OPERATION DOODLEBUG



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Piccadilly

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To Mum and Dad, who filled my head with wartime stories.
They'd have loved this one.





1
AU REVOIR

Croydon, Surrey. April 1944.

We're almost at the station.

It's so early, the sun ain't really up yet. It's still stuck on top of the Clocktower like a lolly on a stick and them low rays would poke my eyes out if I wasn't trotting along in Dad's tall shadow. But it don't matter how hard I try to catch up, he's still striding ahead of me, checking his watch.

He's taller in that new uniform than in the crumpled kitchen whites he wears for work. Like he's got more angles. Like he's *sharper*. Call that sharp, though? Heading off for war when you don't have to?

'You're *daft*!' I yell at his back. He keeps walking, but I know he can hear me. 'Joining the army when you ain't even been called up!'

At that, he stops and turns. He's so big, my dad, he blocks the whole pavement. Folk tut-tut and step off the kerb to get to the station, but Dad don't care. He stoops so we're level and

looks me in the eye.

'Stan,' he says. 'Stan, we been through this a hundred times. All this talk about a 'big push', about us driving Jerry outta France—'

'But bakers are still reserved, though, ain't they? No one says *you* gotta fight!'

'No . . .' he says slowly. 'They don't.'

'Then, *why*?'

'Because . . .' Dad straightens up and grabs his lapels.

Not now, Dad, please, please, I'm begging him with my eyes, but he rocks back on his heels.

'This is . . .' he growls, 'no time for ease and comfort! It is time to *dare* and *endure*!'

I look away. I know he's trying to cheer me up with his Churchill impression, but nothing's funny right now. 'Ain't we *endured* enough without you going off?'

Dad puts his hand on my shoulder, his face so near I can smell his pipe. 'Listen, son, I know the prime minister ain't saying bakers *have* to, but I'm going all the same. I done my bit at home, and now I gotta do my bit in the army. I owe it to all 'em who—' He shuts up quick.

All them who didn't come back, he means.

He straightens up. 'Well, I can't just stand round and not do my bit. I gotta help. Britain needs *soldiers*, not bakers. Loaves and cakes ain't gonna win the war, are they? Although, thinking about it . . .' He drops me wink that scrunches half his face. 'Your mum's biscuits would make good ammo, wouldn't they? Eh? *Eh?*'

He tries to nudge a smile out of me with his elbow, but

nothing's funny today.

I *need* him. What if there's another Blitz? I can't stand being stuck down in the shelters – I need him there to keep me calm, stop the panic bursting out my chest.

We're standing outside the baker's shop where Dad works – *worked*, I should say. In the window there's a big wedding cake that's been there for blooming months. It looks all proper and fancy, with twiddly bits of white icing and all, but I know my dad made it from cardboard and plaster of Paris. Four and a half years into the war, there ain't enough eggs or sugar in the whole of Croydon for that cake. It's fake.

Dad sees me looking and gives a great old grin, like we got nothing to worry about. 'Cheer up, son! I'll be back baking before you know it.' He slings his kitbag over his shoulder and turns for the station again. 'C'mon now, son, or I'll miss my train.'



East Croydon station's busy as an anthill. Schoolchildren and workers are charging off in all directions, porters criss-crossing the concourse pushing trolleys piled so high they're tottering. Groups of troops stand guarding their bags like they're precious eggs. The station smells of sweat and steam and coal and cigarette smoke.

Under the high roof, sounds boom and echo like in a church. Against all the chatter and chuffing and laughter, a newspaper seller is yelling the headlines:

'*READ ALL ABAAAAAHT IT! MISSIN' CROYDON SOLDIER BACK FROM THE DEEEEAD!*'

Dad backtracks, hands the man a coin and picks up a copy of the *Croydon Times*.

He whistles. 'Look, Stan! That's Mrs Piper's husband. He was posted *Missing, believed killed* a few weeks back.' Dad scans the front page. 'Says here he's a prisoner of war in Germany.' Dad tucks the newspaper under his arm. 'I don't suppose being a prisoner is any fun, but it's a darn sight better than being dead.'

A lady from the Women's Voluntary Service is serving teas from a wagon. She flashes us a bright smile. I get a little glow of pride despite myself. After all these years of being embarrassed and having to explain why my dad's not in uniform, he's joined the heroes.

Train doors are slamming. The coast train leaves at quarter past and the big station clock says that's only ten more minutes. Tears are vinegar at the back of my nose: I swallow 'em down and blink. *I must not cry*. Breathe. *I will . . . not . . . cry*.

Dad checks the platform boards. 'That's my train, over on Platform Six. Where are the others from my platoon?' He glances round, then points towards a clump of khaki uniforms at the tea stand. 'That could be my lot. Look like a jolly bunch, don't they?'

Do they? They're just drinking tea and smoking and talking quietly, berets balanced at an angle or tucked into shoulder straps. Most of 'em are a lot younger than my dad.

'Excuse me.'

A boy with the same cap badge as Dad is standing behind us. His beret's jammed on, his ears stick out like jug handles and he don't look jolly at all. He looks as miserable as I feel.

He can't be a day over eighteen and so scrawny he'd blow over in a strong wind. His kitbag's fatter than he is.

'Do you . . . do you know where we're supposed to go?' The boy's dark eyes flick nervously round the station.

Dad points. 'I reckon that's our lot.' He gives the lad a broad smile. 'I'm George. What's your name?'

'Arthur.' His voice is all posh, sharp as a squeaky recorder. 'Pleased to meet you, George.'

They shake hands. Arthur looks at me.

'And this is my son, Stan.' Dad smiles kindly. 'We're just saying our goodbyes.'

'Oh, of course, sorry!' The young soldier steps away smartish.

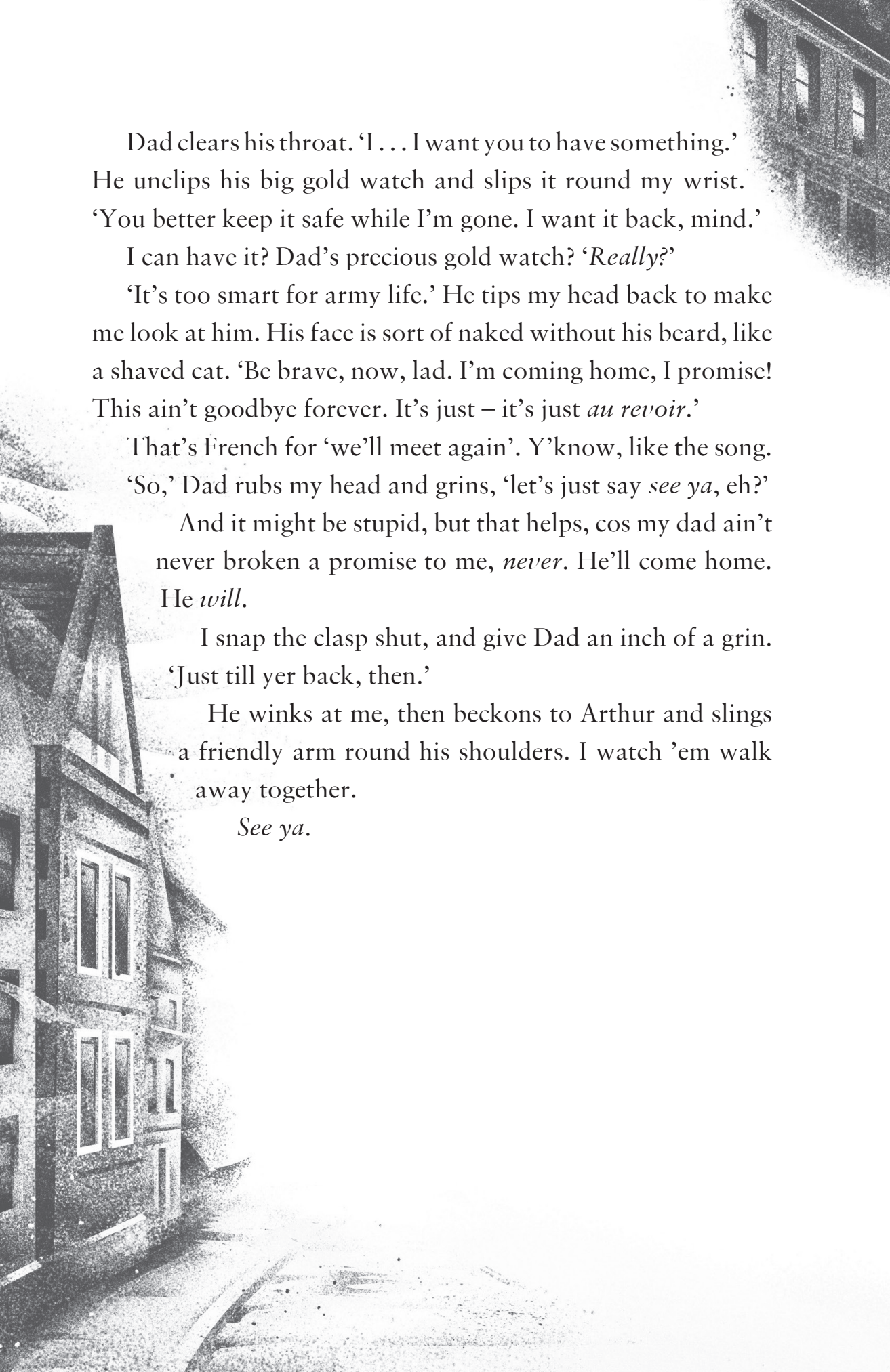
This is it. A giant hand reaches inside my ribcage and squeezes my heart till it hurts. I can't speak. Don't think I can even breathe. The blood beats in my ears.

Dad looks down at me. 'Be brave now, lad. I won't be away for long. And your mum's got you to look after her, hasn't she? You got to be the man of the house now, Stanley.'

I duck my head to hide the tears spilling over, but I can't stop the words any more than I can hold back Niagara Falls. '*You* said we should all stay together! You, me and Mum! Always! You said we'd never leave each other!'

Dad's big hands rub my back like I'm two years old, not twelve. 'Hey, hey, sonny, *don't*. Don't take on so.' He sighs. 'Oh, I knew you should've stayed at home with your mum . . . Listen, I'll be back before you know it, just as soon as I've given ol' Hitler the heave-ho, all right?'

I breathe in the familiar smell of tobacco and Brylcreem. 'But what if you *don't* come home?'



Dad clears his throat. 'I . . . I want you to have something.' He unclips his big gold watch and slips it round my wrist. 'You better keep it safe while I'm gone. I want it back, mind.'

I can have it? Dad's precious gold watch? '*Really?*'

'It's too smart for army life.' He tips my head back to make me look at him. His face is sort of naked without his beard, like a shaved cat. 'Be brave, now, lad. I'm coming home, I promise! This ain't goodbye forever. It's just – it's just *au revoir*.'

That's French for 'we'll meet again'. Y'know, like the song.

'So,' Dad rubs my head and grins, 'let's just say *see ya*, eh?'

And it might be stupid, but that helps, cos my dad ain't never broken a promise to me, *never*. He'll come home. He *will*.

I snap the clasp shut, and give Dad an inch of a grin. 'Just till yer back, then.'

He winks at me, then beckons to Arthur and slings a friendly arm round his shoulders. I watch 'em walk away together.

See ya.