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The Diary

by Garf Collins

After finishing his breakfast Bernard sat back in his chair. Silence engulfed him like a cold mist. It was the silence that Bernard couldn't stand. After intensive activity for weeks and being surrounded by concerned relatives and friends he was now alone in the house. He reread the notice he had placed in the local paper;

'Blackwell, Joan Lily died peacefully at home on 4th September 1999 at the age of 79, mourned by her husband Bernard and their children Derek and Marilyn, by five grandchildren and two great grandchildren. She loved and cherished us all. May she rest in peace.'

He thought how inadequate it was to honour his wife of 55 years. That couldn't be summed up in a few cold words. Every minute of silence was a cruel reminder of her absence. He hadn't done anything but eat and sleep for weeks. To shake off the lethargy of loss he resolved to set about clearing out Joan's belongings. The clothes and knick-knacks could go. He would keep only those things that were precious to him- those that reminded him of their love and friendship.

For many days Bernard sorted through a lifetime's accumulation. Her WAAF uniform from WW2 went to a museum. The accumulated books and notes from her subsequent career as a teacher and the piles of childhood mementoes - apart from a selected few - were burned.

Her clothes were sent to a charity shop. After he thought he had finished, he came across a small bag tucked in an alcove in the loft. Inside was a single postcard with faded writing and a small leather bound diary. The post card simply said,

'I've got Brian's MG Saturday night. I'll take you for a spin. Can't wait to see you.

Love Johnny' The date stamp was 2nd Sept 1940.

"Who was Johnny?" Bernard wondered as he sat down in the dust of the loft and opened the diary. The writing on the yellowing pages was clearly Joan's neat hand. It started in Jan 1940. He flicked through the pages until he reached;

22 Jan 'Joined the WAAF today. I'll get my uniform soon and then go for training to West Drayton. Good to be doing my bit. Bernard will be proud of me.'

23 Feb 'Not much good at diary. Too busy in training. I'm an Aircraft Woman 2nd Class assigned to Biggin Hill Aerodrome where I'll be assisting scheduling of sorties in the control room. Good to be doing something important. Better than folding parachutes! I'll be billeted in Bromley which isn't far. Terrible. I only managed to see Bernard once.

5 Mar 'Can't keep up. So much going on. Digs good with nice lady whose husband is in France. She's lent me her bike so I can get to BH easily. Wish I could do something about my curly mop. Bernard's coming over tonight.'

11 Mar 'Said goodbye to Bernard today. He's been sent to Egypt. I don't know when he'll be back. I'll miss him terribly. Meat's to be rationed like bacon, butter and sugar are. What next. Managed to repair my one decent dress though I don't know when I'll be able to wear it.'

12 Mar 'Really getting used to the routine here. Sometimes it's mad with telephones going and pilots being assigned to sorties and the noise of these Spitfires as they take off. Made a good friend in the control room. Betty's been here since January and seems to know all the pilots in 610 Squadron.'

Bernard continued flicking through pages until he reached;

18 Jun 'Mr Churchill made a big speech today all about the Battle of Britain starting. That must mean we will be in it up to our necks. 610 have already had loads to do. Betty has arranged to go with a pilot called Bill to the Fox tonight. She suggested I go along. Bill's got a nice friend called Johnny. She's lent me some combs to tame my hair. Those poor soldiers being rescued from Dunkirk. Terrible.'

19 Jun 'We had a smashing time. I wore my dress! Johnny is a lovely boy. He looks handsome in his uniform but there's something different about him. I expect I'll find out. We're all meeting again at the dance in the Officers Mess on Saturday.'

23 Jun 'It was a lovely dance. So hot in the Mess we went outside to cool off. Johnny is so funny when he gets going. We had a good laugh. Then Betty and Bill went off.

When he heard a plane Johnny got very serious and went very quiet. I don't know how it happened but he suddenly kissed me. I stopped him then. I mustn't when Bernard's away but I wanted him to. He says he likes curly hair!

Bernard read through the pages with increasing concern.

21 Jul 'Went out just with Johnny. We sat outside the Crown and talked for hours. I'm really getting to know him. He's seems very confident and wanting to shoot the Messerschmitts out of the sky. But we both know that lots of pilots are lost. Underneath I think he's frightened. How brave to fly like that. I really wanted to cuddle him. Last night I kissed him. This is getting very confusing. I'm falling in love with Johnny. I should tell Bernard but I don't even know where he is in Egypt.'

22 Jul 'Terrible news. Betty's Bill didn't come back yesterday. She's awfully upset. She told me she's pregnant and they were going to get married. They've added tea and marge to rations now. We'll have nothing to eat or drink soon except the local fruit and veg.'

The diary went on with pages of detail about the aerodrome which normally would have fascinated Bernard but he was finding more and more mentions of Johnny and Joan's feelings for him.

12 Aug 'They're attacking aerodromes now and we are in the front line as we're directly on their way to London. So there's lots of plans being made. We've practiced running into the shelter when the bombers come. Johnny's been doing three sorties a day sometimes. I don't know how he can stand it. It's hot in the Control Room and I get so sweaty but I'm only allowed two baths a week at my digs.

1 Sep 'Operations now in a shop in the village. On Friday 100 planes attacked us. They've hit the village and destroyed the radar. Repair shop destroyed and direct hit on shelter - 40 killed. I didn't have time to get in thank goodness but it's terrible. Betty was injured. I must get time to see her. Here they come again.'

2 Sep 'It's amazing that the runways have been repaired and we are flying off planes again. Everybody's saying we must get revenge. We'll never be beaten. Had a post card from Johnny who's been away for training on the new Spitfires. He's back tonight and luckily I can get time off. Exciting. He's got his friend's MG so we can go to a pub in Westerham or somewhere for a change.'

3 Sep ' After the pub we stopped on the North Downs. The MG's got a very comfortable bench seat. We laid back and looked at the stars. Johnny thinks he won't make it. I kept telling him that he's very experienced and that should keep him alive. Wanted to comfort him. I love him so much now. It was lovely to be held and kissed by him. I wanted it to go on forever. It's scary what I want us to do together. I don't know if I'd be able to stop myself.'

Bernard dreaded seeing the days after this but they went unrecorded until;

7 Sep 'Luftwaffe now concentrating on attacking London. 610 Squad have to fly to intercept them. The boys are making lots of kills now. We're moving from the shop to a proper Operations Centre in Towerfields Manor. That means we can keep control when the aerodrome is being attacked. My bike was damaged in the bombing but I've managed to borrow another one in the village'

18 Sep 'Mr Churchill says 15th was Battle of Britain Day. We have done so much damage to the planes attacking London that they have stopped these daylight raids. Perhaps things will calm down. Lucky I can see Johnny tonight.'

19 Sep 'Johnny was in quite a state. He has been on so many sorties and has hardly slept for days. I tried to comfort him and in the end I think I did. It happened. It was marvellous. We weren't really prepared. I hope it will be alright.'

20 Sep 'Johnny's late back from a sortie attacking an enemy port. Surely he'll come. The plane must have gone wrong and he's bailed out on his way back. He'll be picked up I know.'

21 Sep 'Betty's back. She told me a report has been filed by one of the other pilots. He saw Johnny shot down and dive into the sea. I don't know what I'll do now. I've lost my love. I've nothing to live for. I wouldn't mind if a bomb dropped on me. That's the end of this diary. It's too painful to write now.'

Bernard sat for a long time in the attic just holding the diary and staring ahead. He knew in 1943 when he came back from Egypt that Joan was different. She seemed so much older and careworn. He had assumed it was all the trauma of being in the front line of the German attacks. But this. How could she when he was away fighting in the desert?

He slowly made his way down the attic ladder and descended to the kitchen. There he had the small pile of mementos he had chosen to keep. He began disconsolately going through them. There were their wedding photos from 1944. Then happy photos of Joan and the children playing on a beach. Pictures of their three houses - each had held an important part of their lives. Joan's leaving card after she had been Head of the local comprehensive for 15 years. He remembered the many grownups who had come up to them over the years wanting to thank her for their time at the school. Then some pictures of Joan with her ageing parents who she had looked after so well.

As he continued Bernard began to weep quietly - remembering what a loving person his wife had been. Theirs had been a good marriage full of fun and adventure. That affair with Johnny was at one with her caring life but it had been intensified by the exceptional times. How can you judge actions in the middle of war with death always lurking around the corner? After all he had given way to his lust on several occasions in Cairo when he was on leave.

As he wiped the tears from his eyes, Bernard deliberately pushed the diary into the flames of the old boiler and with a sense of relief watched it burn to ashes.

Editorial note: Joan and Bernard are fictitious but the events in Biggin Hill Aerodrome and the background of national events were only too real. Biggin Hill was truly in the front line and a prime target for elimination by the Germans. The pilots in southern England would have been at the mercy of the attackers without the early warning that radar gave them. They would have still been climbing into the sun when they met the enemy planes.