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WORLD WAR I

IN THE DAYS BEFORE LEAVING

by Beth Kephart

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World War I

In the Days Before Leaving

by

Beth Kephart

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1

Horse Hands

They say they're leaving soon. The horses and the doughboys and the guns. Packing the trains. Packing the boats. Then away. Across the seas, which will roll them like thunder. To Brest, in France, for nervous waiting. To the battlefields, finally, where their part of the war is waiting. The sickness and the mud and worse.

I wish I couldn't imagine, but I do.

I wish it weren't, but it is.

The rumor is that they'll be gone next week or next month, some of them sooner, some after that. The rumors are as thick as the early June heat at Camp Meade, which is in Anne Arundel County, which is in Maryland, which is the place that I come from. Used to be peach-tree orchards and strawberry fields around here. A couple of houses and the roads the farmers would drive their produce on. A post office, for whenever some news might roll in. The train depot. But starting nearly a year ago, in the summer of 1917, most of this land gave up its fruit.

doughboys: a nickname for American Infantry in World War I

Flew its own white flag. Surrendered itself to the national army of the U.S. government, which turned it into acres of brand-new soldiers training for a three-year-old war. There are dozens of camps in the country now, but Camp Meade is ours. It's mine.

"You talk so funny," Georgia, my twin sister, says.

"Do not."

"You carry on like they built the whole darn place for your personal amusement."

I stare at her like I could win the stare. But nobody beats Georgia at staring. She's got eyes like saucers and lashes like daddy longlegs. She can see straight through a lie or boast, and maybe I've been boasting. But there's nothing I've ever seen like Camp Meade. Nothing you've ever seen like it, either.

Housing quarters. Training grounds. The division bakery and the mess halls. Twelve hundred wooden buildings through which the wind blows the snow, the dust, the mosquitoes, thanks to the haste of their making. "Twelve hundred wooden buildings, and none of them pretty," Private Benjy says, which is his opinion, freely given.

mess halls: halls or buildings (as on an army post) in which meals are served

"Private Benjy is a made-up person," Georgia says, but now she's lying.

"Is not."

"Private Benjy is a book of mathematics," she insists, judging by the stories I tell about this someday soldier who spends all his time naming the numbers of things and talking to the horses when he thinks nobody's looking. He's not much older than me, but he's got a uniform. He's got a card in his shirt, where he keeps his counting. He's got spectacles, too, that gather up the sun. He's got an allergy to horses, or at least it seems that way to me: Private Benjy is one big sneeze machine. But that doesn't keep him from talking to horses.

"Would I like him?" Georgia says.

"I don't know."

"Is he handsome?"

"You're asking me?"

"Well, what does he look like then?"

"Like a soldier in the stables."

Georgia stares at me, but I look away. I don't need to win the game she's playing.

There are hard-packed roads Private Benjy knows the distance of. Some fifty miles of water pipes, he speaks of, some four hundred miles of electric wire. There's one

whole infantry division, he'll say, and one depot brigade and thousands of men, and all these horses. These horses that used to be farm horses and go-to-town horses and pull-the-tractor horses—these horses that now belong to the army. The horses have their own major—Major Peter F. Meade—who is the nephew of General George Gordon Meade, the Civil War hero of the Gettysburg battle for whom this camp is named. Twenty-five acres of horses, of posts and stables and whinnies and tack and rope. Of never enough hay and I don't know how many buckets. Even Private Benjy has no firm count on the buckets, or if he does, that number got lost inside his sneezing.

I volunteer from down the road. Walk to camp in the morning through the fruit flies and the drain flies and the gnats. Walk from camp before the lightning bugs go wild. The army feeds me breakfast and lunch, and I take dinner home in my own modified mess kit, enough for Momma and me and Georgia. Enough to keep us in the good eats, now that Pa is gone.

---

infantry division: a large military unit consisting primarily, but not exclusively, of foot soldiers

depot brigade: a military unit that organizes, equips, and trains new recruits

tack: equipment used to ride or work with horses, such as a saddle and bridle

mess kit: a set of eating and cooking utensils designed to be small and portable

What I like is the sound of the big teeth of the big beasts crunching the sweetness out of the hay. What I like is the swish sound of the tails, the talk that horses make while the men go on about the girls on the switchboard down the road, or the hospital nurses, or the sergeants who bark their orders at them. But what I especially like is the sound of the marching, boot-blistered men and the songs they sing.

Over there, over there,

Send the word, send the word over there

The Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming,

The drums rum-tumming everywhere,

So prepare, say a prayer,

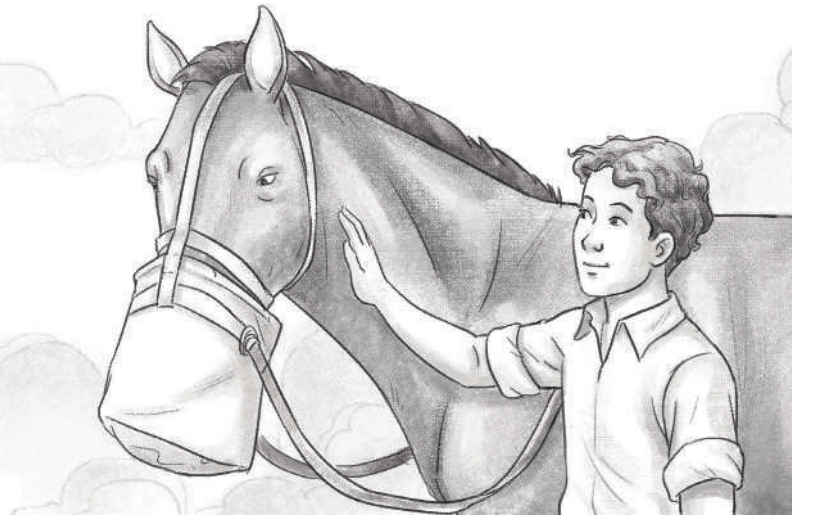
Send the word, send the word to beware,

We'll be over, we're coming over

And we won't be back till it's over over there.

I tend to the business of nose bags and hoof checks for a dozen horses in the army stables. I tend to the cracked heels and the bug bites. I tend to the grooming, too—getting the scurf out with a currycomb, always starting at the place behind the ears, like Pa taught me.

switchboard: a device used to manually connect telephone calls
nose bags: bags that are filled with food and hung from horses' heads so they can eat
currycomb: a comb with rows of teeth, used to clean horses' coats



Then watering before feeding, always. I tend to Missus especially, the Percheron who once was ours before Pa sold her to the army one month before he volunteered for war. We'd need the money, he said, as if we wouldn't need the horse. We'd need some cash, he said, to get us through.

But Missus is a nervous thing who would rather be back home with Momma and Georgia. She's got wild eyes and a bruising kick, which is how I got my volunteering. I would come to the remount station to take a good look at Missus from afar. I would come down the road like an open-air spy—only to watch, only to see, only to be close to the horse that was ours. And there Missus would

Percheron: a large, strong breed of draft horse, originally from France
remount station: a place where horses are kept and trained for military use

be, among all those thousands of horses, throwing her fits like she does, kicking up dust like she was good at, getting into Missus trouble. A regular tornado of a horse.

But everything changed on one particular spying day, when the men in their uniforms were yelling. Maybe it was because Pa had been gone a while and I'd been getting used to the idea of stepping up. It's what Pa would've done, if Missus were still our Missus. I went flat-out running, straight up to the fence. I was bold and Ma would even say impolite—pushing myself in through the gate, then running some more, toward Missus. When she saw me, she put her two front hooves down. Stood on all fours. Flicked her head up and down and back and forth but waited. The soldiers stepped back. They gave me room. I whistled my Missus whistle, low and clear. Reached for her when I got close enough. Put my hands on her long, warm, dusty nose and said, *There, there*. She was calm in half a minute.

"You're hired," said one of the soldiers, who turned out to be Private Benjy.

"Hired for what?"

"Horse volunteer," he said. He sneezed.

"Horse volunteer?" Never heard of it. "You have that?"

"We do now. Just the one, seeing as you seem to be one of a kind." He sneezed again. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Jeremy Hagy."

He took that in. He nodded. He did some explaining. We struck a deal. My time in exchange for those meals. My coming every day down the road to help with the horses and especially with Missus, who doesn't give anyone a lick of trouble whenever I'm around.

There, there. Low whistles. That's the sound of home. And that's the story of me at the remount. The adventure Georgia says I'm having, and it's true. This is adventure. Every day is a new day among the horses and privates. But it's also war, I tell Georgia, and these men and horses are leaving soon.

This is a serious business.

"Boy's got good horse hands," the privates say when they remember me or find me in the shadows. Their shirts are off. The sun's so hot that their backs are peeling from burn. They talk about the mess halls where they eat and the movie reels with the movies on them and the news that they read in the papers. They talk about the people they miss—their mothers and their sweethearts, their sisters. They get sad, and then they get tough, and then they remember the horses—the spotted and cinnamon and star-faced horses that each arrived with their own given names but whom I've bestowed with new ones. Snort Boy. Flicker. Crunch. Don't Touch Me I Told You.

"Hey Horse Hands," they'll call to me, "which one is this again?"

"That'd be Used to Be Quick," I'll say, about the old racehorse with the white stripe on his back right leg. Or "This here is Shady," the one with the scars on his withers, who is the blackest gelding in the whole huge yard. Or "Goes by Polka Dots," I'll say, about the Appaloosa, who looks like she was splattered by a soft gray rain. There's a toughness in her I admire, a toughness that will do her well on the battlefields. Soon she'll be pulling or dragging or digging out the machinery of war while the metal and the bullets and the flamethrowers hiss. The gas. The deadly gas.

I'd rather not imagine that, so I don't imagine it. Not right this instant.

"Jeremy Hagy getting all the fun," Georgia will say. And I'll want to say that it's fun mixed up with sweat and pain. But that would tilt the stories I'm telling. And my other job is to keep Georgia entertained. Georgia, who knows a good story when she hears one and a bad story when it comes.

It's the heat of early summer.

---

withers: the highest point of a horse's back, between its shoulder blades

gelding: a male horse that has been neutered

Appaloosa: a North American breed of horse, usually characterized by a spotted coat

It's the build up to a leaving that will forever change us. Could even break our hearts. Like I said, could be a week, could be a month. Nobody knows for sure.

"Don't forget to bring me tales," Georgia will say, in the light of dawn, just before I set off for camp. "Don't forget that I'm waiting on you."

"Never do," I tell her. "Never would."

She'll give me that look with her bright green eyes. She'll lay herself back down on her bed. She'll take the time it takes for her to get comfortable, but she won't let me fuss. I wait by the bedroom door until I know she's all right. I wait, fiddling with my buttons or my boots. I make my worries small, my sorrows, too, so she won't know how much I wish against her condition, how much I regret what our mutual birthing did to her.

2

The Long and the Short of It

There are just two sleeping rooms in the house where we live, and the other one's for Momma. Used to be for Momma and Pa, but Pa, like I said, is gone. A whole lot of "thens" made him go. First (June 28, 1914) the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife are assassinated by a Serb. Then (July 28, 1914) Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia. Then Germany fights in Luxembourg and Belgium, and France invades Alsace. Then the British join the French. Then Austria-Hungary invades Russia. Then (May 7, 1915) a German submarine sinks a passenger ship called the *Lusitania*, and then (April 6, 1917) the United States declares war on Germany. Now millions of Americans must be trained to fight. That is why there's Camp Meade, and that is why my Pa volunteered last October. That is why my Pa is gone. For eight long months he's not been at home with us.

That would be the long and the short of it.

That would be the story of the war.

Pa was an early volunteer. He was a strawberry farmer who left his farm for the duty he felt in his soul. "Fight for what's right," he said. "Responsibility," he said. But I thought his responsibility was at home. I thought home was his first and foremost, where he belonged. The two sleeping rooms and the kitchen. The long narrow room with the window at one end and the doilies on the two stuffed chairs, where we take our guests. The cracked wooden steps leading up to the porch, which leads up to the door, which is painted the color of a robin's egg, Georgia's favorite bird. The chicken coop, such as it is. The barn where Missus lived nice and easy in her stall. The loft overhead, where Pa kept the jars and lids and pots of jam, which is what Pa used to be famous for—the strawberry jam from his strawberry fields. Hagy's Jam, is what he called it.

We called it.

It was our jam.

It was all of us. All of us nourishing the ground with the dried manure of our horses in the after-picking season. All of us plucking the plants clean of weeds and weevils and aphids, when the greens came up in the spring, when the flowers began to bud. All of us pinching the trailers off and encouraging the fruit to grow. All of us hauling

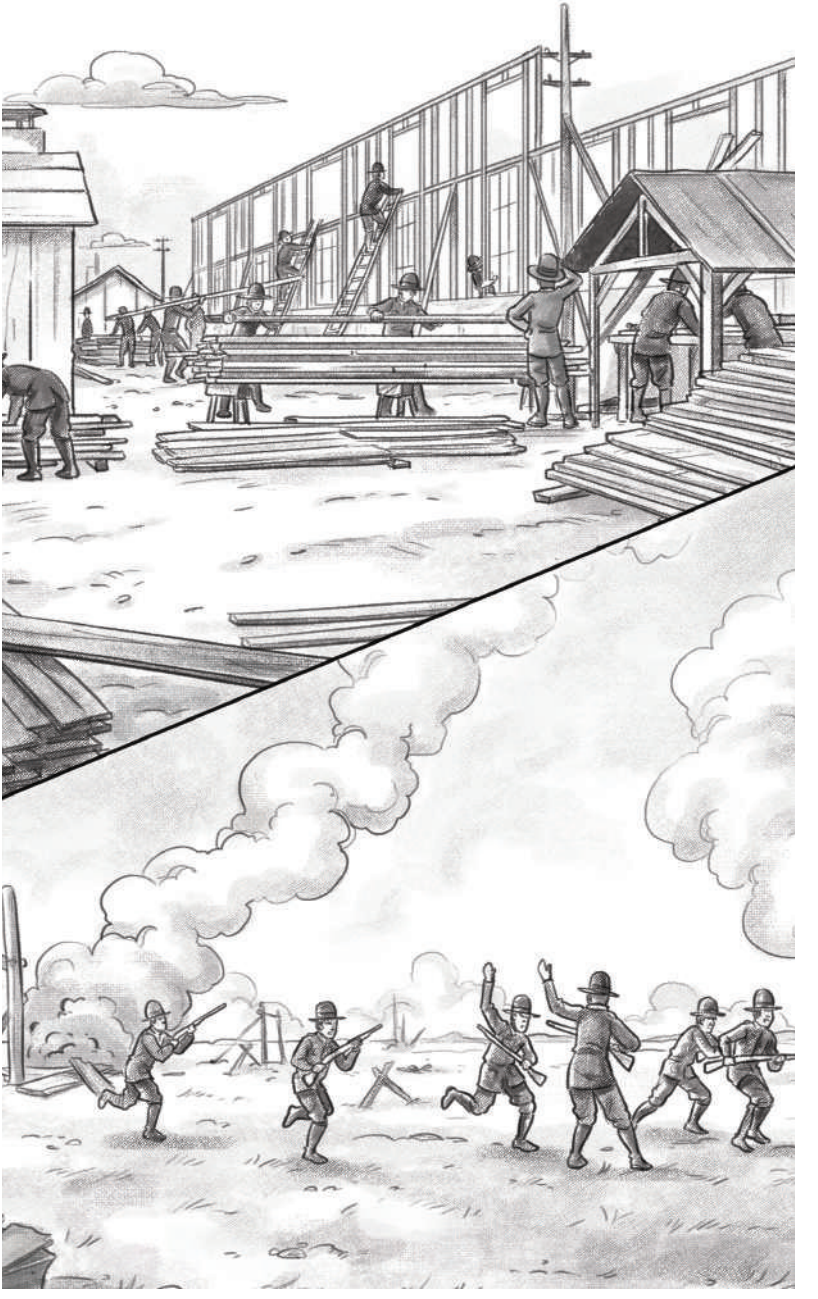
doilies: small, decorative lace or paper mats

out the water buckets when the rain wouldn't come and the sun was strong. All of us keeping the hares from their thieving, the deer and foxes, too. And then the harvest. And then the jamming, always leaving some berries aside for pies and pancakes and salad and ice cream, for the neighbors who would come. But mostly we were in the business of jam. All of us.

I say "all" because Georgia helped, too. Georgia in her wheeled chair with a basket on her lap at harvest, or tools in her hand, or water for when we got thirsty. Georgia in the kitchen, pulling the green pedicel and leaves from the bright red fruit—hundreds of them, thousands of them, more than Private Benjy could ever know, the mathematical brilliance that he has notwithstanding, all due respect, Private Benjy. Sir.

Pa said, "Duty." Pa said, "I will find a way to help." Left the house and the chickens and the strawberries and the jam for Camp Meade. He slept in muddy tents and built the barracks by day. He trained with dummy guns carved from forest wood. Trained with dummy bullets and dummy machine guns. Wore whatever he had, to start with, which was not enough, because it got to be winter, it got to be cold. Pa looked thinner than he should have been whenever Momma went to Camp Meade to visit.

pedicel: a small plant stalk that supports a flower or fruit
barracks: a building or set of buildings where soldiers are housed



That's what she'd tell us, when she came home—Georgia and me waiting by the window. Georgia and me waiting for news. Waiting for Momma to haul our pa home.

When it was time for Pa to ship out, after the months of building and the more months of basic training, which was hardly any training at all, we came for our goodbyes. We were our own small crowd inside the roaring, weeping crowds gathered at the train depot on a hard February day, me and Momma and Georgia. Pa looking thin like Momma said. Pa slapping my back, naming me the man of the family now, like that was my reward. Pa kissing Momma so hard on her lips that he changed their shape; her lips would always be different afterward. Sad lips, pressed-together lips, downturned, lips not talking much anymore. Pa picking Georgia up out of her wheeled chair and holding her like she was a baby again, like she was the last warm thing he'd ever hold.

Hugging and crying and waving. *Goodbye, Pa, we love you, Pa, come home to us real soon, will you Pa. Come home.* The train taking him away to join another France-bound division—to meet new men from new camps and to sail to some place far away. What he knew was that the war was going to make him a hero. Plenty of stories he'd have. He'd write them in his letters. He'd mail them from the other side of the world. This was his promise. But the

last we saw of Pa was the thin man at the depot, older than he'd been before he volunteered. He wasn't a Hagy Jam man anymore.

Last we saw of Pa was through the tears we shed, the tears that we couldn't sweep from our eyes, and I mean for days afterward.

Not a single letter since. Like he's forgotten us or forgotten our love. Forgotten the days when it was just him and me going creek fishing. Or dinners at our table, Momma's bread so nice and warm. Or how the chickens knew his name, I swear, called to him each dawn. Or how the land grew its best fruits for him, the best strawberries for his best jam, which we took up and down the roads in a cart driven by Missus. Back and forth to the country stores and the churches and the families that depended on our jam.

The sweet red taste of it.

The chunks of the red berries.

It doesn't seem to me like there'll be jam this year, not anymore. Momma wants nothing to do with it now, and how could she? No one in a picking mood. No one in a buying mood. No Missus here to pull the cart. No Pa anywhere near.

"I'm a-coming," Pa would say to the chickens and the fruits and the jam. "You slow your needing down."

Feels like Pa's forgotten that. Forgotten us and his famous Hagy Jam.

"Hagy Jam puts us on the map," Pa used to say. Nobody was prouder of those strawberries than him.

And if he hasn't forgotten, then the other thing is worse, and I'm not imagining the other thing. I'm telling you for sure: I will not and I won't. Because someday Pa will be home.

So now I wait at the window at night, hoping that Pa is on his way—hungry, maybe, tattered, sure, but please the Lord, be coming. I wait, watching the moon flick off the fence line and the tall, sweating grasses, off the top of the barn, off the faces of the strawberry plants in the strawberry fields, soon to come into their own. I wait, watching for shadows that don't belong to hares or strays. I wait until I hear Georgia, restless and aching, dreaming strawberry dreams and not waking up to bother me to lift her to the window to look out at all we have and what it seems we've lost.

3

Miracle Child

The doctors call Georgia a miracle child. It's a miracle, they say, that she lived at all—tiny baby that she was and hurt in the womb by the size of me. They call what she has "cerebral palsy." Her legs are complicated, her hips, her way of trying to walk and wanting to stand. "Disordered movements," they say about her. "Exaggerated reflexes." "Crippled." I say mind your own business, because Georgia Hagy is the family genius. Maybe her muscles are in a twist, but her brain is as bright as the nearest-to-you star.

Family.

Genius.

A smart girl bored silly at home.

"What's the story?" she'll ask when I return home from camp. She'll be downstairs in her wheeled chair, shimmying the peas out of their pods. Momma will be at the stovetop, cooking something to go with whatever I bring from whatever they made for the mess hall. Rye bread, mostly. That's what Momma does, her contribution. Rye bread and likely those peas to go along

with the mess hall pleasures. Mash, meat, and something sweet. I'll leave my boots on the porch and dust off my dust, then let the cheesecloth screen door bang behind me. I'll report out the news of the day, the stories of the boys who were drafted for war, who had no say in it—no yes or no. These boys who weren't volunteers like Pa.

"Private Frankie found a mouse," I'll start, "and now it lives inside his pocket, and no one knows but his best of friends, and I am one of those."

(Best story I've got. I'll start with the best. Georgia will be miffed if I don't.)

"A mouse living in a pocket?" Georgia will give me that look of hers, that don't-lie-to-me look, but I'm not.

drafted: selected for military service

"Sure as there's the sun."

"And you? A private's *friend*?"

"'Told me I am. Told me on Tuesday."

"Just like that, out of nowhere?"

"'Truth. I was cleaning out the stalls, laying in disinfectant. 'You got a name for a mouse?' Private Frankie asked me. I said, 'How about Champ?' And he said, 'That's right about perfect, my friend. Right about.'"

"My *friend*."

"'That's right. His *friend*."

"Huh." Georgia will go furious with the peas. "So the mouse lives in his pocket."

"Lives and dreams inside that pocket. Eats his share of Sunshine Biscuits."

It's all I will have on Champ and Private Frankie. The story will have come to its end.

"Okay," Georgia will say, after it's clear there's nothing further. "That is a satisfactory story." She'll nod. She'll cross her arms. She'll shell her peas without asking for more, but not for long.

Because then she'll say she needs another story,

another good one, fast and quick. I'll have to give it a good think while Momma checks on her bread, then goes outside to get the end-of-day air on her skin. I'll settle on Private Sammy and the Hello Girl kiss that was left upon his cheek. I won't have to tell her what a Hello Girl is, because Georgia already asked that question and Georgia already knows. It's one of the first stories I told. About the not-yet-married ladies training at Camp Franklin down the road. About the ladies speaking French as much as they speak English. About the women, members of the army, who will operate the switchboards overseas. *Hello* in French and *Hello* in English and *Enemy advancing, sir*.

Private Sammy's got a Hello Girl, and he's proud as a bee at a flower. The day before (this is the tale), he wore his girl's lipstick lips all day long—high on his right cheekbone, where she left it. A perfect mouth. Straight through mess hall, he wore it. Straight through drills. Everyone snickering and calling out shame, but Private Sammy wouldn't lift a finger to the sticky lipstick pink.

That's until Major General Joseph E. Kuhn, commanding officer, called Private Sammy to the front in the middle of drills. Called him to wipe his face with the officer's own rag. Then he had to do a hundred push-ups, which he did, dropping down to the dust, in the sun.

drills: physical exercises used to train soldiers in marching and using weapons

Some of the privates giving him a holler and a cheer. Some of the privates brimming with envy. All of them counting the push-ups out loud until it was like a battle song.

"Which Hello Girl was it that gave him the kiss?" Georgia will ask.

"Can't say as I know."

"Because he didn't tell?"

"Calls himself a gentleman."

"Gentleman. Psshhhaaaww." Georgia will give me a look, like she doesn't believe. A look I will meet with my own.

"I'd like to be a Hello Girl," Georgia will say. "Saving the world by answering the phone. 'Hello. Bonjour. Here's the news you're asking for. Here is the news of the war.'"

"Now that's enough," Momma will say, back now from her early evening airing, back to the rye bread in the stove. "Now you be quitting."

"Just one more," Georgia will say. "Just one more good-enough story."

"The Hello Girl was only *good enough*?"

"The Hello Girl was *fine*."

"One," Momma will say, giving up, giving in, because Georgia always wins. "Jeremy." Momma looks at me. "Just *one*." It's up to me to find a compromise, so I'll keep the next one short.

"Private Benjy got himself a new statistic," I'll say. "Three million gallons. Three *million*. That's how much water is pumped through camp each day."

"Hmmm," Georgia will say, and her eyes will get all dreamy. "I like your Private Benjy. I like him measuring the world in math."

"It's his favorite talent," I'll say.

"I sure would like to meet him."

"*Georgia*." From Momma.

"Well, how do *you*?" Georgia will ask, after the scold, and I'll look at her, confused.

"How do I *what*?"

"Measure the world?"

"By horses, I guess. By hay bales."

"I measure them by stories," she'll say. And now supper will be served, and that will be the end of that.

Sometimes, if it's a slow story day and I have nothing but boring, I'll pull out *The Drivers' and Gunners' Handbook to Management and Care of Horses and Harness* and start to read. *Drivers' and Gunners'* is a beat-up booklet I found down by camp and stole, if you want to know the truth. It didn't seem to be anybody's. It was tore out in places. It was printed on a street called Victoria in a town called London by "Our Dumb Friends' League" Blue Cross Fund—that's what it says, I swear, on the cover.

"Dumb Friends' League," Georgia repeated, when I showed her the thing on the day I first brought it home, tucked into the pocket of my trousers.

"Facts be strange," I said, and started to read from the start. First page. First chapter.

> *It is absolutely essential that the horses of every Unit should be hard and fit and free from galls, cracked heels, sore withers and backs, etc., and this book is issued in order that all Drivers may have simple knowledge which will assist them to keep the horses under their charge thoroughly fit and ready for Active Service. Every Driver should take the greatest interest in his two horses; if he does so they will know him and look to him for their daily care.*

"More?" I asked, and Georgia nodded, her green eyes dazzled, so I read a little further down:

> *The Driver should teach them to know him and his voice and by so doing he will find that they exhibit complete confidence in him at all times. He will find that they will even know him by scent (though of course not so plainly as a dog does).*
>
> *A Driver's reprimand to his horse should be sharp and firm, but never harsh. A Driver should take infinite interest in his horses and study their wants and peculiarities.*

"I want to be a driver," Georgia said, and Momma said, before I could answer, "No, Georgia, you do not. Nobody wants to go to war. Not a driver. Not a horse."

But Pa *did* want to go. That's the thing of it. Pa was a volunteer.

And that's what we had for supper that night, besides the warm cornbread, no butter, and the meatloaf left over from mess hall extras. Just long breezeless hours of not talking about how we all miss our pa.

4

The Eyes of the World

Been rain overnight. It turned to mist. Now it's a splatter of ditch pools. There's the sometimes shade of old peach trees. There's the tall grass on the fringes and the birds making song and the sweet smell of the field strawberries ripening. There's no one awake but me and my thoughts, going backward, rolling on. No one I can see from my window here except for our neighbor Clarabelle, out picking weeds by her fence. No one except for Whiskers, John Senior's mule, who is too old to go to war but can still drag along a cart.

Today, as I'm leaving the bedroom right about dawn, Georgia catches my wrist with her hand—catches my wrist and holds me there. She's lying in her bed. I'm standing by the door with my only pair of work boots on, a cap on my head to beat back the sun.

"Why can't you take me?" Georgia asks. It's not the first time she's said it. "Why can't I go? Missus misses me. I just know it."

"You're right about that," I say.

"She told you?"

"Course she did."

"You didn't tell me that story. You never talk about Missus. It's my right to know how she is. It's your job to tell me."

"I'm telling you now."

"I'm listening."

"It was early. Yesterday, as a matter of fact. I had just arrived and hadn't had my breakfast, but Missus was giving Private Benjy a hard time. Stomping her foot when he got near. Refusing to be bridled. Knocking his glasses with her tail. Setting him off into a streak of sneezes."

"Poor Benjy," Georgia says, all dreamy.

"Poor Missus," I say. "She doesn't want to go to war."

"How do you know?"

"Because, as Momma said, no one wants to go to war," I say, hoping Georgia will not interrupt with the fact of our Pa volunteering. "And because Missus keeps whinnying her whinny."

"So what'd you do?"

"I whistled Missus our tune. The one you taught me. You remember?"

"Course I remember."

"She calmed right down, thinking of you, which is how I know she misses you. Then Private Benjy took out his card, sneezed two short high sneezes, and wrote a number on it. 'What's that?' I asked him. 'That's number forty-two,' he said, sniffing. 'Forty-two times that Horse Hands saved the day by singing a soft song to Missus.'"

"So you've been going there forty-two days," Georgia says.

"That's right."

"So every day you're a hero?"

"Guess I am."

"You have to take me, Jeremy. You have to take me with you. I want to be a hero, too." Those eyes of hers, I'm telling you.

"Momma would—" I stutter. "Momma wouldn't—Momma said—"

But Momma is not the all of it. Momma wanting Georgia home is not the only excuse there is. The fact is that I'm the strong-armed son of a shipped-off volunteering farmer, which makes me a boy who knows horses. The fact is that there's too many horses at the remount to be cared for by the privates, many of them city boys, many of them needing instructions in horses. The fact is that after I showed up on my spying mission

and calmed Missus down, I was shown the stables, shown to a stall, and handed a pitchfork.

"Show us," Private Benjy said, though I didn't know his name yet or his crazy passion for all numbers.

I pitched. I cleaned. I smoothed out the rough spots in the stall that would hurt any horse that came too close. I named the points of the horse—starting with the muzzle and forelock, heading to the jowl, then to the crest, withers, back, and ending with the dock and tail, which needs good grooming to keep the diseases out. I talked about bloat and how you stop it. I talked about bridling and saddles, exercise and horseshoes. More and more privates came as I gave my talk. Then their boss, Major Peter Meade, came along and heard. And then they had me sit on a new bale of hay while they went off to do some talking to themselves. By the time they came back, the shadows had changed. They gave me a salute and a look that said I could stay. They said Missus could use my company and they could use my help.

The fact is: I bring home supper, and someday maybe I'll bring home news of Pa. So Momma says, "Go."

muzzle: the nose, mouth, and jaws of an animal
forelock: the top part of a horse's mane that falls over the forehead
jowl: cheeks and lower jaw
crest: the ridge along the top of a horse's neck that the mane grows from
dock: the bony part of a horse's tail that the hair grows from
bloat: a condition in which gas builds up in a horse's stomach
bridling: putting a bridle on a horse

But Momma would never say "Go" to Georgia.

The fact is: I'm the only horse volunteer at the remount. Everyone else here is a drafted private or a general or a someone with a uniform, a someone with a future at war.

Still, I imagine it. I imagine carrying my twin, with her reddish curlish hair, down the narrow wooden stairs from our room to the kitchen. I imagine placing her, easy, into her wheeled chair. Georgia wearing her best white dress and the shoes made special for her. I imagine strapping her in because the road is slightly crooked and sometimes pitched. I imagine leaving a note for Momma as I open and shut the cheesecloth door. I imagine pushing Georgia ahead of me, free. Georgia, going to camp to collect her own stories. Down and down the old country road, the gnats letting her be. Down and down, beneath the tree shade. Then up to the bump of the highest hill, pausing right there and saying nothing but "See?"

Because then she would see. She would look down and out and wide, and there Camp Meade would be. It would be spread out like some endless tablecloth, with its rows and rows and rows of wooden buildings, its huff and puff of big machines. It would be bustle and hustle with its privates and corporals and sergeants and staff sergeants and Hello Girls. It would maybe be General John J.

corporals: noncommissioned military officers who rank below sergeants

Pershing himself, leader of the American Expeditionary Forces, come for a visit, for a good long look at the men and women he'll be taking off to war.

The sound of the morning bugle floating up to her.

The dazzle of her big green eyes.

I imagine.

Then I remember again this thing that is true. There is no room for girls at the remount at camp. Never seen a single one. It's men and horses and me. Horse Hands. The one and only. It's hot work in the hot sun. I can't just show up there with my sister, genius that she is.

"I'll bring you tales," I say.

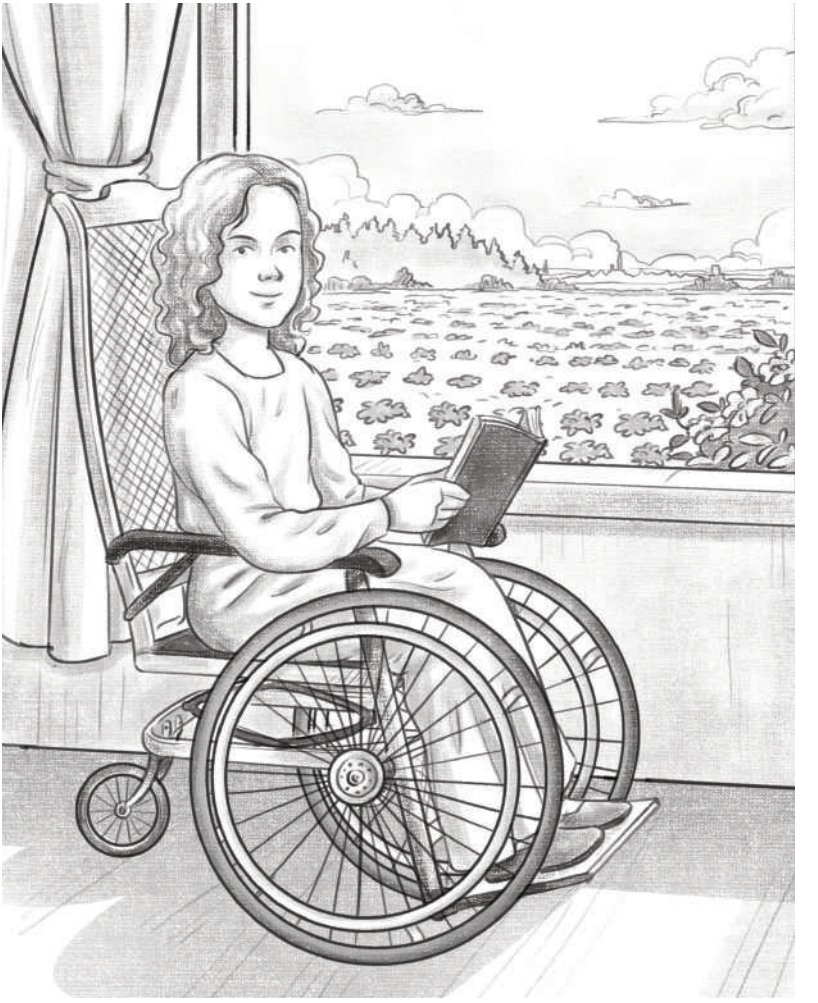
"Promise?" she says.

"Promise," I say, and then I imagine her day. Imagine Momma in the garden, tending to beans and peas and looking out on the field of Pa's strawberries, so many strawberries coming in now. Imagine that book in Georgia's lap—*The Eyes of the World*, by Harold Bell Wright, which Momma says is a book for grown-ups, but Georgia reads it nonetheless. Over and over, she reads that book. It's a story about California sun and California people that a friend of Momma's left on our kitchen table by accident and never came back to reclaim.

expeditionary forces: military units that are sent to fight in foreign countries

The Eyes of the World is Georgia's now.

This is what Georgia does in the heat of summer. Gets smarter by the minute while I pitch hay down the road. She gets the stories she tells from the book she reads. Someday, she says, she will tell me. Someday her stories will be better than mine. That day will soon be coming.



5

Agonies

Private Benjy's early to the remount and so am I, but he doesn't hear me come. He's talking to Sallie, a cinnamon-colored quarter horse, who is getting better now from a sickness she carried from drinking water that wasn't too clean. Private Benjy's reading Sallie some numbers, sniffling behind the card in his hand. He pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose and pretends that she understands his talking. "Good girl now, Sallie," he says. I make my noise. Fill the buckets with a hose. Rattle the pitchfork off the wall hook. Scrape down the stalls. Rub some oil into the cracked leather of the bridles that have so much history to them.

"News has come in," Private Benjy says, talking to me now.

"Yeah?" I say. "What sort?"

"News on Brest," he says. Which I already know means something bad, because there's been Brest news before.

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quarter horse: a small, stocky breed of horse, known for great speed over short distances

Brest is in western France, a harbor town in Brittany, a sheltered cove, they say, thanks to the long nose of a peninsula across the way. Brest is the landing place for the American Expeditionary Forces. It's where the soldiers and the horses and the Hello Girls go after the huge ships of Hoboken, New Jersey, sail them across the churning seas. It's where they return to after the war spits them back out, damaged, needing hospital treatment, rest, and care. Brest is a place that's in between. It isn't war. It isn't safe. I can hear the worry in Private Benjy's voice as he talks about the agonies suffered there. The long lines of sick men. The long spells of sickness.

I can see him thinking that soon he'll be there himself—so far from here. Far from Camp Meade, from me, from Sallie listening with her big brown eyes and switching the flies with her tail.

When Private Benjy leaves, I will still be with the horses that have not yet left the remount. When Private Benjy leaves, I will not be living in a slaughterhouse, waiting in line at the latrine, hoping for bread or something sweet, my face pressed up against another in the dark of the night. When Private Benjy leaves, I will not be waiting for my name to be called, to go off to the trenches, to war.

latrine: a simple toilet, often just a hole in the ground

My luck is my age.

His luck isn't.

"Couple of dozen came in last night," he adds.

"Returnees?"

"That's what I'm hearing."

"Men sent home from war?" It's the first time since I volunteered that I've heard news like this.

"Or come in from other hospitals. After coming home from war."

Men too sick to fight anymore. Men who didn't die but who came close. Men who, one way or the other, survived and are on their way back to the people they love.

"Any Private Hagy, best as you know?" I ask, screwing up my courage.

"No one's telling names," he says.

6

Hope Is Complicated

Hope is a good spell, a kind of magic. Hope is dangerous, a warning. I can't decide. I'm walking the road. Thinking maybe Pa has been returned to camp. Maybe Pa's come back. Just a little time in the hospital before his forever time at home. Maybe Pa plans on surprising us all. Maybe it's going to be good like that. Maybe the missing will be over.

No names, I tell myself.

It's just hope, I tell myself.

It's just what I know or don't *really* know, and should I tell Momma? Should I tell Georgia? I wish I had some proving math, some way of calculating fortune.

Still, I allow myself to think of it, to see it all as clear as I can see the sun—hot and pink and dropping down low in this night's sky. No lightning bugs yet, but there's crow caw and wing flutter. Nobody out on the road except old Marv, returning from his day of delivering dairy. Except Mrs. Jenny, taking her evening constitutional.

constitutional: a walk intended to maintain or improve health

Except Spots the dog, who is everybody's dog, going house to house collecting bones. Nobody but me, picturing Pa in a tucked-in white bed in a ward at camp, eating his three squares every day and getting himself all picture perfect so that he can get on home.

Home. Pa coming home.

Georgia won't be needing my stories then.

The strawberries in their field will have their purpose.

I'll be the man of the house, still, but there'll be two of us. Going fishing before the sun goes down. Bringing Momma supper on a hook, Georgia stories for the night, and riding out at dawn with our Hagy Jam, though we're going to need a new horse for that. Four of us, instead of three, which is how it's supposed to be.

I'm a mile, maybe, from home. All the morning ditch water is gone, lapped up by the late June heat. My shirt is sweat-wet. My trousers are stable-dirty. Tomorrow is wash day, and Momma will do what she does—shake her head at the mess I've made, then beat the cloth clean and hang it in the sun. I'll set off to camp in my other shirt, my other trousers, which are Pa's better trousers, washed last week and crisp in their foldings. I'll be setting off clean, and tomorrow I'll need clean, if I dare to do what I'm thinking of doing. If I have the bravery.

If you don't know all the rules, are you breaking them?

If you say, *My Pa is here*, is that a lie? If you let your hope do your talking for you, is that a kind of dishonesty?

"You be a truth teller," Momma always says.

But truth, in war, is complicated. I have time, still, to decide.

The next day, I leave while Georgia's still dreaming. I leave while Momma's still soft-snoring in her bed. I leave my dirty clothes in the pile of dirty clothes that Momma will suds out later and clip to the rope outside after breakfast—tea and berries, and porridge served hot if Momma is up to hot or if Georgia asks for it.

Spots is out, his tongue hanging wild. He falls in behind me like a shadow, like a person I might be talking to, and so he is, and so that's a relief. I need someone to tell my secrets to. My secret plan. My secret wish.

I start by telling Spots about the rumors I heard—about the men coming home, from across the seas, from the trenches, the camp hospitals, the base hospitals, the cargo holds of the big ships that dock in New York City. Then the trains. Men coming home sick with the after

trenches: long ditches dug into the ground for military defense

parts of measles and mumps, tuberculosis and typhoid, diphtheria and smallpox, infections, the hurt of war. I tell Spots that today, when I arrive at camp, I'll put a search on for Major Peter F. Meade. I'll shore up my courage. I'll stand in salute. I'll ask for a major/minor favor. Might I, Sir Major, I'll say, receive special hospital visitation permission? Spots barks enthusiastically, seemingly approving of my plan. Might I, Sir Major, be given an afternoon off from my volunteering post so as to inquire after the off chance of my Pa? My father, one of the first to serve, you see, Sir Major? Neglectful of his letters, Sir, but still he is my Pa. May I?

My words clearly resonate with Spots. He barks again. He shakes his head until his whiskers quiver. He pushes his tongue from one side of his open mouth to the other, then finds a stick. He wants to play the tossing game—his reward for listening to me. He drops the stick at my feet and circles my boots, wild tail wagging.

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tuberculosis: a bacterial infection of the lungs that causes fever and difficulty breathing
typhoid: a disease caused by bacteria that leads to fever, headache, and diarrhea
diphtheria: a bacterial infection of the throat that causes fever, sore throat, and a buildup of tissue that makes it difficult to breathe
smallpox: a disease caused by a virus that leads to fever and a bumpy skin rash
shore up: support or strengthen
resonate: positively affect or appeal to

"All right, Spots," I say. "All right." I toss the thing farther down the road to the southwest edge of camp, which is where the remount is.

"Go, Spots, go," I say.

Spots takes a running start and then a long hairy flying leap, and then he skids back down to earth toward where the stick has landed. He chews it up into his mouth. He doesn't have fine manners, Spots. His chin drips with saliva.

Now he pads back down the road to me and drops the stick at my boots, saliva goo on the new birch bark, like the stick is my reward.

"This is is your game, Spots," I say. "Not mine." But I toss the stick because he insists on it, and off he goes, his tail waving like a flag. I should sign him up for the circus.

This is how we make our way. This is us, on our road. Nobody else out here with us, excepting Marv the milkman in his beat-up Ford truck, and Priscilla, new with a baby while her husband's gone to war, and Sir Long Johns, who I nicknamed such on account of the so-called clothes he wears, which are hardly any clothes at all.

All the way down the road we go until Spots hears the stomping and the nickers of the thousands of horses, smells the black heat from the smithing shop, hears the trucks coming in from the other side, the roar and commotion of their engines. That's enough for the country dog Spots. He takes his stick and turns, his flag tail waving.

At the stables, Missus is out in the grazing fields. She's not giving another soul a single problem. Private Benjy is

nickers: low or gentle whinnies
smithing: metalworking

hanging over the fence, watching her and Sallie and the rest of the horses in the part of the remount where we work, like he's the one who tamed them by reading out his numbers. There's something wistful about Private Benjy today. There's something sad, and I don't disturb him. I can't see his eyes for the sun in his glasses. I can't hear his voice, for he's silent. Even his sneezes have left him today. It's the beauty of the horses, I think. It's the calendar that just keeps turning. The inevitable truth that someday soon, they will all be headed for war.

In the haze of the stalls, Private Frankie is standing in a spotlight of sun, admiring his Champ. He calls out my name as soon as I show up.

"Hey, Horse Hands," he says, and I salute him. "Champ is learning tricks."

"That so?"

"Champ's so smart he'll be our general next," Private Frankie boasts. "He'll be in charge of the war. General Pershing will be working for him."

The idea is so absurd that I snort. "He'd need a special uniform," I say.

"Oh, he'd get one," Private Frankie says. "Sure enough."

"He'd need four boots and someone to tie them on."

"Oh, sure. He'd be special like that."

Private Frankie has Champ eating out of his hand. Yesterday's stale biscuits, set aside for a mouse in a pocket by a nurse Private Frankie says he's kissing.

"So what's the trick?" I ask.

"This is the trick," he says.

"Champ eating is your trick?"

"Eating out of the palm of my hand."

"Where else is he supposed to eat from?"

"It's my hand," Private Frankie says. "And no one else's."

"You've got a point," I say. I give a low whistle and a slow nod. "Impressed," I add. I tap my heels and give another salute. I watch Champ start to clean off his whiskers. "Major Meade in the vicinity, Private?" I ask now, getting down to my business.

"Not yet," Private Frankie says, "to the best of what I know."

"You tell me if you see him?" I ask.

"Why, sure." He gives me the suspicious eye. He gives Champ a finger pat upon the head.

vicinity: surrounding area

"You tell the others to tell me if they see him?" I ask.

"You getting too big for your britches, Horse Hands? You giving out instructions?"

"Nah," I say, and shrug.

"You got business to do?" he asks.

I turn on my heels. I go to my business. I talk to the horses as I work. I whistle tunes that keep them happy in the morning heat that's headed for hotter. Or I try to keep them happy, though the flies are about, and the temperature is climbing quick, and there's way too many horses here for any one of them to be dreaming of fresh pastures.

7

Wondering Still

Later I'll tell Georgia every minute of this story, starting with Spots and adding in Champ and then pushing right up through the hour of noon when the major appeared in his tall boots and his wool coat, wiping the sweat from his brow. My stomach was a fist, I'll say, showing her what I mean. My mouth was dry and rough. I was aching around for the proper words, and I found nothing satisfactory, but still I did my business.

I found him myself, the major, among the whinnies of new horses. I found him counting off horses bought off of more northern farms. Young enough horses. Strong enough horses. Horses in need of feeding and stabling. Horses in need of a veterinarian's quick check. Horses with names that would be, in time, replaced. The privates took notes as he inspected. Then he waved them off, and he was still standing there. I cleared my throat and I saluted.

veterinarian's: animal doctor's

"Sir Major," I said, and he looked around before he saw me. Shadows fall hard at camp.

"Sir Major," I repeated. "A word?" Like I had heard some others saying. Like I wasn't a farm boy volunteer who didn't have much of a name at camp, except for Horse Hands.

"You did not," Georgia will say.

"I did," I'll tell her.

"You asked for a word with the major."

"It was the only way," I'll say.

And, in fact, it was.

"Walk with me," the major said, after he'd listened to me explain about my Pa—how I was hoping that maybe he was among the men who have come home from war. After he'd given me a good long look, up and down and sideways. "I'll be headed that way."

"Sir," I said, and I fell in behind him.

And that is how what happened, happened.

The remount is at the southwest end of camp, like I said. The base hospital is all the way north. The major is walking like he's on a march. I'm stepping close and tall behind him, dust slapped off the knees of my trousers,

buffed off the tips of my boots. For now. Past Bakery Company No. 301. Beneath the passing steam clouds wafting over from the laundry. Past Truck Company No. 328 and the 304th Ammunition Train and the 304th Supply Train. On the other side of the wide, wide road we're walking down, the 368th Infantry Regiment (Colored) and the 351st Field Artillery (Colored).

And everywhere we go, wherever the men are, whatever they are doing, they straighten their spines and salute the major. It feels like they're saluting me, too.

"Beautiful thing, now, isn't it, son?" the major says at last.

"Yes, sir," I say, in my best and most respectful way.

"Built this camp from nothing in less than a year—still building it, as you can see. An entire operation rising up from earth and trees."

"Yes, sir," I say, and I can just hear Georgia in my mind. *This is all you've got, yes sir, yes sir? Use your imagination, Jeremy Hagy. Please.* But Georgia's the big thinker. Georgia is the one who would have this conversation singing. Georgia is the genius in the family.

"Men in formation," the major is saying.

formation: arrangement or grouping of troops or military units in a specific pattern or structure

"Men in uniform. Men following that donkey brigade up into the woods. You see it all? You looking around? Do you see what I see? We are war ready, I'm telling you, son. We are victory coming."

"Sir."

"You have a name other than Horse Hands?" the major asks me now, and I can't wait to tell Georgia that somehow or other the major has heard about me. The major knows my Camp Meade name.

"Jeremy Hagy, sir," I say. "Born and bred."

"You take a good look around, Jeremy Hagy," he says. "You remember all this so you can tell the story later. About the regiments, the gun battalions, and the brigades. These are real heroes around you."

"Yes, sir," I say, wondering how he knows that I'll be reporting every detail to Georgia.

It's noon and hot. There are hardly any shadows. Finally we get to where we've been going—the last complex in camp, the hospital. I know the stats, thanks to Private Benjy. Thirty-six wards. One hundred five buildings of X-ray and laboratory, mess hall and bath, sterilizing plant and mortuary. The storehouse, the powerhouse, the fire station, the place where nurses sleep.

gun battalions: military units that provide artillery support

Later I'll tell Georgia about how clean and bright it was inside, how crisp the nurses looked. How orderly and pleasant. Later I will tell her how I said Pa's full name out loud, how I explained the circumstance of his volunteering, being older. "Reddish hair like my sister's hair," I said. "Curls bunched up within it, too."

Later I'll tell Georgia how the major went off to do his own visiting business and left me there, in the front lobby on my own, waiting while the nurses checked their lists, then checked their wards. Waited the whole rest of the afternoon. No Pa at the hospital. No Pa came back. No Pa that I could bring home.

"He'd have written if he were coming home," Georgia will say, later, when the moon is up and our talk is just a whisper. He'd have written, and perhaps he still will. Georgia and I agree on it, but I will lie awake, wondering still.

8

The Harvest Comes

My friends are shipping out in a week—on the train, on the boat, to the dock, to Brest, and then from there to war. Men I know. Friends. A couple thousand horses with them. One week. More or less. The actual word has come. I heard it from Private Benjy, who heard it from Private Sammy, who heard it from the major himself, who heard it from General Pershing, some say. General Pershing himself. Salute. Yes, *sir*.

The men need to gather their things and say their goodbyes to their quarters and their mess halls and their liberty reels. They need to write their letters home, their best letters now, the ones that will last them or outlast them, whichever is necessary. The horses need shoeing, their tack needs packing, their bales need stacking, their leathers need oiling. The whole calamity of being ready to be gone. I imagine waiting for the enemies at dawn. I imagine too much, and there's nothing I can do, nothing I can stop, war being bigger than us all.

liberty reels: films and newsreels designed to promote the purchase of war bonds

Tonight, the truth is the only story I tell to Momma and Georgia, both of them at the table now, both of them listening like my voice is the only voice in the world. "I'll be missing . . ." I say, and I can't finish. "Champ," I say, "and Sallie. And that Appaloosa that's still waiting on a name." And . . .

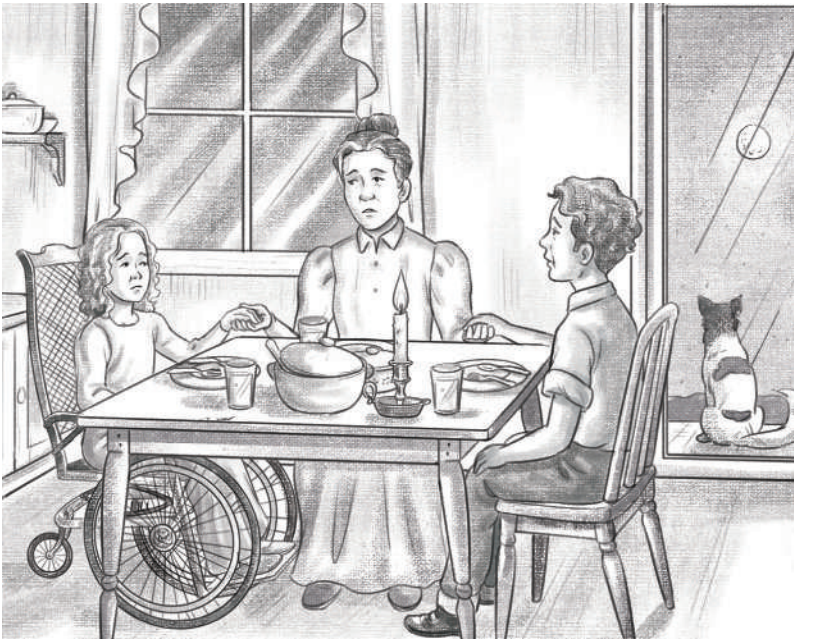
"Missus?" Georgia finally asks.

"Missus will be gone, too," I say. "She's not misbehaving anymore. She's Private Benjy's favorite." I add that part, though I'm not sure it's true. I think all the horses are Private Benjy's favorite. I think he loves them more than he loves his math, and that is saying something.

"Missus is a good horse," Momma says. "Pa would be proud of her, doing her responsibility."

I feel choked up inside. There's more I want to say. I can't.

Momma reaches out for a hand to hold. First Georgia's and then mine. Now it's all three of us crying, our tears caught in the candlelight, in the soft dust on our cheeks, our chins. It is so quiet out there, beyond. Our supper dishes have not been scrubbed. It's long past the rise of the moon. Spots followed me home, and he won't take leave. Spots is a guard at our door.



"How many days?" Georgia asks.

I tell her: "Six. Maybe seven."

"Okay," she says, and I don't know what she means.

"Okay?" I ask.

She looks not at me but at Momma, and I know something big is about to happen. She'll always be the genius in the family.

The next day, when I walk home from camp, there's no wheels, there's no people. There's not even Spots, which makes the whole few miles worse than lonesome. It's a

long, long way when you're feeling nothing but sad and the sun is on your neck, still burning. It's a long, long way when the biting bugs are fierce with hunger and you're slapping yourself hotter and redder than you already were, which is really saying something.

I hear them before I see them. I hear them, like it's a party—all the quiet of the past many months being broken by something new going on. Something down the road where Pa's strawberry fields lie, ripe and red with fruit. It's Marv and Mrs. Jenny. I can tell from the pitch of their voices. It's Roy and his brother Horace, both of them with that loud hee-haw laugh, both of them too young for war and too young for volunteering. It's Twiddle Susan, who knits like a fiend. And now it's me, running, my boots slapping hard on the hard ground, the dust coughing up to my knees, the gnat buzz breaking. And now I see Long Johns, who has put some trousers on. I see Priscilla, with her baby. All these people we have hardly seen or spoken to for all these weeks when things just haven't been the same. All these people out from their houses, where they've been keeping themselves, worrying their own worries. I see Spots running around in circles, chasing his own bark and tail. In the middle of it all, in the center of the field, I see Momma and Georgia—Momma with a harvesting basket in one hand

and Georgia with another on her lap. Georgia is safe, and she sits straight and tall in the wheeled chair Pa recaned for her just before he left.

It's the harvest come to the strawberry field that Pa wouldn't want us to neglect.

"Jeremy!" Georgia calls when she sees me. "Jeremy!" Spots comes bounding across the rows of red and green to where I stand, hands on my knees, out of breath.

"Wash up and grab a basket," Momma calls out. Her lips are making a different shape. Her mouth is looking like it did before Pa left. I'm close enough to see. I'm sure I see it. Marv is humming an old song. Priscilla has the baby on her hip.

I head inside. I clean myself up. I loosen the knots on my boots and ease up the ache in my feet, and then the cheesecloth door is banging behind me.

We harvest through the dusk, and we harvest through early night, and we harvest by the light of the moon. Mrs. Jenny sings soft songs, and when she quits, Marv tells olden-day stories. When Priscilla needs a long sit, Georgia bounces the baby on her lap, dances those baby feet, watches the way the baby's feet should be, and

recaned: replaced old cane or rattan

I don't know what she's thinking. All I know, all I will come to find out, is that this strawberry harvest was Georgia's idea, Georgia, our genius, and that this is the best story yet. Georgia seeing those strawberries out in the fields ripe and bursting to be picked and deciding, at last, not to leave them to rot. All I know is that this gathering of neighbors was Momma's doing. Momma leaving the house she has hardly left since Pa went off and walking the miles from door to door and explaining how the men are leaving soon. How there is jam that the men will need. How there are all those berries wanting harvest, wanting jam. Pa's berries. Pa's jam. This is what he'd want.

Every person Momma asked said yes, because this is the something that can be done. This is the way we send our privates and their horses off to war, on the proper side of hope.

9

Special Delivery

Georgia's up and ready before I'm all awake, when I haven't shaken the aching out from the night before. Momma's already in the kitchen, banging pots around, washing down glassware—the leftover jars from last season. She's climbed up into the loft to get the jars. Georgia tells me the story while I'm dressing. Momma's gone back up to collect the burlap sacks of sugar—mouse-proofed, thanks to Pa's metal-bin work. Everything is as fine and as purposeful as it was before Pa left. Everything is as he would like it.

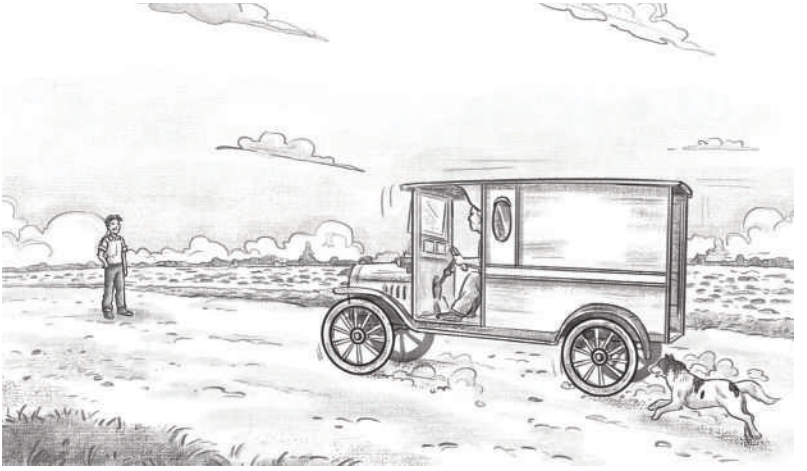
"Responsibility," I hear him saying, in my memory. "And duty."

Out on the road, there is the sound of people coming. Someone's throwing a stick to Spots. I'm guessing that it's Long Johns. Someone's singing a song; must be Priscilla. A big truck is rattling up the road, and that would be no one but Marv.

It'll take all day, I know, because Georgia tells me. It'll take tomorrow and the next day, too, and I am sworn to keep the secret, to not tell a soul at the remount, not

even Sallie or Used to Be Quick. My job is to go about my business, Georgia says, because at camp they really need me now, at camp they're giving me more work than I can do, and still I do it. For the next three days now, it will go like this—the harvesting and the hulling and the jamming at home, the preparing for leaving at camp. The days will go fast, and the days will go slow. Everyone with a good job to do.

On the fourth day, Marv rattles up with his dairy truck, and Spots is not far behind him. It's so early that there's only half a lid of sun on the horizon, and most of the birds are still quiet. But Georgia is ready, dressed in her best and only whites, the reddish curls on her head all behaving, thanks to her borrowing of Momma's brush. Thanks to the mirror she's been staring into, turning her face this way and that.



Momma's up, too. I can hear her downstairs in the kitchen and in the greeting room, moving among the jars of jam, so many jars, you couldn't imagine. I can hear her whistling a song Pa used to sing. I can hear him, I can imagine him, still singing:

In the evening when I sit alone a-dreaming

Of days gone by, love, to me so dear,

There's a picture that in fancy oft' appearing

Brings back the time, love, when you were near.

It's so early, it's not even milk-delivering time. It's so early that the shadows are long and blue on the field, which I am watching from my window now, and which is mostly green—the red all gone into the harvest, the sweet all gone into the hope of Hagy Jam, into the song that Momma is singing now, words instead of tune:

It is then I wonder where you are, my darling,

And if your heart to me is still the same.

For the sighing wind and nightingale a-singing

Are breathing only your own sweet name.

"Pa," I whisper. "If you could see us, Pa." Georgia with the dazzle of her green eyes, waiting. Momma with her fingers berry stained. Marv almost to the house now, in the truck that will carry us all down the road, to the

remount boys of Camp Meade, to the horses, to Missus, who will go off and do her duty. Here's Georgia lifted up into the front alongside Marv. Here's Momma and me, in the back, among the sweetening in the jars. Here's Spots running behind, his tongue crooked in his mouth. These are the days, the days before leaving. The leaving days.

Afterword

On June 28, 1914, the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife were assassinated by a Bosnian Serb. Within a month, Austria-Hungary had declared war on Serbia. This war quickly expanded to include the Germans, the French, the Belgians, the British, and the Russians, among others.

Woodrow Wilson, the president of the United States at the time, was determined to keep the United States out of this war. But unrestricted German submarine warfare in the Atlantic Ocean—starting with the sinking of the passenger ship *Lusitania* in 1915, which killed almost 1,200 people, including 128 Americans—tested his resolve. When British intelligence intercepted a German telegram promising U.S. territory to Mexico in exchange for its assistance in the war, President Wilson decided that it was time. On April 6, 1917, the United States officially joined what would eventually be known as World War I.

Few American men had been trained for battle—and a lot would be needed for war. On May 18, 1917, the U.S. Congress passed the Selective Service Act, which enabled the government to require able-bodied men

telegram: a message sent using electrical signals over wires

to serve in war. But special training camps would also be required, and so the federal government created a special construction division dedicated to overseeing the development of training camps across the country. Sixteen cantonments for U.S. Army members were hastily built. Sixteen National Guard camps were built as well.

One such army cantonment was Camp Meade, located on former farmland in Maryland. This camp was built in just three months by more than fifteen thousand people. It consisted of all the buildings shared in this story, plus enough barracks to house forty thousand men. There was also what was called the remount station, which was built to house twelve thousand horses and ran under the leadership of Major Peter F. Meade.

Ultimately, some four hundred thousand soldiers would pass through Camp Meade during the war, and some twenty-two thousand horses would be cared for at the remount over time. I have imagined a boy named Jeremy Hagy as a volunteer at the remount. I have imagined the soldiers around him—many of whom would be leaving by train to head to Hoboken, New Jersey, where large boats that held more than ten thousand people and many horses would be waiting.

cantonments: military camps

I have created the strawberry jam as a gift the Hagy family can give to these men going off to war because jam was one of the treats that soldiers loved the most, a treat that reminded them of home.

World War I ended on November 11, 1918, when the Germans signed what is called an armistice with the Allied forces, to which the United States belonged. The total number of military casualties over that four-year war is estimated to be nearly forty million.

armistice: an agreement to stop fighting, often for a limited time
casualties: people who have been killed, injured, or otherwise lost

Meet the Author

National Book Award finalist **Beth Kephart** is the award-winning author of more than three dozen books in multiple genres, an award-winning teacher of memoir at the University of Pennsylvania, a widely published essayist, and a paper artist. Her new book for adults is *My Life in Paper: Adventures in Ephemera*. Her new book for children is *Good Books for Bad Children: The Genius of Ursula Nordstrom*. More at *bethkephartbooks.com* and *bind-arts.com*.

Meet the Illustrator

Kailien Singson. A born artist, Kailien hails from the northeastern region of India known for its rich natural beauty that serves as a constant inspiration in his work. His passion for art began at a young age with artistic scribbles in notebooks at school and gradually developed into a serious career that led him to pursue a degree in arts. Having explored several techniques in art through his education and professional years in publishing, Kailien specializes in using striking colors and depicting realistic forms in his work. He is equally adept at traditional art styles, taking inspiration from everyday life.

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Jeremy Hagy loves horses. He's good with them too. In fact, that's the reason he was hired as a horse hand at nearby Camp Meade, in Maryland. Being around the camp helps him feel more connected to his father, who has gone off to fight in the Great War, World War I. Others will go too. They are getting ready. Some are his friends now. There's Private Benjy who has a mind full of numbers and a nose full of sneezes, and Private Frankie who has a pet mouse who lives inside his pocket. And at home, waiting to hear about his daily adventures, is his brilliant twin sister, Georgia, and their mother. Everyone in Jeremy's world is preparing for the leaving, while hoping that the day of returning is just a whisper away.

These books are suitable for readers aged 8 and up.

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