

Casualties of War

by Siren of Brixton

When Jimmy — and Frank and John and all the rest — joined up, it all seemed a big lark. Little Mary — she can't have been more than about five years old — was dead proud her Dad was going off to fight the Germans. I doubt she really knew who they were.

The lads all laughed and joked about it, and there was a big party down the social before they went away. Me and my mates were allowed to go and we were made up. I caught Wendy kissing Jimmy out the back: a long, intimate kiss that made me embarrassed to watch. I remember hoping I'd have that, one day.

So when the news came that Jimmy had been killed, it was devastating. Wendy was inconsolable; Mary uncomprehending. Not yet fourteen myself, I wished with all my heart that I could take their place. My sister; barely a woman, now a widow. I took Mary out for long walks, away from the hollow of grief that our home had become.

Being evacuated was a blessing: we were spirited away from the memories, away from the misery to a country idyll. Fruit grew on trees and the air smelled fresh and sweet and, instead of a cramped terrace with an outdoor loo, we were spoiled with our own bedrooms in the home of a woman who lost her husband and sons in the first war. My naive little heart thrilled at the adventure and filled with hope to see Wendy's pretty face regain its natural flush. I still fretted in the night, when the sound of her tears would seep through my bedroom wall, but by day the war — and death — all seemed very far away.

There were few men left in the village and the few that remained were elderly or infirm. We boys and girls were expected to work on farms after school or to help out in shops or with manual labour. Wendy landed a plum job at the post office and I do believe it brought her real fulfilment — a state that in those days women of our class didn't aspire to. I thrived; many of us did.

When the US troops at the nearby air base started spending their R&R in the village, we all went a little bit crazy. I wasn't allowed to do anything except cadge sweets, of course, and with Mary trailing after me everywhere I went, I didn't have much chance. I'd sneak out at night and join the other boys and girls peering in the window of the hotel. We were fascinated by the tall, dark men who so enchanted our elders. Mrs Jones, our host, muttered darkly to Wendy about the dangers of 'consorting' but Wendy just said that after all she'd been through, didn't she deserve a little fun? But when the troubles came, Mrs Jones was stalwart.

She wasn't alone in shunning the troops: the village divided over it. Some thought it was a betrayal of our boys to flirt with these big brash Americans. But Wendy was defiant: her man was never coming home and she was going to look out for herself.

When her breasts swelled and her waist thickened, Wendy was excited: there was no secrecy about it at home. She wrote away to her American beau, who I coached Mary to call Uncle Sam, and we dreamed of a life far, far away. 'Take me with you', I made her promise.

Out in the village she let baggy clothes keep the secret. As days, then weeks, then months passed with no reply, and no visit, she became more withdrawn, less certain. And in the village, the gossip started.

Jimmy went off to fight the Germans but for our Wendy the enemy was much closer to home. She was bitter about it, especially after she was sacked from her job at the post office with no explanation. I was scared for our future but Mrs Jones calmed me, 'after the war, when everything goes back normal no one will know, no one will judge.' We could start afresh, she said.

I dared not ask the question that plagued me — how would we explain the black baby? Young as I was, I knew enough about the world to know that was not done.

When Wendy went into labour I fetched the midwife. As soon as the chore was done, I was shoo-ed away with Mary. We climbed the apple tree in the churchyard and watched the house.

When we were finally allowed home, it was all over. The house was silent. Wendy was sedated, and there was no baby. Mary cried from fear but Mrs Jones wouldn't allow any talk about it; 'it's done', was all she said. I asked Wendy what happened when I took her tea in, but she just curled up in a ball and sobbed. I never asked again. Mary found the patch of freshly dug earth in the back garden, a tiny plot filled with secrets.

Life in the village was never again the idyll it had once been. The visits from the troops lost their sheen: we joined Mrs Jones in shunning them — and many of the villagers. The village is a tourist attraction now, and Mrs Jones' house is a tea shop. I went there once and sat in the old front room, looking out at the war memorial and thinking about loss.

