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In Falling Snow



Par Mary-Rose MacColl
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIris is getting old. A widow, her days are spent living quietly and worrying about her granddaughter, Grace, a headstrong young doctor. It's a small sort of life. But one day Iris receives something unexpected in the post; an invitation to a WWI reunion in France. Determined to go, Iris is overcome by memories of the past and of her journey to France in 1914, where she followed her young brother Tom, intending to bring him home to safety. But on her way to find Tom, Iris discovers the old abbey of Royaumont, where a group of women work to set up a field hospital. Putting her fears aside, Iris decides to stay and help. It is at Royaumont that she truly comes of age, finding her capability and her strength, discovering her passion for medicine, making friends with the vivacious Violet and falling in love.

But war is a brutal thing, and there is a terrible price that Iris has to pay; a price that will echo down the generations. Extrait At first it was the summers I remembered, long warm days under the palest blue skies, the cornflowers and irises and forget-me-nots lining the road through the Lys forest, the buzz of insects going about their work, Violet telling me lies. He loves you, he loves you not, shed recite, skipping along the road until all the petals were gone. Shed finish with he loves you no matter what the flower told her. Id seen her cheat like that. Violet showed me an iris and told me what it was. Beautiful like you, she said. She couldnt believe Id never seen one. Theyre common as weeds, she said. No offence. None taken. But now in my minds eye, its winter, that first winter we arrived, Miss Ivens and me alighting from the train in Viarmes, the darkness descending, no one to meet us. And theres Miss Ivens herself, charging ahead to walk, not a thought for our luggage, abandoned on the station platform when wed failed to rouse the porter. Wheres Monsieur Bousier? Miss Ivens said, as if I might know. I shrugged but shed already moved off down the hill at a cracking pace even with my long stride I could barely match her turning back to me every now and then, those large straight teeth somehow adding to my trepidation, all the better to eat you with going through my head. What was I doing? Id boarded a train with a perfect stranger. Id listened to her story for an hour from Paris and now I was following her to a place called Royaumont. Better to walk at any rate, Miss Ivens said. Nothing like seeing it on foot, turning back to smile, the world, I mean, and then she was off again. You should know that you and I and the rest are at the beginning of something momentous, shed said on the train, a curl of her dark hair slipped from its moorings and dangling between her eyes. Its going to be grand, she insisted, reading something in my face that suggested I disagreed. Id been assigned to the British Casualty Clearing Station in Soissons, close to Amiens where we thought Tom had gone. A Sergeant Fleming would be there to meet my train unless Matron had sent word, and no one sent word of anything in these strange days, not as far as I could tell. Id signed up in London with the Red Cross and already, Id had orders changed, waiting those three days in Paris, I assumed because of a change in the fighting. And then Id happened upon Miss Ivens and everything changed again. I was just what she needed, Miss Ivens said. She smiled so quickly I almost missed it. Her French wasnt the best, she said, book-learned, she could write but no one understood her spoken word, and no one else at Royaumont had time. Youll be my shadow, she said, my voice. Just what I need. I cant believe our good fortune. Theres a little work to be done at the abbey, of course, dismissing it like a fly with a flick of her wrist. The buildings not quite ready. Its rather old, making shapes with her hands, collapsing them into her lap. I need someone who understands the language and can liaise with the tradesmen, someone with common sense. I believe thats you. If I was silent, she never noticed, just kept on talking, more to herself really, setting out on her fingers the work she wanted to do that night, the supplies theyd need to order before Christmas, the long list of people to meet the next day. I listened. And then Viarmes itself, at the base of the hill, a main street, a few shops, already shut up tight although it was barely 4 p.m., a little stone square defined by the church and town hall, the smell of incense benediction or death and we soon saw which. There was a funeral procession ahead of us. A boy had died, we learned from some stragglers. His leg went under a plough and no one knew to stanch bleeding. Miss Ivens was furious at that. Knowledge was something the whole world had a right to and how could they not be told? We turned off the main road, watched the funeral at its slow march behind a black motor vehicle. Monsieur Bousier, our taxi driver, was also the undertaker heading across a cold field towards the little cemetery in the nearby town of Asnieres-sur-Oise. We took a narrow road out of town, more a path really, which was flanked on either side by pine trees. Blanche de Castille rode her horses through here, Miss Ivens said. Perhaps I looked perplexed. Her son built the abbey, Royaumont. Louis IX, the saint. She sniffed the air. They were all white the horses I mean. But Blanche was marvellous. Such an example to women. Id love to have known her, just for an hour. We passed a grand house that at first I took for the abbey. Miss Ivens had told me about. No no, Miss Ivens said, thats the palace, built by the last abbot. Absolute indulgence. Monsieur Gouin lives there now. Delightful fellow but completely impractical, as if I should know who Monsieur Gouin was or why we might wish he were practical. It began to snow. Miss Ivens took no notice, walked on ahead, asked me, without turning back, what I knew about drains. Drains were a problem. I must talk to Mrs. Berry. Berry knew something but not enough; we needed a plumber. I should go into Asnieres tomorrow and arrange it. I should take Berry although she didnt speak the language. Berry is a brick, though, shes good for me. Dont know what Id do without her. And then forging ahead, failing at first to notice that Id stopped, turning, seeing me, laughing, for I was looking straight up, my mouth wide open. Snow, she said matter-of-factly. I must have looked blankly at her. Youve never seen snow? No, I said. Frost in the winter, but nothing like this. Wonderful stuff. Well make angels tomorrow. By the time we turned into

the abbey grounds, the day was almost gone. The pines of the long drive were newly dusted with the snow which also dotted our coats and Miss Ivens's hair. She looked wild, a little mad even. She charged ahead once more, the gravel along the drive crunching with an alarming efficiency under her boots. Snow makes the world quieter and louder at the same time, she said quite loudly. Imagine never having seen snow, she said more softly, so softly I had to strain to hear. I stopped again and was standing still, for when you round that last bend and begin along that long drive, you see Royaumont Abbey for the first time, and you never forget it. You must stand still, or you'll miss the chance. Even at the end of that cold amazing day, even with the wonder of my first snow at hand, the abbey took my breath away. And the feeling in my heart? That feeling surprised me, for it was joy, joy and fear in about equal measure. Until three months before, I only ever travelled between Stanthorpe and Brisbane, less than two hundred miles, the towns at each end with their proud little post offices and hotels as their architectural achievements, the space between them mostly bush. Royaumont Abbey was some other order of place, a feat of engineering or evidence of God, depending on how you saw the world. To one side were the remains of the chapel, recollecting a structure that once nudged the spires of Paris's Notre Dame in size but was now just one tall tower looking as if it might topple over. Next to the church tower were the monks' buildings, menacing in the winter twilight. I could just make out the window recesses along the front wall. I know I was exhausted. My life at home had been simple, divided between Risdon and the Mater nursing quarters, with the occasional train trip to St. Joseph's to see one of Tom's teachers about something he'd done or hadn't done. I knew from one day to the next what lay in front of me and mostly it was much like what lay behind me. And now this, where every day was full of the strange. And through it all the ship journey from Australia, the days in London, the Channel crossing, the days in Paris in the back of my mind was that other thought that could creep up on me when I least expected, as it did now, the thought of my brother Tom, telling me of his plan to run away, me agreeing, letting him go when Daddy said I should have stopped him. Tom now, just fifteen years old, somewhere out there in this cold, fighting the wicked Germans. As we drew closer, I made out two large wooden doors. Darkness would soon be with us but no light shone inside the abbey. I looked to Miss Ivens, her hair flecked with snow, her arms out to the sides, hands not touching anything, those enormous boots. It was so cold now my breath caught in my throat. The doors looked as if they hadn't been opened for years. Miss Ivens knocked, waited, said, more to herself than to me, Where the devil are they? I still heard no sound nor saw a light within. A notion lodged in my brain that there was no one here but us. It took hold quickly, the cold feeding my imagination. Miss Ivens was mad. She'd led me here to the pixie twilight on a merry chase, and her talk of drains and equipments and hospitals was nothing but a product of her madness. Oh Iris, you fool, now look what you've done, acted impulsively, followed your most wrongheaded instincts, followed this mad Englishwoman, and here you are in the middle of a dark forest with no way back. I was not given to hysterics, but the cold, exhaustion, the newness of it all, Miss Ivens herself so much larger than life, like a character from Dickens, made me less than logical. My excited mind worked quickly. What would we do? We had no lamp to walk by, and the road was rough in parts. There had been a light in the window of the last house, the Gouin residence; Miss Ivens had pointed it out. He might be impractical, he might be Mr. Ivens for all I knew, but if we could make it back we might be able to beg a room. There was sure to be a train to Paris in the morning. I could be in Soissons by nightfall. I could be back at what I was supposed to be doing. Daddy need never know. And Miss Ivens could . . . Miss Ivens rapped on the door a second time. Just as I was about to suggest that we go quickly to try to reach somewhere before dark, the door swung open with a whine. My thoughts were interrupted by the telephone and at first it sounded exactly like the porters' horn at Royaumont. How we came to dread that sound. Of course, the porters' horn was nothing like a telephone but it took me a moment to come back to my senses and realise where I was, in my house in Paddington, not at Royaumont waiting for the wounded. I got up slowly, felt a little dizzy in the bright sun. I stood there until it passed, using the railing to keep from falling. The phone was still ringing. I bent down and picked up my teacup and saucer and went inside. I walked carefully. They say that our greatest sense for memory is the sense of smell, but it was the sound of that horn I couldn't get out of my mind now. I can just imagine what Miss Ivens would say to me. Oh for goodness sake, Iris, who cares a fig for a silly horn? But I know she'd have remembered it too, after we left. That horn ruled our lives. You'd hear it in your sleep, over and over. The phone stopped before I reached the kitchen. Then it started again. I caught it this time. Hello? I felt like my voice was coming from somewhere else. Iris, is that you? Are you all right? Grace. Yes, I'm fine. I was just out the front in the sun and I dozed off. My lips wouldn't work properly and I could still hear that porters' horn, in the distance now, as if I were one of the patients approaching in the ambulance along the

drive. I wonder did it reassure them that someone knew they were coming, that someone would help them now, ease their suffering? I just rang to say Ill drop in on my way to work, Grace said. You dont need to do that. Im fine really. Ive got time. Davids taking the girls to school and he said hell take Henry to day care. Ill just pop in. Grace had started popping in a lot over recent months, ever since the appointment with the heart doctor. But I didnt want to see her today. The invitation had unsettled me. Violet Heron. Violet Heron, after all these years. The flower bird girls, she called us, Iris Crane and Violet Heron, the flower bird girls. What young fools we were. *Revue de presse* Praise for *In Falling Snow*: "In her sweeping American debut, Mary-Rose MacColl creates a beautifully by the choice to follow her brother across continents into France. An epic tale of love, heartache, and a sisterhood created by nursing in a time of war, *In Falling Snow* is one of those novels you will want to read again. If you liked *The Aviators Wife*, you will love this book!" Michelle Moran, bestselling author of *Cleopatras Daughter* This is a story of love, ultimately, and a woman whose life has sought to atone for a mistake she hardly knew she made. Caught between the past and her impending mortality, Iris relives her life as a nurse in WWI, when she was too young to understand what her choices would mean not only for her, but for the family she cobbled together out of the rubble. At once perceptive and sympathetic, *In Falling Snow* beguiles, a tale of selflessness and youthful indiscretion as singular and seductive as one could hope for. Robin Oliveira, New York Times bestselling author of *My Name Is Mary Sutter* A thoroughly absorbing time-switching tale that gives a fascinating insight into one of the little-known stories of the Great War, that of the Scottish Womens Hospital at Royaumont Abbey on the Western Front. Mary-Rose MacColl brings the courageous women of Royaumont to vivid life as we follow their joys and sorrows, and discover secrets that will affect their families for generations to come. Lucinda Riley, author of internationally bestselling *The Orchid House* "In *Falling Snow* is expertly researched and written with a keen eye to the complexities of wartime and the mighty role of women therein. From past to present, Australia to France, MacColl guides readers through unknown lands abroad and territories of the heart. For readers, like me, who love to see historys forgotten heroes given powerful voice, you will delight in this novel." Sarah McCoy, author of the international bestseller *The Bakers Daughter* At once chilling yet strangely beautiful. The book touches on the contributions made by a group of pioneering women who succeed despite societys bias toward their gender; the strong friendships that develop, particularly between Iris and ambulance driver Violet Heron; Iris' increasing love for medicine and her involvement with a man she meets during the war; the men and boys whose lives are sacrificed for a cause many of them dont identify with or understand; and the far-reaching effects of the war on the generations that follow MacColls narrative is fortified by impeccable research and her innate ability to create a powerful bond between readers and characters. Well done. Kirkus s (starred) "In *Falling Snow* is a moving story about women's roles and the challenging decisions they face as mothers, nurses, doctors and leaders. MacColl brings to light the forgotten histories of the women of Royaumont hospital with engaging prose. The lives of Iris and Grace are divided by several decades, but their career ambitions and the sacrifices they face are universal." Suzanne Desrochers, author of *Bride of New France* Well-crafted easily slipping through time. Publishers Weekly This satisfying saga from an award-winning Australian author takes the reader across continents and time. Women as healers, family secrets, medical mysteries, historical setting call the producers of *Call the Midwife*. Booklist