

ANNABEL DAVIS-GOFF

Author of *The Dower House*

THIS
COLD
COUNTRY



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Annabel Davis-Goff

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The Dower House

Walled Gardens

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*For my sister
Julia*

. . . for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain

— MATTHEW ARNOLD, *Dover Beach*

Dunmaine, Shannig, Dysart Hall, and other Irish houses are loosely placed somewhere in West Waterford. The names of the nearby towns are fictional and are not based on any town with a similar name elsewhere. Petrol rationing in the south of Ireland has been anticipated by a few months and some other small liberties have been taken with the timing of rationing, both in England and Ireland.

BRITISH ISLES



Shetland Islands

Orkney Islands

Loch Ness

SCOTLAND

North Sea

ATLANTIC OCEAN

Glasgow

Edinburgh

NORTHERN IRELAND

Belfast

Bannock House

Ile of Man

Irish Sea

IRELAND

Dublin

Liverpool

Manchester

WALES

Birmingham

ENGLAND

Dunmaine

Rosslare Fishguard

Abernath Farm

London

Cardiff

Bristol

Isle of Wight

English Channel



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PART ONE

Autumn 1939

CHAPTER 1

NO ONE LIKED the rats, and only Daisy felt any affection for the ferrets. She liked the thickness of their coats, their efficient sharp teeth, and their stubborn refusal to establish a relationship with their owners, or—as Daisy, and maybe the ferrets themselves, thought of the humans who caged them—their captors.

The ferrets worked for their keep. No bargain had been struck. They did what they would have done in nature and in return were fed with food they would not have needed had they not lived in captivity. They seemed aware of this, Daisy thought, and their constant vigilance and ready teeth seemed to her less an instinctive reaction than a conscious wish to sink their teeth gum deep into the wrists of the humans who exploited them.

Although she was not unsympathetic to their plight, the rough treatment, the small, dirty, and foul-smelling cages in which they lived, Daisy was determined not to become an object of their revenge. She quickly learned how to grasp a ferret by the neck, lift the temporarily powerless creature, and drop it into the sack used to transport them.

It was a skill she had learned less reluctantly than when she had been taught to snap the neck of her first rabbit, the rabbit itself

a victim of the unnatural alliance between ferret and man. It had struggled in her hands; she could feel its warmth, its weight, its terror. She had been appalled by what she was doing and had been clumsy, failing to snap the rabbit's neck at her first attempt; Frank, the shepherd who was instructing her, had had to finish killing it. She had vomited afterward—a little way off, behind a bush—and Frank had pretended not to notice either that or the tears that she wiped away with the sleeve of her jacket. Although Daisy had enlisted in a branch of His Majesty's Services the day after war was declared, it was the Women's Land Army and she had been sent to a farm in Wales—so far the only blood she had seen spilled had been that of rabbits, and the greatest danger she had faced had been a sharp nip from a ferret.

"Can I come, too?" A child, Sarah, stood on the badly lit landing outside the nursery bathroom. An only child, she was holding a tatty doll dressed in expensive baby clothes.

Daisy shook her head.

"Take Dolly back to the nursery and make sure Marmalade is there. Then close the door. I'll come and tell you afterward."

Sarah trotted obediently along the landing, proud of the responsibility. Daisy watched her go; Sarah's gait had a little bounce that made her seem to float for an instant between steps. It always gave Daisy pleasure. Although Sarah left her doll in the nursery when she took a bath, Marmalade—the old black Labrador—accompanied her every time she ventured into the chilly bathroom.

When Daisy wanted a long soak after a cold day's hard work—plenty of hot water was one of the luxuries at Aberneth Farm—she usually roused the old dog from wherever she was sleeping and had her flop on the bath mat. Marmalade was more a talisman against the rats than a practical deterrent. The rats, far from desperate, were not likely to invade the bathroom while

humans were there. But, if she entered the room quietly, there was sometimes a sinister scrabbling sound and occasionally even the glimpse of a naked, obscene, gray tail disappearing under the tub.

The rats came up under the bath. Where the pipes came through the floor they had gnawed the edge of the wood and were able, it seemed, temporarily to flatten their bodies and squeeze through before returning to their usual surprisingly large size. Under the bath and in one corner of the skirting board, pieces of tin cans had been hammered out and nailed over holes. Similar metal barriers, less skillfully worked, covered corners of the barn floor and the small room where the feeding grain was stored.

With her right hand—the ferret dangling helplessly from her left—Daisy locked the bathroom door. Losing a ferret was an eventuality as eagerly to be avoided as being bitten by one. The overhead light did little to alleviate the gloom under the large iron tub that lay close to the linoleum-covered floor. The narrowness of the dusty space between its heavy iron base and the hole the rats shared with the plumbing pipes made it impossible effectively to seal the gap.

The ferret averted his nose as Daisy pointed him at the small dark hole; then, when she persisted, pushing his unmuzzled snout down beside the drainpipe, with a wiggle, as she released him, he was gone.

Daisy stood at the window and waited. She did not expect the return of the ferret, which she had privately named Sebastian. Although the ferrets had not been given names, Daisy had once overheard the gardener—in whose shed they lived, and who fed them—call one of them Fred. His tone, if not of affection, then of familiarity.

Nevertheless, she had to stay. If Sebastian-Fred returned and she were not there, he represented a danger to the next person entering the bathroom. Or, she considered (for she spent quite a lot

of her time exploring the logistics of “what if”) what a problem she would have set herself if she were on the other side of the closed bathroom door attempting to enter in order to recapture a not so small, fierce creature while preventing it from fleeing, with or without a passing nip, between her ankles and disappearing into the recesses of the large old house—forever. Seen only when it came on food raids or waged intermittent guerrilla warfare against the legitimate inhabitants, a scapegoat and a reproach to Daisy for years to come. “Daisy’s ferret” they would call it, she thought dreamily, pleasantly aware of the smell of baking drifting up from the kitchen below. The window overlooked fields and a copse of gnarled trees, behind which, unseen, lay the sea. It was from here that Daisy had first seen the sky light up when the oil storage tanks nearly fifty miles away had been bombed.

A scream from the kitchen below suggested the return of Sebastian was now unlikely, and Daisy left the bathroom, closing the door carefully behind her; like many of the doors at Aberneth Farm, it required a tug after it seemed closed to ensure the click that prevented it slowly reopening when the house settled on its timbers, or when the persistent drafts in the upstairs corridors, supplemented by the wind outside, reached the proportions of a small indoor gale.

Hurrying down the back stairs, the thick wool of her stockinged feet (her muddy gumboots stood side by side outside the back door) catching unpleasantly on the dry splintered wood of the steps, Daisy reached the kitchen. By the range, Mrs. Thomas, the cook, remained on duty beside a large and fragrant pot, permitting herself only an expression of extreme disapproval while Elsie, the housemaid, stood to one side of the door leading to the scullery, intermittently screaming. Tabitha, the kitchen cat, an animal that Daisy had never before seen awake, now stood, arch-backed, bristling, on the table, a primitive, dangerous glare

in her eyes. Daisy was not sure whether the stance was aggressive or defensive, but she knew it would not be wise to touch her.

“Where is he?” Daisy asked.

Mrs. Thomas’s lips remained pursed, but Elsie pointed to the larder, a small dark room off the scullery. Daisy, following Elsie’s pointed finger, stepped into the room, closed the door, and turned on the light. Behind her, the screaming stopped. She could hear the sound of the wireless from a shelf behind the range.

Moments later, she recrossed the kitchen, the ferret held out from her body, dangling helplessly from her hand. Elsie looked at her with an expression that contained both respect and disdain; Mrs. Thomas merely shook her head, indicating that were there not a war on, she would not, for a moment, put up with that kind of carry-on in her kitchen.

Hearing the newscaster’s words, Daisy paused by the kitchen door. The two women looked at her pointedly; she had not been invited to remain in their territory, particularly not with that creature hanging, although apparently patiently, from her arm. After a moment, they followed her gaze to the wireless and they, too, heard and began to comprehend the words. Daisy silently indicated the set with a gesture of her head and Mrs. Thomas reached up and increased the volume, at the same time adjusting the tuning so that the voice, although still overlaid with static, was easier to understand.

The three women and the inert ferret stood still while a Welsh voice—the BBC broadcasting from Cardiff—announced the sinking of the *Royal Oak* in Scapa Flow.

THE LIBRARY WAS the warmest room in the house. Daisy closed the door behind her, aware that her entrance was heralded by a blast of cold air from the hall. As she came around the strategically

placed screen, the change in temperature reinforced the impression of a small enchanted pre-war room, one in which now sat three young, attractive, and laughing people. Rosemary, Daisy's employer—for although Daisy had enlisted in the Land Army and had been issued a uniform, it was on Rosemary's farm that she worked, and Rosemary who paid her at the end of each week—sat in a low armchair beside the fire, a tea tray on a low table in front of her. Even the two men—one a little older than Daisy, the other perhaps in his late twenties—in uniform, smiling and healthy, suggested nothing more ominous than a stint in a smart regiment. At Rosemary's feet, Margo, the older black Labrador, snoozed; Rosemary looked up with a welcoming smile as Daisy entered.

“Daisy, you're just in time for a cup of tea,” she said.

Daisy hesitated. She was aware of the figure she cut: stocking-footed, an inert ferret held a little away from her body. Rosemary, in contrast, was wearing a tweed skirt and a light brown twinset; her low-heeled shoes were elegant and well polished. Only her hands, her wedding and engagement rings emphasizing her short nails and reddened skin, suggested that she was not presiding over tea at a peacetime house party.

“Daisy, this is my cousin James Nugent. And Patrick Nugent, he's by way of being a kind of cousin too. Daisy Creed.”

“I just came—” Daisy said awkwardly. “There's something on the wireless—I was in the kitchen. A battleship called the *Royal Oak* has been sunk. In the Orkney Islands—somewhere called Scapa Flow.”

The two men exchanged glances—Daisy had the impression that the mention of Scapa Flow had caused a greater reaction even than had the sinking of the battleship—and the younger, James, turned on the wireless that sat on the table beside him. It was tuned to the BBC, and after a moment Daisy heard the same