In 1940, I lived with my father in the town of Deal, on the Kent coast of England, safe from the thunder of the Germans' guns in France. Some days in May I could hear it, rolling in big booms across the English Channel. Some days I could feel it, rattling the glass in the windows on our street.

My father, Martin Gates, owned the Lucy, a sturdy fishing smack. Her wooden tubs were thick and heavy.
and smelled of herring
and mackerel
and cod.
I liked to watch my father’s quick hands,
stacking tubs and sorting fish.
I liked to listen to Dad’s friends
trading stories on the beach.
They were all Deal fishermen too.

But now their talk was about
the trouble at Dunkirk,
just across the Channel,
only fifty miles away.
British soldiers were trapped there, they said.
Thousands and thousands.
And so were the French.
The Germans and their tanks would capture them.
Families would lose all those men who were
uncles and brothers
and fathers and sons.
Every boat on the English coast
was needed to go and help.
The owners
were to report for orders,
and for maps, and charts.

My brother, John, was a British soldier,
fighting in France.
Maybe he was in this trouble too.
Maybe he was trapped on the beaches of Dunkirk
and was waiting for a navy ship,

Author’s Note

In May of 1940, many countries in Europe were at war with Germany.
British and French soldiers, half a million of them, were trapped on three
sides of northern France by German troops and tanks. The only way out for
the Allied army, the only escape, was the sea.

An incredible armada of 861 ships, the largest at the time in naval
history, assembled off the beaches of Dunkirk to ferry British and French
soldiers across the English Channel to Dover and other small ports in
southeastern England. Vice Admiral Bertram Ramsay, who organized these
rescue efforts, directed “Operation Dynamo” from his headquarters in the
chalk cliffs of Dover, just across the Channel from Dunkirk. He called the
rescue armada his “Cockleshell Fleet” because of the hundreds of small
river and coastal fishing craft that answered the government’s call to assist
the larger ships of the British Royal Navy.

Of the 338,226 men rescued, most came back to England on the
bigger ships. But the little ships had their part to play during the crucial
nine days, May 26—June 4, ferrying hungry and exhausted soldiers from
Dunkirk’s beaches across the dangerous shallow water to the bigger ships.
Many dogs that were pets of English and French soldiers, and a few strays,
were rescued as well. Almost two hundred dogs were aboard ships landing
in Dover. There are as many stories about Dunkirk as there were ships and
people involved. This story is part truth, part fiction. It could have
happened. Maybe, indeed, it did.
or a fishing boat like the *Lucy*,
to bring him home.
Fishermen on the beach
said I was my father’s daughter.

I could set an anchor
and coil a rope
and nudge speed into the *Lucy’s* old engine
better than some of the village men
who were signing up to go to Dunkirk.
Like Mr. Lewis, who worked at the post office,
Mr. Cribben, the locksmith,
and Mr. Marsh, who had taught geometry to John.

So I pulled on a wool cap of my father’s
that smelled of herring,
and a patched pair of John’s outgrown trousers.
Only my father knew it
was me.

“Hurry!... Not much time! ...
Too many men... Not enough ships!”
Those were the words we heard echoing in town
and up and down the beach.
I hurried to help Dad
stack cans of water.
I lugged more cans, full of fuel, and yards of rope.
And I hurried again
to haul the wet nets off the Lucy.
“We’ll need every inch of room for soldiers,”
my father called to me over his shoulder.
“Maybe even John,”
I called back.

That afternoon we sailed for Dunkirk.
Dad didn’t have much time for talk.
He kept his words in his hands,
stowing a rope ladder
and checking the engine gears.
And he kept his words in his eyes,
reading the Channel charts and maps,
scanning the sky, thick with clouds,
My father wasn’t famous,
but he knew about the sea and the tides and currents
and how to steer clear of the Goodwin Sands.
He was the one who had taught me to read a compass
And he could name all the stars at night
like the explorers I had studied in school.

I sat straight up
when the Prime Minister thundered his grand speech.
I was glad that Mr. Churchill didn’t keep
his words in his hands and in his eyes
in the way of Deal fishermen.
At first he had thought
only a few men could be saved
from the beaches of Dunkirk.
He was wrong.
The newspaper later said
over 338,000 men came home.
But I think Mr. Churchill knew all along
that our country could do it,
if everyone pulled together.
That’s why he sent all those big navy ships.
And the little ships,
like our Lucy,
too.
And so we went back to Deal,
and sailed the Lucy onto the narrow beach.
We kept the black, matted dog
that a French sergeant had asked us to take.
I named him Smoky Joe.

Smoky, with his damp rope collar,
was a part of Dunkirk
that we brought home to Deal.

On June 3,
we got word that John
had come back safely on a Belgian tug.
And the very next day,
I sat by the radio
with my father and Smoky Joe.

So on the last day of May the Lucy left Deal
and sailed north to Ramsgate
to join a motley group of ships.
All kinds were in her convoy.
Farther out in the Channel,
past the Goodwins,
our group joined with others.
It was like an amazing armada.
Armada.
It was a word from my schoolbook.
And there I was,
in the middle of the biggest armada of all.

That day
the line of convoys going to help rescue the British Army
was almost five miles long,
stretched end to end
on a smooth gray sea.
To save time and fuel,
tugboats and bigger ships
pulled little ships in their wakes.
A lot of towropes frayed and snapped.
A lot of rusty motors sputtered and stopped.

I listened to the low throb
of the Lucy’s engine.
Hour after hour.
Mile after mile.
Steady engine.
Steady friend.
The dozens of ships around us were headed to Dunkirk too.
The littlest ships looked even smaller under that sullen Channel sky.

Everyone in the boats around the Lucy knew there was terrible trouble up ahead.

Big navy ships passed with their white wakes, going the other way.
Headed back from Dunkirk, to England and to home.
They made a silent parade.
Not grand.
Just uniform brown and battleship gray.
Their decks and railings were crowded with men.

I tried to look up and find John in that sea of tin helmets and tired faces.
But they were the faces of strangers and not my tall skinny brother.

Dad handed me a mug of strong, sweet tea, and a woolly thick jacket to keep off the Channel chill.
When our convoy reached the French coast, we heard the German guns.
Other guns were answering back.

Suddenly the sky was filled with the noise of an enemy plane.
It was a dive-bombing German Stuka.
Some stray bullets hit the Lucy and she sprang a dozen leaks.
Our last load of soldiers had to bail with their helmets on the miles going home.
But the Lucy’s engine kept running steady with that throb I knew so well.

And then we were there, with dozens of other ships, streaming into the safety of the harbor at Dover.
Bringing our army home...

I helped my father look for John among all the ships unloading men.
I asked busy officers who were yelling orders, but no one could tell me news.
The ships crowding the harbor were full of tall skinny soldiers.
But none were John Gates from Deal.

Mr. Lewis and Mr. Marsh spotted the Lucy, and came to tell us how they’d been towed by a Scottish trawler, all the way back to the white cliffs of Dover.
And then they looked away, and said Mr. Cribben wouldn’t ever be coming home.
I saw two men, side by side,  
in a half-swamped rowboat,  
pulling on oars for hours,  
ferrying a beaten army,  
a few men at a time.  
I saw a plank raft with a rusty old bicycle,  
strapped down with bits of rope.  
And a soldier who’d lost his helmet,  
but who brought a parakeet in a cage.  
I saw men who were brave,  
and some who were not.  
I heard shouts in English and in French,  
and in Belgian and in Dutch.  
“Get the men off the beaches.  
Get the men off the Mole.  
Get them onto ships,  
get them back home.”  
That was the job we had been sent to do.  
That was the job, and we each had a part.

And then the *Lucy* was there,  
off Dunkirk’s beaches,  
in the night  
and in the early morning,  
and it was real.  
All the oily smoke that got in my eyes,  
and all the terrible noise that got in my ears.  
And all the men.  
The sandy beaches at Dunkirk were black  
with lines that curved like snakes.  
And the lines were British soldiers.  
And the French were there too.  
There were even men standing shoulder to shoulder  
along the length of the Mole,  
the narrow wooden pier in Dunkirk’s harbor.  
Thousands of soldiers, waiting for ships.

We stayed close to a minesweeper,  
then sailed into the shallows  
to ferry our first load.  
I called back the depth of the water  
as Dad steered the *Lucy* toward the beach.  
Not a beach like Deal’s.  
This beach was wide and flat,  
its sand covered by men who were hungry and thirsty,  
by horses running loose from their French riders,  
by dozens of barking dogs,  
by trucks and equipment,  
by the wild mess of an army on the run.  
And there were hundreds of other ships  
that were little like ours—

*A *Smoky Joe* was a nickname used in the British Navy for a minesweeper  
** A *skoot* is a flat-bottomed Dutch boat, originally known as a *schuit*. 
English and French, Belgian and Dutch. We were all there rowing and carrying and paddling and ferrying—from the sand beaches to the big ships anchored out in deeper water and back again. My father gazed at the thousands of men and I knew that he was thinking about John.

He stood at the helm, holding the Lucy steady in the water, against the wakes from other ships, against broken planks washing toward the beach, against lost boots and army coats, and everything that soldiers leave behind when they can take only themselves.

I had to stand taller and help my father. I had to help soldiers whose names I never knew. And not say that I was afraid to see war.

I had to pretend that my arms didn’t ache from hauling soldiers, dripping wet, onto the rocking deck of our boat. My hands were rubbed raw inside the work gloves that fit my father, not me.

Most of Dunkirk was burning—town and harbor, houses and docks. I had to rub the sting from my eyes, not from tears, but from the black smoke. And I couldn’t look for more than a second at a soldier who cried for me to give him water, who had no bandages, just blood all down his front.

We ferried a Cameron Highlander who couldn’t find his regiment. And a red-faced cook who spoke only French. And so many British soldiers that I lost count of how many in all the Lucy’s loads, out to the big ships.