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opening extract from

Shrapnel

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Spivs

The youth in the natty suit rose, scooping up his companion's empty tankard. 'Same again, is it?'

The other boy frowned, shook his head. 'It's my . . . you got that one. I can't let you . . .'

'Relax, chum. I told you, lolly's not a worry. Back in a sec.'

He watched the suit swerve through knots of young men in uniform, heading for the bar. Must be nice, he thought, enough of the readies to stand a total stranger two rounds in a row, and on a Thursday night. His own wage never stretched past Monday.

'There y'are.' The youth banged two fresh pints on the table. 'Get that down the inside of your neck.' He sat down, sketched a toast with his tankard and took a long pull.

His companion sipped, studying his generous acquaintance over the rim of the glass. 'So,' he said, 'what line are you in, if it's not a rude question?' He smiled in case it was. 'It obviously pays well.'

The youth shrugged. 'I manage.' He grinned. 'Better than slaving in some factory at any rate: beats me how you stick it, mate.'

The boy pulled a face. 'It's a reserved occupation for one thing – I won't be called up.' He sighed. 'Tedious though, day in day out since I was fourteen. I've a good mind to enlist, if only for the chance of a bit of excitement.'

The smart youth shook his head. 'No need for that, chum. If it's excitement you're after, you can find it without getting your head blown off, and have cash in your pocket.'

'How?'

'Easy. Join me. Us. We can always use another bright lad who thrives on excitement.' He smiled. 'Have to leave Mummy and Daddy though, or the Army'll get you.'

The boy smiled. 'That'll be no hardship, I'm cheesed off being treated like a kid. What d'I have to do?'

The youth winked. 'Nothing you'd need a university education for, chum. Drink up.'



ONE

If

'If we had some bacon,' said Dad, 'we could have bacon and eggs, if we had some eggs.'

Mum smiled at this well-worn wartime joke. 'If we had eggs, Frank, we'd be tucking in to one of those rich cakes I used to bake for Sunday tea before the war, instead of this eggless so-called sponge.'

'If I was eighteen instead of thirteen,' I put in, hoovering up dry crumbs with a fingertip, 'I'd be bringing my Spitfire in to land at this very moment, after bagging two Messerschmitts over Kent.'

'If you'd the sense you were born with, Gordon,' snapped Mum, 'you'd thank your lucky stars you're *not* eighteen. Many a lad will have died today, and more'll die tomorrow. I hope it's all over before you're old enough to go.'

'He won't go anyway, Ethel,' said Dad. 'Minute he turns fourteen, he starts with me at Beresford's.'

Hang Beresford's, I thought but didn't say. Beresford's is where Dad works. It's a light engineering factory. In peacetime they make bicycle parts. Now it's shell cases, same as in the Great War. Dad's worked there since he was a boy. He missed the Great War, because engineering was a reserved occupation. It's a reserved occupation this time as well. My brother went there straight from school, but he packed it in a few weeks ago, when he turned twenty-one. You can do what you like when you're twenty-one. He left home at the same time, but he's been seen about so he's not in the Army. Raymond, his name is. I wish he'd taken me with him.

Well, I get picked on, see?

'What colour's Price's dad?' yells Dicky Deadman, and his three chums shout, 'Yellow.'

Their dads served in the Great War. *The last lot*, as it's called now. Deadman senior was in the Navy. Charlie Williams and Bobby Shawcross's dads survived the trenches, and Victor Platt's old man drove an ambulance. Victor's got a sister in the WAAF as well.

Fellows in reserved occupations are doing their bit, but chumps like Deadman don't see it. If you're not in uniform you must be a coward, that's what they reckon.

Proves something I'm about to learn – that war brings out the best in some people, and the worst in others.