

SALE

JANCIS M. ANDREWS

WALKING ON WATER

STORIES

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JANCIS M. ANDREWS

Stories



Cormorant Books

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*Dedicated to the memory of
“our captain” ex-Yeoman Peter Platt, R.N.*

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

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COUNTRY OF EVIL

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

*B*ecause thick fog shrouded England's northeast coast that spring night in 1941, searchlights had failed to pick out the German bomber until the very last minute. Even as the air raid siren's banshee wail ripped apart the night silence, we recognized the distinctive whoo-who-who-who that was the menacing growl of an enemy aircraft separated from its squadron. As with everywhere else in the United Kingdom, our small Victorian seaside resort of Whitley Bay, Northumberland, had been blacked out for the night. My brother Ted, aged nine, sister Cynthia, aged five, plus myself, aged seven, were preparing for bed. Lengths of black cotton material, distributed by the government and dubbed "blackouts," were drawn across every window of our corner second-floor apartment at 118 Cambridge Avenue, ensuring that no chink of light would escape and attract enemy attention. Our town was only four miles north of the Tyne, a major river that on moonlit nights metamorphosed into a treacherous silver finger pointing unerringly to the locations of the great shipyards that serviced the warships of the Royal Navy. On such nights the Tyneside communities of South Shields, North Shields, Gateshead and Newcastle received the full fury of German attacks. When bad weather thwarted the enemy, however, Whitley Bay often got the bombs meant for our bigger, more industrialized neighbours.

“Under the bed!” Mam ordered, which was what you had to do when there was no time to reach the corrugated iron air raid shelter constructed in the back yard. We children dived under the double bed I shared with my sister, not stopping to switch off the light, and Mam scrambled in beside us. Yanking at the bedclothes, she pulled them down until only a sliver of light showed between the blankets and the floor.

“Why would the Germans want to kill us when we hadn’t done anything bad, and they didn’t know us and we didn’t know them?” Children had asked their mothers in an attempt to puzzle it out. The answer was always: “Germans are evil. Germany is an evil country. That was why, Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s gravelly voice announced on BBC radio, “Our brave lads are fighting at the Front.”

The Front wasn’t a country but lots of countries, and if “our lads” wouldn’t fight they were put in prison, and if they ran away from a battle they were shot by their own lads, which, the grown-ups assured us, was good riddance to bad rubbish. Mr. Churchill had also told our mothers to “keep the home fires burning” by knitting balaclavas, scarves and gloves in khaki or navy blue wool every minute they could spare, so that our brave lads wouldn’t catch cold while they were fighting the evil Germans. Now we lay on our stomachs, listening as the evil German pilot and his aircraft throbbed above us, and the big guns that protected the coast began booming.

Then we heard a sound we had never heard before. Something metallic was clanking as it travelled over the rooftops of our street and the neighbouring street of Oxford Avenue: a mournful, lonely sound, like an iron bird calling for company.

Mam whispered, "Oh my God!" Huddled against her, we waited.

The world blew up. Blankets lashed our faces at the same instant that a monster crashed through the window and careened around the walls, flinging a chair to one side and hurling shards of glass and pieces of ceiling under the blanket barricade. The closed bedroom door flew open and slammed back against the wall as if kicked by a giant foot. Roof slates sang high over the rooftops before crashing into the street.

Then came a great stillness and a strong, strange smell like burning matches. All I felt was an enormous surprise. Through the ringing in my ears I heard Mam whisper, "The light's still on."

For a while we lay paralyzed; then screams began breaking out up and down the street. A woman's voice was yowling, "Oh Jesus! Oh Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" Carefully, Mam lifted the blankets and put her head out. We did the same.

We didn't have a window any more. The drapes had disappeared, sucked out into the night, leaving a glaring oblong that invited the German pilot to return and finish us off. Nor did we have a proper ceiling, only part of one. There was no flowered wallpaper left, only paper ribbons that had peeled from the walls and now lay tangled like heaps of discarded Christmas streamers over the skirting boards and the broken bedroom chair. In the centre of the carpet lay the bright green head of somebody's parrot, black eyes staring, beak open to reveal a narrow tongue whitened with plaster dust.

Swear words that we had never heard Mam use began spewing from her mouth, including "Filthy sodden fucking German piece of shit!" and "Oh Christ, some poor buggers have had it!" and

“Shit, I’ve forgotten the gas masks!” Moving inch by inch in case the floor gave way, she wormed out from under the bed, picked up the parrot’s head and hurled it through the hole that had been our window. She then reached up and switched off the light, plunging the room into a safe darkness. She began scrabbling in the cupboard where she kept the gas-mask boxes that the government said everyone had to carry with them at all times, then crawled back under the bed and told us to put on our masks. The smell of burned matches was growing strong. Beyond our windowless window fog was reflecting a distant crimson glow that danced like the northern lights, meaning that somewhere near the seafront a house or perhaps several houses were on fire.

My astonishment that somebody who didn’t know us would bomb our apartment was so total, so overwhelming, that there was no room for fear. Equally astonishing was the knowledge that complete strangers, who lived in foreign cities that you had never visited and who didn’t even speak English, would try to kill you, your family, friends and neighbours, even your pets, with poison gas. What had we done? What had our pets done? The world became dreamlike, as if my family and I were taking part in a movie. We struggled into our masks, pulling the coarse canvas straps back over our heads. As always, a strap caught my long hair and yanked painfully at my scalp, so I pulled my mask off again. Their novelty had worn off long ago; now we children despised them even though they were gifts from the government and the grown-ups told us they had cost a lot of money. We were jealous of our baby cousin Paddy who was too tiny for a mask and needed to wear Auntie Liz’s wetted handkerchief across his face, and we were indignant that our cousin Peter, aged four, was the

proud owner of a pink and blue Mickey Mouse gas mask. It didn't seem fair that little kids could have a fun mask and babies only needed to wear a handkerchief, while we bigger kids had to struggle for breath within a smelly black rubber bag with a pig-like snout and goggly frog eyes that always fogged up. I began grumbling, but Mam, who was usually a smiley person, lost her temper, yanked off her mask and yelled at me "to put that bloody thing on!" Reluctantly, I dipped my face into the mask and tightened the straps while she did the same to hers. Then we all lay slowly cooking within the smelly rubber and listening to the flapping noises the rubber made against our cheeks as we breathed.

The screaming and weeping in the street were increasing. In the distance rose the fainter screams of people living in Oxford Avenue. Most of the screams came from women and children because of all the brave lads fighting at the Front. For perhaps ten minutes we remained under the bed, not grumbling too much because the mask made our voices sound distant and echoing, as if lost at the back of a big cave. Talking also made the frog eyes steam up. Slowly, the interior of our masks grew wet with condensation. Then the high, steady note of the All-Clear siren climbed the night, indicating that the German bomber had gone away. Ripping off the gas masks, we gasped for air.

The first thing Mam did was to sling a blanket over the curtain rod to make a blackout curtain. She told us to keep our clothes and shoes on in case the evil German pilot returned, then made us sit on the bed with our backs against the headboard and our shoes dirtying the bedcover. She took out the air-raid box (another thing the government said every family had to have), which contained gauze bandages, adhesive bandages, cotton

batting, scissors, aspirins, a bottle of iodine, a bottle of cough mixture, a packet of digestive biscuits and a big bottle of water. She gave each of us a drink of water and two digestive biscuits. She told Ted and me that we didn't have to go to school in the morning because she didn't know if Rockcliffe School was still standing. My brother and sister and I fell asleep, warmly tangled together like a heap of puppies.

Next morning, a team of older men in coveralls and tin hats examined our apartment ... older men because of all the young men having to fight at the Front. As with other apartments in Cambridge Avenue, ours was repairable, which was just as well because many months of bombing had reduced the supply of rental housing to zero. After the men had gone Mam told us to put on our coats, then helped us fix the long straps of our gas mask boxes across our chests so that the sharp corners of the box didn't cut into our hips. Thus armed against poison gas, we joined the groups of people picking their way through the bricks and slates and broken glass that littered Cambridge Avenue and Oxford Avenue. The pig bins that the government had placed at the street corners, and that were emptied once a week, had been blown apart. The apple cores and vegetable peelings carefully saved by our mothers for the pigs (as part of our mothers' efforts to keep the home fires burning) were smeared all over the road. Older workmen and women wearing men's coveralls were knocking shards of glass out of shattered windows, pushing great brooms about the sidewalks and roads and dumping debris into handcarts. This was another shocking thing: in order to keep the home fires burning and free young men for the Front, the government had given unmarried women the choice of either

joining His Majesty's forces or performing men's jobs such as driving tractors and double-decker buses and riveting and welding in the armaments factories. It mixed our minds up because the school picture books showed only ladies in dresses who baked and washed the dishes and looked after children. Never did the picture books show ladies using a welding gun or driving a double-decker bus, and never ever did ladies wear men's coveralls. It was one of the street-cleaning ladies who told Mam that the strange iron voice we'd heard calling overhead was not a bomb. It was, she said, a land mine, which was many times more destructive.

The mine had landed in the middle of several small streets of Victorian row housing built at right angles between Oxford Avenue and the bed-and-breakfasts lining the wide seafront road known as The Promenade. As we approached, we saw air raid wardens and policemen keeping sightseers and would-be scavengers at bay behind a rope barricade while workmen dug for bodies. We knew this area well because Mam used this route to walk my brother and me to Rockcliffe School. Every school day we had passed housewives, aprons around their waists, turbaned heads lumpy with iron-toothed curlers, getting an early start on the housework. Rinsed milk bottles glistened in neat rows on spotless white-stone front steps, waiting for the milkman with his horse and cart; sparkling windows reflected the passersby; polished brass letterboxes and door-knockers defied anyone to desecrate their gleam with sticky fingers. Sometimes a housewife had frowned at us from behind white or cream lace curtains, ready to bang on the window if we dared to try and sneak a flower from her pretty little front garden. Now there were no gardens. There were no houses. There were no housewives. In their place

was a vast, deep hole out of which piles of bricks and plaster, roof slates, ripped books, bits of carpet, shoes, tangled clothes and parts of suitcases towered like a frozen whirlpool.

We never learned the toll of dead and injured because the government would not disclose numbers in case the Germans used them for propaganda. Housing inspectors declared that while Oxford Avenue was badly damaged, most of it was repairable. The bed-and-breakfasts of The Promenade, however, were in ruins, the beams supporting the slateless roofs angled like blackened bones against the sky, the shattered windows staring blindly at the North Sea, too damaged to host anything now but cats left ownerless by the land mine, and rats. The houses still standing at the southern end of the land-mine site were also declared uninhabitable. For three weeks workmen shoveled rubble to make a road wide enough for trucks to enter and retrieve salvageable items for distribution at a community centre. They erected signs stating DANGER. KEEP OUT. TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED. Then they left.

Before this, evil had been something that slid through our minds like jellyfish — slippery and shapeless. With the land mine, we children knew at last what evil was, and its essence was German.

Now, instead of Mam walking Ted and me to Rockcliffe School via Oxford Avenue and the little streets, we had to use Whitley Road, the main shopping area, which doubled the length of the walk. One morning, Ted and Cynthia came down with the flu, and Mam was unable to find a babysitter. “You’ll have to walk to school by yourself today,” she told me. “You’re seven years old now, so you know better than to go near the bombed area, right?”

And you know better than to pick up anything that looks like a pen or a lost parcel, right? Remember it's not a pen or a parcel, it's a booby trap those evil Germans use to try and blow up little English boys and girls. If you see something like that, remember where it is, then tell a teacher as soon as you get to school and they'll tell the police. Be a good girl, use Whitley Road and you'll be fine. No talking to strangers, just go straight to school. Don't forget your gas mask." She stood at the door and waved me goodbye until I turned the corner.

The morning was clear and sunny, but an icy wind careening off the North Sea was cutting through my clothes and stinging my nostrils with salt. Within minutes I was shivering with cold. Making sure no grown-up was watching, I dodged toward the bombed area, knowing that this route would shorten the walk to school by twenty minutes.

At the edge of the wasteland that used to be the little streets, I paused. Nearby, the sign reminded me TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED. I peered at the ruined houses edging the site, alert for workmen who would order me to go back and use Whitley Road. There were none. The only sound was the wind moaning through the ruins of the bed-and-breakfasts. I began hurrying along the rough road carved between the mounds of broken glass, bricks and slate, my shoes pattering over the gritty debris left by the trucks. Soon, the habitable part of Oxford Avenue lay far behind me. On my left lay the ruins of the concreted backyards of the once-busy bed-and-breakfasts, their walls standing like grave markers between the sea and me. To my right lay the most badly damaged part of Oxford Avenue, its houses empty while awaiting repairs. In front of me stood the street of still-

standing but uninhabitable houses. Rockcliffe School lay two or three streets beyond.

I had reached the halfway point when a man wearing a brown suit walked slowly out of one of the uninhabitable houses and stood very still, staring at me. I knew from the grown-ups that if you saw a man wearing a suit, not a uniform, it meant he held an important civilian job and didn't have to fight at the Front. For maybe a minute the man remained immobile, staring as I continued hurrying along the road. Then his head moved in a slow arc as his gaze searched every part of the deserted site. He stared again at me. Slowly and steadily, he began walking towards me, never taking his gaze from my face.

Instinct stilled my feet. The only sounds were the whining of the wind and the faint rattle of the stranger's shoes on the littered road. So total was the surrounding emptiness that it seemed as if he and I were the only creatures left alive in the world. Then came something that perhaps only young children can experience, for, like wild animals, they still live close to the earth. As the man walked slowly and deliberately toward me, I saw that many thick, black rods, like spears, had begun growing out of his head. The spears continued growing and multiplying, reaching far into the air above him and pointing far below his shoulders. When they stopped growing the man wore a huge black halo. The darkness cast by this halo was so intense it turned his clothes black.

Everything within me told me I had to get away.

The door to the concreted backyard of a nearby bed-and-breakfast had been blown off. My feet came to life. I scrambled

over mounds of rubble, the corners of the gas-mask case banging painfully on my hip, then ran through the empty doorway and over the broken bricks and shattered glass of the backyard. Another broken doorway led into what had once been a kitchen, its lead pipes now angled over a smashed sink. The bitter odours of cat urine and damp were overwhelming. A passage led to the closed front door. I ran to open the door, planning to escape along The Promenade and thus reach Rockcliffe School via the seafront. To my dismay, the door was bolted at the top, far out of my reach. The front room was to my right, its splintered door slumping from one hinge. Glass exploded under my shoes as I ran inside and toward the shattered bay window, planning to climb out and escape that way. However, when I reached the window I saw that this house was the kind whose front steps arched over a basement courtyard before they met the sidewalk. The steps had been blown away, and now a wide gap and a huge drop lay between me and safety. There was no way I could make such a leap without falling into the courtyard and breaking my legs.

Panicking, I dodged back into the passage. Where to hide? I ran towards the small dark cupboard under the stairs, thought about black beetles and changed my mind. I ran into the back room. The door was blown off, the window glass blown out and the wallpaper hung in swathes. Shards of glass, broken wooden slats and ceiling plaster littered the floor. Someone had defecated in a corner. In the aperture between the fireplace and the window stood a wrecked wardrobe, its partly-open doors revealing a dried-up shoe. I ran towards it, planning to climb inside and close the

doors, then noticed a very narrow gap between the wardrobe and the wall behind it. Turning, I forced my body backward deep into the gap. Then I waited.

Came the steady crunching of glass in the backyard. My heart swelled and air snorted through my nose. I stopped breathing through my nose and began pulling in air through my mouth.

Footsteps crunched through the kitchen. Slowly, the man walked into the passage and halted outside the back room.

Silence.

The footsteps crunched toward the wardrobe and halted. I breathed through my mouth. The wardrobe rocked as the man pulled the doors wide open. I stopped breathing altogether.

Silence.

The footsteps crunched slowly back into the passage and toward the front room. I breathed through my mouth. Glass spat over the floor as he moved to the bay window. Another pause and I knew that he knew that not even a grown-up could make that leap. The footsteps moved slowly back to the passage and halted. The front door rattled as he unbolted it. Silence. He was checking to see if I'd somehow managed to reach The Promenade. The door closed. A few more steady footsteps, then a door scraped open. The cupboard under the stairs. I heard him grunting as he went down on his knees and crawled inside. Patting noises told me he was feeling around the floor. A pause, then he backed out. The door clicked shut. Slowly, steadily, his footsteps crunched up the stairs. Each stair tread creaked. His footsteps trod a circle in the bedroom above my head. Another faint sound indicated that he had opened the door of a closet. A pause, then a soft thud as the door closed. The footsteps

moved toward the front bedrooms. He walked around a big front bedroom. Then a smaller bedroom. Another pause, then the footsteps returned to the top of the stairs. Once again came the slow, steady creak of each stair tread. The footsteps crunched along the passage and halted outside the back room.

A strange calm and a distancing came over me. If he found the space and pulled me out, I don't think I would have felt a thing.

"Little girl, I know you're in here!" His voice echoed through the ruined rooms. His tone was kindly and what we working-class children called "posh."

I breathed through my mouth.

"Little girl, I've found your pretty red hair ribbon, so I know you're here. Please come out and let me give it to you. If you don't come out I'll have to keep it. Don't you want your pretty red hair ribbon?"

Something swelled in my throat, forcing me to swallow. The sound was like thunder.

"Little girl, I'm a good friend of your mummy's. She knows you're here and she's asked me to fetch you home. She's terribly worried about you. Please don't worry your poor mummy. Please come out."

How had he known that? Then Mam must have sent him, after all! I was about to step forward when I remembered the black spears and knew I must not move.

Slowly, the man walked into the room and crunched toward the window. A hand with nicely manicured nails and wearing a gold wedding ring rested on the broken window sash. He was less than three feet away. The cold wind lifting around the room

carried a faint scent toward me: Imperial Leather, the good soap and aftershave lotion that Mam had given Uncle Billy on his birthday. A brown left shoe and part of a brown trouser leg appeared. The shoe was polished and had fancy tooling over the instep. The trouser leg had a neatly pressed cuff.

If the man turned to the left he would see me. Such a terror came then that my body seemed to dissolve and another me stepped backwards, out of my body and into the safety of the wall behind me. I could hear my blood roaring.

He turned to the right and crunched toward the fireplace. I heard grunting noises and the sound of a wooden slat being rattled up the chimney. The noises ceased. Slowly, he returned to the passage then walked into the front room. The slat rattled up the chimney. The rattling ceased and he returned to the passage. Once again he climbed the stairs and walked through the bedrooms. The slat rattled up the chimney of each small fireplace. Slowly, he returned to the landing and descended the stairs. He walked along the passage and into the kitchen. His shoes cracked the glass in the back yard. Then came silence.

For an age I remained hidden behind the wardrobe while the wind whined through the broken window and my legs and panties turned to ice. I had peed myself.

At last I felt that the man had gone away for good. Taking minutes between each step, my ears honed for the slightest sound, I edged out of my hiding place, crept through the back room and kitchen and into the ruined backyard. My eyes were starting out of my head as I strained to see if he were hiding somewhere. Then I flew back to Oxford Street and went to Rockcliffe School via Whitley Road.

Miss Blackwell was young and without the bad temper that racked so many of the older teachers. Those teachers kept a cane on top of their desks and beat the children on their hands for the slightest infraction of school rules, especially if BBC radio reported bad news of the war. All the same, I feared Miss Blackwell might cane me for having disobeyed the KEEP OUT sign and so I didn't tell her about the man. Instead, I pretended I had been sick. I didn't tell my mother either, in case my disobedience made her angry. However, several times during the next few days Mam wondered aloud if I'd caught the same flu germ as my sister and brother because I had gone "unusually quiet."

The quiet came from having a huge problem to solve. The grown-ups had told us children that Germany was an evil country and that all Germans were evil, which by deduction meant that England was a good country and that all English people were good. Yet the man who had hunted for me through the ruined bed-and-breakfast had been English, and I had known with every pore in my body that he was an evil man. It was the beginning of knowledge that evil is a country in-and-of-itself, coming to rest wherever it recognizes its own.