna tight for a second and then turned to help her mother.

The three of them headed back across the paddock. By the water trough, they passed three clumps of white. The missing sheep.



The storm was gone by the early hours, leaving behind a syrupy dampness in the air. “Just look at all that windfall,” Mother said, looking out at the orchard. “There’ll be plenty of apples for a pie, I’d say.”

After breakfast, Anna took a basket and went out to the fruit trees. Her hand searched for apples in the long, damp grass.

“That was some storm,” Father said, appearing beside her. He examined some of the fallen fruit, then gathered them in silence.

“I was scared last night,” Anna said at last.

“You weren’t the only one.” Her father stopped for a moment, a battered apple in his hand. “You know Grandma always liked her fruit to be perfect.” He passed the apple over. “What do you reckon?”

Anna searched her father’s face. There were grey smudges around his eyes. Smudges like bruises. But in his eyes, there was light – a light she hadn’t noticed before.

“It looks fine to me.”



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