

'A PAGE-TURNING TRIUMPH TO MAKE YOU
LAUGH AND CRY – IT'S PHIL EARLE AT HIS BEST'

JACQUELINE WILSON

WHILE THE STORM RAGES



FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *When the Sky Falls*

PHIL EARLE

Also by Phil Earle

When the Sky Falls

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PHIL EARLE



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This book is dedicated to Lel Preston,
who passed me *Holes* and changed
everything . . .

1

The ball cut through the sky like a grenade. But there was no real explosion when it hit the water. Not at first. Not until Winn hit the canal seconds later, four paws slicing through the surface, her shaggy belly forcing the water skywards.

It wasn't a dive that was going to win medals: more a belly flop than anything else, but it made Noah and his dad laugh, just as it did every morning.

'Do you think it hurts when she does that?' Noah asked.

'Does it look like it?'

How a dog managed to smile with a ball between her teeth, Noah had no idea, but it gave him his answer nonetheless. The smile only disappeared when Winn dropped the ball at their feet, her expression changing instantly to pleading.

Throw it, please. Now.

Dad launched another throw that detonated in the filthy canal, twenty five yards on. Same dive from Winn, same splash, same smile from all three of them.

It was going to be a splendid late August day. Weather-wise at least. Six in the morning, but Noah could already feel the heat of the sun on his neck, and knew that by lunchtime he'd be seeking solace in the shade. But it wouldn't just be the heat that drove him somewhere quiet. He was sure that by lunchtime the only company he'd want would be his own. And Winn's, of course.

They walked on, quietly, waiting for Winn to return with her bounty.

'Penny for 'em?' Dad asked.

Noah said nothing.

'Tuppence then,' Dad added, with a sad smile, but still he got nothing in return. 'Blimey, Noah, I know you've always got a money-making scheme in your head, but I never thought you'd fleece your old man. Especially not today.'

'Don't go,' Noah said, not quite daring to look Dad full in the face as he said it. 'Please.'

Dad didn't reply. Not with words anyway. Instead he pulled Noah into his side as they walked and rested his head on top of his son's. Noah waited for the sound of a kiss on his crown, but it didn't come. It felt like Dad was just breathing him in, banking what he could before he marched off at midday.

They continued, through Wapping Woods, doing what they did every morning before the rest of the world woke.

They never tired of it, and Winn certainly didn't, though the ball was now sporting a soggy algae wig. In fifteen minutes, after another dip in Shadwell Basin her coat would look the same, and she'd return home to the inevitable wrath of Mum and the shame of being doused in buckets of cold water.

They ambled on until they hit the Thames and turned east along the river path, saying nothing, thinking plenty, until they reached the end point: Limehouse Basin. The same place where they turned back every morning. The place that housed the boat. Dad's boat. *Queen Maudie*.

She looked glorious to them in the sunshine despite her decrepit condition. Even the rust shone as she sat, tethered to the bank.

Dad gave her flank a loving rub. She might share Mum's name (Dad's idea – to prevent Mum going off at the deep end when he bought her out the blue), but there were times when Noah thought Dad gave *this* Maudie more attention than the real one.

'Hopefully won't be long before we can work on her some more,' Dad said. 'We'll have her purring soon enough, I promise.'

Noah smiled. It was a project they both loved. The *Queen Maudie* was still some way from being truly shipshape, even short journeys had to be done slowly.

‘I can keep her engine turning over, while you’re . . . you know . . . not here.’

‘Oh, can you now? And I can trust you, can I? For once?’

Noah pretended to look wounded; sad, furtive eyes and wobbling lip. It was an expression he’d perfected over the years to try and pull the wool firmly over his parents’ eyes. ‘Trust me? Of course. And, well, we don’t want the engine seizing up, do we?’

‘I don’t want her crashing into a battleship when you get lost at sea either. So it might be best you leave her well alone, eh? Wait for me instead.’

That silenced and sobered Noah, the idea of waiting. Waiting was all he had in front of him.

Dad must have sensed it. ‘Come on, son. I know me going is hard, but it’s better than the alternative, isn’t it?’

They’d discussed the alternative a lot. War was coming, Dad said. It was inevitable.

‘Don’t matter what’s written on that piece of paper Mr Chamberlain was waving around, Hitler’s going to keep on marching and invading. And don’t be thinking the sea between us and France is going to stop him.’

‘Why go now though, Dad? Can’t you wait till war actually comes? Other dads aren’t going now.’

‘Do you think Hitler will wait patiently while we put an

army together? Course he won't. It'll come hard and it'll come fast and so we have to be ready.'

He knelt in front of Noah. It was unusual for either of them to be wearing such serious expressions. 'I have to do this, son. You might not understand why right now, but in time you will. In time, something will happen, right in your eyeline and you'll know, you'll just *know*, that you have to stand up and fight it. No matter what the fear, no matter what the cost. Because if you don't? Well, everything you know and love and recognise will suddenly look completely different.'

'But what if you . . .' Noah started, before realising he couldn't finish the sentence.

'*What if* hasn't happened yet, so there's no point giving it space in your brain. All I can think about is, if I don't fight, then how long will it be until our country isn't ours any more? Until we're taking orders from people who only know hate. Who live to make folk feel one thing alone: fear.'

What could Noah say to that? For once he had nothing. He just wanted his dad to be safe.

'Soon as I'm back,' said Dad. 'We'll *really* get to work on the boat. Make the engine run so smoothly that me, you, Mum and Winn can fire her up and point her in that direction. And we won't stop until we hit the sea. Sail her round the coast, we will, before catching our own tea and cooking it on the beach. Fancy that?'

Noah nodded. He didn't dare risk Dad hearing the wobble in his voice that might suddenly be there.

'Well, to do that, I need you to be strong, son. Because we don't know how long all this is going to last. It might be months, it might be longer. So while I'm not here you're the man of the house. You've got your mum to look after for starters. Be strong for her, don't be causing her grief with any of your madcap ideas. And DON'T be giving her any of your lip either, d'you hear me?'

A smile crept across Noah's face. There was no way he was swearing to any of *that*.

'And as for this daft beggar,' Dad said, as Winn dropped the ball at his feet for the umpteenth time. 'Don't let anything happen to her, you hear?' Dad went on to his knees and stroked Winn tenderly. 'We've been through a lot, me and Winn. And knowing that the *three* of you are safe is all I'll need to keep *me* safe. Can you do that for me, Noah?'

Noah bent down beside his dad and fussed Winn too.

'I'll do it, Dad. I promise. We'll all be waiting for you. Especially this daft beggar.'

That was enough for Dad. He pulled Noah into him, before throwing him to the floor for one final, laughter-filled wrestling match. One that Winn had to both join in on, and win.

2

‘Your dog’s a Nazi.’

Clem said nothing. Neither did Noah. Partly due to shock, and partly due to the fact that the words, ridiculous as they were, had come out of the mouth of Big Col.

‘Did you not hear me, squirt? I said that dog of yours is a Nazi.’

Clem’s mouth fell open this time, but still nothing came out.

‘I mean, it’s a dachshund, in’t it,’ said Big Col.

‘Sausage dog,’ Clem said, hesitantly.

‘Yeah and we all know what that means. It’s German. A filthy Hun dog. And dangerous.’

That was the *most* ridiculous bit. The dog, Frank, was anything but dangerous. There was little chance of him nibbling you anywhere above the ankle for starters, as well as the fact that he was probably older than Hitler’s grandfather in dog years.

Frank, adorable as he was, was an arthritic, draught

excluder of a hound who wheezed by the time he reached the end of the front path.

Big Col, though, was adamant. ‘So?’ he said, gruffly. ‘What you going to do about it?’

He was younger than Noah and Clem by months, one of the youngest in the year, but what he lacked in age he made up for in height, breadth and menace. His bulk threw the pair into shadow as he loomed over them.

‘What *can* I do?’ said Clem. She wasn’t being clever (although she was whip smart). ‘All I can tell you is that Frank’s never been to Germany. We got him years ago off Mrs Shreeve on Tench Street and she ain’t even been to the seaside, never mind Berlin.’

Big Col wasn’t persuaded. ‘Don’t matter. You shouldn’t be having a dog like that. Not now. Not with everything going on. My dad says Jerry dogs need shooting. It’s not patriotic.’ He struggled a bit with the pronunciation, but they knew what he meant.

Noah felt his insides curl in irritation at the stupidity of it all. He didn’t want to hear what Big Col’s dad reckoned. Why wasn’t he off training to fight like *his* dad? It left Noah prickly on Clem’s behalf. He stroked Winn, who was sitting alert at his side, growling quietly, and that somehow made him feel braver than perhaps he should have in front of Big Col.

‘So, what you’re saying is, you think Frank here – a dog – . . . is a Nazi?’

‘Course he is. Every bit of him.’

‘And if I can prove to you that he’s not, what will you give me?’

Big Col thought about it, then pulled half a dozen sherbet lemons out of his pocket. Lord knew how old they were, but they were probably the most appealing things lurking in there.

He offered the sweets out in front of him.

‘They’ll do,’ said Noah and he stood in front of Frank, who squinted up at him, eyes old and milky.

Clem looked at Noah too, her expression asking: ‘Are you sure you know what you’re doing?’

But Noah didn’t care. He didn’t want the sweets. He just wanted to expose Big Col for the fool he was. So, without warning, Noah faced Frank, clicked his heels together and threw his right arm in front of him.

‘*Heil Hitler!*’ he yelled at the dog, with a force that shocked even Big Col.

Frank didn’t move or bark. And he certainly didn’t raise his own front leg in a matching salute.

‘See?’ said Noah, pointing at the dog while looking in Big Col’s widening eyes. ‘How can he be a Nazi and not shout it back?’

But this did nothing to convince Big Col. Instead it lit his fuse.

‘You cheeky g—’ he roared, lurching forward, but Noah was no longer there. Nor were Winn, Clem or Frank. There was less chance of Frank sprinting than there was of him saluting, so Clem was now carrying him as the four of them hared down the street and out of sight.

Big Col couldn’t hurt what he couldn’t catch, and that was the way Noah liked it.

They only stopped when they had to. Lungs burning and foreheads pouring. The dogs were thirsty, even Frank, who hadn’t run a single step, and they lapped at a puddle. Clem shook life back into her arms, Noah just shook with laughter.

‘Did you see his face?’ he said.

‘Not for long I didn’t. There wasn’t time. What were you thinking, pulling his leg like that?’

‘Well, he’s a fool, isn’t he? Reckoning Frank’s a Nazi. He’ll be saying Winn’s a German spy next. Only spying Winn does is on Mum when she’s frying sausages.’

Winn barked in agreement. She always barked when sausages were mentioned.

‘Well, I don’t think it’s a good idea, picking a fight with Big Col,’ Clem said. ‘He’ll knock you into next week when he sees you again.’

‘He’ll have to catch me first. And even if he does, Winn won’t let anything happen to me, will you, girl?’

Winn growled, right on cue, though in all honesty, she wasn’t much of an attack dog. She was a mongrel, a greyhound’s sprinting frame covered in the thick, tangled hair of a terrier. Neither Dad nor Noah had a clue what kind exactly, nor did they care. Winn was a true original and that was one of the many things they loved about her.

‘How’s Winn been since your dad went?’ Clem asked as Noah pulled at foliage tangled in the dog’s coat.

‘All right, I suppose. She’s started sleeping on my bed. Sneaks up, but only once Mum’s light goes out. She’d give her a good hiding if she got wind of it. Me too probably.’

‘She’s never loved Winn the same way as you and your dad, has she?’

Noah thought about it, though he didn’t really need to. Mum had never wanted or asked for a dog, though she’d done little more than roll her eyes when Dad had brought Winn home from the pub three years ago, wrapped sleepily in a blanket.

‘At least it isn’t a ruddy boat this time,’ she’d sighed.

‘I’ll walk him, don’t you worry,’ Dad had said, nose red and smile wide with beer. ‘We both will, won’t we, son?’

Noah had nodded enthusiastically. And he’d kept his word. More than that in fact. When Winn the puppy used

the floor as a toilet, Noah cleared it up, no matter how awful the stink was. It was better than Mum saying ‘told you so.’

‘Mum likes her all right,’ Noah replied. ‘Winn’s my responsibility, that’s all. Especially now Dad’s off training to fight the jerries.’

‘They used dogs in the last war. Did you know?’ said Clem. She knew these sorts of things. Had a brain like a full, but well-ordered filing cabinet. ‘They delivered messages between trenches, sniffed out enemy soldiers, even pulled machine guns behind them.’

‘Well, Winn won’t be doing anything like that. I won’t let her out of my sight, apart from when I’m at school.’

‘Why’s that then?’

Noah’s answer was simple. ‘Promised my dad, didn’t I? Swore nothing would happen to her while he was away. And he promised that if Winn was safe, then he would be too.’

Noah nuzzled into Winn’s neck, face immersed in her fur. So immersed that he couldn’t see the concerned look that swept over his best friend’s face.

3

Maudie Price had the patience of a saint, which was just as well given the trials thrown constantly at her, firstly by her husband, secondly by Noah, and finally (and most irritatingly) by the damn dog, Winn.

Though her husband and son painted it otherwise, the lion's share of dog responsibilities fell to Maudie. She'd accept that yes, they *were* out with the larks every morning, walking Winn, plotting lord knows what, but even before Tom left to go to war, by half-past eight he was away to the factory and Noah had stomped off reluctantly to school, leaving her and the dog alone. It would've been almost acceptable if Winn, tired after her walk, had slept by the kitchen hearth, but in the years since she had joined the family, that had never happened once.

Instead, she followed Maudie around, twisting between her legs and lighting her fuse. Maudie wasn't daft, she knew the dog wasn't doing it out of love, but greed. Winn had worked out very early on that Maudie was the bringer of food, and that if she stayed close and sharp enough, she

could eat anything that found its way through Maudie's fingers.

Only weeks earlier, Maudie had been raging, 'That stupid dog is constantly under my feet, tripping me up on purpose, just so she can eat whatever I'm cooking.'

Neither Dad nor Noah would have it, naturally. 'She just wants to be close to you,' they'd said.

'Close to me? Only time she leaves me alone is when I go out to the lav, and that's only because I bolt the door.'

'She just wants to spare your dignity,' said Dad, winking at Noah.

'We both know that's not true,' replied Mum. 'That dog was put on this earth for one reason alone. To eat anything I slave over cooking.'

'Rubbish,' said Dad, before whispering something to Noah about how Winn had better taste than that.

'Rubbish you say?' spat Mum. 'I came back from the lav today to find her on the counter with her head in my mixing bowl.'

'You expect us to believe that?' said Dad. 'How do you think she got up there?'

'She managed to move a chair and climb up. It was there, pushed up against the cupboard.'

Dad and Noah both laughed. 'And how did she do that? She's a dog.'

Maudie felt her face flush. ‘Pushed it with her nose? Built a bloomin’ rope ladder? I don’t know. All I know is the bowl was empty when I got back and two hours later I had several piles of flamin’ dog sick to clean up. Not that you two beggars care.’

Dad always knew when it was time to make amends, and usually left Noah to cuddle Winn (who remained seemingly oblivious to the allegations levelled at her), while he talked Mum down from sending the dog to fend for herself on the streets.

Today was different. Mum was already flustered when Noah strolled in from school and sent Winn into her usual euphoric frenzy. It didn’t help that Winn’s exuberance saw her crash into the kitchen table and dislodge a teacup that smashed into a hundred pieces.

‘For the love of God!’ Mum cried, as Winn stopped barking long enough to lap up the cold tea. ‘Noah, get that animal out of my sight before I take up taxidermy as a new hobby.’

Noah laughed unhelpfully, fussing Winn under her collar. ‘She won’t stand still long enough to be stuffed, will you, girl? No you won’t.’

That was it for Mum.

‘I mean it, Noah!!’ she roared, before the anger on her

face collapsed into a look of sheer, undiluted despair. Tears appeared and fell so quickly that Noah did something he rarely did, he put his mother before the dog. He pushed Winn into her basket and dashed to Mum.

‘What is it?’ he asked, though he feared the answer instantly. It couldn’t be Dad. It couldn’t, could it? He’d have barely been handed a rifle by now. And anyway, he thought, we aren’t at war. Not yet.

‘There’s been an announcement,’ Mum said. ‘From the Prime Minister. He said that if war is declared, then they expect Hitler to start bombing immediately. That cities will be under attack.’

A shiver of horror went through Noah. ‘How’s he going to do that? We’re an island.’

‘He has planes. Lots of them. Rita next door says there’ll be nothing left of London by Christmas.’

It shocked Noah to see Mum as frightened as this, almost as much as the words she was saying scared him. But he also remembered what Dad had said. Noah was the man of the house now. He had to be brave.

‘It won’t come to that, Mum. Mr Chamberlain and all them generals and colonels, they won’t allow it. And even if a plane does get through, we’ll fight back. We will. I will. I won’t let anything happen to any of us. I promise.’

But Noah didn't know what Mum knew. And when she told him, it knocked the air clean out of his lungs.

'You won't be able to stop it, son.'

'I will, Mum. I know you think I'm just a kid, but I'll fight if I have to.'

'I know you would, Noah. But it won't be possible.'

'Give me one good reason why not.'

'Because you won't *be* here. They're shipping you out to the countryside. You and all the other kids. You're being evacuated.'