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Blitzcat

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Blitzcat

Robert Westall

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

1

Sergeant Millom got up on the twenty-seventh of May after another sleepless night. Outside his one-man police station, the sun shone on the little river that danced through the village. The clock in the tall tower of Beaminster church chimed eight, disturbing the pigeons on the parapet. A horse and cart passed, its clop and rumble echoing between the honey-coloured houses.

It should have been peaceful, but the warm east wind carried, like persistent distant thunder, the rumble of German guns. Jerry had reached the French Channel Ports. The King of the Belgians had surrendered. The British Expeditionary Force and their commander, Lord Gort, were trapped around Dunkirk with their backs against the sea.

The news on the radio sickened Sergeant Millom. All the tripe about planned strategic withdrawals, and our troops being in high fighting spirits, and how many Jerry tanks the French 75s were knocking out. The newspapers sickened him, too, with photographs of grinning Tommies giving the thumbs-up. Probably photos a month old. They wouldn't be grinning now, poor sods. Even if they weren't lying dead in some Belgian ditch with the rats at them. Sergeant Millom had fought in the trenches in the last lot; he had never managed to forget the rats . . .

Neither could he forget that Jerry was only nineteen miles away, across the Channel, from an England that dreamed defenceless in the morning sun, its only army trapped around Dunkirk. And among that army, his Tom. Tom was all he had left since Agnes died. He kept remembering Tom laughing on his fifth birthday. Teaching Tom to ride his first bike. Tom still laughing when he went to join up and do his bit, though he wasn't any kind of fighter. Tom was a motor-mechanic, with the Service Corps. He hadn't minded Tom going off to France, because he'd be a mechanic, safe miles behind the lines. But now . . . he hadn't heard from Tom for a fortnight. Since the Jerry push started.

Tom and the rats. He could hardly see straight for thinking about Tom and the rats. And suppose Jerry invaded England? Won? What was left to stop him, with the Army trapped around Dunkirk? As a policeman he'd have to work with Jerry, keeping law and order in the village. But working with Jerry would make him a traitor, a Quisling. Unless he refused and resigned. But Jerry might shoot those who refused and resigned. Who'd look after the village then? Some Gestapo swine in jackboots, kicking people around . . .

He was still fretting over his shaving when a knock came at the door. He answered it with the soap on his face. A stranger; nasty-looking bloke in a black trilby hat and long grey overcoat, in spite of the heat. Millom distrusted all strangers now. Jerry had dropped paratroops in Holland and Belgium, disguised as vicars and nuns. So Millom was sharp with him, though he guessed the stranger was another

copper, if only from the size of his highly polished boots.

‘Hillfield. Inspector. Special Branch.’ The man produced his official card, and stared rudely at the soap on Millom’s face. ‘Don’t stand there dithering, Sergeant. We’ve got a spy to catch.’

Millom gaped. ‘Here? In Beaminster?’ He knew everybody. Poachers, wife-beaters, drunks. But a *spy*?

‘Woman. Name of Wensley. Florence Wensley. Brereton House. By the church, I’m told. Pretending to be an evacuee.’

‘Florrie Wensley? Little Florrie Wensley? I’ve known her since she was a kid. Family come here every year for their summer holidays. Her husband’s in the RAF. She’s just had a baby. There’s been a mistake . . . I’ll ring my superintendent at Bridport!’

‘No mistake. She’s been sending false telegrams. Creating alarm and despondency. Military censors picked them up. Look!’ He waggled a slip of paper.

Millom took one look and turned pale.

LORD GORT MISSING THREE DAYS
STOP PLEASE REPORT ANY SIGHTING
IMMEDIATELY STOP FLORENCE

Hillfield grinned evilly. ‘That set the cat among the pigeons in Whitehall, I can tell you. Till they checked Gort was safe. He keeps moving his Army HQ, see? And his communications keep breaking down. The Prime Minister was *frantic*.’

He jerked his thumb towards the church. ‘C’mon, Millom, don’t stand there all day with soap on your face. There’s a war on.’

*

The front lawn of Brereton House was littered with kids' tricycles, balls and tiny red sandals. Through the wide-open windows at least two babies could be heard crying. Florence Wensley answered the door. Sergeant Millom had always thought her very much a lady, but she didn't look a lady this morning. She look a pale, weary wreck; her fair hair was greasy, hanging in strands round her face. She was holding the baby, and the baby had been a bit sick down her jumper. And when she saw Sergeant Millom's uniform she went as white as a sheet.

'Geoff,' she said. 'Something's happened to Geoff.'

Sergeant Millom remembered the husband in the RAF. Flying Blenheims somewhere in France. They said Blenheims were flying death-traps; too slow, not enough guns. They said Jerry was eating them in handfuls for breakfast. They said Geoff Wensley was the last of his old squadron still alive.

And Geoff was lost somewhere in France; like Tom. Millom wanted to say something to comfort her; to say they hadn't come about her husband. But Hillfield took his wrist in a grip like iron, and said coldly, 'Can we go inside, Mrs Wensley?'

The swine didn't care. He was using it to break her up. All he wanted was his spy. A confession.

They went into a front room; pretty once, but faded now, and littered with children's toys worse than the lawn. Florence Wensley sat down in the sagging settee like a falling brick. She was away somewhere inside herself, her eyes blank. The baby, catching her mood, began to cry. Florence's long, pale hands, spotted with drying potato-scrappings, moved automatically to soothe it, like mechanical things.

The lines seemed to grow across her face as Sergeant Millom watched. She seemed to wither, turning into an old woman. That's what will happen to me, he thought, when I hear about Tom.

Mrs Wensley made an effort. Her blue-grey eyes came back into focus, like a submarine coming up to the surface, putting up a terrified blue periscope.

'He was only twenty-five,' she said. 'The RAF was his whole life. He was a Regular. He joined up in 1938, straight from university . . .'

Sergeant Millom could bear it no longer. He blurted out, 'It's not about your husband, Mrs Wensley. It's about that telegram you sent.'

She stared at him, turning her head slowly. 'Not dead?' she said. 'What telegram?'

'A telegram about Lord Gort . . .'

She looked bewildered. 'Lord Gort? She's lost.'

Sergeant Millom thought *he* was going mad. '*She's* lost?'

'Lord Gort's a cat . . . Geoff's cat. We got her just when the war broke out. As a kitten. The BEF was going to France, and everyone was talking about Lord Gort. So Geoff called her Lord Gort. We thought she was a tom; but she had kittens. Mummy and I brought her here when we were evacuated from Dover, but she wouldn't settle. She went missing five days ago. We thought she'd go home to Dover. So I telegraphed our old housekeeper to keep an eye open for her . . . has she turned up?'

'Not as far as we know, Mrs Wensley,' said Millom solemnly. He watched life start to drift back into the woman's face; watched her summon up enough courage to ask the vital question.

‘And Geoff? My husband?’

‘We know nothing about your husband at all, Mrs Wensley.’

Her pale smile was the best thing he’d come across in a week. From being ugly, she became pretty. From looking stupid, she became lively. It was like watching Lazarus return from the dead.

‘I’m not satisfied,’ snarled Hillfield from the corner.

As if in answer, the door opened, and an older woman came in. An older version of Mrs Wensley, but with a nose formed for command and a mouth as impatient as a rat-trap. She was wearing the green uniform and absurd schoolgirl hat of the Women’s Voluntary Service. ‘God, these evacuee mothers . . .’ she said. Then she saw Sergeant Millom’s uniform and her face fell apart, too.

‘Something’s happened to Geoffrey,’ she said, flat and dead.

‘No, no,’ said Sergeant Millom. ‘We know nothing about Geoffrey.’ He felt as if he were some dreadful plague, haunting the village, tearing people to pieces. ‘We’ve come about Lord Gort.’

The older woman’s face resurrected quicker; she was more used to the blows of life. ‘Oh, good. Has she been found?’

‘No, I’m sorry. She hasn’t.’

‘Then, why have you come?’ Suddenly the older woman became bossy, angry, ready to work off the fright she had had, in rage.

‘My colleague will explain all about it,’ said Sergeant Millom. ‘Goodbye.’ He shook hands with both the women, and walked out. Serve the miserable swine right. Let him explain.

After twenty minutes, Hillfield rejoined him, looking furious.

‘Thanks for nothing.’

‘You’re welcome,’ said Sergeant Millom.

‘I’m not convinced, you know. Calling a she-cat “Lord Gort”.’

‘I’ve checked with the neighbours. She’s been round the village calling to that cat for five days. Only they thought she was calling “Lord God”. They thought she’d gone potty – religious mania – on account of her husband being in France flying those death-trap Blenheims . . .’

‘Couldn’t care less,’ said Hillfield. ‘I’ve wasted a whole day. It’s beyond belief, sending telegrams about bloody *cats*. Don’t they know there’s a war on?’

‘Oh, I think they know there’s a war on. You haven’t got anybody trapped in France, then?’

‘What’s that got to do with it?’ said Hillfield.

Millom just walked away and left him standing there.

Meanwhile, the innocent source of all the panic in Whitehall was moving slowly east, along the high ridges of the downs that overlook the English Channel. A biggish black she-cat with only a few white hairs, invisible beneath her chin. It is impossible to understand exactly what was on her mind. But she was used to having her own way. She did not like noise and upset. She hated the strange house at Beaminster, full of women and children, tears and tantrums. She hated the smells of sour milk and nappies, and the toddlers in every room who would not leave her in peace. She hated the close-packed

smells of the Beaminster cats when she went outdoors; cats who attacked her in defence of their own territory wherever she walked.

And she hated the way her own people no longer had any time to stroke and fuss her. She hated the kitchen scraps she was fed, instead of fresh-boiled fish. Above all, she hated the new baby.

She was going back to where she'd been peaceful; where she could spend hours alone, sleeping on the silken coverlet of a sunlit bed in the long afternoons; where she could go to the kitchen and get fresh fish and milk on demand. Somehow, sure as a homing-pigeon, she knew it was ahead.

More dimly – and this was something no homing-pigeon knew – she knew her *real* person was ahead; only further off, *much* further off. She remembered his gentle voice calling her, in the mornings; the tobaccoish smell of his hand stroking her. She remembered riding about on his shoulder, while his gentle hands caressed her. She remembered the game in the garden, when he lay hidden in the long grass, and flicked his white handkerchief while she stalked him. Then she would pounce on him, and they would roll over and over in mock-fury, until the ecstasy of his nearness grew too much for her, and she would scamper off, her back twitching with too much pleasure. To stalk again. And the long evenings by the fire, in his lap, when she would end up lying on her back, paws in the air, and her head hanging abandoned down his long shins.

Somewhere ahead, there was endless happiness again. And she knew how to get there.

Meanwhile, she was not unhappy, merely tense.

She had learnt a few things already. She had learnt to avoid the coastal road, with its endless streams of green army lorries, its vile noise and its vile smell. She preferred soft grass under her feet, and the silence of the Downs, the occasional, widely spaced smells that marked the tracks of other animals, strange cats among them. She paused often, to sniff a sticking-out twig or a tall blade of grass, where another creature had paused to mark its territory. Her ears turned backwards and forwards constantly, assessing every new sound carefully. To her eyes, the world was a fuzzy grey blur, which a human would have thought near-blindness. Only when things moved could she sense them clearly; the flight of the smallest fly caught her eye.

Some sounds and smells would have frightened her if they had not been so far off. She could hear the explosions around Dunkirk far clearer than Sergeant Millom ever would, and not simply because she was nearer to them. She could smell the burning rubber and oil, the smell of the dead, which he would never smell. But far off, so they did not worry her. Nine Hurricanes flew overhead, *en route* for Manston, and then the Battle of France. But she didn't look up; she had long discounted aeroplanes flying overhead. The fat flies buzzing in the hedgerows were more interesting.

She was already in trouble, though she did not know it. Hunger gnawed at her belly. In rejecting the road, she lost the dead rabbits and birds that lay thick on its verges, killed by the passing lorries. She was already hungry enough to dare approach farmhouse kitchens; but there were always other cats

there, or dogs, or people who threw stones. She had some instinct to hunt, but had never practised it. Instead, she'd chewed a few beetles and spiders. She still weighed seven pounds, but she had been nine when she had left home. Her once-sleek coat was matted with the burrs of goose-grass which her tongue could not cope with.

And her journey was too slow. She did not dare cross an open field; she kept close to the cover of the hedgerows. She wasted too much time assessing every strange sound and smell. She crept along too close to the ground for speed. In five days, she had covered only forty miles. Things would need to change for her, or she would never reach home alive.

She found a dead vole in the next hedgerow; caught and left by a cat from a nearby farm. She mouthed it, then left it. Voles taste vile. A cat will always catch them; but it will have to be *really* desperate before it eats one.