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Amy's Diary

Written by Maureen Lee

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Amy's Diary

Maureen Lee



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Chapter One

My name is Amy Browning and today, 3 September 1939, is my eighteenth birthday. The day I decided to keep a diary.

A lot has happened already. At two o'clock this morning my sister Jean had her second baby, a boy this time. She's going to call him Mickey. And just a few hours later it was announced on the wireless that Great Britain had gone to war with Germany.

It's Sunday and I'd been to church with Mam and Dad so we didn't know about the war until we got home. Germany, led by the dictator Adolf Hitler, had invaded Poland, something that Britain had warned it not to do.

It's been a lovely sunny day. In Opal Street, Liverpool, where we live, everyone was standing outside, talking about the war. It wasn't a surprise as we'd been expecting it for months. A brick air-raid shelter had been built at the end of our street. Once the sirens went, we'd have to go there until we heard the all-clear.

Mam shuddered and said to Dad, 'Just

imagine, Joe, sitting in that shelter with bombs falling all around us.'

'Don't worry, Mary,' Dad said. 'It won't come to that.'

'Then why have the government built shelters in nearly every street in Liverpool?' Mam snapped. 'And why has our Harry had to join the army?' She burst into tears. 'Now he'll be sent away to fight. Oh, Joe, what if our Harry is killed?'

My older brother Harry is in an army camp not far away in Preston. I didn't want to think about him being killed.

We went indoors and had our dinner, although nobody spoke much. When we'd finished, I said, 'I'm going to see Sally. We might go for a walk.'

Sally Clarke is my best friend and she lives around the corner in Coral Street. We'd gone to the same school and been in the same class. Now we worked in the same place, in the steam room of Reed's Dye Factory. We both hated it. I mean, who wants to spend their whole life pressing other people's clothes? Well, I certainly don't and neither does Sally.

Sally's front door was open and her gran was sitting on the front step. Like those in Opal Street, the houses were terraced and didn't

have front gardens. There was just a little yard with an outside toilet at the back.

'Sal's upstairs,' her gran said when she saw me, moving aside to let me in. The house was noisy. Very loud music was coming from the wireless and Sally's mam and dad were yelling at each other in the kitchen. They had fights all the time.

'Sal,' I called as I ran upstairs.

Sally came out of her room. She was very pretty with blonde hair and bright blue eyes. Her five older sisters were all married and had left home.

'Happy birthday,' she said. 'I've got you a present. Eh, what do you think about the war?' Without waiting for me to answer, she went on, 'Our Cora said there's really good jobs going at Gregg's, a factory in Speke where they make guns, bullets and tanks.'

I knew Britain was short of munitions. We were going to need a good deal more of them to fight a war with a well-equipped country like Germany. 'What sort of jobs?' I asked.

'All different sorts. They pay really good wages, at least three or four pounds a week.' She wrinkled her nose. 'The only bad thing about it is that it's shift work. They work from six in the morning until two in the afternoon

one week, and the next week it's from two until ten o'clock at night.'

'I wouldn't mind that,' I said. 'Not for three or four pounds a week.' Our wages at Reed's were less than a pound each. 'Could we get jobs at this place?'

'Cora said all we've got to do is write them a letter and ask. She's got the address. We could write tonight.'

We climbed over Sal's gran to get out of the house. I told Sal about our Jean and the new baby. 'It's a boy and she's calling him Mickey. Shall we go to the maternity hospital to see them?'

'Okay.' Sal linked my arm in hers. 'You know, even though we're at war with Germany, everything's still exactly the same. The sun's still shining, the birds are still in the sky.' She looked at the seagulls flying above. 'Later on, night will come just as it always does. Nothing's changed.'

'Why does there have to be a war anyway? So many people are going to be killed. You'd think people could settle arguments in a better way.'

Sally shrugged her shoulders. 'My dad said it will all be over in six months, but Mam thinks it will take longer. It's what they were fighting about. Whatever happens, I think it's going to

be exciting. Liverpool is one of the biggest ports in the world so there'll be loads of sailors around. The dances will be full of them.'

Well, that was something to look forward to. Sally and I went dancing two or three times a week.

At the hospital, our Jean looked happy, but tired. Jean was several years older than me and we looked very alike. We both had the same brown curly hair and darker-brown eyes. Mam describes us as nice looking rather than pretty. Jean's husband Dennis was away at sea and didn't know he'd become a father again. Mickey, the baby, was huge and looked more than just a few hours old.

'He weighed nine pounds three ounces,' Jean announced. 'He didn't half hurt.'

I was shocked and Sally gasped. I said, 'I bet he did.'

I doubted whether I could ever bring myself to have a baby. The very idea frightened me.

'Where's Emily?' Emily was Jean's daughter who was two.

'Mam's taken her back to the house for your birthday party. Many happy returns, by the way.' She pulled me towards her and kissed me

on the cheek. 'There's a present for you at home. I'll give it to you another day.'

I was looking forward to my party. 'Mum's made a smashing cake. We'll save you a slice,' I promised. We were having ham, tomatoes and potato salad, followed by jelly and custard. 'Grandad's coming, Auntie Eileen, and Sally. And of course Mam and Dad and me.'

'What about our Alice?'

'She's on duty and can't get away.'

Our sister Alice was a staff nurse at Mossley Hill Hospital. We were all really proud of her. Training to be a nurse was really hard and took years, but Alice had earned top marks for everything.

Sal and I said goodbye to Jean and went for a walk along the Dock Road. It was very busy despite it being Sunday. Big ships were loading or unloading their cargoes. Horses pulled carts piled with crates of fruit or sacks of grain along the road, which was full of traffic. Dozens of different languages could be heard coming from the foreign seamen who pushed their way along the crowded pavements.

I sighed happily. The Dock Road was my favourite place. Apart from our house, I'd sooner be there than anywhere else in the world. I loved the smell of spices, exotic

perfumes and foreign fruit. Above everything else I was aware of the salty tang of the River Mersey flowing nearby.

I really enjoyed my party. Mam and Dad had bought me a purse with a clasp and five pockets. They had put a penny in it for good luck, the good luck meaning it would never be empty. Grandad gave me a box of chocolates, Auntie Eileen a pretty georgette scarf and Sally a bottle of Evening in Paris scent. When Emily, my niece, sat on my knee I dabbed scent behind her tiny white ears.

I was feeling pretty happy with myself when our Harry turned up in his army uniform. He hadn't got me a present, but I was so pleased to see him I didn't care. I threw my arms around him and gave him a hug. Mam, who had been worrying about him all day, burst into tears. She made him sandwiches out of the ham that was left over and opened a tin of cream to go with the remainder of the jelly.

It had been a perfect party, but then it became even more perfect when the front door opened and Alice came in. My sister is the most beautiful person I have ever known. She has dark-green eyes and long hair the colour of autumn leaves, a sort of reddish gold. When I

go out with our Alice, everyone turns their head to stare and it's not at me.

'Happy birthday, Sis,' she cried. 'I managed to persuade the hospital Matron to give me a few hours off, but I can't stay long.'

I was really pleased. It meant that all the family, apart from Jean, had managed to come to my birthday party. It made me feel very emotional. I loved them all so much.

'I haven't had time to buy you a present, Amy,' Alice said, 'but a patient gave me this the other day. I think he was from India.' She handed me a large book with a brown leather cover painted with gold flowers. 'It would be a shame to use it for my nursing notes and get it covered with stains, so I thought I'd give it to you.'

'Thank you.'

The book felt heavy in my hands, and the surface was as smooth as velvet. When I opened it the pages were cream with faint brown lines. It smelled too of strongly perfumed flowers that I didn't know the names of. It was one of the nicest presents I'd ever had. Alice also gave me a new pencil and a pencil sharpener.

'I remember when I lived at home I could never find a sharpener for my pencil,' she said.

'From now on, that notebook, pencil and sharpener must never be parted.'

My friend Sally stayed until it had gone dark so that we could go outside and see what it was like in the blackout. Every house in the country now had blackout curtains on the windows, so that not so much as a pinprick of light could be seen from the air.

With any luck, this would help to protect us from the German bombers that would be bound to target such a big port as Liverpool.

Outside, there was no moon and no stars. Sally and I could hardly see each other. I fell off the pavement because I couldn't see the kerb.

'I'm frightened,' I said.

'So am I.' Sally's voice shook.

Footsteps could be heard across the street. A man called out, 'Who's there?'

'It's Amy Browning and Sally Clarke,' I called back.

'Be careful where you go. It's not safe for young women to be out in the blackout.'

The man hadn't said who he was. I reached for Sally's hand. 'I think we'd better go home. I'll come to the corner with you.'

*

It was later that night that I decided to start writing a diary, in the notebook that an Indian patient had given to my lovely sister. I wrote what you have read so far, while sitting on the edge of my bed and resting the diary on the bedside table. Although I didn't promise myself that I would write in it every single day, I would try to write something at least once a week until the war is over.

I wondered how old I would be then. I said a little prayer that the war would end before I reached my next birthday.