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# Staring at the Sun

JULIAN BARNES

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*Julian Barnes*

**STARING AT THE SUN**

Born in Leicester, England, in 1946, Julian Barnes is the author of more than ten books, including *Metroland*, *Talking It Over*, and *Something to Declare*. His work has been translated into more than thirty languages. In France he is the only writer to have won both the Prix Médicis and the Prix Fémina, and in 1988 he was made a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. He lives in London.



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S T A R I N G  
A T T H E S U N

*Julian Barnes*

*Vintage International*

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*To the memory of Frances Lindley*  
1911–1987

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**T**HIS IS WHAT HAPPENED. On a calm, black night in June 1941 Sergeant-Pilot Thomas Prosser was poaching over northern France. His Hurricane IIB was black in its camouflage paint. Inside the cockpit, red light from the instrument panel fell softly on Prosser's hands and face; he glowed like an avenger. He was flying with the hood back, looking towards the ground for the lights of an aerodrome, looking towards the sky for the hot colour of a bomber's exhaust. Prosser was waiting, in the last half hour before dawn, for a Heinkel or a Dornier on its way back from some English city. The bomber would have skirted anti-aircraft guns, declined the publicity of searchlights, dodged barrage balloons and night fighters; it would be steadying itself, the crew would be thinking of hot coffee fierce with chicory, the landing gear would crunch down—and then would come the poacher's crafty retribution.

There was no prey that night. At 3:46 Prosser set course for base. He crossed the French coast at eighteen thousand feet. Perhaps disappointment had made him delay his return longer than usual, for as he glanced up the Channel to the east he saw the sun begin to rise. The air was empty and serene as the orange sun extracted itself calmly and steadily from the sticky yellow bar of the horizon. Prosser followed its slow exposure. Out of trained instinct, his head jerked on his neck every three seconds, but it seems unlikely he would have spotted a German fighter had there been one. All he could take in was the sun rising from the sea: stately, inexorable, almost comic.

Finally, when the orange globe sat primly on the shelf of distant waves, Prosser looked away. He became aware of danger again; his black aeroplane in the bright morning air was now as conspicuous as some Arctic predator caught in the wrong fur by a change of season. As he banked and turned, banked and turned, he glimpsed below him a long trail of black smoke. A solitary ship, perhaps in trouble. He descended quickly towards the twinkling, miniature waves, until at last he could make out a tubby merchantman heading west. But the black smoke had stopped, and there seemed nothing wrong; probably she had just been stoking up.

At eight thousand feet Prosser flattened out and set fresh course for base. Halfway across the Channel he allowed himself, like the German bomber crews, to think about hot coffee and the bacon sandwich he would eat after debriefing. Then something happened. The speed of his descent had driven the sun back below the horizon, and as he looked towards the east he saw it rise again: the same sun coming up from the same place across the same sea. Once more, Prosser put aside caution and just watched: the orange globe, the yellow bar, the horizon's shelf, the serene air, and the smooth, weightless lift of the sun as it rose from the waves for the second time that morning. It was

an ordinary miracle he would never forget.



**1**

You ask me what life is? It is like asking what a carrot is. A carrot is a carrot, and nothing more is known.

—CHEKHOV TO OLGA KNIPPER, 20 April 1904

OTHER PEOPLE ASSUMED it must be a strain, looking back over ninety years. Tunnel vision, they guessed; straw vision. It wasn't like that. Sometimes the past was shot with a hand-held camera; sometimes it reared monumentally inside a proscenium arch with moulded plaster swags and floppy curtains; sometimes it eased along, a love story from the silent era, pleasing, out of focus and wholly implausible. And sometimes there was only a succession of stills to be borrowed from the memory.

The Incident with Uncle Leslie—the very first Incident of her life—came in a series of magic lantern slides. A sepia morality; the lovable villain even had a moustache. She had been seven at the time; it was Christmas; Uncle Leslie was her favourite uncle. Slide 1 showed him bending down from his enormous height to hand over a present. Hyacinths, he whispered, giving her a biscuit-coloured pot surmounted by a mitre of brown paper. Put them in the airing cupboard and wait until the spring. She wanted to see them now. Oh, they wouldn't be up yet. How could he be sure? Later, in secret, Leslie unscrewed a corner of the brown-paper wrapping and let her peer in. Surprise! They *were* up already. Four slim ochre points, about half an inch long. Uncle Leslie emitted the reluctant chuckle of an adult suddenly impressed by a child's greater knowledge. Still, he explained, this was all the more reason why she shouldn't look at them again until the spring; any more light could cause them to outgrow their strength.

She put the hyacinths in the airing cupboard and waited for progress. She thought about them frequently and wondered what a hyacinth looked like. Time for Slide 2. In late January she went to the bathroom with a torch, turned off the light, took down the pot, unscrewed a tiny viewing hole, aimed the torch and quickly looked inside. The four promising tips were still there, still half an inch long. At least the light she had let in at Christmas hadn't harmed them.

In late February she looked again; but obviously the growing season hadn't started yet. Three weeks later Uncle Leslie called by on his way to play golf. Over lunch he turned to her conspiratorially and asked, "Well, little Jeanie, are the hyacinths hyacinth Christmas?"

"You told me not to look."

"So I did. So I did."

She looked again at the end of March, then—Slides 5 to 10—on the second, fifth, eighth, ninth, tenth and eleventh of April. On the twelfth her mother agreed to a closer examination of the pot. They laid yesterday's *Daily Express* on the kitchen table and carefully unwrapped the brown paper. The four ochre sprouts had not advanced at all. Mrs. Serjeant looked uneasy.

"I think we'd better throw them out, Jean." Adults were always throwing things out. That was clearly one of the big differences. Children liked keeping things.

"Maybe the roots are growing." Jean started easing away at the peaty earth packed tight against the tips.

"I shouldn't do that," said Mother. But it was too late. One after the other,

Jean dug out four upturned wooden golf tees.

Strangely, the Incident didn't make her lose faith in Uncle Leslie. Instead, she lost faith in hyacinths.

Looking back, Jean assumed that she must have had friends as a child; but she couldn't recall that special confidante with the wonky grin, or the playground game with skipping rope and acorns, or the secret messages passed along ink-stained desks at a village school with a daunting stone inscription above its door. Perhaps she had had all these things; perhaps not. In retrospect, Uncle Leslie had been friends enough. He had crinkly hair which he kept well Brylcreemed, and a dark blue blazer with a regimental badge on the breast pocket. He knew how to make wineglasses from the silver paper round chocolate bars, and whenever he went to the golf club he always called it "popping down the Old Green Heaven." Uncle Leslie was the sort of man she would marry.

Shortly after the hyacinth Incident, he began taking her down the Old Green Heaven. When they arrived he would sit her on a mildewed bench near the car park and instruct her with mock severity to guard his clubs.

"Just going to wash behind the old earpieces."

Twenty minutes later they would set off towards the first tee, Uncle Leslie carrying his clubs and smelling of beer, Jean with the sand iron over her shoulder. This was a good-luck ploy devised by Leslie: as long as Jeanie was carrying the sand iron in readiness, the lightning would be diverted and he would be kept out of the bunker.

"Don't let the club head drop," he would say, "or there'll be more sand flying than on a windy day in the Gobi desert." And she would shoulder the club correctly, like a rifle. Once, feeling tired at the uphill fifteenth, she had trailed it behind her off the tee, and Uncle Leslie's second shot squirted straight into a bunker fifteen yards away.

"Now look what you've done," he said; though he seemed almost as pleased as he was cross. "Have to buy me one at the nineteenth for that."

Uncle Leslie often talked to her in a funny code she pretended to understand. Everyone knew there were only eighteen holes on a golf course and that she didn't have any money, but she nodded as if she were always buying people one—one what?—at the nineteenth. When she grew up, someone would explain the code to her; though in the meantime she felt quite happy not knowing. And there were bits she understood already. If the ball swerved disobediently off into the woods, Leslie would sometimes mutter, "One for the hyacinths"—the only reference he ever made to his Christmas present.

But mostly his remarks were beyond her. They marched purposefully down the fairway, he with his bagful of quietly clanking hickory, she sloping arms with the sand iron. Jean was not allowed to speak: Uncle Leslie had explained that chatter put him off thinking about his next shot. He, on the other hand, was permitted to talk; and as they strode towards that distant white glint which sometimes turned out to be a sweet paper, he would occasionally stop,

bend down and whisper to her the secrets of his mind. At the fifth he told her that tomatoes were the cause of cancer, and that the sun would never set on the Empire; at the tenth she learned that bombers were the future, and that old Musso might be an Eytie but he knew which way the paper folded. Once they had stopped on the short twelfth (an unprecedented act on a par three) while Leslie gravely explained, "Besides, your Jew doesn't really *enjoy* golf."

Then they had continued towards the bunker on the left of the green, with Jean repeating to herself this suddenly awarded truth.

She liked going down the Old Green Heaven; you never knew quite what would happen. Once, after Uncle Leslie had washed behind his ears more thoroughly than usual, he had crackled off into the deep rough alongside the fourth. She was made to turn her back, but couldn't avoid hearing a prolonged splashing noise of remarkable volume and implications. She had peered under a raised elbow (it didn't count as looking) and seen steam rising amid the waist-high bracken.

Next there was Leslie's trick. Between the ninth green and the tenth tee, surrounded by newly planted silver birches, was a little wooden hut like a nesting-box for monster birds. Here, if the wind was in the right direction, Uncle Leslie would sometimes do his trick. From the breast pocket of his tweed jacket with the leather elbows he would take a cigarette, lay it on his knee, pass his hands over it like a magician, put it in his mouth, give Jeanie a slow wink, and strike a match. She would sit beside him trying to hold her breath, trying not to be a shufflebottom. Huffers and puffers spoiled tricks, Uncle Leslie had said, and so did shufflebottoms.

After a minute or two she would ease her glance sideways, taking care not to move suddenly. The cigarette had an inch of ash on it, and Uncle Leslie was taking another puff. At the next glance, his head was tipped slightly back, and half the cigarette consisted of ash. From this point on, Uncle Leslie wouldn't look at her; instead, he would concentrate very carefully, slowly leaning back a little more with each puff he took. Finally, his head would be at right angles to his spine, with the cigarette, now pure ash apart from the last half inch where Leslie was holding it, rising vertically towards the roof of the giant bird-box. The trick had worked.

Then he would reach out his left hand and touch her upper arm; she would get up quietly, trying not to breathe in case she huffed and puffed the ash down Leslie's jacket with the leather elbows, and go ahead to the tenth tee. A couple of minutes later Leslie would rejoin her, smiling a little. She never asked how he did his trick; perhaps she thought he wouldn't tell her.

And then there was the screaming. This always happened in the same place, a field behind the triangle of damp, smelly beeches which pushed their way in to the dogleg fourteenth. On each occasion, Uncle Leslie had sliced his drive so badly that they had to search the least visited part of the wood, where the trunks had moss on them and the beechnuts were thicker on the ground. The first time, they had found themselves by a stile, which was slimy to the touch though the weather had been dry for days. They climbed the stile and began

hunting in the first few yards of sloping meadowland. After some rather aimless kicking and club scuffling, Leslie had bent down and said, “Why don’t we have a good old scream?”

She smiled back at him. Having a good old scream was clearly something people did on these occasions. After all, it was very annoying not to be able to find the ball. Leslie explained further. “When you’re all screamed out you have to fall down. That’s the rules.”

Then they had put their heads back and screamed at the sky: Uncle Leslie deep and throaty, like a train coming out of a tunnel; Jean high and wavering, uncertain how long her breath would last. You kept your eyes open—that seemed to be an unstated rule—and stared hard up at the sky, daring it to answer your challenge. Then you took your second breath and screamed again, more confidently, more insistently. Then again, and in the pause for each fresh breath Leslie’s train noises swelled and roared; and then exhaustion arrived suddenly, and you had no scream left, and you fell to the ground. She would have fallen anyway, even if it hadn’t been in the rules; fatigue raced through her body like a tidal bore.

There was a thump as Uncle Leslie flopped down a few yards away, and they stared their parallel, heaving stares up at the quiet sky. Halfway to heaven, a few small clouds shifted gently as if reluctantly tethered; but perhaps even this movement was given them only by the panting of the two supine figures. It was clearly in the rules that you could pant as hard as you liked.

After a while, she heard Leslie cough.

“Well,” he said, “I think I’ll allow myself a free drop.” And they trailed back across the slimy stile, through the crackly beechnuts to the angle of the fourteenth, where Uncle Leslie, after looking around for spies, calmly thumbed a tee into the fairway, popped a gleaming new ball on top, and struck a brassie some two hundred yards to the green. This despite being all screamed out, thought Jean.

They went screaming only when Leslie sliced his ball very badly off the tee, which seemed to happen when the course was empty. And they didn’t do it too often, because after the first occasion Jean got the whooping cough. Getting the whooping cough hadn’t qualified as an Incident, but Uncle Leslie’s whip-round had. Or rather, the result of Uncle Leslie’s whip-round.

She was in bed on the fourth day of her illness, occasionally giving the throaty cry of some exotic bird lost in a foreign sky, when he dropped in. He sat on her bed in his blazer with the badge, smelling a bit as if he’d been washing behind his ears, and instead of asking how she felt, murmured, “You didn’t tell them about the screaming?”

Of course she hadn’t.

“Only you see, it’s a secret, after all. Rather a good secret, it seems to me.”

Jean nodded. It was a remarkably good secret. But perhaps the screaming had caused the whooping cough. Her mother was always telling her to guard against overexcitement. Maybe she had overexcited her throat by screaming,

and it had started whooping as a result. Uncle Leslie behaved as if he suspected things might be his fault. As she gave her panicking bird call, he looked a little shifty.

Two days later Mrs. Serjeant put Jean's winter underwear on the edge of the bed, then a thick dress, her winter coat, a scarf and a blanket. She seemed displeased but resigned.

"Come on. Uncle Leslie's had a whip-round." Uncle Leslie's whip-round, Jean discovered, included a taxi. Her first taxi. On the way to the aerodrome she took care not to appear overexcited. At Hendon her mother stayed in the car. Jean took her father's hand, while he explained to her that the wooden parts of a De Havilland were made of spruce. Spruce was a very hard wood, he said, almost as hard as the metal parts of the aeroplane, so she was not to worry. She had not been worrying.

Sixty-minute sightseeing tour of London; departures on the hour. Among the dozen passengers were two more children wrapped up like parcels although it was only August; perhaps their uncles had had whip-rounds as well. Her father sat across the aisle and stopped her when she tried to lean past him and look out: the point of the flight, he explained, was medical, not educational. He spent the whole trip gazing at the back of the wicker seat in front of him and holding on to his kneecaps. He seemed as if he might get overexcited at any minute. When the De Havilland banked, Jean could see, beyond its chubby engines and the crisscross of the struts, something that might be Tower Bridge. She turned to her father.

"Shh," he said. "I'm concentrating on getting you better."

It was almost a year before she and Uncle Leslie went screaming again. They popped down the Old Green Heaven, of course; but somehow Leslie's driving at the dogleg fourteenth had acquired a new accuracy. When, finally, the next summer, he drew the club head across the face of the ball and produced a high, wailing slice, the ball seemed to know exactly where it was meant to go. So did they: through the long rough, across the damp beech wood, over the slimy stile, and into the sloping meadowland. They screamed into the warm air and thumped down on their backs. Jean found herself scanning the sky for aeroplanes. She rolled her eyes round in their sockets, and searched to the edge of her vision. No clouds and no aeroplanes: it was as if she and Uncle Leslie had emptied the sky with their noise. Nothing but blue.

"Well," said Leslie, "I think I'll award myself a free drop." They had not looked for his ball on their way through the wood, and they did not look for it on the way back either.

The third time they went screaming, there was an aeroplane. Jean hadn't noticed it while they were bawling at the heavens; but when they were supine and panting, and the clouds were bobbing on their tethers, she became aware of a distant buzzing. Too regular to be an insect; sounding both near and distant at the same time. It appeared, briefly and more noisily, between two clouds, then vanished, reappeared and buzzed slowly towards the horizon,

losing height. She imagined chubby engines, whistling struts, and children wrapped like parcels.

“When Lindbergh flew the Atlantic,” Leslie commented from a few feet away, “he had five sandwiches with him. He only ate one and a half.”

“What happened to the others?”

“What others?”

“The other three and a half.”

Uncle Leslie stood up; he looked moody. Perhaps she wasn’t allowed to talk, even though they weren’t on the fairway. Finally, as they scuffled in the beechnuts, this time looking for the ball, he said, in an irritated mutter, “They’re probably in a sandwich museum.”

A sandwich museum, Jean wondered to herself: were there such things? But she knew not to ask any further. And gradually, over the next couple of holes, Leslie’s mood improved. On the seventeenth, after a quick look up and down the fairway, he became conspiratorial again.

“Shall we play the Shoelace Game?”

He’d never mentioned it before, but she agreed at once.

Blatantly, Uncle Leslie kicked his ball across to the short rough. When they caught up with it, he bent down and took off his brown-and-white correspondent shoes. He laid the loose ends of the laces in a cross on the middle of the inner sole, looked at her and nodded. She took off her black walking shoes and did the same. She watched as, with a comic formality, he worked first his toes, then the rest of his feet, back into his shoes. She did the same; he winked, bent down on one knee like a suitor, patted her calf and slowly tugged both laces out from the soft underside of her left foot. Jean giggled. It felt wonderful. Ticklish at first and gradually more ticklish, but with a thrust of pleasure pushing right up into her stomach. She closed her eyes, and Uncle Leslie with a teasing pull, eased the laces out from underneath her right foot. It was even better with your eyes closed.

Then it was his turn. She crouched down at his feet. His shoes seemed enormous from this distance. His socks smelt distantly of the barnyard.

“One at a time for me,” he whispered, and she seized the first lace close to where it disappeared into its eyelet. She pulled; nothing happened; she pulled again, more sharply; he wiggled his foot, and the lace came suddenly free.

“No good,” he said. “Too quick. Put it back.”

He arched his foot, and she poked the long brown lace back into his shoe, between his damp sock and the inner sole. Then she pulled again, more smoothly; the lace came out with slow ease, and from the silence overhead she deduced that she had done it correctly. One by one, she pulled out the other three ends of his laces. He patted her on the head.

“I think a little seven iron, don’t you? Toss it up, bit of backspin, Bob’s your uncle.”

“Can we do it again?”

“Certainly not.” He addressed the ball, shuffled his feet as if he’d still got the laces trapped, and waggled the club head with loose wrists. “Got to let the

batteries recharge, haven't we?" She nodded; he pushed the ball a few inches on to a mossier clump of grass where it sat up well, fiddled his feet some more, struck a clean shot towards the flag and set off down the fairway. "Laces!" he shouted back at her, and she stooped to tie them up.

But they did play the Shoelace Game again, quite often. Not always at the Old Green Heaven; sometimes, rather suddenly and furtively, when they were at home. The rules were always the same: Uncle Leslie went first and pulled out both laces; she went second and tugged one at a time. Once, she tried to play it by herself; but it was not the same. She wondered if the game made you ill. Everything nice was supposed to make you ill. Chocolates, cakes, figs made you ill; screaming gave you the whooping cough. What did the Shoelace Game give you?

Presumably she would find out the answer to that quite soon. And then, as she grew up, she would find out the other answers. Answers to all sorts of questions. How to decide which club to use. Whether there was a sandwich museum. Why your Jews didn't enjoy golf. Whether her father had been frightened in the De Havilland or just concentrating. How that Musso knew which way the paper folded. Why food looked quite different when it came out at the other end of your body. How to smoke a cigarette without the ash falling off it. Whether Heaven was up the chimney, as she secretly suspected. And why the mink was excessively tenacious of life.

Jean didn't even understand what was meant by that last phrase; but in time she might discover the question, and later she might discover the answer. She knew about the mink because of Aunt Evelyn's prints. There were two of them, left behind years earlier with a promise of early collection, and subsequently shuffled from wall to wall. In the end, they were put in Jean's room. Father wondered if one of them wasn't unsuitable; but Mother insisted that Evelyn's pictures stay together. It was only honest, she said.

The horizontal picture showed two men in a forest somewhere; they wore old-fashioned clothes and hats. The one with the beard was holding up a ferret by the scruff of its neck, while the other man, the one without the beard, leaned on his gun. There was a pile of dead ferrets at his feet. Except that they weren't ferrets, because the title of the picture was *Mink Trapping*; and underneath was a story Jean had read many times.

The Mink, like the muskrat and ermine long-tailed weasel, does not possess much cunning, and is easily captured in any kind of trap; it is taken in steel traps and box traps, but more generally in what are called deadfalls. It is attracted by any kind of flesh, but we have usually seen the traps baited with the head of a ruffed grouse, wild duck, chicken, jay, or other bird. The Mink is excessively tenacious of life, and we had found it still alive under a deadfall, with a pole lying across its body pressed down by a weight of 150 lbs., beneath which it had been struggling for nearly twenty-four hours.

"Excessively tenacious of life" was not the only part she didn't yet understand.

What was a ruffed grouse? Or a muskrat? She knew what a wild duck was, and there had been a pair of barking jays last spring in the beech wood at the dogleg fourteenth, and they had chicken for Sunday lunch when her father had done a customer a favour. Mrs. Baxter would come in to pluck and draw it for her mother in the morning, and would call back at about five o'clock for one of the legs, which would be wrapped in greaseproof paper. Jean's father liked to make jokes about Mrs. Baxter's leg while he was carving, jokes which made his daughter giggle and his wife purse her lips.

"Does Mrs. Baxter have the head as well?" Jean once asked.

"No, dear. Why?"

"What do you do with it?"

"Throw it in the dustbin."

"Shouldn't you keep it to sell to the mink trappers?"

"You just get them to call, my girl," replied her father jovially. "You just get them to call."

The vertical print in Jean's room showed a ladder set up against a tree, with words painted on the rungs. INDUSTRY said the bottom rung; TEMPERANCE said the second, though really it only said TEMPERAN, because the last two letters were cut off by the knee of the ladder climber. Then came PRUDENCE, INTEGRITY, ECONOMY, PUNCTUALITY, COURAGE and, the top rung, PERSEVERANCE. In the foreground people were queuing to climb the tree, which had Christmas balls hanging from its leaves, with more words written on them like "Happiness," "Honor," "the Favor of God" and "Goodwill to Men." In the background were people who didn't want to climb the tree; they were gambling, swindling, betting, going on strike and entering a large building called Stock Exchange.

Jean understood the general intention of the picture, though sometimes she absently confused this tree with the Tree of Knowledge, which she had heard about in Scripture. The Tree of Knowledge was clearly a bad thing to have climbed; this tree was clearly a good thing, even if she didn't really understand all the words on the rungs, or the two written on the main shafts of the ladder: MORALITY, said one, HONESTY, the other. Some of the words she thought she understood. Honesty meant keeping Aunt Evelyn's two pictures together, and not moving your ball to a better position when no one was looking; Punctuality meant not being late for school; Economy was what her father did at the shop and her mother did at home; Courage—well, Courage was going up in aeroplanes. She would doubtless understand the other words in time.

Jean was seventeen when the war began, and the event made her feel relieved. Things had all been taken out of her hands; she no longer needed to feel guilty. For the preceding few years her father had taken the full weight of various political crises firmly on his shoulders; that was his duty, after all, as Head of the Household. He would read the news to them from the *Daily Express*, with pauses after each paragraph, and explain the bulletins on the wireless. It often felt to Jean as if her father owned a small family business

which was being threatened by a gang of foreigners with outlandish names, illegal business methods and cutthroat pricing. Her mother knew all the right responses; she knew the different noises to make when names like Benes, Daladier and Litvinov came up, and when it was best to throw up her hands in confusion and let Father explain it to her again from the beginning. Jean tried to be interested, but it sounded to her like a story which had begun a long time ago, even before she was born, and which she would never completely master. At first she used to keep silent at the names of those sinister foreign businessmen with their lorry-loads of stolen digestive biscuits and poached pheasants; but even silence wasn't safe—it suggested lack of proper concern—so she would occasionally ask questions. The trouble was, how could you know what questions to ask? It seemed to her that you were in a position to ask a really correct question only if you already knew the answer, and what was the point in that? Once, coming out of a bored reverie, she had asked Father about this new woman prime minister of Austria called Ann Schluss. That had been a mistake.

War, of course, was men's business. Men conducted it, and men—tapping out their pipes like headmasters—explained it. What had women done in the Great War? Given out white feathers, stoned dachshunds, gone out to nurse in France. First they sent men off to fight, then they patched them up. Was it likely to be any different this time? Probably not.

Even so, Jean felt obscurely that her inability to understand the European crisis was partly responsible for its continuation. She felt guilty about Munich. She felt guilt about the Sudetenland. She felt guilty about the Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact. If only she could remember whether you could trust the French or not. Was Poland more important than Czechoslovakia? And what was this about Palestine? Palestine was in the desert and the Jews wanted to go there. Well, at least this confirmed what Uncle Leslie had said about Jews: that they didn't like golf anyway. Nobody who liked golf would choose to go and live in the desert. It would be like playing out of the bunker all the time. Perhaps the golf courses out there had fairways made of sand and bunkers made of grass.

So when the war began, Jean was relieved. It was all Hitler's fault: it was nothing to do with her. And at least it meant that something was happening. The war counted as another Incident: this was how she viewed it at first. The men were called up, Mother joined the WVS, and Jean was finally allowed to cut off the broad yellow-brown plait which had run down her back for so many years. Her father mourned its loss, but was persuaded that the saving on soap and water when Jean washed her hair would significantly help the war effort. Sentimentally, he asked for the plait when it was cut and kept it on a shelf in his potting shed for several weeks, until his wife threw it out.

There had been secret discussions among the Serjeants about whether Jean should get a job; but with Mother joining the WVS it was thought she would be better off keeping house. "Good practice, girl," said her father with a wink. Good practice: not that she felt in any way up to whatever it was she was