

# WAR GAMES

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'Look at this.' Toby turned from the game he was playing, his face as animated as the screen in front of him. 'Look, Gran, I just killed three aliens!'

His grandmother looked up from her book. 'What did you say, dear?' She smiled at Toby and put the book down on the coffee table.

'Oh, Gran! Stop reading and watch us play. We're amazing,' Toby's brother John pleaded. 'It's my turn to exterminate the rest of the aliens. Watch this!'

Dorothy Green sighed inwardly but gave in. She had just been engrossed in the 19th century, where the American Civil War had been raging for two years. She found the three-day Battle of Gettysburg fascinating. She loved books about history.

Certain they now had their Gran's attention, Toby and John turned back to the game. 'Pow! Wham!' The staccato sound of gunshots filled the sunny living room as Toby shouted, 'Get him!' and John flailed his controller frantically in pursuit of the enemy.

Dorothy watched as the onscreen war progressed. The noise was deafening.

'Epic!' Toby obliterated another orange alien.

A wicked gleam suffused John's face as he continued his reign of terror.

*They've really lost touch with reality,* Dorothy thought. It was her turn to raise her voice. 'C'mon boys. Let's have some afternoon tea.'

No response.

'I baked some chocolate biscuits this morning. Your favourites,' she said, even more loudly. 'And I have some lemonade in the fridge.'

Then Toby spoke. 'Yeah, Gran. Great. Just a second. Just wait till we wipe out the rest of these guys.'

*I give up,* Dorothy thought, going into the kitchen and filling the kettle. She needed a cup of tea. Minutes later, her two grandsons appeared, faces painted with triumph, talking animatedly.

'That was the best!' John exclaimed, his face still pink with excitement. 'We killed off all the aliens. Every last one of them.'

'Yeah, we finished the game for the first time. It was awesome,' Toby chimed in, grinning at his Gran.

They sat at the kitchen table and continued to relive details of the battle. *At least they aren't fighting like they usually do*, she thought.

'Fighting a war sure makes a man hungry,' John declared, helping himself to a handful of biscuits.

Toby took a large gulp of lemonade. 'Think I'll be a soldier when I grow up,' he added. 'Pow, pow!' He aimed his imaginary pistol at the kitchen door.

Dorothy was shocked. Toby had always been a gentle child, unlike his rowdy older brother. She imagined him growing up to become a doctor or a lawyer – something dignified. But now she wasn't so sure. Should she mention her concerns to his parents? No, she was probably just old-fashioned and they'd laugh at her. She decided to keep her fears to herself. Certainly, Toby had come out of his shell lately and had begun to rival his older brother for attention.

'War isn't as much fun as you think,' Dorothy said, as she wiped crumbs from the table.

Both boys looked at her with expressions that she interpreted as: *What would you know about it? You've never lived through a war, and besides, you're a woman.*

'Even if you were a man, you'd be too old to fight,' John protested.

Dorothy felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up in anger. White hairs. John didn't mean to be rude, she realised. He was just stating a fact. However, she couldn't let it pass, as if she were irrelevant.

'I'm reading a book about war at the moment,' Dorothy continued.

'Pah. Books,' John snorted. 'Books are boring.' He got up to go back to his online game.

Toby carried the plates to the kitchen sink. 'Is it good, Grandma?' he asked. 'The book you're reading?'

Dorothy smiled. All was not lost. The real Toby was still somewhere inside that small blonde head. She patted him fondly on the shoulder.

'Yes,' she said. 'It's fascinating. All about the American Civil War and the Battle of Gettysburg.'

Dorothy began to fill the sink with hot water. Toby picked up a tea towel.

'Wow.' Toby sounded impressed. 'I didn't know you read that sort of stuff, Gran. Cool!' He hung the tea towel on the rack and went back to join his brother.

A month later, on Christmas morning, Toby was not surprised to open a present from Gran and find a book inside. Dorothy always gave Toby and John books on their birthdays and at Christmas, even though she knew that neither of them were avid readers.

'*Great Battles in History*,' Toby read. He looked at the cover of the book. It was dominated by war weaponry, including a huge tank that looked as if it were about to crush a battalion of soldiers. 'Cool,' he said. 'Real war. The real thing.'

'Pooh,' was John's response when he opened his parcel from Gran, even though the shape made its contents obvious. '*X-Box Alien*,' he read. 'Bet it's not as good as the game.' He flung the book aside and stomped off, holding the new game that his parents had given him. 'Coming to play?' he called over his shoulder to Toby.

'In a while,' Toby replied. He had curled himself up on the lounge with *Great Battles*. He was so immersed in it that he didn't even hear his mother call him for Christmas lunch.

'Gran'll be so pleased that you like her present,' Toby's father said as he carved the turkey.

His mother smiled across at him. 'Yes, she'll be delighted. Your Gran is crazy about reading.'

Just then, John broke in to tell Toby all about his new game. 'It's awesome,' he said. 'I'm up to level seven. Wanna play after lunch?'

'Sure,' Toby agreed, as he took a large helping of Christmas pudding. But after a few minutes of watching John 'shoot' a few monsters, he slipped out of the bedroom and back into the living room.

It was when he got to the chapter about Gettysburg that he got the greatest surprise. As he turned the page to read about the final day of the battle, something slipped out of the book. It was a \$10 note. Attached was a small piece of paper.

'Secret Good Reading Award. Love, Gran,' Toby read.

*Cool*, Toby thought to himself. He wondered whether there was a similar message in John's book. And if there was, would his brother find it? Toby decided he would keep Gran's secret, and just wait and see.