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Friday 20th September ~ evening

A strange arrival, Adam thought.

Carted around on a trailer in an unknown town, stopping at houses as darkness fell. At each house, one of the children was dropped off. Sometimes two together if they were brothers or sisters. A woman from the Women's Voluntary Service was with them, young, efficient, cheerful. At each door, there were explanations and instructions.

It was almost dark when, finally, it was Adam's turn but he could see that the house was bigger than most of the others. There was a notice outside: *Ely Guesthouse*.

A woman on the doorstep, and two girls standing shyly with her. Adam guessed they were about his age. Behind them, a long dark passage, and a light in the depths of the house. Like living in a cave.

'Well, Mrs Barnes, we have one for you. He says his name is Adam Swales. He's not on my list for some reason. There's been some kind of muddle. But it won't make any difference to you, will it? One boy is just like any other boy. We were expecting more, to be honest. But they haven't all come.'

Mrs Barnes took a few steps into the street and took

Adam's case while he jumped to the ground. Then she shook his hand and said she hoped he would be happy with them.

Who *are* these people? Adam thought.

'There's one important rule, Mrs Barnes. Please make sure that Adam writes to his family tomorrow – to let them know where he is staying and that he is all right.'

The door was shut behind him and Adam found himself being led along a passage in almost total blackness. There were unevennesses in the floor which his feet didn't know about. He sensed that they passed a couple of large empty rooms, one on each side.

One of the girls was chattering. 'I'm Abigail. I don't live here. Molly lives here. I live at the crossing-house by the railway. I saw you lot come in.'

Someone's hand guided him from behind, round a corner and into a large kitchen. He had never seen a room like this. Low ceiling, huge stove, cupboards and shelves on every wall. Cluttered but spacious. How strange it all was. These people were cave-dwellers. He had come to live among aliens.

But the table was familiar. A big steel air-raid shelter, with metal grilles fixed on all four sides. They had one at home. They hadn't been given an Anderson shelter because their backyard wasn't big enough to put it in. Instead, his father had installed the table-shelter with some of his workmates. You could unhook the grilles so that there was space for your legs when you sat at the table. 'It won't stand a direct hit, but it will protect from

falling masonry,' his dad had said. 'We'll be like animals in a cage.'

'Girls, show Adam where his room is. When you come down, Adam, there will be something for you to eat.'

He worked out the two girls. The quiet one lived here but it was Abigail, her friend, who did most of the talking. She was excited and happy, explaining where the big breakfast room was, and the bathroom and the lavatory, and which parts of the house were set aside for paying guests. Molly, the other one, was watchful.

Alone in his room, he put out the light, pulled back the curtain and opened the window. Below him was the street. Not a light to be seen – total blackout. He was used to that; it was like that back home. But the darkness there was busy, full of noise and people and vehicles. Here the street was empty and silent. The sky, too, was peaceful and still.

Adam sighed. He closed the window and began the journey back down to the kitchen. He took with him his sketchbook and a pencil. I need a map for this house, he thought.

A plate piled high awaited him. 'We had ours earlier,' Mrs Barnes said. 'I kept this warm for you.' Meat and Yorkshire pudding, with peas, sprouts, mashed potatoes and gravy. There was a slight dryness all over where it had been kept hot in the oven, but under that it was delicious.

The girls sat at the table opposite him, with scissors and paste.

'What are you doing?' Apart from a few thankyous, this was the first time he had spoken.

'Molly's sorting out her Rupert stories,' Abigail said. 'I'm helping.'

There was a big pile of pages torn from past copies of the *Daily Express* and Molly was cutting out the Rupert Bear stories, arranging them for glueing in a scrapbook.

'I'm saving them for my baby brother,' Molly said. 'For when he's older.'

Adam found himself looking directly into her eyes. 'I used to read them,' he said. 'There used to be two pictures every day, not just one.'

'There's only one now – because of the War,' Molly said quietly.

Adam opened his sketchbook and drew a frame. Abigail watched, wide-eyed and puzzled. In Adam's mind Rupert Bear was standing with a bren gun, under a night sky and taking aim at a passing Messerschmitt.

One of the Rupert episodes was missing. The girls couldn't find number 32. Adam joined in the search. There were old copies of the *Daily Express* all over the table, in disorderly piles on chairs, and on the floor.

But number 32 was nowhere to be found and Molly, in spite of not wanting to seem babyish, had tears in her eyes. Abigail, knowing her friend, explained her to

Adam. 'If one bit is missing, it spoils the whole story,' she said. 'It's like jigsaw puzzles.'

Adam took up his pencil. 'What happens in the missing bit?' he asked Molly.

Molly found numbers 31 and 33 and studied them. 'Well, not much,' she admitted. 'In 31 Rupert is walking up a hill, searching for his friend Algy Pug. In 33, he's found him and they are talking.'

Adam studied the two episodes. 'Can you write out the missing bit?'

'I can make it up,' Molly said. But she asked Abigail to write it because she could do writing which was neat and really small. Adam showed her where to write it in his sketchbook.

Mystified, Molly dictated to Abigail:

Rupert hurries to the top of the hill and sees Algy in the distance. He is overjoyed to see his friend and shouts and waves to him. Algy shouts 'Hurrah! I've seen the Moon Imp!'

Adam drew a small frame beside the words. He took a pencil from his sock, and a penknife from his pocket, and delicately made the point as sharp as a pin. Then he sketched in clear black lines a picture of Rupert Bear, perfect, seen from behind, coming over the brow of a hill, one arm waving and both feet clear of the ground as he ran. The country was wooded and Algy could be seen in the distance at the bottom of the

hill, tiny, with his arms in the air. Fat round clouds floated across the sky. Adam finished off by shading in the trees.

He cut the picture and text from his book to match the size of the others. 'It's not the original,' he said. 'But it fits.'

Abigail found ten different ways of saying how wonderful she thought the drawing was. Molly simply said 'Thanks.'

Adam was already beginning his own Rupert Bear story. *Rupert and the Messerschmitts*. A war story, he thought. He stored the idea away in his head for use later.

Friday 20th September ~ midnight

Adam sat up in bed, listening. The faint wailing of a distant air-raid siren travelled across the Fens. Barely a minute later another siren joined in, loud and much closer. Probably only two streets away.

Nothing was to be seen from the bedroom window. Adam could sense the people – in the town, on distant farms and in scattered cottages. He could *see* them, crouching quietly in the dark and lying still, hoping they would be unnoticed as the enemy flew overhead.

A knock on his door. Molly in pale pink pyjamas. 'Mum says we have to get in the shelter.' She looked sleepy, unhurried.

'Listen!' he said. 'They're Dorniers.'

Molly squinted at him sleepily. 'What?'

The low purposeful roar of the approaching bombers was unutterably sinister.

'They're called flying pencils,' Adam whispered.

'Oh.' Molly left his room and set off towards the stairs. Adam followed. 'Because of their shape.'

In the big kitchen, Molly crawled on all fours into the cave under the shelter-table. Adam followed the soles of her feet. Mrs Barnes had eiderdowns laid out for

lying on, and there were rugs and pillows. 'Molly,' she said, 'take Baby William.'

She passed the baby into the shelter and went away. The bombers overhead seemed close enough to slice off rooftops and chimneys as they passed. There was a climax of noise, a prolonged intensive roar.

Molly's mum returned with a tin of biscuits. She passed them to Molly and hurriedly crawled in herself, closing the metal grille behind her.

'Do they come every night?' Adam said into the darkness.

'They did in the summer. We've had a bit of a lull lately – when they turned their attention to London.'

'They sometimes bomb the dummy aerodrome,' Molly said. 'Over near Welney.'

'Dummy aerodrome? What's that?'

'A decoy. A trick to make the Germans bomb that instead of the real airfields. They have planes made of plywood, and everything. I've seen it.'

'Molly, you're not supposed to say that sort of thing. It's top secret and there's a War on. How many times do you have to be told?'

'Adam's not a German spy!' Molly said.

The Dorniers passed westwards and left the night silent again.

'We'll hear them later, on their way back,' Molly said. 'That's when they drop any bombs they've got left.'

Adam thought: I am in a sort of bed, under a sort of table. With a family of complete strangers, in a strange

house, in a strange town, in a strange countryside. He thought of home, where the air-raids were noisier, with screaming dive-bombers, falling sticks of bombs, distant thudding explosions, collapsing walls, incendiaries, and fire-engines and ambulances clanging through the streets. Who would be getting the worst of it tonight? Bethnal Green? Hackney? The City?

'We've had a murder,' Molly said. 'Abigail and me are going to solve it. You can help us if you like.'

Adam frowned in the darkness.

What an extraordinary thing to say! Was she being serious?

Saturday 21st September ~ morning

The murder was incomprehensible. An impossible thought. Every night, enemy airmen flew over England intent upon killing thousands of people. Yet this one murder, this single death, stuck in the throat. It was unnatural, unthinkable.

But Molly thought about it all the time.

She was trying to explain this to Abigail on their way home from the shops. Every Saturday morning, they did errands for both their mothers. Molly's mum sometimes needed more shopping because of running a guesthouse, but they shared the work equally. And the wages. A shilling each.

'It's stuck in my mind,' Molly said. 'I can't get rid of it.'

'We need to find out who did it,' Abigail said. 'Then it wouldn't worry you any more.'

Molly shifted the shopping-basket from her left hand to her right. It was heavy and made the inside of her hand sore. It bumped against her leg as she walked.

'Do you think murderers should be hung?' Abigail asked.

Molly corrected her. '*Hanged*,' she said.

'All right! *Hanged*. It was *me* that taught *you* that! But do you?'

'I don't know,' Molly said doubtfully.

'Well, I do! And you should know what you think. It's an important matter.'

'Is it?'

'Well, it's important for the person they're going to hang. Everyone should have an opinion about it.'

'Well, I haven't got one.'

'At Sunday School, Miss Milson says everyone should have opinions.'

Molly was suddenly angry. 'Well, she's wrong! I'm not grown up yet. I don't have to have opinions! It's not my *job* to have opinions.'

'Well, whose is it then?'

'Other people's,' Molly said lamely. 'Judges and policemen and prime ministers. And the king. It's *their* job, it's not mine. I'll get opinions when I'm grown up.'

Molly always got cross when Abigail went on about Sunday School. She went to a different one. It was the only activity where they went to different places. Molly hated the Methodist Sunday School because she didn't go there.

Still, they made friends again quickly. They always did.

'What do you think of your evacuee boy?'

Abigail sounded wistful. Molly considered and said, 'He's OK, I think.' And he *listens*, she added inwardly.

'Did he go in the shelter with you last night?'

Molly nodded.

'What were his pyjamas like?'

Molly looked confused. 'I don't know,' she said helplessly. 'Blue, I think.'

'But were they *clean*?'

'Yes, I think so. How should *I* know?'

'Molly Barnes, you're *useless*! He's good at drawing Rupert Bear. I'll say that for him.' Abigail sounded just like her mother. She didn't know that, but Molly did.

'I told him about the murder,' Molly said. She hesitated and then added: 'I told him he could help us find the person who did it.'

There was just the slightest pause before Abigail asked her why.

'I don't know,' Molly said. 'I just did.'

Molly knew that she had upset Abigail. She also knew that Abigail didn't want another quarrel. So it was up to her to prevent it. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I should have asked you first.'

'Oh, well. I daresay we can find a use for him,' Abigail said.

Then Molly knew it was all right. But the fact of the murder was still there. That was not all right. It was in her mind, unshiftable, like a piece of grit in her eye.

There was a man crossing the street towards them. 'Excuse me! I wonder if you could give me some directions.'

The girls stopped and waited.

'I'm looking for the Ely Guesthouse. Could you tell me how to get there?'

Molly and Abigail stood silent, taking him in. He was large, middle-aged, well-dressed and grey-haired, with a friendly face. He was not in uniform.

'Now why,' said the stranger, 'should a perfectly innocent question from a perfectly innocent person cause such consternation?'

'Oh, we're not consternated,' Abigail said. 'It's just a strange coincidence, that's all.'

'What is?'

'Molly lives there. It's her mum who runs the guesthouse.' Abigail was excited. Whenever there was a coincidence, she thought the universe was speaking to her.

'Is that correct?' the man asked Molly.

Molly nodded. She liked his eyes. 'You can come with us if you like,' she said. 'It's only just round the next bend.'

The stranger was relieved. 'I'm very tired,' he admitted. 'It's a long way from the station, and there was no taxi.' Then there was a discussion about how they could help him with his luggage. But, since they had their shopping, there was little they could do.

'I can take your umbrella,' Abigail suggested. 'Then you'll have two hands to carry with.'

Abigail tried swinging the flapping umbrella beside her, as if it were a walking-stick. But it was too long for that, or she was not long enough. She finished up with it over her shoulder, marching like a soldier with a rifle.