



Susan Cooper

MUFFIN



S U S A N C O O P E R

When a war has been going on for more than a third of your life, you feel it's always been there. It seemed normal, to the children of Cippenham Primary School, that there were air-raid shelters on the school playground, long, windowless concrete buildings half sunk into the ground, and that they should all sit inside, singing songs or reciting multiplication tables, whenever the bombers came rumbling their deadly way overhead. It seemed normal that every signpost in the country should have been removed; normal that the streets were fringed with huge concrete barriers called "tank traps," to make life difficult for the invading enemy if the Germans should ever manage to cross the English Channel.

Daisy and her friends took all this for granted, like the fact that they'd never seen a fountain or a steak or a banana. They didn't recognize that they were living through World War II; it was just "the war." It was part of life.

Fat Alice was part of life too, unfortunately. She was the boss of the school playground: a big, pasty-faced girl with short straight hair and an incongruously shrill voice. A group of hangers-on drifted in her wake, notably Pat and Maggie, two wispy, wiry girls who hovered about her like pilot fish escorting a shark. As prey for her little gang, Fat Alice chose a particular victim at the beginning of each term. This term she had chosen Daisy.

It was a Monday morning in a blossoming spring, but Alice, Pat, and Maggie were not paying attention to the daffodils. The three of them had Daisy cornered against the fence just inside the playground gate. It was a rough wooden fence, put up to replace the elegant old wrought-iron railings that had been taken away for the War Effort, to be melted down and used for guns, or ammunition, or bombs. A splinter drove deep into Daisy's arm, where it was pushed against the wood by Maggie's mean little fingers.

"Ow!" said Daisy. "Ow-ow-ow!"

"Shut up," said Fat Alice, in her high, whiny voice. "Walk along the line like I said, and don't step off it or you'll get punished."

Fear was making Daisy breathe fast. She felt sick. She teetered along the chalk line they had drawn on the ground, and because of her fear she lost her balance, and lurched to one side. Shrieking with delight, the other three fell on her, pulling her blonde braids,

shoving her to the ground so that Fat Alice could grab her hand and scrape the back of it over the gravel-studded asphalt. This was Alice's favorite torture; she had learned it from her brother, who ruled the boys' end of the playground.

Daisy squealed. Her hand was bleeding. She aimed a furious kick at Fat Alice's bulging leg as her three tormentors scattered, and the kick was seen by Mrs. Walker, one of the "dinner ladies" who not only served meals but also kept watch during recess, to prevent the children of Cippenham Primary School from murdering each other. "Daisy Morgan!" screeched Mrs. Walker. "I seen that! No kicking! I'll tell your teacher!"

But a dog was barking fiercely on the other side of the fence, a little gray terrier with sharp-pricked ears and tail, and beside him stood the old lady who lived in the house next to the school. Daisy didn't know her name. She was standing very upright, wearing a shapeless brown cardigan and skirt, and she was shaking her stick at Mrs. Walker.

"It wasn't the girl's fault!" she called, in a clear, authoritative voice. "She was defending herself! I saw the others attacking her!"

The bell rang, and Daisy fled for school. Mrs. Walker sniffed suspiciously as she passed, but she didn't report her.

At dinnertime, Daisy slid a piece of meat from her

plate into her handkerchief, even though it was—for once—good-tasting meat instead of rubbery gristle, and she hid it in her pocket. On the way home after school, she paused by the fence.

The old lady and her dog were standing on their doorstep like sentries, watching the shouting hundreds of children flood untidily by. Daisy called out, "Please may I give him a piece of meat?"

"I'm sure he'd be delighted," the old lady said in her strong clear voice. "Muffin! Show your manners!"

Muffin barked, twice, deliberately, before bolting the limp gray square that Daisy tossed to him. Beaming, Daisy waved, and ran home.

"Alice Smith did it," she said, sitting at the kitchen table, wincing as her mother dabbed antiseptic on her scraped hand. "Alice Smith is a *Nazi*!"

Daisy's mother spent most of her time worrying about Daisy's father, who was in a destroyer somewhere in the North Atlantic, chasing enemy submarines. She said softly, "I don't think so, darling. Not quite."

But Alice and Pat and Maggie were on the attack again next day at recess, chasing Daisy into a corner and lashing at her bare legs with thin whippy branches torn from the old lady's front hedge. Daisy heard Muffin barking indignantly at them and knew that the old lady was watching, but she was running too fast to be able to ask for help. Instead she took the perilous step of

complaining to her teacher about her persecution. Her teacher spoke reproachfully to Fat Alice for thirty seconds, and Fat Alice sat next to Daisy in the shelter during the next air-raid practice and pinched her silently and viciously for half an hour.

Daisy's arm was black and blue. She felt desperate. There was no escape. All her life she was going to be made miserable by the Alice gang, and nothing she did could make the slightest difference. After school that day, on a wild impulse, she ran down the sidewalk and in through the old lady's front gate. Beside the front door, a forsythia bush was blooming like a great yellow cloud.

Daisy knocked at the door. "Please," she said when it opened, "please—" and to her horror she burst into tears.

"Oh dear," said the old lady. "This won't do. Come in and have a cup of tea with Muffin and me."

It was a house filled with framed old-fashioned photographs and hundreds of small ornaments; it felt friendly. Muffin lay with his chin across Daisy's feet. Over a cup of comforting weak tea with milk and sugar, and two digestive biscuits, Daisy asked the old lady if she would mind speaking to her teacher, to describe what she had seen Fat Alice do. If a grown-up gave witness, perhaps there was a chance the tormenting might stop.

"Of course I will!" the old lady said briskly. "Bullies must always be stopped, by any means possible. That's

what this war is all about. I shall speak to your teacher tomorrow."

But before the morning came, the village of Cippenham was given a very noisy night. Daisy was woken in the darkness, as so often before, by the chilling up-and-down wail of the air-raid siren, agitating the night from a loudspeaker on the roof of the local police station. She pulled on her raincoat over her pajamas, slung her gas-mask case over her shoulder, and followed her mother and her sleepy four-year-old brother Mike out to their air-raid shelter, the little turf-roofed, metal-walled cave sunk into the back lawn. The night was cold, and the bright beams of searchlights groped to and fro over the dark sky. There was already a faint rumble of aircraft engines in the air.

"Quickly, darlings!" Her mother hurried them to the shelter door, behind its barricade of sandbags. It was hard to see anything; flashlights were forbidden in the blacked-out nights of wartime England, where the windows of every house were covered closely by black curtains, or by strips of sticky brown tape that would also keep glass from scattering if the windows were blown in by blast.

Daisy could hear shells bursting in the sky, fired from the long guns of the anti-aircraft post at the end of the street. Then the bombs began falling, with their unmistakable dull *crump* sound, vibrating through the earth.

She had never been much afraid of the bombs, not with the intense personal terror she felt when Fat Alice and her friends jumped out at her. But this time, the bombs sounded closer than ever before—a sequence of huge crashes, louder and louder, shaking the shelter so that the single lighted candle jumped and flickered on the earthen floor. Daisy buried her head in her mother's lap.

It was a long night, before the single steady note of the all clear sang out through the sky, and they could go back to bed.

When Daisy set out from home next morning, she found a crowd of excited children milling in the road near her school, and behind them a fluttering orange tape strung as a temporary barrier across the road. Behind the tape was a huge hole. Broken pipes jutted from the clay-brown soil; the earth had been sliced as if it were a cake.

"What is it?" Daisy said to the nearest familiar face.

"It's a bomb crater, stupid! Jeff found three super bits of shrapnel!"

"A whole stick of bombs fell last night." This was a chunky, confident boy called Fred, who always came top of Daisy's class. "Our two were the first, that's why they're closer together."

"Our two?" Daisy said.

"The other one's right by the playground. Just our luck it didn't hit school."

"Jerry can't shoot straight!"

"Look, there's all the teachers! They're sending everyone home!"

Daisy wasn't listening. She was edging along what was left of the sidewalk, past the crater, past houses whose windows were blank and empty, their glass all blown in by the bomb. Assorted grown-ups frowned at her and called her back, but not before she had reached the playground gate—splintered now, and hanging from one hinge. She saw the playground littered with bricks and broken glass and strange pieces of metal. And beside it, she saw an unfamiliar gap. The old lady's house was no longer there.

Daisy rushed forward, into the playground, ignoring the shouts behind her, until she stood at the edge of the ruin where the house had been. It was a mass of rubble, of broken brick and splintered beams; she saw a piece of carpet jutting from underneath a pile of roofing tiles. There was a strong smell of dust.

A hand took hold of her shoulder; it was the elderly policeman who watched the road crossing before and after school.

"Come on, love. You can't come here—it's dangerous."

"The old lady," Daisy said urgently. She looked up at him. "The old lady?"

"Did you know her?" said the policeman.

"Sort of," Daisy said.

The policeman hesitated, then sighed. "She was killed by the bomb. Direct hit. She can't have known a thing about it."

Daisy stared at him, stunned. Yesterday the old lady had given her tea and digestive biscuits. Today she didn't exist. It wasn't possible.

The policeman said again, gently, "Come on."

As Daisy turned to go with him, a movement in the ruins of the house caught her eye. She paused, peering, and saw Muffin, cowering behind a heap of rubble. He seemed to be unhurt, but he was coated with dust and dirt, and he was shivering—shaking all over, violently, as if he were terribly cold.

"Muffin! Here, boy! Muffin!" She tried to get his attention, but he wouldn't look at her. She wondered if he could hear.

"It's the bomb," the policeman said. "That her dog, is it? England's full of dogs and cats like that, these days. Lost their people. Shell-shocked, like. Come on then, boy!" He moved toward the dog, hand outstretched, but Muffin turned away abruptly and fled.

"We'll keep an eye out for him," the policeman said.

Before she went home, Daisy stopped at the tiny general store opposite the school. Its windows had all been blown in, but it was still open; indeed there was a cheerful notice lettered on the plywood which had already been nailed over the windowframe, reading:

MORE OPEN THAN USUAL. With some pennies she found in her pocket, Daisy bought a bun, and when nobody was looking she threw it into the ruins of the old lady's house. Muffin would be back, and he would be hungry.

And Muffin did come back. Before long, the playground was cleared of rubble, the road was repaired, the remains of the old lady's house were flattened, and school began again. And the children began to notice Muffin, sometimes, lying on the ground where his house had been. He was thin and dirty, and his ears and tail were no longer as perky as they had been before. Some of the children tried to call him, or catch him, but he always ran away.

Only once, when Daisy was alone and called, "Muffin! Muffin! Show your manners!"—then Muffin came trotting to her and licked her hand, and let her pat him. But even then he leaped away when she tried to take hold of his collar. There was no sign of him afterward, for days.

Fat Alice had been distracted from her usual pursuits by the excitement of the bomb craters, and the prestigious bits of shrapnel that could be collected, or taken away from the collections of smaller, weaker boys or girls. She had not forgotten Daisy, however. She began now a quiet campaign of small intermittent cruelties, with no reason or pattern. At unexpected times of the day, in classroom or playground or corridor, she would

appear suddenly at Daisy's side and give her a quick fierce kick or pinch, vanishing afterward with a speed remarkable in one so large. Daisy began to feel constantly nervous, like a hunted animal.

Sometimes she felt angry with herself for doing nothing to combat the maliciousness of Alice Smith. But what was there to do? She was outsized and outnumbered, and the little gang of bullies took care never to do anything that might catch the attention of a teacher. Now that Daisy had lost the old lady, the only grown-up she could enlist as saviour was her mother. But that had been tried last term, by Molly Barnes, a placid, amiable girl even fatter than Alice, who was the butt of the gang for so long that she seemed to be constantly in tears. Molly's mother had come to school to complain—and close on her heels had come Alice's mother, a tough, aggressive lady who was heard, through the headmaster's closed door, angrily shouting a number of words Daisy had never heard uttered before.

So the headmaster had not known which mother to believe, and the reign of Fat Alice had gone on undisturbed. And Daisy said nothing that would bring her own mother to the school, because she knew the result would be just the same.

It was a Friday, four weeks after the bombs fell, when Alice did the worst thing of all. Daisy liked Fridays, not only because they marked the end of the week, but

because the last class of the day was art. She loved drawing and painting, more than anything. Even though, in their overcrowded school, her class had to double up with Alice's class for art—giving Alice easy opportunities for poking Daisy with one end of a paintbrush, or dabbing paint on her skirt with the other—even so, it was Daisy's favorite class.

And this Friday was even better than most. Their teacher said, "Think of the best story you've ever heard from your mother or father, and paint me a picture of it."

Daisy thought of the last time her father had come home on leave, after he had been sailing to the north coast of Russia on what he called "the Murmansk run," and she painted what he had described. She painted his destroyer, as she often did at home, but she showed it encrusted all over with ice, with men muffled up in heavy jackets and gloves chipping the ice away from spars and guns and rails. She painted the gray angry sea and the big waves, and a patchy blue sky, and a huge, white jagged iceberg rearing up in the background. She particularly liked the iceberg.

"That's wonderful, Daisy!" said her teacher, and she held it up in front of the class. She said Daisy should take the picture home to show her mother, and then bring it back next week to be shown to the whole school in morning assembly.

Daisy set off cheerfully for home, in the noisy

bouncing crowd pouring out of the playground. But a figuré came running and pushed her sideways, and then another, and she found herself nudged and shoved out of sight of everyone else, behind the air-raid shelters. Alice, Pat, and Maggie closed around her, bright-eyed, grinning.

"She did *ever* such a nice painting!" said Alice, shrill, jeering. "She's so stuck-up, she thinks she's the cat's meow—here, I'll show you her *lovely* painting!"

She grabbed the rolled-up paper from under Daisy's arm.

"Give it back!" Daisy yelled. But Pat and Maggie were holding her arms, and she couldn't get free. She struggled, feeling her eyes blur with angry tears, and she saw Fat Alice unroll her beautiful painting and drop it deliberately face-down into a muddy puddle. Then Alice lifted her foot and trod on it.

Daisy let out a great sob, and kicked at Alice. She felt her shoe hit Alice's shinbone, hard.

Fat Alice shrieked with pain. Her face twisted with fury and venom, and she advanced on Daisy. "Just you wait!" she hissed.

But behind her, there was a sudden astounding noise, halfway between a roar and a shriek, and out of the wasteland that had been the old lady's house, Muffin came rushing. He looked very small, and very dangerous. He flung himself at Fat Alice, growling and snapping; then whirled at Pat and at Maggie, nipping

their ankles, jumping up at them, teeth bared. A small dog had become a small tornado, a whirling flurry of danger and menace. The three girls screamed and backed away, but Muffin came after them, snarling, biting, until they scattered and ran.

"Mad dog!" Alice howled. "Mad dog . . ." Her voice faded as she disappeared down the road.

Muffin came back to Daisy. He looked up at her, panting, his tongue lolling, and she crouched beside him and fondled his small dirty head. Muffin licked her face.

"Let's go home, Muffin," Daisy said.

Muffin barked, deliberately, twice.

Daisy picked her painting out of the puddle. It was a blurred, muddy, unrecognizable mess. She crumpled it up and dropped it again, and she turned and ran out of the playground, through the streets, home. Muffin ran at her heels.

Bursting through the kitchen door, breathless, Daisy found her mother peeling potatoes. "Mum," she said, grasping for the words she had been rehearsing as she ran. "Mum, I have a friend, he's been bombed out, please can he stay?"

Daisy's mother looked down at Muffin.

"Dad says every ship should have a mascot," Daisy said.

Her mother smiled. She said, "You just have time to give him a bath before tea."



Notes from

SUSAN COOPER

"My story 'Muffin' is set in England during World War II, because that's where I was when I was your age. I once put all that part of my life into a book called *Dawn of Fear*, a war story which is pure autobiography except that I turned myself into a boy called Derek. Don't ask me why.

The main character in 'Muffin,' Daisy, is not me, but she goes to the same school as Derek/Susan, and the bombs that she hears fall are the same ones Derek hears in *Dawn of Fear*. I found myself wondering the other day whether Derek ever met Muffin. It's sometimes hard for writers to remember where real life ends and story begins.

I began life as a passionate reader and pretty soon realized I was a writer as well. When I edited my school magazine, I found it was much easier to write things than to persuade other people to write them, and I still own a rather embarrassing issue in which eleven contributions (and two pictures) are signed by Susan Cooper. I've been scribbling away ever since."