

PWY YDW I'N MEDDWL
OEDDWN I?

1914

WHO DO
I THINK I WAS?

1918

Irene Janes, Dowlais Visual Art Group

Why Me?

I rocked back onto my haunches admiring how well I had cleaned the scullery flagstone floor. However, my pride was tainted by the fact new found 'elbow grease' was born of loathing. Why me, why did I have to clean the floor, and not my twin brother, David? Added to my anger, SHE with her strange language had come between me and my very best friend, Iris. I flung the scrubbing brush into the zinc bucket. As if by some sort of punishment for my sinful thoughts, dirty water sloshed and splashed up over the sides. With that, my mother put her head around the door pointing to the telling puddle I had missed a bit.

'The war' was becoming an everyday mantra for everything that put my world out of balance. It just wasn't far, why me, I didn't even live in France. Nevertheless, my three elder brothers did, in trenches. From my bedroom when they thought I was sleeping I could hear Dad reading out their letters to Mam, whose reading was not too good. There was someone called 'That bloody Censor', my father's words, who sometimes scribbled out whole sentences of their writings. Now, I am a good scholar and when I had a chance I would take a peep at the opened letters stacked behind the china dog on the mantelpiece. I didn't know all the words but enough to know my father was telling my Mam the boys were fine and they weren't. She never heard the words rats, mud or lice.

Dad was an intelligent man but poverty and lack of education bound him to the life of a steel worker in Cyfarthfa but that didn't stop him wanting to learn. I had never felt so alone in my life. Dad working longer hours, because of the war, Mam walking distracted around her face pale and drawn. Then, THAT girl taking my very best friend.

Dad went to the Library as often as he could. When Mam took to her bed he took me and David. Down the length of the reading room, was a beautiful dark wooden thing, I suppose you would call it a sort of plinth. The daily newspapers were spread open and in the centre pages brass rods run down the inside of the spines and locked to keep the paper safe. This was the only way the working class people of the day could find out what was going on in the world. Their headlines were easy for me to read and the photographs needed no words. No wonder Mam was so sad.

Until SHE came to live in Caedraw, everything had been great. Me and Iris went everywhere together then SHE came, Amelie, some sort of distant cousin or something from Belgium. Why us, why me? Why couldn't she be someone else's cousin? Why didn't she stay with the rest of the refugees in England? By now they lived in purpose built towns, had their own money, and not like us in the valleys, they had running water and electricity.

It was a warm spring day as I sat on the bank of the Taff dreaming about living in Cyfarthfa Castle. I hid behind a bush as two drunks from the Crown Inn, decided to have a pee in the river. They were so busy talking and trying not to fall into the river, they didn't see me.

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“Send them all back, I say,” said the one standing. “Come over here they have. Those bloody U boats are sinking our ships and our food along with it. We get less grub and more bloody foreign mouths to feed. Only last month they sank the steamer Gadsby. I bet there were a few Belgians hiding on that boat too.”

“Right you are too bud. I bet they don’t have to pee in a river.” Slurred the other one, while sliding down on his bum to the water’s edge.

When I got back home Mam was out the back leaning over the old tin bath and dunking Dad’s shirts to death.

“Go and get your father from the pub.”

“Ah Mam, why me, can’t David go?”

I had never heard Mam shout so loud. “Now this minute my girl. Don’t you argue with me.”

I hurried towards Picton Street. Then I heard a roars of agony. It was if the torn ragged breath from my mother’s lungs was pushing my body onwards. I ran faster than I ever did in my whole life.

As soon as Dad saw me he put down his pint of beer and I ran into his open arms. I was too breathless to speak and he didn’t wait for answers. He hoisted me up on his broad shoulders and ran the way I had come.

It took him a while to stop Mam pounding away on the old washing board. The water had gone cold and the soap bubbles flattened into submission.

David was still sitting at the kitchen table. When he saw my father, he burst into tears.

“I didn’t do anything wrong Dad. I only opened the door to the telegram boy.”

In front of him were two telegrams. Mam didn’t have to know her words to understand the messages inside. Dad’s knees buckled yet managed to stop Mam from falling to the floor. She still had a shirt in her hand. She would not let it go, as though if she did the universe would split. But split it did when Dad read out the name Edwin and then opened the other telegram and whispered Glyn.

In my mind, it was the fault of the Belgians if they had stayed in their own country and fought the Germans perhaps my brothers would not have gone to France to die.

It was two days before I went back to school, my anger greater than my grief but I could wait.

Our first lessons on Monday morning were ‘joined up writing’ and spelling but I could not concentrate. Everyone in class knew my brothers had died and thought that was the reason. When the bell rang for playtime time, I was first out of the door, across the yard and into the girl’s toilets. I didn’t have to look through the cracks in the wooden doors, just listen. Then they came, THAT girl with her strange accent and Iris giggling in reply. In one smooth, quick

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action, I was out of the door pinning Amelie against the stone wall and pulling her stupid plaits from on top of her head.

My spit landed on her face as I shouted “It’s your fault you should have stayed in Belgium.” Encouraged by whistling and shouting of the boys my fists landed on my target. Combined with the screams from the girls and a sobbing Iris I didn’t hear the furious clanging of the brass school bell as my headmaster ran across the yard, THIS girl, Amelie had had it coming for a long time.

My mother never knew about my fall from grace. Half the time she didn’t even know who I was. All she knew that two of her babies were dead and buried in a foreign field and the other two had taken their place on the front line. If anyone knocked our door, she would run and hide in the back yard in terror in case it was the telegram boy.

Therefore, it was my father who now had all the burdens of life on his shoulders went to my Head Masters office with Ameile’s father. I didn’t realise it at the time but behind that huge oak door three shrewd men came to a compromise; I would not be punished. Nevertheless, it felt like punishment to me. For an hour, twice a week I had to join the dinnertime knitting class where I would make socks for our brave soldiers. That wasn’t too bad as I really thought my homemade socks would go to, my brothers and keep the safe for Mam. What I hated was being forced to sit next to Amelie, the humiliation of it all. So there we sat, both with stern faces, knitting needles in hand, trying to make socks out of the old wool, which last week had been a jumper. Casting on wasn’t a problem for me and it would have been great if a sock could be just a line of twenty stitches, but it wasn’t. I had no choice but to ask Amelie what to do next. I think she was afraid I was going to stab her with the needles. I was so surprised when she didn’t answer me in that strange language. Therefore, with a mixture of hand gestures, a smattering of English and a bit of Welsh Amelie showed me how to knit socks. She had great patience while I fretted trying to master my ‘plain and purl’. Out of this not only the number of pairs of socks grew but an understanding of each other and a friendship formed. I sat engrossed when she told me why they had to flee Belgium. How difficult it had been to live in Britain being stared and spat at for having a German accent. How she struggled learning her lessons, as they were so different from those where her home used to be and may never go back. She too had brothers but they had decided to stay in Belgium to fight the invading Germans by ‘going underground’ and in the two years since they had fled they have had no word from them and didn’t know if they were alive or dead. We shared out tears and handkerchiefs.

Overtime we became firm friends and played hopscotch or skipping together, with iris of course. But do you know, not once, not ever did she say “Why me?”

April 2016.