When We Were Warriors



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90 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE
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The Night Visitors

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At the exact moment the bomb hit, Stan and his sisters were on their way to get chips. They were taking the short cut through the alley that ran behind Pavilion Street. It was unusually late to be out – almost bedtime – so they were hurrying in the hope of catching the chip shop still open. The evening was warm, the sky a lovely soft orange. On nights like these – and there'd been plenty this summer – it was hard to believe there was a war on. June, the eldest, walked in front, swinging Mum's purse so the coins inside clinked. She'd already decided on haddock with her chips. Stan and his younger sister Maggie were debating whether battered sausages or fishcakes were best, and what else they might get with Mum's money.

'You could have a pickled onion,' Maggie said, the ones she meant were the size of apples and eye-wateringly strong. 'Go on, Stan, dare you.'

'I might, but—'

The bomb cut him off. There wasn't a warning siren. They didn't even hear the plane. The sizzling white flash came out of nowhere.

When Stan opened his eyes again he was lying down, staring up at someone's washing line. It was dark. He was in a back garden. Damp from the grass was soaking into his shorts. The air smelled smoky, like bonfire night but bitter. In the distance, a fire engine wailed.

Stan sat up, dazed. 'June? Maggie?'

There was no sign of his sisters. All he could see was things burning. Pavilion Street, which usually buzzed with buses or grocery vans, or women in aprons chatting over their front gates, was eerily quiet. It felt like he was looking at the world through very thick glass. Where earlier there'd been a row of houses, now he could see straight across to the other side of the street. If this was a dream, then it was a pretty weird one. He wished someone would tell him to wake up.

Stan's legs, at least, were still working. As he got to his feet, string, pennies, a tiny glass bottle he'd found in the deepest part of the river, all tumbled from his torn-to-shreds pockets. Mum would be cross; she was forever mending his clothes.

She didn't like him swimming in the river, either. If he wasn't careful, she warned him, the river weed would pull him under and he'd never come up again.

'I'm a decent swimmer,' he'd tried to tell her. 'Better than June, at any rate.'

But his mum was a prize worrier. There'd been another child between June and Stan, who'd died of diphtheria. Though he'd never met Donnie, Stan thought he might've been born to make up for it, which in June's eyes he felt he never would.

Stan began to get his bearings. Behind him was the alley. To his right was their garden gate, still upright, still making that annoying squeak as he pushed it open. Beyond the gate things got confusing again. Stan's legs began to shake, almost as if his body knew before his brain did, because he was still trying to work out where their house had gone. Where it should've been the ground was all caved in. Sticking out on either side of the hole, like the ribs of a long-dead giant animal, were roof timbers from the neighbouring houses.

He'd seen enough blown-apart buildings to be almost numb to it. Amongst the kids on their street, the craze for shrapnel meant scrambling over still-warm bomb sites to get the best bits. Most was from our own anti-aircraft guns. But the bits with German

writing on were worth a mint, and June, who liked to be best at everything, had a shoebox full under her bed.

This was *their* house, though. The trembling in Stan's legs spread up his body. All he recognised was their cooker and the bathtub, blown halfway across the yard.

'Mum?' He clung to the hope she'd shout down the stairs, asking him why he'd been out so late. Trouble was the staircase, like the rest of the house, had gone.

Hearing something behind him, he spun round. Two people – one tall, one small – their faces badger-streaked with mud, drifted across the garden towards him. June was still carrying Mum's purse, though he couldn't remember why she had it. Maggie, a few steps behind her, looked stunned.

Stan was so choked with relief, he started to cry. And then he felt ashamed to be the only one blubbing: wasn't that always the way? June never cried at anything. And Maggie was only six, so that didn't really count.

Clumsily, he took his younger sister's hand. 'Are you all right? Is Mum with you?'

'Don't be stupid, Stan, you know she's not!' June snapped.

But he didn't know, and the way June said it made it seem as if he should.

'Where is she, then?' he asked.

'Inside. Too sick to cook our tea, that's where!'

It came back to him in an agonising jolt: Mum bent double coughing, shivering with the flu despite the good weather. Mum getting her coat on, finding her purse, and coughing, coughing. He offered to fetch the chips himself, didn't he, and the others said they'd come too.

'You told Mum to go back to bed.' June scowled at him. 'Don't you remember?'

Stan wasn't sure he did.

June pushed past him for the house. When she saw the huge crater, the broken roof, she stopped. Her shoulders went stiff. Her legs crumpled. She sat down on the ground with a bump. His older sister, who never cried at anything, started sobbing angrily.

'Where's Mum?' Maggie wailed. 'I want Mum.'

Holding her hand a little bit tighter, Stan tried not to admit that he wanted Mum too.

Other people were now arriving – the air-raid warden in his ARP hat, a policeman, two ambulance women carrying blankets and a stretcher.

'But the warning siren didn't even go off,' the policeman was saying.

'It was a leftover bomb, that's why,' the warden

explained. 'The pilot'll have been on a raid up north somewhere, and dropped it on the way home to save fuel.'

'He could've waited another mile or two till he was out over the fields,' an ambulance woman replied. She stopped at June and put a blanket around her, passing another to Stan and Maggie. 'Anyone inside?'

Stan nodded, though before he could explain, the other ambulance woman called out, 'Hey, Sheila! Reckon we've got someone!'

'Quick! Bring your torches over here, please!' the blanket lady yelled.

There was a rush of people, lights, men with buckets, shovels, ropes. Someone was shouting and waving their arms. Maggie lunged forwards.

'Stay back,' Stan warned her, terrified in case they'd found Mum. More terrified that they hadn't.

In the confusion of torch beams and shouting, he thought he glimpsed a hand, an arm, what looked like Mum's bobbly old blue sweater. It was too dark to be sure. June was on her feet, craning to see. Stan couldn't bear to and turned away.

It was the ambulance driver who made him turn back again. She was talking to someone – not urgent or shouty, but like she was sat at the kitchen table, enjoying a cup of tea with a pal.

'Don't worry, love. We'll have you out of there and tucked up in bed in no time.'

She was holding someone's hand. Someone in a blue sweater.

'Mum!' Now Stan was the one rushing forwards.

June grabbed his arm. 'Keep back!'

'Is she all right?' he wanted to know.

'She's alive, at least,' June said, still sounding cross. 'Let them dig her out and get her into the ambulance. You've poked your nose in enough.'

He stared at her. 'Why? What've I done?'

'Mum would've come with us to the chippy if you hadn't been such a fusspot,' June said spitefully.

'Now hang on a minute!' Stan cried. All he'd done was suggest Mum would be better off going back to bed. Besides, like the policeman said, there hadn't even been an air-raid warning. It was unfair to blame everything on him.