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Opening extract from

Billy's Blitz

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One

Birthday surprise

Have you ever had one of those nights when you can't sleep? And you lie in bed tossing and turning? That was me, the night before my twelfth birthday. I lay there in the dark, eyes wide open, even though I couldn't see a thing.

Mum had put up blackout curtains, and I didn't like 'em one bit.

'No use complaining, Billy,' she'd said. 'There's a war on. If that Hitler sends his planes over Balham, they won't see any lights from this house, that's for sure – or my name's not Ruby Wilson!'

After that, my bedroom was black as a coal mine. There wasn't so much as a pinhole of light got through those curtains. Not that I was scared of the dark. Not me. Balham boys ain't scared of nothing.

That night, when I couldn't sleep, I lay there thinking about everything that had happened since my last birthday – good and not so good.

The day I was eleven, I remember waking up to the smell of bacon frying and leaping out of bed and rushing downstairs.

Bacon, egg and fried bread, that's what I had. It was a special treat for my birthday. Things weren't rationed then. Oh boy! They tasted good! And when I'd wiped the last trace of egg yolk with my bread, Dad said, 'I've got a present for you, Billy boy!'

I'd tried to guess what it was.

'Is it a football? A stamp album? New boots?'

Dad laughed and shook his head.

My little sister, Rose, who was five then, got excited. 'What is it, Dad?' she squealed, tugging at his sleeve and jumping up and down like a jack-in-a-box.

'Calm down, pickle,' Dad said and he lifted her up, giggling and wriggling, and beckoned me to follow him to the back door. Mum came with us – she must have been in on the secret cos Dad always told her everything.

We stepped out into the garden, which was long and thin and planted with vegetables: cabbages, carrots, turnips and potatoes. We used to have a lawn where I played football, but Dad had told us there was going to be a war with Germany and we'd need to grow our own food.

That day, Dad pointed to the far end of the garden. 'Go and look in the shed, Billy,' he said. 'See if you can find something in there.'

I raced over and flung the shed door open. It was quite dark inside and I couldn't see much till my eyes adjusted to the gloom. Then I saw it! Sitting on an old grey blanket was the most beautiful dog I'd ever seen. It was a young German shepherd with the loveliest, kindest eyes and a coat like black

velvet. I could hardly breathe, I was so excited. I'd always wanted a dog, see.

'She's yours, Billy,' said Mum with a big smile on her face. 'And she's wanting a good home.'

I reached out to stroke her and she jumped up, full of energy, wagging her tail non-stop and licking my hand as if she knew she was my dog.

Mum and Dad were standing by the door, watching. 'Is she really mine? Honest?' I asked, hardly believing it was true.

'She is,' Dad said, grinning from ear to ear. 'All she needs is a name.'

I looked into the dog's brown eyes and she gazed back at me as if she had known me all her life. That was when I knew she was special. And a special dog should have a special name. I thought for a minute. 'I think I'll call her Sheeba.'

'Good name,' said Dad coming over to stroke her soft back. He liked dogs. He'd been brought up on a farm, see. He was as pleased as I was to have Sheeba in the family. 'She's nine months old, son, and I know you'll take good care of her.'

'Course I will, Dad,' I said, wrapping my arms round her and nuzzling my face in her fur. I couldn't have been happier. It was my eleventh birthday and I had a dog!

Later, Dad said, 'It's a pity not everybody feels like that about dogs,' and he told me a terrible thing. Because we were expecting to go to war with Germany, people didn't want anything German in their houses – not German music, not even dogs with German names, such as dachshunds and German shepherds. 'So they get rid of 'em,' said Dad. 'Kick 'em out.'

'They ought to be ashamed of themselves, if you ask me,' said Mum. 'It's cruel. As if this beautiful dog has anything to do with the Nazis, eh?'

That afternoon, we all went out to give Sheeba her first walk as part of our family. I felt really proud when I walked down the road with her on the lead – especially when I saw my mates, Ken and Barry, and they came over to pat her. Once we reached Tooting Bec Common I let her off the lead and threw a ball. You should have seen her run! She went like the wind to catch it. She was brilliant! Rose had fun, too. She found sticks for Sheeba to carry but she kept calling her Sherbert, which made us laugh.

Right from the start, we all loved Sheeba, and my eleventh birthday was the best ever: the best present and the best cake with candles and my family singing 'Happy Birthday' round the table. My life was good. I was happy. But it didn't last.

Not long after my birthday, Britain declared war on Germany and Dad went and joined the army. We didn't want him to, but he said he had to go and do his bit.

'I can't have that Mr Hitler coming over here,' he told us. 'So I can't leave all the fighting to the other chaps, can I?'

When he signed up, they gave him a uniform. It was a funny khaki colour, but he looked ever so smart in it and he polished his boots till you could see your face in 'em. He even had his photo taken.

'This is so you won't forget your poor old dad,' he said when he brought it home.

He gave Rose a big hug. Mum got a sloppy kiss and he

winked at me. He was a joker, my dad. He always tried to put on a brave face and make us laugh even when he was going off to another country where the Nazis might be shooting at him. He didn't want us to feel sad, see.

'I'll be back home before you know it,' he said. 'I don't suppose this war's going to last long. We'll show them Germans, eh?'

After Dad left, Mum went into the kitchen and cried by the sink, holding her apron over her face. I'd never seen her cry before and she didn't know I'd seen her that time. But I had. I knew she was worrying about him already. Wondering if he'd come back home.

We put Dad's photo in a nice frame on the mantelpiece and every night we said, 'Good night, Dad,' to it before we went to bed. Mum always gave it a kiss and said, 'Sleep tight, Norman. Keep safe.'

Poor little Rose couldn't understand why Dad had gone and she sobbed herself to sleep for a long time. We tried to stay cheerful and wrote him letters and Rose drew him pictures of Sheeba, but we didn't hear a lot back. I expect Dad was busy looking for Nazis.

By the end of September there were already anti-aircraft guns on Clapham Common and lots of barrage balloons fixed with long cables and floating in the air. Rose liked them. She said they looked like silver elephants.

'They're doing a good job,' Mum told us. 'If ever them Jerry planes come flying over Balham, they'll get tangled up in them cables. That'll fix 'em, won't it?'

Balham's only a few miles from central London and Mum thought Hitler might one day try to bomb important buildings, like the Tower of London or Buckingham Palace. So far he hadn't tried anything like that, but she said it was best to be prepared. That's why they put up the barrage balloons.

When I went back to school after the summer holidays the headmaster told us we were going to be evacuated. The whole school! We were being sent to somewhere in the country so we'd be safe and out of the reach of the Nazis. We'd go on a train, he said, and stay with some kind people who would look after us. My school was going to Hertford and all the teachers would be with us too. My best mates Ken and Barry were really excited.

'It'll be like an adventure,' said Ken. 'We'll stick together – just the three of us – and we'll have a great time. It's in the country and I bet there'll be loads of trees to climb.'

'There might be a river we can swim in. That would be brilliant!' said Barry who was very keen on swimming and spent most of the summer – and winter – at the swimming baths in Elmfield Road.

But when Mum heard about the evacuation she wasn't so pleased.

'What an idea!' she said. 'No stranger's going to have my children. You're staying here so I can look after you properly,' she insisted. 'What are they thinking of? That Hitler's in Poland and that's a long way off. What's wrong with you staying here?'

So when the others went, I waved them off – and I was left behind, with no school and no friends.

As it turned out, Mum was right. The war seemed far away with the Nazis fighting in places I'd never heard of. Everything stayed the same in Balham except we'd all been given gas masks and petrol was rationed. Sometimes the anti-aircraft guns fired on Tooting Bec Common and the air-raid sirens sounded – but we knew it wasn't real. They were only practising. People were calling it the Phoney War.

Then Dad came home on a week's leave in December, two weeks before Christmas, and I helped him build an Anderson shelter in the back garden.

'Just in case Jerry starts dropping bombs,' Dad said. 'Then I'll know you'll be safe.'

The shelter was great! It had a curved tin roof, which Dad covered with the last bit of grass in the garden so a Nazi pilot looking down from his plane would hardly notice it. It was brilliant camouflage! Rose called it her little house and played inside, putting her teddy in the bunk beds.

I liked being with Dad and helping to build the shelter, but his leave was soon over. Just before he went back to the army, he gave Mum present. 'Here, Ruby darlin',' he said, handing her a little box. 'It'll be your birthday next week and I shan't be here – so it's an early surprise.'

Mum's eyes filled with tears as she opened the box. She ooohed and aaahhed and her cheeks flushed pink when she saw a pair of gold earrings like little hoops. 'Oh, Norman!' she squealed. 'They're gorgeous! Where did you find them?'

Dad just grinned and gave Mum a great big kiss. Then he hugged Rose and me before he set off down the road, waving goodbye, looking smart in his uniform. We were proud of him, but as soon as he'd gone I started to worry and I'm sure Mum did, too. We knew he was heading for danger and there was nothing we could do to keep him safe.

Soon after that, it was Christmas, but it felt empty without Dad. We sent him some biscuits and Mum knitted him a pair of socks, but we wished he could be home with us. Christmas didn't feel the same.

Then heavy snow came in January, and I helped Rose build a snowman in the garden. The snow stayed for ages and, before it finally disappeared, I heard that some of the kids who had been evacuated had been brought home by their parents.

'You see!' said Mum. 'I was right, wasn't I, Billy? Nothing's happened. We're safe as houses here. It was all a big fuss over nothing, if you ask me.'

But my mates Ken and Barry didn't come back. They stayed in Hertford – which was bad cos I didn't have nobody to play footie with or swap cigarette cards with. I missed them a lot. But, looking on the bright side, none of the teachers came back either, so our school couldn't open again and that meant I'd got plenty of time to do what I wanted.

Until Mum got a job.

'I'm going to work in Mr Lodey's garage,' she suddenly announced one day.

I was shocked! Mum had never had a job, see. She'd always stayed at home and looked after us like all the other mums.

Who was going to do the cooking? That's what I wanted to know.

'We'll manage, Billy,' she said. 'Mr Lodey needs help now his son's been called up.'

This sounded crazy to me. 'You won't be mending cars, will you?' I asked. She didn't know anything about engines. Dad knew loads.

Mum shook her head. 'Nothing like that, Billy. I'll be working on the petrol pumps. It's an important job now that petrol's rationed. Not a word to Dad though,' she said, tapping her nose. 'He thinks a woman's place is in the home and he'll only worry. But I say that while he's away fighting, I've got to help out and do my bit. It's only right.'

'What about me and Rose? What'll happen to us?'

She put her arm round my shoulder. 'Mrs Scott next door will look after both of you and you can help her with the shopping. It's hard for her with two babies and her husband away.'

Mrs Scott had twins called Lily and Grace. They were born at Christmas and they made a terrible racket. Always crying, they were. I could hear them through the wall at night.

'Do I *have* to do her shopping?' I groaned. Shopping was horrible. I'd done plenty for Mum. Shopping meant queuing for hours and by the time you reached the counter they'd often sold out of whatever you were queuing for. 'Do I *have* to, Mum?'

She raised an eyebrow and gave me one of her looks and I knew I couldn't wriggle out of it.

Mum started work at the garage in April that year. I did my best to help out – digging the veg patch, cleaning the house and sometimes pushing Mrs Scott's babies out in their pram. I showed Rose how to play marbles and how to kick a football. She wasn't bad for a girl. I even taught her reading and writing. I must say, she was a fast learner so when she sent a drawing to Dad, she could write her name underneath and later a whole sentence. I bet Dad liked that.

All this time the war was going on in Europe and I knew what was happening cos people talked about it all the time. Some of them had wireless sets, see. And then there was the news at the cinema. Mum took me to see *Gone with the Wind*, which was a brilliant new film in full Technicolor – I'd only ever seen black-and-white ones till then. Before the film started, the news came on and showed a place on the French coast called Dunkirk. Our soldiers were on the beaches trying to escape from the Germans. They were trapped there until loads of boats came across the Channel from England to rescue them. Some boats were really small – just little fishing boats – and it must have been dangerous travelling all that way. But somehow they managed to rescue hundreds of soldiers and take them back home. I thought they were really brave and I wished I could have been there to help out.

That summer was long and sunny and I often took Rose and Sheeba down to Tooting Bec Common. Rose liked looking at the barrage balloons and she gave them names like Silver Whale and Heffalump. Meanwhile I threw sticks for Sheeba. She loved chasing after them and brought them back to me,

her tail wagging with pleasure, ready to go again.

There weren't many other dogs around because lots of people had theirs put down when the war started. They were worried that pets would eat too much and it would be difficult when food was rationed. I think that's disgusting. I'd rather starve than have Sheeba put down. We shared our food with her – that's what we did in our family.

Over those summer weeks I spent a lot of time training her. I taught her to sit and stay and when I held up my finger, or said no, I could stop her barking.

'She's ever so clever, ain't she, Billy?' said Rose, and I had to agree. She was a very intelligent dog.

When July came, the Nazis landed on the Channel Islands and Hitler tried to cross the Channel and invade England. But he hadn't reckoned on our pilots and their brilliant aircraft. They kept him out all right! A man told me there'd been air battles near Biggin Hill and they called it the Battle of Britain. Planes were shooting each other down, spinning out of control and plummeting to the ground. It must have been terrifying, but I wished I'd seen it. I wished I'd been there. Instead, I was shopping for Mrs Scott – the most boring thing in the world.

All those things had happened since my eleventh birthday. Now here I was – the night before my twelfth birthday, lying in bed, with Sheeba curled up on the rug. I didn't feel excited. There was nothing to get excited about. There was no Dad, no mates and probably no presents now that things were so difficult, what with the war and everything.

My thoughts were fizzing round in my head, but I finally closed my eyes and managed to drift off. I hadn't been sleeping long when I was woken by a noise downstairs. Sheeba growled softly under her breath and I said, 'No, Sheeba,' to quieten her while I listened again.

Rat-tat-tat. Someone was knocking at the front door.

It's never good news when somebody comes in the middle of the night. I sat up, wondering who it could be. I knew Mum hadn't heard the knocking cos I could hear her snoring in the next room.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat. The knocking came again.

'Mum!' I yelled and thumped on the wall. 'There's somebody at the door.'

The snoring stopped, but still she didn't answer. Sometimes she's slow to wake up.

Without waiting for her, I slid out of bed and hurried down the stairs towards the front door, the lino in the hall cold under my feet.

Rat-tat-tat.

'All right I'm coming!' I shouted.

A man's voice replied. 'About time, son!'

I gasped. I couldn't believe it. Dad was home!

I threw the bolts back, turned the key in the lock and flung the door open wide. Dad stepped inside and grabbed hold of me, swinging me off my feet while I clung to him, unable to speak, drawing in his smoky smell and thinking that this was the best birthday present I could have wished for.