

Growth & Disaster

1938

'Come on, Margie. Get to work.' Anna barks to her sister. Margie trudges behind her, carrying coal for the fire. Guilt stirs in Anna's chest. Margie's only six, she shouldn't have to do this yet. She wouldn't have to, if only Mum and Dad were still alive. Since they died last year, it's been up to Anna to ensure that Margie is raised right. The only way Anna knows how to do that is by instilling a strong work ethic and practical skills within her younger sister. Anna tries her best to make sure Margie knows she's loved and cared for, no matter what happens.

Sometimes Anna wonders if she and Margie should just go and live with their older, more responsible relatives. Something stops her every time. Fear, maybe. All Anna knows is that she and Margie have made out fine on their own so far, and she doesn't want to do anything to jeopardize their newfound stability and independence.

Arthur sits at the counter at Papa's store. He hands a customer her change, making an effort to smile for the sad-looking woman.

'*Au revoir.*' He calls as she leaves. As soon as she's gone, he reaches down and rubs at his foot. It turns in severely, and it prohibits him from standing and walking the same way that those around him can. On top of that, it's painful.

Five of Arthur's friends pile into the store. They shove a newspaper article in his face. He takes a moment to read it. It's more news about political tensions, especially with Adolf Hitler in Germany. Arthur's friends are convinced that it won't be long before war breaks out. Arthur knows that if war does come to Canada, his friends will enlist as soon as they're old enough. They

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have a desire to serve their country. That same desire burns in Arthur's chest, but he knows that his bad foot will keep him here in Montreal.

Gisele walks hand in hand with her 'boyfriend' Pierre. They haven't been seeing one another long - barely a month, but already Gisele knows that he's the one for her. They spend every free second together, away from the prying, overprotective eyes of their parents. They stay out as long past curfew as they can manage without getting into too much trouble. If their parents find out that they've been seeing each other, they'll be kept apart for certain.

Gisele isn't ignorant. She knows that everything going on in the world points to war. She also knows Pierre. If war broke out tomorrow, he wouldn't give a second thought to the fact that he's only fourteen. He would do everything in his power to get enlisted. To fight for his country - for France. Pierre has dreams to become a hero. War or not, he'll enlist as soon as he's able. As soon as he's passable for an eighteen year old.

Born during the Roaring Twenties, Pierre and Gisele have no recollection of the horror that comes along with war. The grief, bloodshed, and desperation. They know only the stories their parents have told them. Youthful naivete has put the heroism of war at the forefront of their minds. They haven't even dreamed that war is something that they might not come back from. At the very least, Pierre hasn't.

1946

Nearly a year after the end of the war, Anna is still struggling to connect with Margie. She's nearly fourteen now, and Anna missed six of those years. When war broke in 1939, Margie was among the young children in London that were evacuated to rural areas and surrounding

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countries. Margie begged not to leave. She begged to stay in London with Anna. Anna very nearly packed up and asked to be taken to the countryside with Margie, but she didn't. She was too afraid to lose everything that she and her sister had built for themselves since their parents died, so she stayed. She'd even gotten a job during the war - and she's managed to keep it. She works as a teller at the bank downtown. Anna still shivers when she remembers Margie's words when Anna made her leave London.

I hate you.

I'm never going to speak to you again.

I can't believe you hate me enough to send me away.

As young as Margie had been at the time, it had been hard for her to grasp that it was because Anna loved her so much that she sent her away.

Now the war has been over for awhile, and it's like looking at a stranger when Anna looks at Margie. She's a beautiful young woman, and most of the crucial years of her upbringing were handled by other people. By the time Margie got back to London, she had spent just as much time with her host family as she had with Anna. All of the qualities that Anna had been eager to instill in her younger sister - independence, kindness, honesty, and a strong work ethic - had all been taught to her by a family who never would have known that Margie existed, if not for the war.

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Arthur limps down the street, disbelieving of the fact that three of his friends hadn't made it back from the war. Those that have are nowhere near the same people. The once energetic

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young boys have become fearful and wary of the world. They no longer have the same boyish sense of humor. They have seen more than anyone who hadn't been there could understand.

Arthur and his remaining friends had tried to make things work. They really had. Eventually though, the fact that Arthur just *didn't understand* what the rest of his friends had been through drove a wedge between them. They barely spoke anymore, except to say hello to one another in passing.

During the war, with all the able-bodied young men out serving, Arthur had been able to help out by driving supply trucks around Montreal. After all, he only needed one working foot to drive. For the first time, he'd felt he could make a difference.

Now that everyone's returned, Arthur has once again become the man with the bad foot. The man who's not good for anything, as far as society's concerned. Even Papa found someone else to help him in the shop, someone who can stand still and stock shelves.

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Gisele scans the workers leaving the coal mine. Many of them are war veterans who returned able bodied enough to get a job. Among them is Pierre. Gisele spots him in the crowd. He still has the face of a boy - he is only twenty-one, after all - but his eyes are those of a seasoned war veteran. He walks with a limp - the remnants of a shrapnel wound that sent Pierre bound for home and killed his comrades.

He meets Gisele's eyes. He doesn't smile. He barely acknowledges that she's there. It's as if he's looking through her. Gisele wonders if he's reliving what it was like for them before the war, before conflict tore them apart. She is. Pierre has barely spoken to her since he returned, as if everything between them had never happened.

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Gisele has heard rumors that Pierre and others that returned with him aren't in their right mind. She's heard that they wake up screaming, terrified of an unseen enemy that they don't know how to combat. Her parents have told her that it was like this after the Great War too. They said that men don't recover after they see what all of the veterans have seen. They say that the men can't stop reliving the day that one or all of their comrades died, and that it haunts them for the rest of their days.

These teens learned the hard way that the cost of freedom is high, that growth leaves scars, that things very rarely turn out the way that you want them to, and that the well-being of a country and its people is more important than the comfort of those involved. Anna had to give up her younger sister to strangers if she wanted to keep her safe. Arthur had his livelihood yanked away by men more able-bodied than he was. Gisele watched her boyfriend shrink further and further into the darkness of war-induced Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

All these teens wanted was to be happy and have value. War took it away from them all.