

WAR
OF THE
SPARROWS

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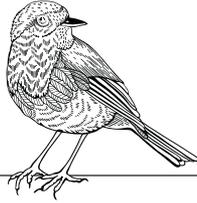
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To my Great Grandfather, Frank—a Rat of Tobruk.
And my Grandmother, Sandra, whose love of
stories inspired me to write this one.

Now my dash contains a book.

Why, sometimes I've believed as many as
six impossible things before breakfast.
—*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

No surrender.
—The Rats of Tobruk motto



1

December 24, 1932

IN THE HEAT of a suburban Hawthorn street, the young man stood defiant, welcoming the scorching sun on his neck. He cast a formidable shadow for his age, and he paused there in the favourable light to admire his silhouette. Broad shoulders tapered to a lean waist—hauling carcasses at the abattoir had packed muscle onto his hulking frame. He twisted a fraction to give the sun a better angle from which to project his image. His garnet eyes turned cold at the unwelcome sight of his withered left leg. He was inspired to rip it from his body as he had done so many bovine limbs, but a familiar sound pricked his ear and stirred his loins. A child's laugh pierced the shriek of cicadas. Peace returned to his gaze; an actor pulling down a mask.

He slipped into the cool of a laneway where, in the stone amphitheatre, the shrill din combined with the tick-tocks of his limping gait. *Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.*

He cursed and wrestled the leather-and-steel leg brace to scratch

an itch. It emitted a familiar rustle and clink that had always reminded him of saddling a horse. He emerged from the shade, and, raising a hand against the glare, inhaled the putrid-sweet perfume of roses past their prime. His stomach fluttered the way it always did right before the act.

He stalked past an open window and closed his eyes at the surging choral strains of “O Holy Night”—his favourite carol.

“Fall on your knees!” the choir demanded. A lump formed in the man’s throat, and his eyes dampened.

In the emerald shade of the home’s manicured garden, a boy played with a toy bear.

The man’s shadow lurched across the grass, his proximity silencing the cicadas.

It was the boy who spoke first, a chirp that barely penetrated the thick air. “You all right, mister?” he asked.

The man flicked the moisture from his eye. “Oh, this?” he said, following the boy’s gaze to his callipered leg. “Doesn’t trouble me too much. Had it since I was a little tacker like you. What’s your teddy’s name, sport?”

“Teddy.”

“A fine choice. Say, you live around here. Would you show me where the playground is? I’m supposed to meet my little brother there.”

“It’s down the lane, mister.”

“Mister? I may walk like an old man, but I’m not yet twenty!” The man chuckled, though he grew impatient. He checked the window of the house, then limped to the gate at the rear of the garden. He was pleased to discover he was obscured from view by a large rosebush. “Young as I am, I’d be mighty grateful if you could give me a hand. I get my lefts and rights in a twist. Never was too good at school. Not like you, I’m sure!” He leaned on the gate, easing the ache in his back. “You look smart as a whip, don’t you? Come here and let

me get a gander at you.”

The gate latch clicked, springs squeaking as it opened.

“That’s a good lad. Now, which way are we heading?”

The gate squealed as it closed.

“Here, young fella—take my hand. That’s it.”

Tick-Tock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

In the empty garden, a cicada shrieked, then two, the crescendo rising to a thousand deafening screams.

2

May 1951

FRANK MILLER WAS waist deep in the engine bay of his Holden. He'd started the car that morning and had heard a faint knock; it would have been, to the untrained ear, indistinguishable from the perfectly ordinary sound of a car engine. But to Frank, that foreign clunk as he turned the key was an unholy aberration. He marched to the shed to retrieve his toolkit.

Removal and inspection of a spark plug confirmed his suspicions, and he cleaned off a buildup of gunk. He performed the routine on each plug before trying the engine again. This time, the motor turned over with a chugging regularity as familiar to him as his own heartbeat.

Frank took great pleasure in restoring things to operational perfection, and he savoured the feeling of satisfaction it brought.

As he put the car in gear, another thud startled him. He returned to the hood to investigate, but the motor purred without complaint.

The sound was unfamiliar, and he replayed the specific noise in his mind in an attempt to diagnose this new ailment.

He tried imitating the sound out loud. “Doop,” he said, searching the engine for anything that might create the peculiar noise. “Doop.”

Frank killed the engine to ensure he’d reinstalled the spark plugs correctly, and in the sudden silence of his front yard, he heard another strange sound: a gentle, wheezing cheep.

A blue wren lay prostrate on the lawn beneath the large bay windows, struggling to correct itself. Frank approached and cradled it in his hands. It still surprised him how willing the birds that careened into his windows were to be handled. A trust so unwarranted, Frank thought. If the injured birds had the ability to sense his hands’ history, they never showed it.

He cupped the bird and took it inside to administer first aid. Under a warming lamp, he inspected the wren and felt the delicate structures of its wings. All seemed to be in order, as did the bird’s darting head movements.

“Just stunned, mate,” he said, running a consoling thumb over its tiny head.

Frank took the bird back outside and opened his hands, but on his palm the wren remained. Standing upright now, it hopped around, ruffled his feathers, and cheeped at Frank.

“You’re welcome,” he replied. “Now, off you go. I need to get to work.”

Frank lifted his hands to encourage flight, and it was then that he could see the wren’s left wing was unable to meet the attitude of the right. The bird cheeped again.

“All right, then. Off to the hospital with you.”

Frank took the wren to the backyard and down to the cage he had constructed for the avian kamikaze. The pair was met with a welcoming chorus from the other chirping invalids.

Occupying his aviary were mostly common garden sparrows, but here was a pair of feisty zebra finches, there a brilliant rosella, a red robin whistling its pretty song.

“Look after Little Blue, you lot,” he said, and placed the wren on the feeder at the base of the cage.

He closed the door and slid the bolt across. It caught a fraction, and he frowned at the slight misalignment of the lock. He went back to his shed to retrieve a screwdriver. Everything’s falling apart, he lamented.

Once he’d tightened the offending screw, he returned to his shed—his sanctuary—and took stock of his collection of well-used but perfectly maintained tools. Though, he remembered it had been some time since he’d oiled the timber handles. A job for the weekend.

Reaching for the rubbing oil, he saw a biscuit tin that shot a familiar pang of regret through his gut. He hadn’t thought about its contents in weeks. But there it was. A nausea of unresolved guilt welled up as he picked up the tin. He felt its weight—so much heavier than what any scales would have indicated.

Just finish it, Frank.

He took the screwdriver to pry off the tarnished lid, but his wife’s call jolted him back to the present.

“Are you out here, Frank?” Rosetta Miller shouted from the back door.

“In the shed, love,” he replied.

“Don’t you have a meeting this morning?”

“Christ!” Frank dropped the tin back on the workbench and jogged from the shed.

“You can drive me now, at least,” she said, trotting to keep up with her husband as he charged down the hall.

In the car, she asked him what he’d been up to all morning.

“The spark plugs were gunked up, a wren busted his wing, and then I had to fix the lock on the aviary.”

Rosetta rolled her eyes and looked out the window.

“What?” Frank asked.

“Nothing, Frank.”

“Tell me. I’m not going through the day with you huffing at me without giving me a reason.”

“Mr Fixit,” she replied. “Always fixing, always tinkering. Always a project. Always busy.”

“And? You’d prefer me to be some layabout? Spend my free time at the pub like Geoff and Sammy?”

“Forget it, Frank. I don’t want to fight this morning.”

“Well, you’re certainly looking for one by the sounds of it.”

“Fine.” Rosetta twisted in her seat to look at him as he drove. “You’re a good husband. You work hard, and you provide for your family. But your obsession with fixing everything, maintaining order, it’s…”

“What?”

“Misplaced.”

“Misplaced?”

Rosetta sighed. “What am I trying to say? You want everything to be perfect, and you spend an inordinate amount of time keeping things that way. Everything from your car, the house, your tools, even the bloody birds. Everything except—”

“Except what?” Frank said, now worried there was a task he’d neglected like so many husbands were accused of doing.

“Your daughter, Frank.”

Frank remained mute. He clenched his jaw and gripped the steering wheel.

“Well?” she asked.

“I’m trying.”

“You shouldn’t have to try. She’s your daughter!”

“Just drop it, will you?” he said, anger stinging his throat. He hated raising his voice to Rosetta and immediately apologised. “I said I’ll try. Harder.”

3

SAINT JUDE'S SCHOOL for Girls was an imposing building of towering bluestone walls, Gothic spires, and iron. It had been said that should the student numbers dwindle any lower than the current 30 percent capacity, it would take but a few modifications to convert it into a much-needed prison. The colossal maple tree that rose like a buried giant's hand from the lawn had lost all but the last remnants of its autumn foliage. And thanks to the meticulous groundskeeper and his rake, the skeletal tree only added to the colourless doom that cloaked the school. Despite its gloomy exterior, inside, neat rows of uniformed girls were enraptured by Alice Berry's lively grade 6 English class.

"The Proust phenomenon," she was saying, "is a curious and wonderful observation of how vivid memories can be conjured back to life through the olfactory system. It's named after the French writer, Marcel Proust, who wrote about his experience of dipping a biscuit in his tea. Proust described being sent back in an instant, as if through time itself, to when he'd enjoyed the same sensory

experiences in his mother's kitchen as a young man."

She pirouetted to the blackboard and, as she wrote in her looping cursive, read aloud over the sweep-clack, sweep-clack of the chalk: "The. Olfactory. System. Girls? Who can tell me which of the five senses we refer to as the olfactory system?"

"Taste?" was proffered hopefully from the front row. A slender arm, half raised, indicated its source.

With a polite smile, Miss Berry said, "Not quite, Lucy."

An eager student but not blessed academically. Lucy's arm deflated to her side once more.

"Smell?"

"Very good, Anne."

With a flourish of her wrist, Miss Berry inscribed the word 'SMELL,' punctuating it firmly enough to chip off a splinter of chalk, followed immediately by the audible clunk of a knee jolting against the base of an oak desk.

"Francesca. So lovely of you to join us."

"Miss Berry, I've been here the whole lesson!"

"I see," said the teacher, obscuring the notes on the blackboard. "So you will have no trouble recalling what we've been discussing."

The girl replied, "I didn't quite catch his name, but a Frenchman's kitchen smelled like an old factory cistern."

The classroom erupted with the trill of teenage girls' laughter.

Stifling a smirk and her affection for the wild-haired Francesca, the teacher admonished her—yet again—for being off with the fairies.

"While that may very well be the case in some far-flung part of your imaginary world, I'm thankful our lesson has not focussed on the bathroom odours of poor Marcel Proust's kitchen. Please see me after class."

"But, Miss Berry—"

"Not another word, Francesca, or you'll see me again on Monday."

“I’m sorry, it’s just that I’m already seeing you after class from yesterday. Do I have to come back twice?”

Sniggers from the class.

“Do not test my patience any further, Miss Miller. Or would you prefer I send you to Miss Robinson’s office?”

“No, miss.” Francesca most certainly did not want to visit Miss Robinson’s office. The school’s burly headmistress was not someone one wished to see at any time, especially when required to discuss one’s suitable punishment for—as she would put it—insolence.

Georgina Robinson was as recognised for her disciplinarian approach to the moulding of young girls as she was for her uncanny resemblance to an owl.

“In that case, Francesca,” Miss Berry continued, “you would do well to pay attention in my class and keep the smart remarks to your schoolwork. As you all know, detention with Miss Robinson is no hoot.”

The hint of a wry smile disappeared as she turned back to the blackboard. Discreet chuckles rippled through the class as girls spun on their seats to make mock horror faces at Francesca.

“I’ll wait for you, Frannie!” Mary-Anne Fletcher whispered to her frequently detained friend.

“Us, too!” confirmed the Goldsmith twins.

The walk home with Francesca Miller was often the highlight of the girls’ day. Her ability to invent wondrous, fictitious stories about people of whom she had no prior knowledge delighted all. They’d even coined the portmanteau ‘Fantasy.’

Francesca smiled her thanks and returned her focus to the small black spider sewing its elegant web with mathematical precision. Like the exquisite but passionless piano recital of a child prodigy. Pure, ornate function.

What a plain little creature to be responsible for such a masterpiece,

she thought, remembering a recent lesson on arachnids.

“The spider,” biology teacher Mr Pritchard had said to a chorus of squeals, “is an extraordinary creature. Consider the intricate design of its home and primary source of sustenance. Every day, she rebuilds her diaphanous creation in which she hopes to ensnare her prey. Every day, her web is damaged by the elements, larger animals, hopefully by something trapped for the spider to eat. And who teaches the young spider to construct this marvel of engineering? No one. It is instinct alone. Innate. As a helpless infant, she is cast into the wind—a single thread of silk her sail—adrift until fate and environment conspire to end her first and only experience of flight. She has no parent to pass down the craft of her elders, she simply gets to it. And do it she must, or perish soon thereafter.”

With his pronounced flair for the dramatic, it was no secret Mr Pritchard had sought to head up the theatrical department when he’d applied at St Jude’s School for Girls. But with a headmistress determined to ‘fashion minds, and pay no mind to fashion,’ and equipped with a passable understanding of phylum and genus, he had accepted the role of biology teacher with the intent to create an extracurricular drama club in his spare time.

The school bell reverberated through the ribs of the near-empty school, triggering the clatter of the class rising as one like slaves at the oars of a Roman galley.

“Wait!” Miss Berry called out above the din. “Your assignment for the weekend is to write a story about a memory triggered by smell. Thank you and enjoy your weekends.”

Francesca remained. She watched her friends tumble down the front steps of the school to wait in the palm of the great maple. The spider made final preparations for its evening meal.

“Frannie?” Miss Berry said to the girl who was, as usual, staring out the window.

“Mr Pritchard says that spiders don’t need parents,” Francesca announced. “He said they are born, leave home, and have to survive with their instincts, that’s it.”

“Well, I guess that’s true,” replied Miss Berry, doing her best to catch up to how they got to orphaned spiders. Improving though she was to Francesca Miller’s indiscriminate mental wanderings, the girl’s vast array of tangents was dizzying for the uninitiated.

“I think Papa would be quite happy if the wind blew me away,” said Francesca, leaning in further to study the web’s most recent catch—a fitful emerald fly.

“That’s absolutely not true, Frannie,” Miss Berry replied. She studied the girl as Francesca puffed her fringe from her forehead. It was a fool’s errand, and the hair settled back in place.

Francesca Miller. An exuberant mind, an aching heart—as if shouldering a burden of someone well beyond her years. There were other children like Francesca, certainly. Distracted, restless, even unhappy. Miss Berry had sat through countless talks with her girls—and some mothers—about the fathers who had returned from the war. But while other girls appeared to accept on some level that their fathers were simply not the same men who had left home a decade before, Francesca’s inability to mend hers seemed to weigh upon her like a personal failure. No matter how regular or extravagant the praise heaped upon the peerless student, there was only one person from whom Francesca sought recognition.

Like the complicated girl before her, Miss Berry was a fixer. She ventured an approach as yet untested in all her moments of counsel.

“Did you know I knew your dad before you were born?” she said.

“Was he happy then?” Francesca replied with the hint of venom she ordinarily reserved for conversations with her friends. “I’m sorry, Miss Berry, I didn’t mean to—”

“There’s nothing to apologise for, Frannie. I know things are...

difficult with your dad. A lot of the girls are dealing with similar things at home.”

A pair of damp eyes peered through a tangle of fringe. “Their dads hate them, too?”

“Your dad does not hate you. Look, you have to understand”—the teacher sat, placing a consolatory hand on Francesca’s knee—“a lot of dads—and mums, for that matter—came back from the war in various states of...disrepair. Some came back with wounds you can see. A lot of them have wounds that you can’t.”

“Under their clothes?”

The teacher smiled softly. She placed a hand on her chest. “On their insides.”

Behind the girl’s silver eyes, cogs turned, gears engaged.

“I just—I thought they would be happy to leave the war and come back to their families,” she said. “I feel like Papa is mad at me all the time. I can’t do anything right.”

“I know you feel like it’s your fault, but you haven’t done anything wrong, Frannie. It’s just...it’s going to take some time.”

The girl appeared to soften, her shoulders slumping down before she sat upright again.

“But he hasn’t so much as touched me in six years! Not a hug, a kiss on the cheek, even a pat on the back. Nothing!” Her voice cracked. She turned her burning face to the window and saw a tear swell, tremble, then felt it run hot down her cheek. It splashed next to the spider.

“You know,” said Miss Berry, changing tack, “I quite fancied your dad when we were young.”

Francesca sniffed, wiped her eyes, and sponged snot into her jumper sleeve.

“Frank Miller,” Miss Berry said, gazing through the window as if it were a time portal to the midthirties. “He was everybody’s mate.

No one had a single negative thing to say about him. A handsome, successful builder running his own business. So young—you know he built your house?”

Francesca nodded.

Miss Berry chuckled. “And funny. Oh, he had those boys in stitches. I don’t know how they got any work done. I used to walk past your house on my way home from school and watch him through a hole in the fence. Clambering over beams like a monkey and laughing as if slaving in the sun all day was his favourite thing in the world.”

Francesca permitted herself a smile, though it was so completely at odds with the Frank Miller she knew, she wondered if Miss Berry might have him mistaken for another student’s father.

“Of course, we know now that he was building the house as a wedding present for your mum.” The teacher sighed. A melancholy smile rose and sank from her face. “But back then, he was just a top bloke.” She pondered a little more. “What you might call an unrefined gentleman.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean he wasn’t...polished. Or snobby like the gentlemen we talk about in Jane Austen. Brave, too. One of the first around here to volunteer for the army, you know? He was really something. But I was so young—too young.”

“How young?” Francesca had always struggled to picture any of her teachers as anything but that—teachers. Adults. Ageless beings who existed only to provide tuition during their set school hours, then retired for the evening in a cupboard somewhere until they were roused by the morning bell.

“How young? Well, not much older than you are now, actually.” She smirked, recalling an anecdote. “One day, he walked over to my hiding spot behind the fence, and I thought my heart was going to burst out of my chest. I thought I’d die right there of embarrassment.

Now that I'm older and wiser, I see it was obvious to him that I fancied him, so the way he handled that situation, well, I just thought he was one of the nicest blokes you could ever hope to meet."

"What did he do?"

"He asked me to come and look at a room he was building. He told me that he was going to marry the girl he was in love with and wanted to make a special room for her in the house. He asked me what sort of room a sophisticated woman like me would like. Where the lights should go, what sort of furniture. He made me feel like I mattered, and even though I was a stupid little girl for ever thinking we could be together, he let me down in the nicest possible way. Let me tell you, Frannie, I hope you never suffer the heartache of unrequited love, but if you do, may it be at the hands of someone like your father."

Francesca grappled with the image of her callous papa being a happy, energetic, nurturing man. Desired by the very beautiful Miss Berry, no less! Try as she might, she could not reconcile the man she knew with the one being described.

"Now," Miss Berry said, clasping her hands in her lap. "Your assignment. I was going to let you have a pass on this one, but upon consideration, I think it will do you good. I know you love a good story, so I look forward to reading yours about a smelly French kitchen."

They shared a smile as they rose. "Don't forget your hat," Miss Berry added.

"Thank you, Miss Berry," replied Francesca, the gravity of her thanks more than the simple reminder warranted.

Heart lightened, Francesca stepped into the expanse of the main corridor and headed for the staircase.

Poor Papa. *Whatever happened to him during the war?* she wondered, taking the stairs two at a time. She resolved to look into what she could find on his unit and what had happened to them.

The doors swung open with a groan that wished St Jude's last departing student a pleasant weekend, moaned shut again, and clunked with the finality of a mother bear flumping down for winter hibernation.

Five little marbles tumbled from the Great Maple.

"Frannie!" Mary-Anne Fletcher called out to her friend.

"Did you get the cane?" called the Goldsmith twins in unison.

"Worse!" replied Francesca with exaggerated gravitas as she secreted a hand inside the sleeve of her jumper. "Miss Robinson took my hand!"

As she thrust the stump toward her screeching friends, she evoked the familiar falsetto and distended embouchure of the headmistress: "Ooh it was truually my favourite, tooo!"

She chased the girls around with her outstretched arm, and they desperately avoided being touched by the handless appendage as if it were a witch's wand—as if, with a single touch, they'd be turned into toads.

4

ST JUDE'S SPARTAN staff room was vacant, save for the million dust motes dancing in golden afternoon sun, a woman of understated elegance, and a slender man in his early fifties stuffing his accoutrements into a briefcase. He wore olive tweed from head to toe with his signature violet pocket square the sole remnant of his once-flamboyant style, a fluttering purple flame clinging to its nearly spent wick.

"Enjoy your weekend, Mr Pritchard," Miss Berry called out, collecting her cardigan and bag.

"And you, Miss Berry," replied the biology teacher without turning, cataloguing the mundanity of his case's contents.

"John," Miss Berry said, pausing at the door, "what do you think about putting on a play?"

Snapping the case shut with the exaggerated gesticulations of a magician, he levitated across the room, admitting in practiced modesty that he had considered the possibility of joining the Union Theatre Repertory Company but that his commitment to the devel-

opment of others over his own artistic pursuits was, for the time being, absolute.

“Actually,” Miss Berry replied to his bowed head, “I was thinking of the students.”

“Oh,” he said, straightening. “Yes, of course. What a wonderful idea.”

Soothing his embarrassment, she asked, “Would you take on the director’s role? I mean, if it’s not beneath you, of course.” She saw life flicker back into his eyes. “My English class needs a group assignment, and I thought perhaps they could write and produce it, while you could bring it to life. As director.”

A spark caught in the kindling; embers formed.

“Interesting,” he said, flames taking hold. Curtains raised, scenery panels sliding in stage left, stage right, the music swelling, house lights dimming, stage lights burning.

Spotlight!

“Yes, Miss Berry! A production. A school of St Jude’s prestige? We’ll have society’s elite in attendance! Perhaps even some political notoriety... It might be the shot in the arm St Jude’s needs to get some students back in the classrooms. This will be my—I should say, their greatest performance!”

Miss Berry cleared her throat to the back of the man now standing on tiptoe, bathing in a spotlight of sun, arms spread wide.

He continued unabated, “Now to get the idea past the old—”

“Miss Robinson!” Miss Berry interrupted with urgency.

“Yes, that’s who I was going to say.”

“Get *what* past me, hmm?”

With her wide, round head tapering out to yet rounder shoulders, it was a bust quite remarkable in its total absence of a neck. Having no discernible features in her considerable frame indicating the end of one body part and the beginning of another, her silhouette was

that of a large brown potato.

“Miss Robinson! I didn’t see you there,” Mr Pritchard said, his heels, arms, and heart rapidly losing altitude.

“Evidently, Mr Pritchard. What is it you need to *get past* me, hmm?”

Mr Pritchard, ever the gentleman, took the liberty of submitting Miss Berry’s idea for a school play. He explained with the penitent attitude of a peasant to his queen the virtues of a theatrical outlet—for the students, of course. He was careful to include the obvious academic merits, the benefits of teamwork, handicraft and trade skills, etcetera, etcetera, while monitoring the effect of his arguments on Miss Robinson’s downy pursed lips. Unpuckering: push the advantage. Tightening: strategic retreat.

“In conclusion,” he said, finally drawing breath, “I think—we think—it’s a jolly good idea. For the promotion of the school, of course.”

Stepping from the shadows pace by unwavering pace, each clomp of her shoe was a mallet hammering pegs into a gallows. Her mouth twisted in consideration as if she contained within it a lemon-flavoured rodent. At last, her furrowed brow lifted, she spun on her heels with surprising agility, and, with the faintest impression of a smile, she announced to the pair, “Absolutely not.”