

School for Skylarks

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This story is for

Stanley

without whose help it would have been finished in half the time

&

with regrets that there are no whoopee cushions nor

ejector seats to be found in it.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

THE HOUSE ON HUMMINGBIRD ISLAND

OFF THE EDGE OF THE MAP

Lyla wasn't at all certain that such a house as Furlongs could exist, until she actually had to go there.

'I am NOT staying with Great Aunt Ada.' She spat out the name with precision. 'I'll run away and you won't be able to stop me.'

Father searched Lyla's face as if about to say one particular thing, then thought better of it and said another thing entirely, enunciating with heavy patience.

'London. Will. Be. Bombed. Children. Are. Being. Evacuated.'

'Some children are being evacuated, but this one has actually been STOLEN from her bed,' said Lyla through her teeth, tears rising behind her eyes.

Father waited a while, then, with an attempt at levity, said, 'Anyway, you'll enjoy Aunt Ada – she's a little unusual. Do be kind to her.'

'You weren't kind to *Mop*,' snapped Lyla. 'She says you'd've *killed* her with your coldness . . .'

Lyla trailed off – her words, being borrowed from her mother, felt false in her own mouth. Besides, Father being in uniform and about to fight a war made her uneasy and put her somehow in the wrong. She gathered her anger, stoking it so it wouldn't run out of steam. You had to do that because Father's patience was a river that ran on and on, and gave you nothing to push against.

'I've not changed, Lyla. I am the same man I was the day she married me. I loved Mop then, and I still love her now.'

'You left her,' Lyla retorted. 'That's what the papers said. And everyone knows what you did. *Everyone.*' Lyla put on a clipped sort of BBC voice: '*High-ranking civil servant Lovell Spence, cited for infidelity.*'

Father gave a brief, taut laugh. He pushed his foot against the accelerator and the motor swung widely round a tight corner.

'The minute she sees I'm gone, she'll come and fetch me, and if she doesn't I'll escape,' said Lyla.

'Lyla . . .'

He'd been about to say something and then stopped, and Lyla was disappointed because that meant it might, for once, have actually been interesting.

After a while, Father slowed the Austen, sighed, and said with forced joviality, 'I should look around if I were you. You'll need to know where you are to plan your escape.'

Lyla harrumphed and folded her arms tightly in a look-at-me-I'm-upset-and-unfairly-treated sort of way. A solitary ewe grazed along a railway track, and in the distance was what might be a station – a clock, a small pavilion and a sign turned around to confuse the enemy. Lyla scowled. 'It's not as if the Germans would even BOTHER to come to such a faraway place.'

Father inhaled wearily then glanced at his watch. He'd have to drive all the way back to the kind of government meeting that Mop said was always just caution and compromise. The Austen rattled

over a cattle grid, then turned between noble gateposts on to an unmade drive. Father slowed the motor, unwound the window and breathed deeply to savour the air.

Just then, the house appeared.

Lyla caught her breath. She saw its crenellations and chimneys, its turrets and swaggering towers. It was baffling, haphazard and rambling, as if all the bits of it had just risen up whenever and wherever they'd wanted, so you couldn't tell for certain where it began and where it ended. Sheep grazed right up to its walls and ferns sprouted from its stones like the plumes of a cavalier's hat. Poetry and romance hung about the turrets and towers, a yearning for the dashing and the untamed that beckoned to something in Lyla's spirit and reminded her of the heroines in the stories she'd read. Nevertheless, she carefully formed an expression of disgust.

'It looks draughty and cold.'

Father chuckled. 'Well, yes – as a matter of fact, it is. When the wind blows, the carpets lift off the floors and dance, the water freezes in the pipes and the cream freezes inside the cows and turns to ice cream.'

'Does it really?' asked Lyla, delighted till she remembered about being cross.

Father pulled up on the circular gravel forecourt beside a door that stood at the foot of a tall octagonal tower. Above its Gothic arch a stone galleon perched everlastingly on the crest of a wave.

'I'm not getting out.'

Father shrugged as if to shake off both the journey and the company of his daughter. He knocked at the door, and immediately it opened and someone appeared – perhaps a butler, for he wore a splendid and ancient livery. He was tall and bore himself with formality and decorum.

'Solomon,' said Father warmly, taking his hands.

'Captain.'

'How are you? How is she, Solomon?'

'Her Ladyship is preparing for war, sir.'

Solomon had the tact and restraint of a butler, but Lyla saw that his eyes twinkled with the faintest hint of amusement.

'Specifically,' he continued, 'she is working on some pyrotechnic illuminations known to herself as Dandelions. They are to confuse the German ships when they steam up the Bristol Channel.'

The twinkle faded from Solomon's eyes, and his face once again assumed the deadpan inscrutability of the butler one might expect to find in such a house as Furlongs. Dipping his head, he withdrew, then walked with a stiff, awkward gait to the luggage on the back of the Austen.

'Aunt Ada!' called Father.

He stood in a shaft of dust-speckled light cast from a mullioned window. All of a sudden, Lyla saw him for the first time as a person distinct from herself and from Mop. She saw a faraway smile soften and light his face, melting its drawn severity, and she realized she'd never before given any thought to Father's happiness or unhappiness.

She tightened her arms about herself. Mother's unhappiness took up most of the space in Lyla's head, and she had to watch it warily, for at any moment it might suddenly spill and cast its tarry darkness over the day or the week.

Lyla looked about the dim room. Tusks, antlers and medieval weapons hung on either side of the immense stone fireplace. Shields painted in heraldic purples, blues and reds ran around the walls. As Lyla's eyes adjusted, she saw the strangest of things crowded willy-nilly on the hall table: a barometer, the tusks of a walrus and an unnervingly alive-looking armadillo that stood tiptoe on quaint little feet between a tray labelled 'Mail In' and another labelled 'Mail Out'.

'It's just the same, Lyla,' Father murmured. 'Nothing changes here.'

Lyla rolled her eyes. Where was the fun in things staying the same?

Just then, from a low stone arch that led to a low stone passage, a brisk, bright voice called, 'Solomon! Solomon! Where are you, Solomon? There's someone in the place.'

The owner of the voice appeared, wearing an all-in-one sort of outfit – the kind that a fighter pilot might wear, with chest pockets, hip pockets and shin pockets, all of them crammed with pieces of wire and batteries and ticking things. Her eyes were bright and reckless, her skin smooth and clear, but her hair was a startling polar white and roughly sheared as if she'd commandeered a passing groundsman on his way to deal with the brambles. She was quite old, yet she held herself very upright, and there was a vigour to her, the fierce energy of a high-voltage current. On her head perched a pair of goggles and – Lyla took a step closer to make quite sure of this – on her shoulder sat a canary.

She made a shooing motion as if Father were a clutch of hens.

'Show 'em out, Solomon. Chop-chop – show 'em out.'

'Ada, it's me, Lovell.'

Father's voice was warm, amused by Great Aunt Ada's curious brand of hospitality.

'Lovell . . . Oh, good.' She paused for a moment. Then, distracted by the bottle in her hand, she waved it about and said, 'Now, look here, Lovell. Well, d'you see, my Pink Dandelions, they're twenty-four inches diameter – that's a hundred feet wide when they burst, d'you see? They'll do the trick. No, no, I will not fail nor falter in my duty. Invasion will be a matter of life or death for us all.'

Ada had laughing eyes, flecked with gold.

Lyla stepped a little closer to see if the canary on her great aunt's goggles was real or not, but then, seeing that the bottle that her great aunt was brandishing about was labelled 'BLASTING POWDER', she retreated a step or two. Father, however, was smiling.

'Dear Ada, you haven't changed at all. You'll blow the place up one day, you know.'

Ada's attention appeared to have been distracted once again, for now she was unearthing a paper from a pocket and flapping it at Father.

'And this! Number of rooms? Number of acres? Dammit. They won't have it, I tell you. They'll sack the place. Solomon! Solomon! Let no one in! Man the doors!' she said with furious indignation, still oblivious to the fact that her butler was not to hand.

Lyla, tired of being ignored, rolled her eyes. 'Actually, I'm sure Hitler will choose a more comfortable house in a more convenient location.'

'Who's that?' barked Ada, peering in Lyla's general direction, then shaking her head vigorously. 'Oh no, Hitler will never get his hands on the place; the Dandelions – the fireworks – will see to that. No, no, no. He'll be baffled – quite baffled – by my Pink Dandelions when they burst over the Bristol Channel. His instruments of navigation will be befuddled by them, don't you see? Hitler won't know where he is at all and will turn tail, don't you worry. No, no, it's the Ministry of Works – they're the problem – got to keep 'em out, d'you see? They'll turn it into a barracks; fill the place with soldiery and so on, just like the last war.'

Soldiers? Aha! Lyla smiled quietly to herself. If Furlongs was to be filled with soldiers, then she wouldn't have to stay here. Option One: run away. Option Two: request that the Ministry of Works fill Furlongs with soldiers and send her home.

'This is Lyla,' Father announced, attempting to put an arm around his daughter's shoulder.

Great Aunt Ada squinted briefly at Lyla.

'WHO IS SHE?' she roared.

'Did you not get my letter?'

'Plenty of letters, but Solomon knows I don't hold with 'em.'

'Ah, well you must find the letter and read it – that's important, Ada . . . Lyla's come to stay.'

'I've no intention of staying,' snapped Lyla.

'Lyla,' said Father, 'London will be *bombed*.'

Ada hesitated, then harrumphed.

'Well, I dare say we shan't notice each other much, she and I.'

'You won't notice me at all. Mother needs me, so I'll be returning to London.'

'Needs you, you say?' Ada asked with quiet ferocity. 'Needs you?'

'Yes. In any case, I don't want to be here. You see, I was kidnapped—'

'Two different things entirely,' Ada interjected. 'She needing you and you not wanting to be here. Don't confuse them.'

'I'm not confused at all,' said Lyla promptly. 'Number one – I don't want to be here and have no intention of staying. And number two – Mop will be anxious.'

Great Aunt Ada glanced quickly at Father. Father held her gaze and gave a brief dip of his head. Ada, noting this, paused and then waggled her fingers in a gesture that could be intended to indicate either understanding, dismissal or goodbye – or perhaps all three. Together with her wires and batteries and gelignite she wandered off absent-mindedly towards the corridor, but Lyla, because she did very much want to know, called out after her, 'Is that actually a real canary on your . . . ?' She tapped the top of her head to indicate the goggles that her great aunt wore.

'Ah yes, dear. This is Little Gibson,' answered Great Aunt Ada before continuing off down the corridor on some peculiar business of her own.

'Oh good, Solomon's ready with the motor,' said Father, looking at his watch.

Lyla, abruptly forgetting the matter of the canary being real or not, whirled around in horror. She said nothing, but inwardly as she watched him she was begging, *Don't leave me here! Please, don't just walk away from me.*

'Come, Lyla.' Father went to her and bent to hug her.

Lyla shied away from him but he took both her hands in his. 'Dear Lyla, you've been so very brave.'

She shook her hands free. The blood rose to her cheeks, her fingers clenched and she burned with hurt and rage. *Please don't leave me here. Don't leave me again.*

Father's face creased with pain. 'You are so very loved. You are everything to me.'

Lyla clenched her fists and bowed her head. *He left me once and now he's leaving me a second time.*

'One day perhaps you'll see that I am not so bad a man as you think me now.' With a sigh, Father rose and slowly, head bowed, went out to the motor.

Alone in the hall, Lyla gazed out through the open door and saw him, his hand on the ignition, looking back at Furlongs with a long, sad smile. She heard the engine start and then the scrunch of gravel and she trembled with disbelief and anger. She ran out and stood alone on the gravel and yelled over the splutter of the engine:

'I'll escape, and you won't be able to stop me.'

3

OLD ALFRED

Mop was right. Father was cold: all head and no heart.

Lyla scowled at the weapons and painted shields but saw nothing she could throw or break. Everything was so immense, so ancient and indifferent to her that she felt small and powerless.

She stayed there, alone in the centre of the vast hall, raging and hot and turning about in a welter of rage and indecision. Should she escape now? Right away?

While thinking about her escape, she grew conscious that something or *someone* was watching her.

She looked about.

No one.

She looked about again.

Still no one.

Yet she *was* being watched. She looked about once more and thought it was perhaps the watchful little armadillo on the table. She didn't care what a stuffed armadillo thought of her, not in the least, but she might just turn it around to face the wall.

'Miss – best not to touch Old Alfred,' said Solomon.

Lyla whipped round, and there was Solomon at the foot of the curling stone stairs of the tower. He bore aloft a silver domed platter, and on his face was a gleaming black moustache that curled up at the edges. Lyla grew alarmed – that moustache had *certainly* not been there before. She gawped, but Solomon was so poised and deadpan that Lyla began to wonder if he were a wizard or a magician, or if she perhaps had been bewitched.

She took a deep breath, lifted her hand and held it mid-air, poised between the vigilant armadillo and the inscrutable Solomon. 'All right, I shan't touch *Old Alfred*.'

Solomon walked with his strange, stiff gait towards the stuffed armadillo apparently known as Old Alfred, and, with some panache, placed the platter at his feet, rather in the way that the maître d' at Claridges might present a boeuf en croute. With a flourish he lifted the lid. Lyla watched, astonished. The butler must be as daft as his mistress, for the animal was clearly dead and not in need of any food at all.

'And what food *exactly* does a dead armadillo require?' demanded Lyla.

'Old Alfred is not to be neglected. Those are my instructions.'

Solomon was clearly accustomed to carrying out all manner of things in the line of duty. Lyla watched his face very carefully in case that moustache should disappear or do some other thing.

Suddenly, and rather surprisingly, Solomon bent down and whispered through a smile, 'There is, however, no longer any obligation to rootle about in Her Ladyship's flowerbeds for the bugs and the beetles that Old Alfred so used to enjoy.'

Lyla smiled because Solomon had the sort of smile that always draws a smile in others, and that made her think how lovely it must be to go about seeing only smiles wherever one went. Nevertheless, everything here was strange and absurd. She would go home. She would go home right away and not waste a minute longer.

'Shall I show you to your room, miss?'

'No, because I am going home – and actually I'm going right away.'

Solomon dipped his head, and Lyla wondered if he might have been a little saddened by the idea

of her leaving so soon. Lyla glanced out of the hall window and hesitated, suddenly assailed by doubt. The hills were sturdier and the valleys deeper than she'd thought; the drive so long you couldn't see to the end of it.

It would be a tricky journey to London. Wondering if Solomon might try to stop her from leaving, she walked slowly over to her suitcase. Slowly she bent to take the handle, but still he didn't come to stop her. Old Alfred, however, was watching her, *definitely* watching her, as if he knew exactly what she were doing, and had in his life seen all manner of things, and a small girl running away was entirely unremarkable, *see if he cared*.

Lyla stuck her tongue out at Old Alfred, grabbed the handle of her case and turned to find that Solomon was at the door opening it for her. Lyla was disconcerted, for the grown-ups she'd come across in stories did not open doors for children to escape through.

'I'm going to catch the train, and nothing you say will stop me,' she told him.

But Solomon simply conjured a thing from his pocket and held it out in the palm of his hand. A small silver compass.

'From Her Ladyship,' he said. 'To guide you to London.'

Lyla was suspicious and wondered if it were a trick, for grown-ups weren't supposed to help you run away.

'I shan't need it as I'll be travelling by train.'

Solomon dipped his head in the restrained way, which suggested that if he knew any better he also knew it was his place not to disagree.

'Good day,' said Lyla, and marched out.

Halfway down the drive she turned to see if anyone was watching from the windows or perhaps running down the drive after her, but so far no one was. She turned back and noted again the height of the hills and the depth of the valleys and she scowled, for it was difficult for an eleven-year-old child to return herself to London from a place that was so far away from all the other places in the world. By the time she'd reached the gateposts, her fingers already ached and her tummy rumbled, so she paused to rest. She glanced up at the stone griffins, which were, however, too high up on their posts and too grand to notice Lyla, so she rolled her eyes at them, snatched at the handle of the case and marched on, telling herself, *It's all Father's fault*.

After a while, because her shoes were all wrong and because all suitcases were the wrong shape for being carried, she began to dawdle and to bump and trail the case along the tarmac. Then, after another while, she slumped down on a green verge beside a patch of yellow primroses and sulked. *No one cared about her. No one had even tried to stop her*. She began to yank at the petals of a primrose, snatching them off one by one.

It was so unfair. Everything was unfair. She yanked the petals from another primrose.

The colour yellow plunged Mop into a black mood. Small things could do that to her mother, even things as small as primroses. Perhaps Mop was having a black day today. Lyla bit her lip. On a black day Lyla always stayed close to her mother because she'd be unpredictable, might begin to make lots of calls, and laugh too loudly, then suddenly – and for no obvious reason – begin to cry.

Abruptly, because such thoughts made her uncomfortable, Lyla stood and marched on. The stone banks were so high you couldn't see over them to know where you were, but suddenly she found herself in front of the little pavilion with the platform and the large round clock.

She was halfway home. From now on it would be quite easy.

After a while she looked at the clock and thought how watching clocks made time move more slowly in faraway places. She crossed her arms and legs several times over and looked about, hoping a station master might materialize.

The same solitary ewe grazed along the track as though it lived there always. Uneasy, Lyla gazed down the track, first one way, then the other, wondering from which direction the London train would come, and she gazed at the clock, wondering actually if clock hands moved at all in places such as this. Suddenly, hearing the screech and rumble of an approaching train, Lyla leaped to her feet. It approached at a leisurely pace, toot-tooting until the sheep eventually lifted its head and wandered off the track. Lyla picked up her case in readiness, but now that the track was clear, the train was picking up speed and the driver had perhaps not seen her, so she waved and shouted, and as it picked up more speed, she looked on in disbelief.

The steam gradually cleared and there, emerging from the mist, was Solomon with a pony trap.

*

It is 1939. When Lyla is evacuated from her home in London to her Great-Aunt's enormous house in the West Country, she expects to be lonely. She has never been to school nor had any friends, and her parents have been at the centre of a scandal. But with the house being used to accommodate an entire school of evacuated schoolgirls, there's no time to think about her old life. Soon there is a horse in a first-floor bedroom and a ferret in Lyla's sock drawer, hordes of schoolgirls have overrun the house, and Lyla finds out that friends come in all shapes and sizes.

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books, including Soldier Dog, Captain, A Horse School for Skylarks is the story of a schoolgirl evacuee from London, who during WWII is sent to live with an eccentric great-aunt in THE SKYLARKS' WAR by Hilary McKay....a - The History Girls - Columbia University Press School for Skylarks Young Quills Awards 2018 â€“ Winners - Trade Me Sam Angus (writer) - Wikipedia - We have small town suburban life complete with delicious domestic detail of the kind that I love finding in a book. We have school, both Macmillan Children's on Twitter: "The latest book by - Skylarks have had a great week focusing on developing skills to retell a story based on our new book The Lost Happy Endings'. The children have been solving 322 Buick Nailhead Engine - Karen Gregory's Skylarks is a book about two girls with very different cons of their home and school life, was so interesting and well done.

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