

[IN MY EARLIER POST](#) on *History of Wolves*, I mentioned two strands of foreshadowing (at least I *think* it's foreshadowing) I've been toying with. One, a littering of dead birds I'd been planning across the first third or half of the book, is probably on its way out – but I'm sharing here some of the material I've written then deleted. The symbolism is just too crude... But I *have* left one bird death in place (the pigeon that clatters against Harold's office window) largely because it provides dramatic punctuation. It is actually part of the action.

After the birds have been examined below, then swept away, I'm also going to share a strand about smoke that I'm developing. This seems far more promising – and subtler. I've made both Anne and Harold extra sensitive to the smell of smoke, so I can use this to reinforce the idea that, having this in common, they might also have an innate, deep, almost metaphysical bond. Smoke of various sorts is also, broadly, unsettling, full of foreboding, for it is the smoke, perhaps, of a forthcoming war. And, thirdly, I'm going to associate smoke with the presence of ghosts... or in fact one particular ghostly memory that continues to haunt Anne.

But first, **birds**. We have the bird incident in Chapter 4, then, in my first long and rambling version of chapter 5, its Sissinghurst section featured:

Vita was right. Or partially right. There was, truly, a dead bird on the Tower Lawn near the hedge. But it wasn't black, nor was it all that big: it was in fact a wood pigeon, its neck broken, its head bent over almost under its body, one wing partially stretched out as if it had died in salutation. Harold toed it gently, flipping it over, aware as he did so of how soft its belly was, how downy. Odd that Vita had thought it was black. But then she had seen it from the tower.

Sometimes you see things differently from above.

Then, a page later:

Light was fading by the time he returned to the garden. He made his way to the Tower Lawn. The dead pigeon was still there. Even in winter twilight, its plumage was unmistakably grey: grey, but with

the most delicate of hints of pinkish-purple. It had been preying on his mind; and he'd sought it out again so that he might kick it under the hedge and have done with it.

My first version of Chapter 6 (posted to Forum B this week as my latest 1000) opened with a montage of Long Barn domestic vignettes... until I realised it was going to take me 1500 words or more to get to the whole point of the chapter – Anne's chat with Harold. At this point in the book, with pacing becoming a significant worry for me, scene-building considerations just have to trump foreshadowing opportunities. So a second bird has been edited out. It may, tragically, have died in vain:

Another morning, Anne and Jon came upon a dead pigeon. It was not far from the kitchen garden terrace, on a stone-flagged path by the sprouts patch, its head at an unnatural angle, its neck broken, its pearl-coloured wings silvered-over with cold dew. By the side of its beak there was a pool of blood; not a large one, it looked a like the sort of speech bubble you'd see coming from a character's mouth in a comic book. But blood nonetheless.

"Why is the bird dead?" asked Jon.

"Perhaps it had been eating the sprouts," Anne told him.

Jon frowned at this; and Anne's heart sank. Pigeons had been at the sprouts for days and she'd heard one of the gardeners threatening retribution – as a joke, she assumed. Yet maybe he'd given deed to this thought and had potted the bird with an airgun. And then again maybe he hadn't. Maybe the bird had died another way. That, though, was hardly the point: the point was that she should never have exposed Jon so glibly to notions of the world's dull diet of cruelty, he surely deserved better than that. Nor, if it came to that, should she have implied that eating sprouts could be bad for you.

There was no way out now, though. She couldn't reel this back. She couldn't try to explain herself. That would just make matters worse. So she bit her lip. And fretted at her own thoughtlessness.

So, yes, when I first thought of this metaphorical strand, I was rather pleased with how clever I'd been... but I now think it may be a little self-indulgent and it has contributed perhaps to a general problem as regards pacing in the first few chapters of *Flying Over Ruins*. I'm easily distracted and I'll grasp at all manner of opportunities to add to the clutter when I should be getting on with the story. I'm definitely going to attempt to find homes for these bird bits in later chapters though. That's an issue for another day: but at this point in the course I'm disinclined to rewrite my rewrites of the chapters concerned. Sorry!

My metaphorical **smoke** thread seems far more promising. Broadly, the presence of smoke will hopefully convey to the reader that there are unresolved issues in play – and that these issues are likely to haunt (or worse) both Harold and Anne at some point in the not-too-distant future.

The strand begins in Chapter 6 (towards the end, beyond the 1000 mark, so I'm not entirely sure I'll be posting it) when Harold gets out his pipe.

Then, in chapter seven:

... and they started to believe they owned these woods and hedgerows and these verges embroidered with wild flowers; and in fact on some days it felt as if they had wandered out into the pages of a children's book. There were spring lambs in the fields down towards Fletcher's Green – and Charles taught Jon how to baa at them. There were bunny rabbits, too, frolicking on the lawn of an evening.

“There! Now! Do you smell it?” said Anne one evening.

Charles said he could smell nothing.

“I know what it is now,” Anne said in triumph. “It's wood smoke. It's a bonfire.”

Charles frowned. Shook his head. “But surely,” he reasoned. “If there was a bonfire nearby, we’d see the smoke.”

He had a point. It was a wonderfully clear and calm evening.

In the days that followed, Anne looked often for bonfire smoke. In fact, she promised Jon a sixpence if ever he could see it. A column of it, say, rising in the still air of the mid distance.

Etcetera, etcetera, across (hopefully) the first third of the book. And there’s smoke at the heart of a light-hearted but hugely-important little vignette, located deeper into the book but written already because it marks an important change of pace just before the climax of Act One of my story:

And then Harold heard the news he feared most. Storm clouds were gathering over Europe. No – literally. Storm clouds were gathering over the continent.

The largest electrical storm system in living memory, torrential rain, thunder, lightning, a horrible stew of thick black rolling doom, was already crossing The Channel. The like hadn’t been seen since King Lear’s day.

According to the BBC news, the very worst of the storm would pass right over the Weald, before heading across London, the Chilterns and on up into the Cotswolds.

Was this the promised end?

Harold knew for sure that the tower at Sissinghurst would be struck down by lightning, reduced in a flash to a pile of smoking rubble. For certain sure. But he did not hide away like a terrorised Emperor Augustus in a sunken cistern. True, he succeeded in persuading Vita to steer clear of the tower all day, but this was not too much of an imposition: it was a Sunday.

Harold had a theory that he might be able to monitor the approaching storm using his wireless set. When lightning was striking somewhere you could hear it as a crackle in the ether, this was a commonplace, a fact of modern life, one that was routinely dismissed as an inconvenient little curiosity; but surely, Harold reasoned, you could chart the storm's progress by tuning to different stations one after another, noting where the loudest crackles came from, then performing some sort of triangulation.

While he waited for the set in his study to warm up, he lit a pipe and laid out a large map of Europe across his desk. Then he began tuning round the dial, Stockholm, Berlin, Hilversum, Luxemburg, Paris, Eireann, and recorded the results. Again and again and again, around and around and around. From his pipe, neglected in its glass ash tray, there arose a thread of blue-grey smoke, straight, undeviating, pungent in the room's close summer air – undeviating, that is, until halfway to the ceiling, when, for seemingly no reason at all, it succumbed to violence, acquiring turbulence, dissipating in coils and extravagant curlicues.

Around and around and around some more; but the results were inconclusive. All he knew was that, wherever he was on the dial, the electrical sizzles and spits were becoming louder and louder and more frequent, until you could hardly hear anything of the programmes at all, just an overwhelming blitzkrieg of crackles. He sighed, he sat back, he picked up his pipe, drew on it two or three times to keep it in... and then switched off the set.

When the skies darkened from black to blacker and the rains came, he stood out on the Tower Lawn under an oilskin cape. He began trembling when the crashes of thunder edged closer and closer overhead and lightning began to electrify the Noonday gloom.

The rain was indeed torrential. It flattened plants and almost washed him away. Then came hailstones the size of tennis balls. But he stood his ground.

The news bulletins were right: it was the most ferocious thunderstorm in living memory, it wrought destruction, a clean corridor of it, up through southern England, High Streets were flooded, trees were brought down, people killed, either outright by lightning strike or felled by falling debris. Towers were struck by thunderbolts.

Sissinghurst's wasn't one of them.

Another date with destiny had been dodged.

In the end, I suppose, I want to convey the general notion that all ruins, freshly created ones at any rate, seem to be smoking when you fly over them. We'll see.