

EMMY' S FARM



Story by James Staddon

Illustrations by Georgina Bevan

I found a diary hidden away amongst a load of old papers in the attic. The brown cover was warped and the edges scuffed but as I peeled away the almost illegible inky pages, I fell into my Great Grandmother's world about growing up on a farm during the Great War.

PRIVATE!

This diary belongs to Emily Faith, aged 9 years, 2 and a half months.



This is me and my dog, Scamp.

He's a Border Collie. We go everywhere together. We live on a small farm, but we don't own it. We rent a cottage and some fields from Mr. Mottershaw, the farmer. His son is a Captain in the army. Same as my father - Only my father's a Private. Private, Thomas Faith. He volunteered to fight in the war. So did Mr Collins, the village blacksmith - and Albert Lightfoot, who's a cowman.



It was very hard saying goodbye to Father.

Henry Gunn, our schoolteacher said it was all because some Archduke called Franz Ferdinand, who was going to be the future Emperor of Austria, which is a really long way from here, was assassinated by Gavrillo Princip, a member of the Serbian Black Hand Society.

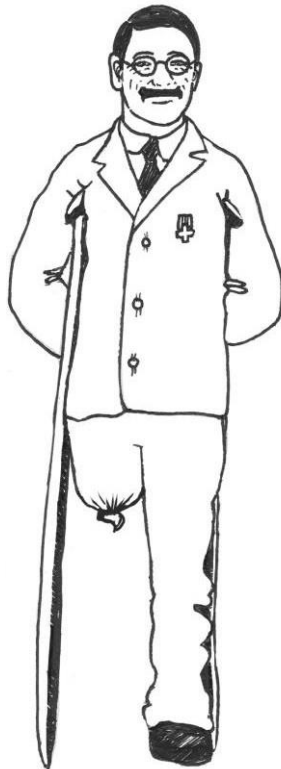


After that it all kicked off and everyone got involved. Austria-Hungary and Germany started having a go at Russia and Serbia. And when Germany marched through Belgium and attacked France - That was it! On the 4th of August 1914, we were at war.

That was over a year ago now.

Henry Gunn our schoolteacher has a big red moustache and only one leg. Apparently, he lost it in France somewhere. Now he can't fight anymore. He got a Victoria Cross for saving a man's life.

Mother says he was very brave.



I wonder if it's called a Victoria Cross because Queen Victoria was cross about the war?



The only men left in our village are all really old, especially Mr. Craggs.

He's seventy eight and completely deaf.

Oh, and there's Arthur Dobbs, retired postman. His job's been taken over by Florence March. Florence's husband Ted March is a poacher. He's a crack shot.

He joined the army just after Father and had a crack shot at some Germans.



Everyone's scared of Ted's wife, Florence, in case she delivers a telegram. A telegram means someone is missing in action or has died.



But last week Florence delivered a postcard from my father in France:

*'Dear Emily,
At present we're billeted at a farm. It's just like home, so not to worry.'
Your loving Father xx*



Sometimes I write back.

Dear Father,

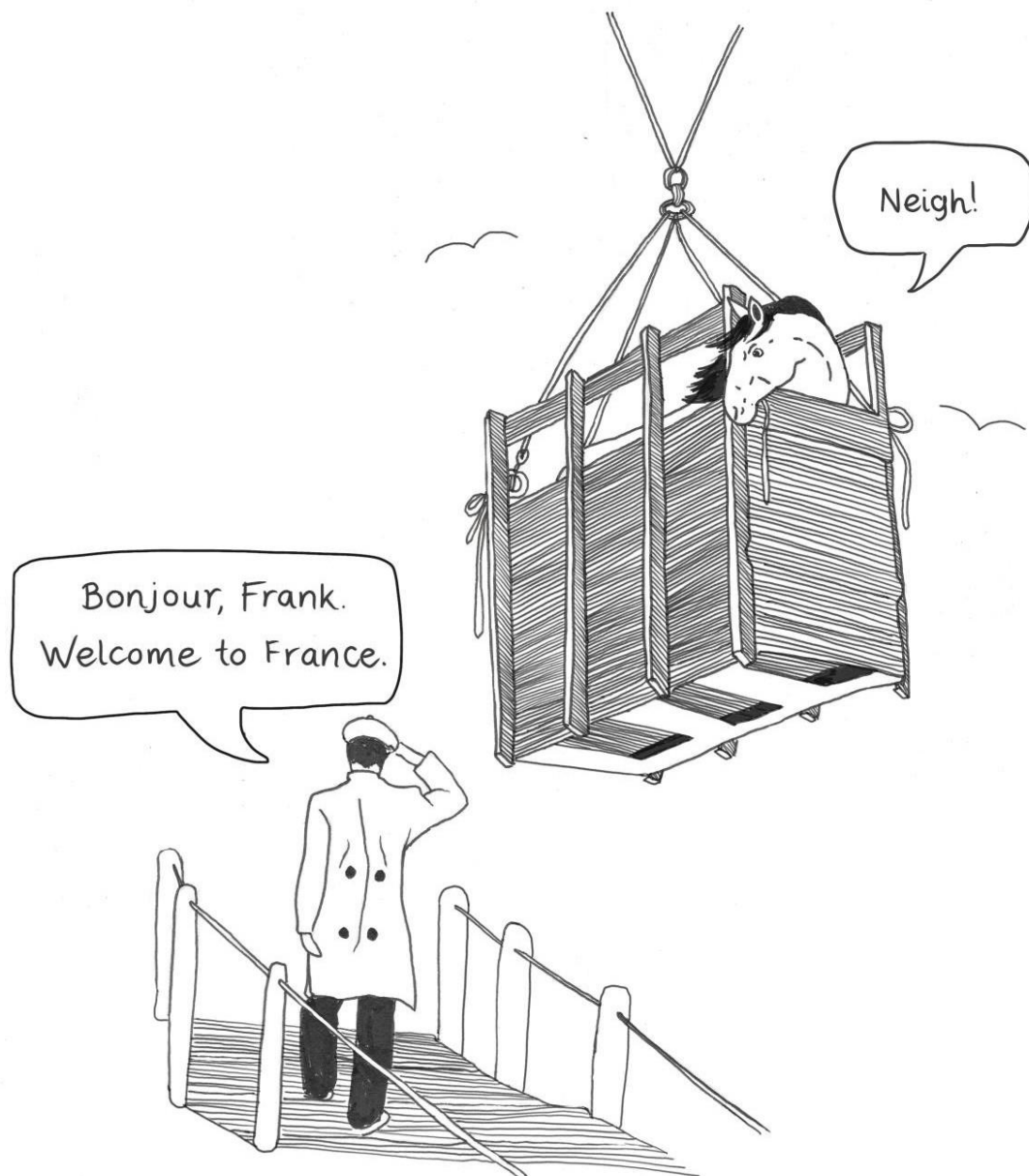
It has been raining here and everything is covered in mud. Especially Scamp! My tooth fell out and I have a big gap where it was. It hurt a lot.



I miss you all the time.

Love Emily and Scamp xxxx

The army even took Frank! He's our horse. They said it was for the war effort. It was an effort for him!



Mother runs the farm whilst Father is away fighting. There's always something to do and never a moment to get bored.

Throughout the year we mend fences, cut back hedges, pick stones off the fields, till the land and sow seed that will grow into big healthy crops. We make hay, collect wood for the fire, pick up all the eggs the chickens have laid, milk the cows twice a day by hand and run around keeping all the other animals on the farm fed and safe.

Sometimes a cow or its calf gets sick and Mother has to stay up all night in the barn and nurse it back to health. I help her as much as I can. So does Scamp, who is not really much help at all.

Scamp loves chasing the chickens. Last week he tried to make friends with one of them. Now there are only two.



WINTER

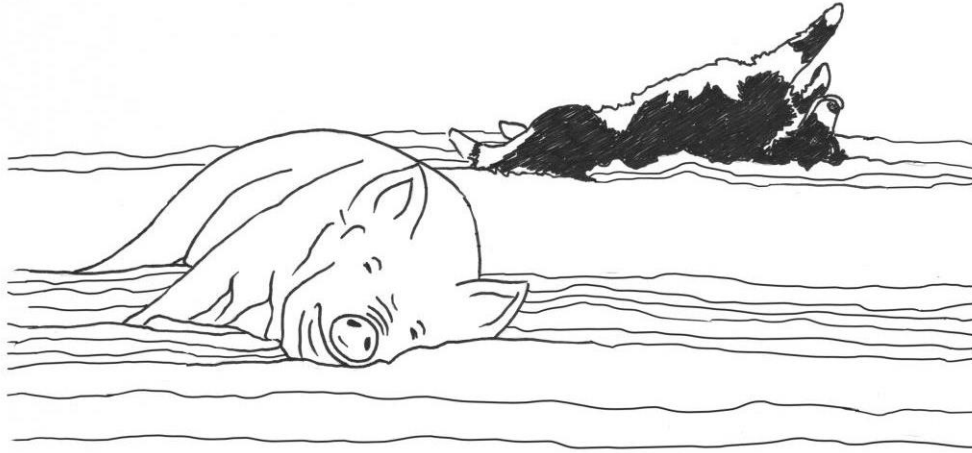
Clumps of green mistletoe hang between the naked branches of the oak tree at the top of the hill. Mangy foxes skulk across the fields in search of food. The days are shorter, the sky smoky grey, and by late afternoon it's dark.

It has been raining for weeks. Everything is sodden wet, including me but we have to keep the farm going. Mother and me dig and repair the ditches at the sides of the fields to stop them getting waterlogged. We bring the cows indoors for a few months to keep them warm and dry. We have about twenty altogether, and six calves. They eat hay and turnips and make a lot of muck. Muck is poo, which I have to muck out!

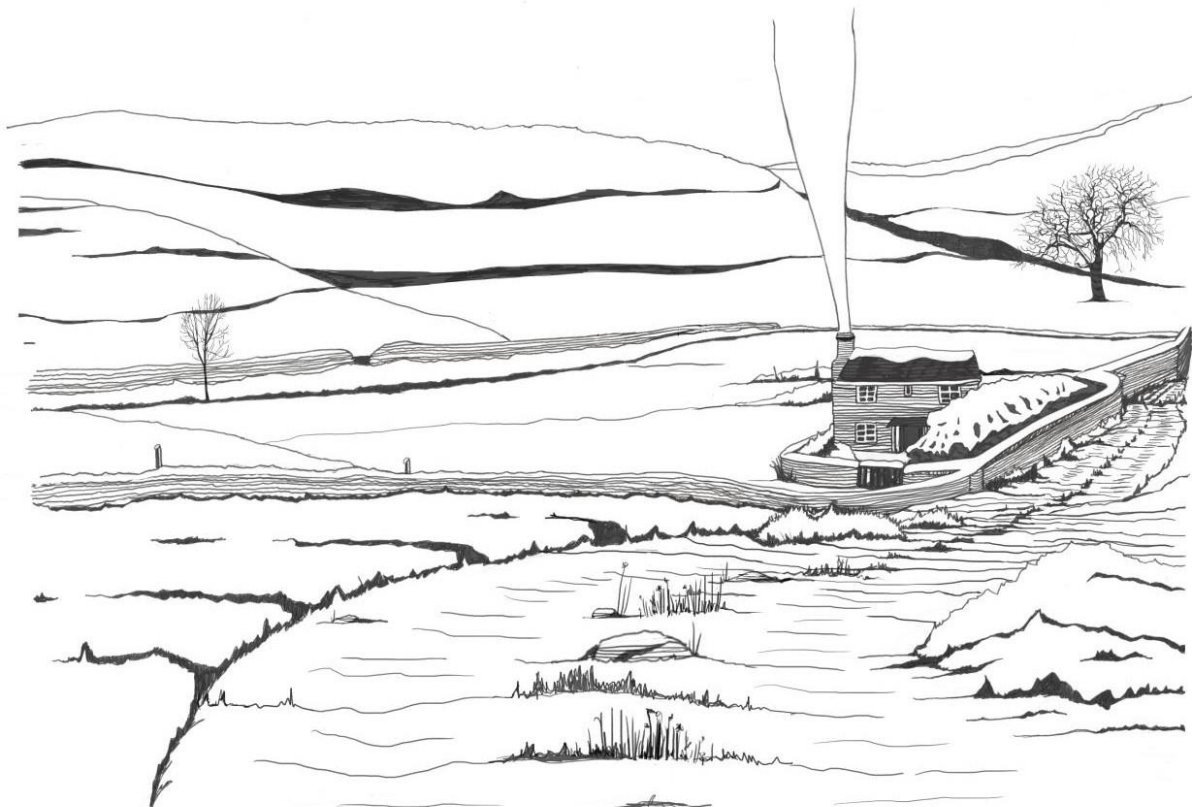
It really does poo!!



As well as the cows and their calves, we have nine ewes and a pig called, Mr. Big. Mr. Big eats grass and berries and insects, and rotting rubbish – everything and anything he can lay his naughty trotters on! He lives in a mucky old pigsty. It smells revolting but he loves it. He also loves being scratched on his big fat belly and behind his funny old ears. Oh, and rolling in the mud!



Nestled in the fold of the valley, where the fields and meadows are hemmed in by a network of hedgerows, is the cottage where Mother and me live. It has four rooms. Two upstairs and two downstairs. We have a small cast iron range for cooking on. The cottage is cold and damp and there's no toilet or bathroom. Just a pump in the yard for water and a stone trough for washing vegetables.



This Christmas was the first without Father. Mother knitted me some woollen gloves and I gave her my collection of bird's eggs. Then we went to church and sang carols.



It cheered us up no end.

The snow has come and gone. It was four feet deep in places and for several days we were completely cut off from the outside world. Mother and me and Scamp had a snowball fight. Scamp tried to eat the snow.

Silly Scamp!



Today when I woke up it was bitterly cold and my boots were frozen to the floor.
Brrr!!!



Work on the farm is never ending. Day after day. Week after week. Month after month. I watch Mother struggling away, all bone and muscle, not an ounce of fat on her thin body. The workload and the weather conditions have taken their toll on her. Her hands are roughened and cracked, her fingernails broken and ingrained with dirt and her face is weather-beaten and lined. I think she's beautiful.

Each morning, hours before dawn, she crawls out of bed to make our breakfast - kettle broth. Chunks of bread sprinkled with salt and covered with boiling water. It's nice and warm and I always want more. Mother says I am always hungry, which is true. I am. Especially during the winter months when it's so cold.

Ted March, the poacher used to bring a rabbit or two to keep us going, and once he gave us a pheasant. But he can't now he's gone off to fight the war with Father.

There's never enough to eat, even though we have a small vegetable patch where we grow potatoes and cabbages and lettuces which the naughty rabbits nibble on. Mother makes pots of jam out of the fruit growing in the hedgerows and sometimes she grows flowers to sell.

And we have three chickens that lay eggs. Whoops! I forget. There are only two now.

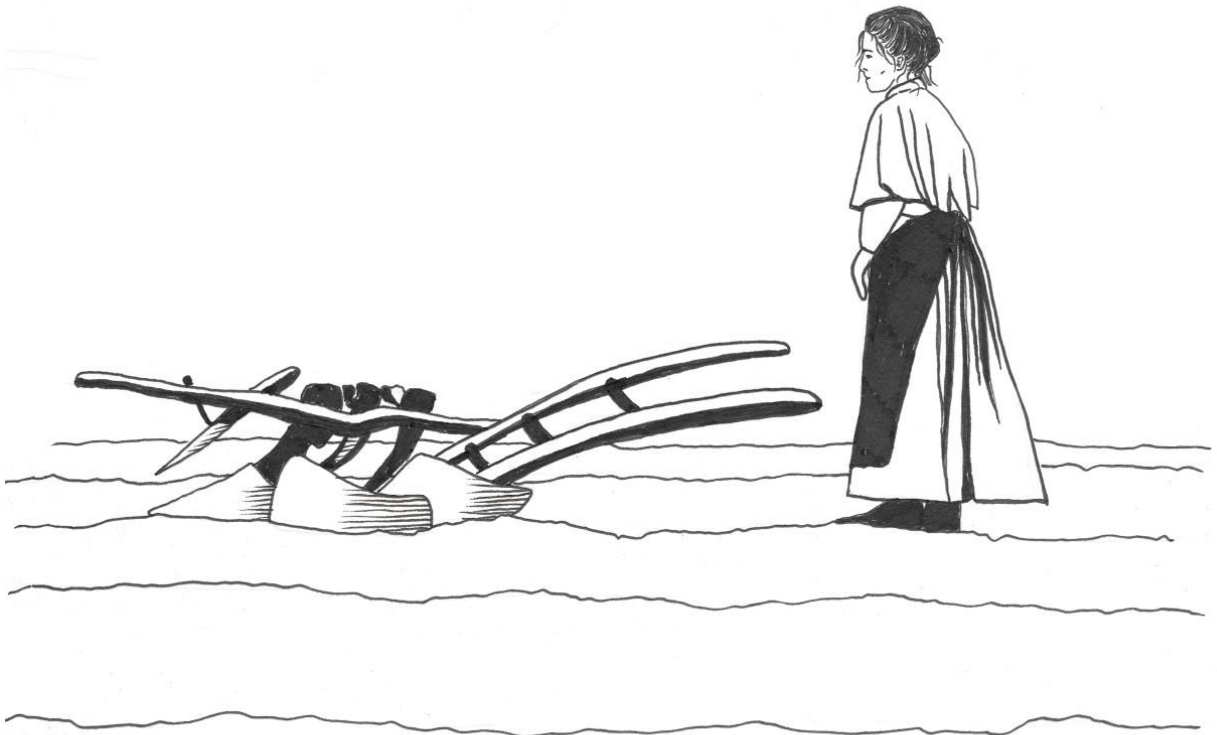
Scamp's always hungry too!



Yesterday was Plough Sunday. We held a service in the church to celebrate the beginning of the agricultural year. It's the first one Father has missed since he was a boy.

We started ploughing the bottom field at dawn this morning, which is really hard without Frank our horse, who's living in France now but doesn't speak a word of French. We had to use deaf old Mr. Cragg's mare, Winnie. She's almost as ancient as he is. And she's very slow. I really, really miss Frank. But not as much as Father.

I kept Mother company as she coaxed Winnie on, the plough slicing through the earth, turning the soil over into great long furrows. Every time it hit a stone that we'd missed picking up, the wooden shaft struck Mother in the chest. But she didn't complain. She just carried on. Even though her hands were red raw from cold and covered in blisters. By the end of the afternoon, she could barely open and close them. But she wouldn't stop. She said she had to keep going.



Mother said: 'If Father's suffering from the cold and the hardship in France, then I've no right to complain.'

By nightfall, we're in bed. We have to huddle together to keep warm. We have no lights and candles are too expensive to use. Except on special occasions like birthdays or Christmases.



Lie still, Scamp!

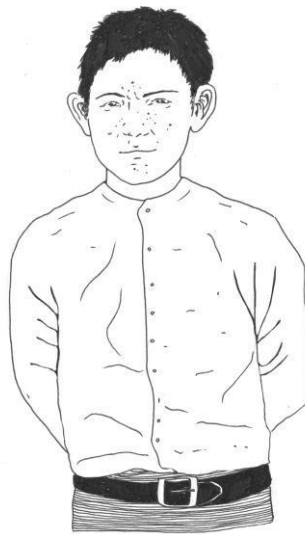
SPRING

After a long harsh winter lambs are born. They run and jump about and bleat excitedly in the pasture up the hill. They make so much noise. I love this time of year. Primroses litter the woods, lemon yellow. Wild daffodils grow down the side of the lane and stinging nettles pop up in clumps all over the place. And then the bluebells come, the woods, a carpet of lilac heads nodding and swaying in the soft breeze. I like them best of all. The earth is teeming with bugs and worms and the sky is full of birds. Everything is coming alive.

The trees wake up and sprout their leaves, big and bushy and incredibly green. And the grass grows thick and lush in the meadow. The days are growing longer now. The cows go out to pasture, calves are born, loads and loads of them. They make even more noise than the lambs with their mooing and their pooing.

Last week, we sowed millions of tiny little seeds that will grow and ripen into big healthy crops. It was exhausting. My back aches lots. And my arms. And my hands. And my feet. Everywhere!

On May Day, as soon as it's light, Mother and me walk out into the meadow and wash our faces in the morning dew. Mother says it's supposed to make us look beautiful for the rest of the year. Albert Lightfoot's son, Billy thinks it's stupid washing your face.



Billy Lightfoot's, my best friend.



All right... Second best friend.

Billy and me go to school in the next village. It's two and a half miles away on the other side of the hill. We always cut across the fields. It's much quicker than trudging along the lane in the valley. Scamp doesn't go to school. Dogs are not allowed! There's no room for him anyway.

The school is very small. There are ten of us children. Three girls and seven boys all in one room.



Yesterday we sang hymns in the morning and then Mr. Gunn told us what was happening at the war. Then he read the newspaper out loud to us. Sometimes the news isn't so good.

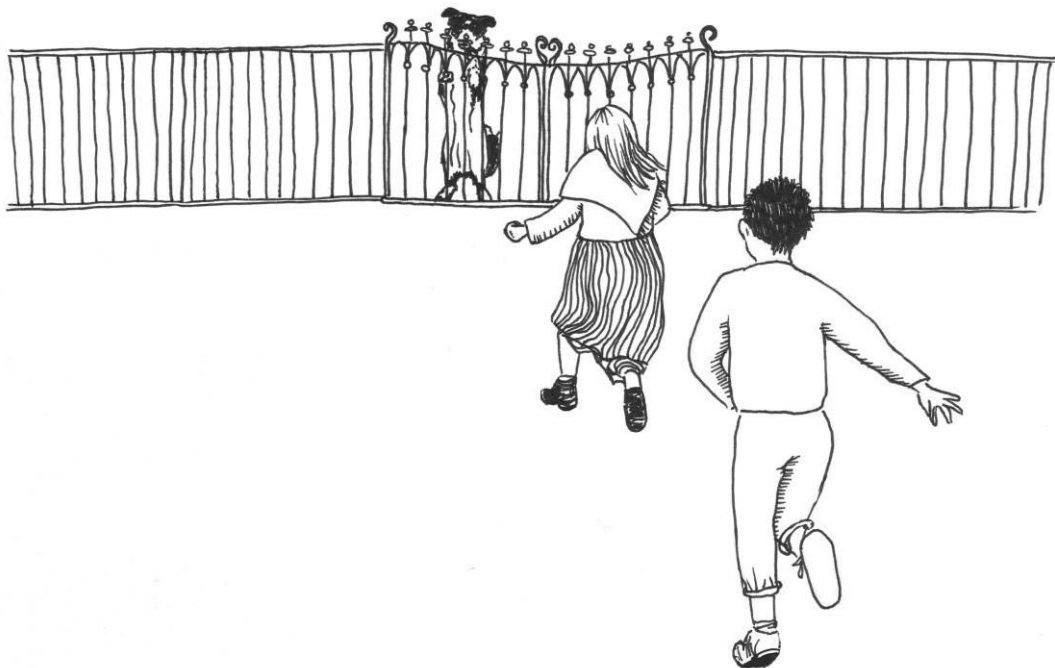


It was awfully sad. I said a prayer for Ted. And I said one for his wife, Florence. Then we did some English, which I really like, but find very hard. Especially the reading bit.

Mr. Gunn's always telling me off for spelling errors and bad handwriting. He says I'm a daydreamer. He says 'Emily Faith. How are you ever going to learn anything if you're always staring out of the window with your head in the clouds?!' It's true. My head is usually full of stuff, like: I wonder if the chickens have laid any eggs yet or if there are any fish in the river? Or if Father will have returned from fighting the war in France. I think about that a lot.

At the end of the day, Mr. Gunn rings the school bell and we pile out of the classroom into the yard. Scamp's always waiting for us by the gate.

'Scamp!'



After school, Billy and me race Scamp up the hill and back down the side of the field, where the seeds we sowed weeks ago are peeping their tiny green heads out of the earth. But Scamp's too fast and we never beat him.

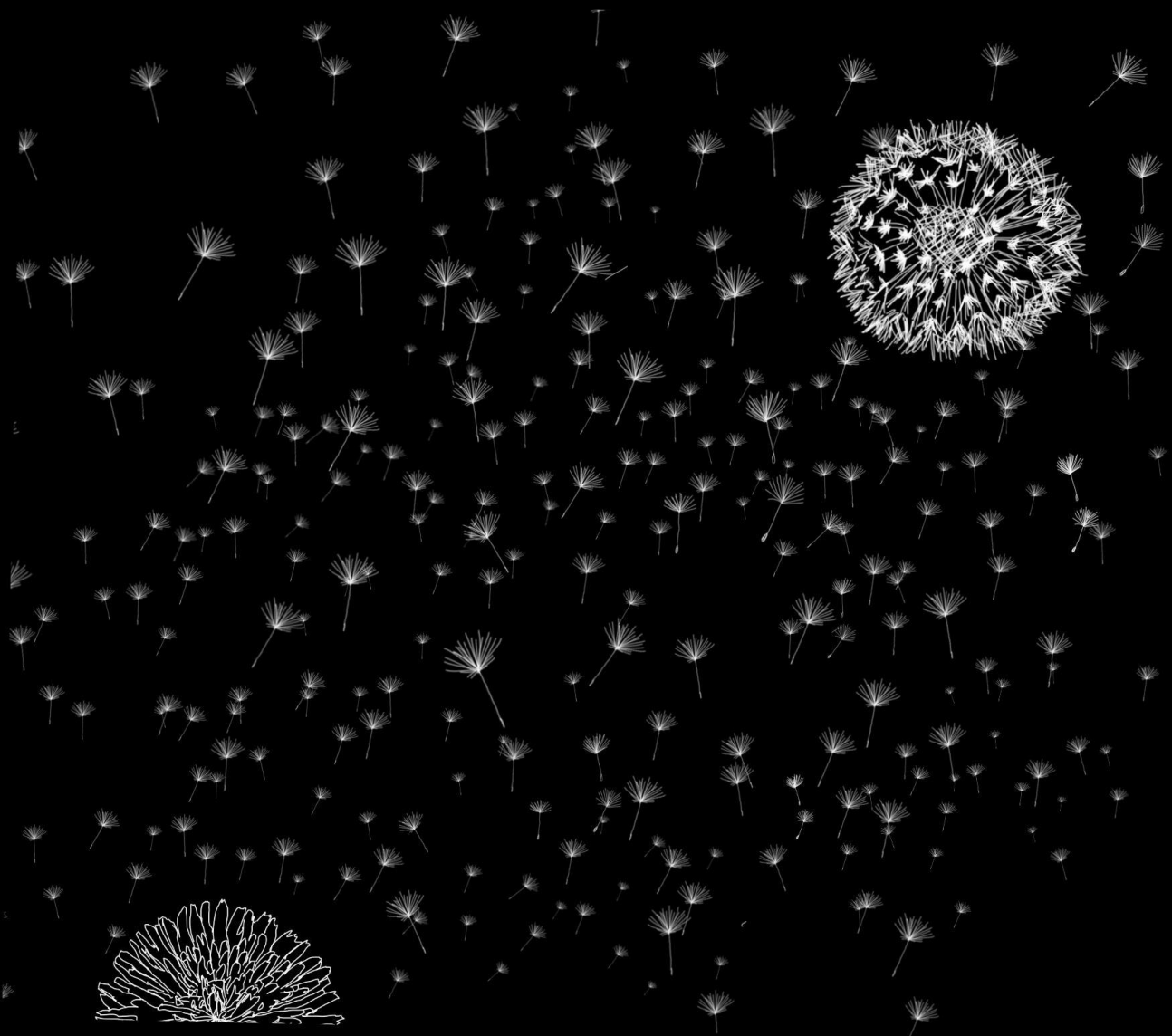
Get off, Scamp!



It's June now and I pick daisies and clover for Mother. And poppies, which only last about four weeks. But my favourite flowers in the whole wide world are dandelions.

Mother told me dandelions represent the sun, the moon and the stars. The yellow flower is the sun, the puffball, the moon and the dispersing seeds, the stars. She told me if you blow on the puffball with your eyes closed, you can make a wish.

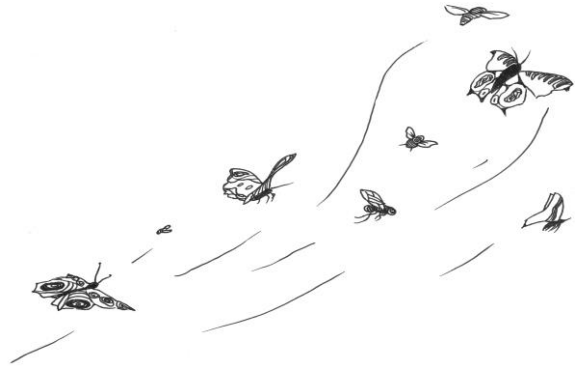
I always wish for the same thing; that Father will come back safe and sound and we can be a family again.



SUMMER

Fork-tailed swallows dart across the sky. Crows caw and flies get everywhere! There are daisies and buttercups and cow parsley in the meadow. Butterflies dance in the air. Fish bask in the river and big blue green dragonflies skim across the water's surface.

It's scorching hot. So hot, I think I'm melting. Mother and me work all hours, cutting the hay, tossing it and building hayricks that will be used to feed the animals over the long dark winter months. I don't like it very much, it makes me sneeze a lot. As soon as I've finished my chores, I'm allowed to go swimming. Phew!

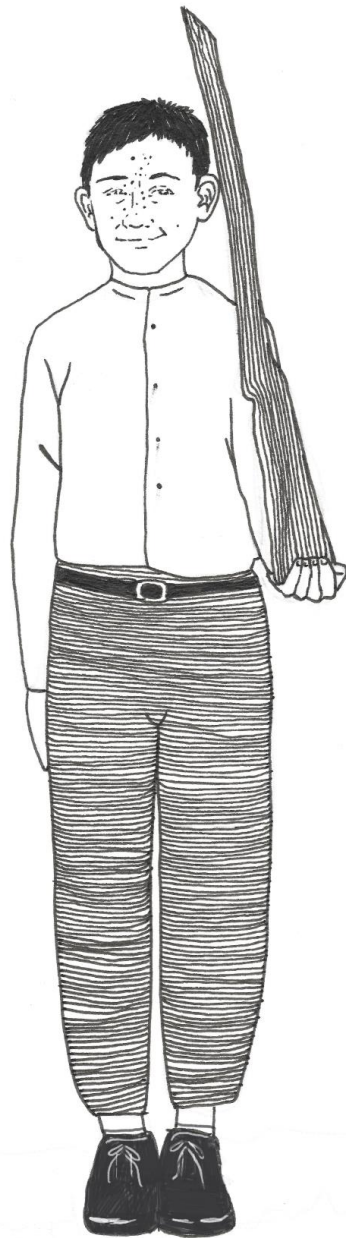


Sometimes, Billy comes too. He makes things out of branches and deadwood with his penknife, like catapults and fishing rods, but we never catch any fish. They're too clever.



Scamp likes swimming too.

This afternoon, Billy made a gun out of a fallen branch and paraded along the river bank saying as soon as he is old enough to fight he's going to join his father in France.



But seeing as he's only nine and you have to be grown up, it won't be for a long, long time. I really don't want to lose Billy. Even though he's got a spotty face and acts funny.

Yesterday, I saw a kestrel hovering above the fields and there's an owl living in the eaves of the barn, though I've not seen it yet. Mother says, it only appears when I'm asleep, but I don't believe her.

The corn is taller than Scamp now and the crops are growing fast. There are blackberries in the hedgerows and very soon there will be elderberries and rose hips.

The sun has baked the earth as hard as rock. There's no wind and there's not been a drop of rain for three weeks. If it doesn't come soon the river will dry up, the fish will die and the animals will have nothing to drink.

Hurrah! It rained in the night and everything is wet and muddy again. Including Scamp!



The wood at the top of the hill is dense with foliage. A tangle of dog rose, honeysuckle and brambles. Branches bent and twisted cling to each other and we have to fight our way through the bracken with sticks. Billy and me were supposed to collect kindling for the fire, but we forgot and hunted for bird's eggs instead. We couldn't find any, not a single one, so we played hide-and-seek with Scamp.

Scamp found us. As usual! But he can't climb trees. Hehee!



I love climbing trees. It's like being on top of the world. I can see for miles and miles but I can't see France where Father's fighting. It's too far away.

On the way home we climbed over the hedge and went scrumping in Mr. Mottershaw's orchard. The apples have grown big and fat and red. We only took a couple. One for now and one for later. Mr. Mottershaw saw us do it. He knows we are always hungry, so he turns a blind eye.

He's very kind.



I miss Father an awful lot. It's not the same without him but I had another letter from him today

Dear Emily,

I hope to be home this year's end. I shall be due a spot of leave by then. I can't tell you how much I long to see you at

Christmastime. Mother tells me you're doing a grand job helping out on the farm. Love

Father.



Christmas is months and months away. It's practically next year!



AUTUMN

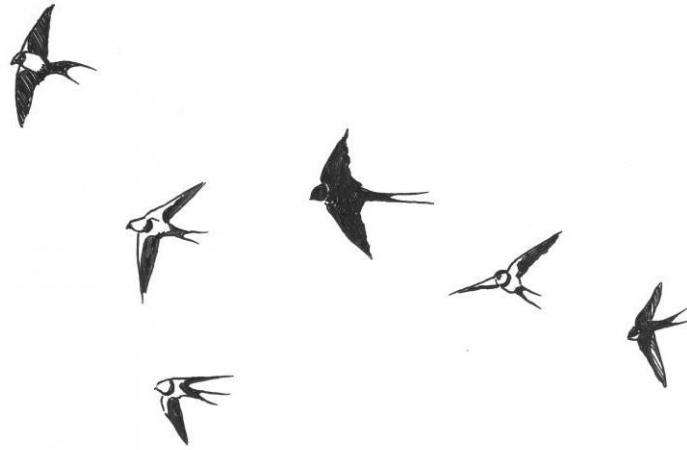
Mist hangs over the field like a grey sea. There's a chill in the air and I have to wear another layer of clothing to keep warm. Wild mushrooms pop up all over the place, brown ones and white ones and strange looking red ones. Some of them are very poisonous. Mother says if you ate the wrong one you might end up in heaven where Ted March lives now, so we have to be very careful which ones we pick.

The trees are getting tired. The ground is littered with piles of golden red leaves that have been stripped from their branches and blown all over the woods. I love kicking them in the air. Clumps of them!

Scamp loves it too. He's always trying to eat them. Silly Scamp.



Sloe berries ripen and grow fat amongst the hawthorn hedges and the swallows around the farm are leaving their nests and flying south to warmer climes. Wish I was too.



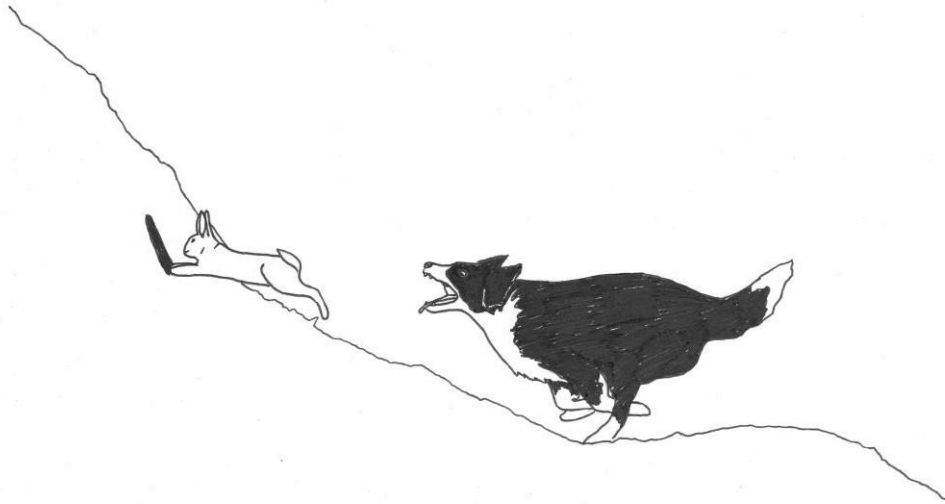
Two days ago I spotted a badger scurrying through the undergrowth. They're extremely fierce. They have sharp teeth and big claws on their feet for digging out wasps' nests to get at the larvae - which they eat.



That's good. Less wasps!

Harvest time was late this year. Billy and me had to miss the start of the new school term to help out. Hooray!

Everyone was needed. Florence March, our neighbours and Arthur Dobbs, retired postman. Everyone apart from Scamp! Who spent his time chasing after rabbits!



We cut the corn and collect it in stooks as fast as we can. My teacher, Mr. Gunn, who only has one leg and a medal, helps as well. He's amazing. It's back-breaking work but if the weather changes and a storm comes, the crop could be ruined and then no-one will have any money. Farming is always dependent on whatever the weather will do. That's what Mother says. And she's always right. Except when she's wrong, which is hardly ever, annoyingly!

When harvesting is finished, everyone in the valley gathers together. The farmers and their families, Mr. Craggs, who is deaf and can't hear anything, Florence

March, the postmistress, who's very sad, and Henry Gunn and his daughter, Phoebe. Phoebe is almost fourteen and likes to boss me and Billy about. I think she's secretly in love with Billy. Yuck!



We have a big party to celebrate the food we've grown on the land. Harvest Festival. Mr. Dobbs plays folk songs on his old violin and we all dance. Even Mr. Gunn has a go with his daughter. We dance and dance, until we're exhausted.

The days are growing short again. There's a nip in the air, frost on the ground in the mornings and spiders webs glistening in the hedgerows. I have to wear a coat which is far too small and a scarf which is far too long. It was Phoebe's old coat. It had holes in the sleeves and the cuffs were frayed but Mother has sowed and mended it and turned up the hem and it fits perfectly now.

I always get hand-me-downs. So does Billy Lightfoot. None of us can afford new clothes and Mother says my boots won't last out another year. Father always mended them and lined them with straw or grass to keep my feet warm when it got too cold. But he can't anymore.

Florence March, the postmistress came to our cottage last Monday with a telegram. It said my father was killed in battle on October the 13th, 1915. Mother cried an awful lot. I cried too and Scamp whined.

The vicar told us Father is up in heaven with Ted March having a lovely time with God, but I'd much rather he was here!

This morning, Billy's dad, Albert Lightfoot arrived home on leave from France with a small package for us. He said my father was a brilliant soldier. Funny and kind and loved by all the men.

But I loved him more.



When we opened the package we found Father's wedding ring and a letter he'd written inside. Then Mother and Scamp and me climbed the hill and sat under the oak tree. We just sat there in silence, for ages and ages. Then Mother read the letter out loud to me.



Dear Constance,

I am thinking of you in the top field by the oak with Emily, your breath fogging in the cold autumn air as you look out across the valley. I think no place on earth could be more beautiful.

We are to march up to the front line tomorrow. Don't worry about me, my darling. If I should fall, know that you and the little 'un were the best thing that ever happened to me. Bring her up right and speak well of me now and again.

You are not to worry about anything.

God will watch over you both until we meet again.

Your ever loving husband,

Thomas.

Three years later at 11am on the 11th of November, 1918, a peace agreement called the Armistice was signed.

After four years and four months, the war had ended.

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My Great Grandmother, Emily, remained a farmer all her life. She ended up marrying Billy Lightfoot - even though he had a spotty face and acted funny. They had four children and she lived until she was 93 years old.

I run the farm now. I love it. But I wish I had Scamp!



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