

NARRATIVE TEXT

Quinn



August 1945

Dearest Mary,

I have two shirts, three pairs of socks and underwear (but only two vests), 1 pullover, 1 sleeveless jumper (green), 1 pair of trousers, one jacket which is warm but a little short, and one tie. With some effort, I can keep myself looking tidy.



27th August 1945

Dearest Mary,

I found a stone in one of my shoes today. I left it there until I could feel a blister beginning.

They are good shoes they gave me at the depot, although they fit strangely.

I have been walking for five weeks now.



This past week I have been staying at a boarding house in Launceston. I am in a room at the top, which is good; I can hear and see the street but I can keep myself to myself up above. Too many faces down there. And too many thoughts in my head. If someone would see a thought they might ask me about it and I don't have an answer for them.



Middlezoy, Dorset, 2nd November 1945

I have been counting my steps - sometimes it's as many as two or three hundred before I notice that they're running in my head.

I loved counting when I was a boy - sitting out at the docks counting the crates on the big ships. One time Ma had to send June from next-door to fetch me I'd so lost track of time it was night already. All up and down there around the harbour - so many spots to watch the ships and machines and cranes and the men working. My favourites were around the granaries and Princes Wharf looking over to Canon's Marsh and the tobacco bonds, because you're close to the swing bridge there as well as seeing water in three directions.

You've always said that you can see everything in my face, but I've got a good deal better at setting my eyes since I saw you last.

Snowhill, January 1946

Snowhill has no snow at present, which, although it would have been pretty as a picture, is a blessing.

Slept badly. Very cold.

January 1946

I want to tell you something. I used to steal, Mary. When I was maybe nine or ten. Mostly I stole from Haskins on East Street - I could nip in and out with a roll or a bun pretty quick. I was hungry all the time. Small things were easy enough to squash into my pocket and I just ran into the market and away I was to my hiding place in between the sheds wet with sweat and the bun a doughy lump by then. Every time I thought my heart would burst but it was so good to not be hungry on those days. I never took one home for Ma either. I couldn't have borne the look on her face if she'd known. She did her best, even though she called me selfish and ungrateful too often I reckon. She'd have been straight to Holy Cross with me by the ear and although I was afraid of damnation I was more scared of her knowing I was hungry. I thought she never knew, but she must have found crumbs in my pockets a few times. Once I got a whole loaf and made myself sick as a dog shovelling the lot down before anyone could find me.

I'm still afraid of being hungry, but I've not stolen since then. So many others are worse off than me - I'm fit and clothed and I have all my faculties which not all can say, and yet I feel so badly most days I can barely move. But I get onto the road and it moves in front of me. I walk, I eat, and every day I'm still here.

Dearest Mary,

There is an anger in me these days. My head is filled with it and I can find nowhere to put it.

I try to read sometimes but the words are hard to pin down.

February 1946

I've been thinking about that time on shore-leave with you and the girls on the pier - I think about that day often. It was blowy sure, but bright, and you looked so pretty in your summer dress.

bread
Apples
cheese
soap
pencils
matches
cigarettes

Near Worcester, March 1946

I have begun to notice that some things feel and look the same as they did, and some things just aren't there any more. People are so grey and tired, and there is weariness in the air. Rain and morning frost though, those are the same as they ever were. The smell of fresh laundry, too - which always reminds me of our first weeks in Philip Street.

Those were good days, weren't they? With our babies in your belly getting fat and our little house so cosy.

Did you change the wallpaper in the front room? Ma's fancy mirror was still on the wall above the mantelpiece, but her china birds were gone. And that wardrobe that was your mother's is still there in our room you know - that damned thing was too heavy for anyone to move. I still don't know why I let you keep it, it's not as if we had so many clothes. I'm sorry I didn't get you those new plates you wanted.

I should have told you to move.

12th April 1946

Yesterday I passed through a village to get some food. I was paying the girl at the counter when a woman came in with a small boy, maybe five he was. I could feel his little round eyes watching me as I sorted out my bill. He hid behind his mother's skirts and she tutted under her breath, muttering in my

direction while inspecting the boxes on the shelves. As if I was somehow to blame.

She wanted a packet of needles and some thread but there was none to be had.



25th April 1946

Some sun. Warmer.



Hundred House. May 1946

Days in the camps were long, long, long, and so dull. We all did our best to stay cheery and damn them but it was hard going. Cheeriness does not come easy when you are in a small space with twelve or so other men none of them friends and us all bickering about small things and waiting from one soup ration to the next. You would think that we'd be friends easily in that situation but being watched all day every day meant that we were restless and uncomfortable. The shame got into everything. We judged each other for the smallest bad deed, or good deed for that matter.

We were a fair few of us from the West Country there but no-one had come with me all the way. Rob Mester, he didn't make it, nor Bill Cockburn. Maybe you knew that.



I wonder what it's like at Wills these days. Has June moved to the packing department yet? She always wanted to get out of the machine room. Or maybe she finally married Tom. I heard that married women were allowed back during the war though.



16th June 1946, Tal-y-llyn

There was nowhere to be alone. And I'd never have thought I'd have missed the water so much as I did when I was in there. So many weeks and months without the sound of the sea, or even a stream. The first camp was on flat ground, very exposed, and in dry weather there were sandstorms where you would have grit in your hair and mouth for days, and when it was wet the ground was as muddy as a bottom river field after cows have been through. The second one was better - sturdy enough huts and a shower block, and hot water some times. The soap though - it stank like sweet perfume mixed with body odour. The smell got everywhere and while it was good to be clean when I could be, if I smelled that soap again I think I'd throw up.



One time it was a bright day. There should have been no bright days there but it's just another country and the sun shines and doesn't shine just the same as here. I was in the exercise yard and I held my hand up to the light and could almost see through it to the veins and the blood and the bones.



29th June 1946.

I went into a pub yesterday, on a corner. It was early afternoon, and I was after a quiet pint and a smoke somewhere dry. It was raining out, my jacket was soaked heavy and my feet were worse off than usual.

There were three men at a table - they must have been there a while - the place was thick with cigarette smoke and a smell of sweat hung around them. The barman was friendly enough, though he looked at my shoes funny.

I sat at the bar. One of the men glanced in my direction - there was some discussion amongst them to do with the price of a field.

After that there's a gap. I don't remember ordering another beer but I must have done because I had a full pint in front of me. The ridges of the glass were bothering me, and I had to hold onto it tightly to stop the feeling getting under my skin. Something was going on, there was a dog barking outside. One of the men was getting up to leave, putting his cap on, another was clapping him on the back, congratulating him for something. I wasn't seeing things too clearly, it was sort of hazy. The glass broke, beer and pieces of glass fell all over my hand and the bar. Blood seeped up from the middle of my palm and I just watched it oozing out until the barman grabbed my hand and wrapped it in a cloth.



Llandrindod Wells
Llanbrynmair
Aberangell
Dolgellau
Blaenau Ffestiniog
Betws-y-Coed
Garreg Ddu
Conwy
Colwyn



Saltney, near Chester. 2nd October 1946

Widow with farm. Fallen oak.



Slept in barn. Drafty but dry. Feet swollen.



February 1947

Very cold.



28th March 1947

The morning we left I saw the Campbeltown out in the water - huge she was, and our little MLs were so tiny next to her and so damned flimsy - plywood and nails was almost all they were.

We left after lunch and everyone was tense. It was hard for me to feel that I was really there with all these lads from London. But then some of them were just ordinary, not stand offish like you'd expect, and we were all young. Some were ready, confident almost. I just wanted not to let anyone down.

It was a long afternoon - calm, and cloudy, and by dark we were pretty close, and we were all stiff from being on edge for hours, and it was cold. It was quiet for so much longer than I had thought would be possible. She even dragged on a couple of sandbanks before they spotted us, but when they did, it all got deafeningly loud.

There were so many explosions the sky was lit up all over - for a minute it reminded me of 5th November, do you remember when I took you to the fireworks at Windmill Hill? It was like that but a thousand times over, and louder - but not bangs and rocket whizzes, more huge crumpling sounds and shrieking, and bullets have a fast whirring zzz zzz noise.

I thought I had been shot in the leg. Felt like I'd been hit with a sledgehammer, but it was a side section of one of the fuel tanks which exploded. Must have landed flat on my leg and trapped me there for a bit. My hand slipped trying to get out - blood all over the deck.

Rob found me - it seemed a long time but probably wasn't; he pulled me out from under and towards the bow and then he got a shot in the neck and went straight down, his hand still in my collar. I fell, but into the water away from the boat, all the colours of the rainbow were in the sky, in sparkles and fire and glittering on the water. I must have been out for a bit there because after that I don't remember much until I was floating near the shore. The water was all on fire, it truly was an inferno; as close to hell as I can imagine. There were clouds of smoke lit up hanging all over the estuary and the air was full of screaming. My legs and arms wouldn't move properly. I tried to swim but the water was so heavy and I was very cold. I must have drifted, because when it was coming up for dawn I was on the dock so someone must have pulled me out.

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It didn't blow until later that morning and then the job was done. We were taken all together in trucks up the country to Brittany and after some Kriegsmarine interrogation we were at Westertimke for over a year. And then later to Germany.

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16th April 1947

Rain. Feet sodden.

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I feel very small here. In the fog I am almost not here at all. I seem to have forgotten how to speak.

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under my feet was solid and warm like a baked pot. A day or so ago I came across a girl in a cotton dress picking berries - she looked like you when you were that age - stringy with plaits. They pick bilberries for market here but she was on her own - maybe it's late in the season.

She gave me a handful of heather - and I almost looked around to give it to you.

2nd November 1947 - Arrived Scotland.

Galloway, January 1948

I have not moved from this house for weeks. I'm not sure how long in fact, perhaps as much as two months. It was too cold to keep going when I found myself at its doorstep and having found a way in I am reluctant to leave it. My feet were in a poor state in general and I had a bad sore on my left heel. I have made something of a nest here in the lowest floor, a winter burrow below the main rooms, and I find that I can read again.

The upstairs is draped in sheets, and silent portraits of handsome men in uniforms watch me as I slip in and out to fetch a book or find a blanket. There is a pram in a small end room, covered with an old nursery curtain. Sometimes I imagine the sound of a child crying when the wind squalls around the walls and the doors rattle heavily at night.

In the cellars there are empty meat hooks ranged on the ceiling, narrow shelves and shallow cupboards. There are sometimes scratching sounds in the back stairwell - the presence of small beating hearts behind the walls gives me some comfort that I am not entirely alone.

The people in the village down there, they must know I'm here, but they don't say a thing. I buy food in the shop and I walk the steep hill behind the house. The view at the top is across all the counties to the south and the north. And the sea - towards Ireland I suppose. It rains and the wind bites and I curse the hill for its slippery paths and the bog for its deep troughs but it is still good to tread on the land.

6th February 1948, Auchencairn

The quiet here makes it impossible not to think. Everything has gone round and round in my head, over and over and over. I don't know if the 'if onlys' will ever stop. Your face flickers in and out of my memory like the underside of a moth in flight.

If only I had told you to leave, to get away from Bedminster, to leave the city. You and Ma and the girls would have gone to the country with Doreen. I didn't know how bad it was - it wasn't London after all. I didn't want you to be in a strange place with no friends or neighbours or family. I thought you would be safe.

I have gone back in my head many times to that conversation we had in the parlour the three of us.

You needed me to decide what was best, and I made the wrong choice.

11th March 1948

Walking again.

17th May 1948, near Loch Lomond

It is green and leafy alongside the roads and paths now, and the birds are going about their business with much noise. At midday I sat by the water to eat and shared some bread with a family of wagtails who dipped and hopped around my crumbs, while the marsh birds called kaak-kor from the far side of the loch.

September 1948, Gairloch, Wester Ross

My but it is a beautiful country here.

Ardmair, 2nd February 1949

Dearest Mary,

This winter has been sharp; as cold and bitter as it could have been.

I spent the past few months with a crofter named MacBrae. A kind, quiet man who would share spindly wisdom of an evening, about his land and the creatures which live there. He would take me to watch the deer grazing just in from the loch, tell me about the generations he has seen come and go in that same place over the past forty years or more. We ate sparingly once a day and he taught me how to fish and how to make rope, how to cut peat and tend it in a fire. There are rarer skills but few so valuable as these in this part of the world.

I left MacBrae some days ago now and am continuing north.

Sandwood Bay, 22nd March 1949

Dearest Mary,

I wish you could be here to share this place with me. It is almost magical.

I find that I am more able to look about me now that the days are stretching longer. I have been following the sea's edges by cliffs and beaches, keeping as close to the water as I can.



Durness, Sutherland, 3rd April 1949

There is a strange house built on the fringe of beach here, almost in the sand itself. It is large and stolid - the windows are of different sizes, and placed oddly around its four faces as if it had been built from the inside out. I dreamt that I was in this house last night, you were there and the girls were there too, and there was a fire which trapped us inside. There were stairs and steps in the house, going up right to under the roof but no door to leave by and all the windows were shuttered.



Dunnet, May 1949.

Dearest Mary,

It was overcast when I arrived off the train and it smelt the same as it always did coming into Bedminster, of fish and tanneries and the malthouse in Stillhouse Lane, but the sound was different - some of the buildings were gone of course and people weren't out in the street so much. I was worried that you would think me thin, and would I recognise the girls, and would you be expecting me and what would we have for tea. I saw the curtains move at number 76 as I passed, and I remember thinking that James and Nelly must be coming up for school soon. I was thinking about the winter of '41 and how it had been and that it had been good. There was our house and our door and steps and bricks, all still there and in the same place but new curtains downstairs. Life was going to begin again for us. I'd start back at Wills, the girls would be happy to have their dad home and maybe we'd have another baby in time and maybe it would be a boy, and - it was all so clear.



I knocked on the door Mary and when you opened it, it wasn't you. It was a pale-faced woman with soft eyes and a child behind her starting to whimper. A hair pin dropped to the floor and she bent down to pick it up. There was another family living in our house; it was their curtains and their walls and their door.

Hicks her name was, Mrs Hicks. She'd married one of Doreen's brothers, I forget which one. She was kind, she sat me down by our fire in her man's armchair and I saw Ma's mirror was still there, and she gave me tea. She brought me my granddad's case. They'd not thrown it out, kept it with that photograph of us that day at Clevedon. And the toy bear and a couple of books of Ma's. I took the suitcase, and I thanked her, and I left.

I remain your loving husband,

William