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Opening extract from

Valentine Joe

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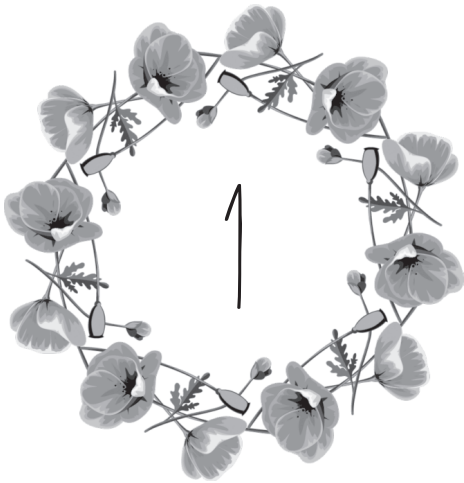
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In memory of my grandfather, Fred Thompson,
and the men and boys of all nations
who didn't make it home from the Great War.

‘In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.’

John McCrae ‘In Flanders Fields’*, Essex Farm 1915*



It was the day before Valentine's Day and Rose was on a train, speeding through the misty Kent countryside with her passport in her bag, her phone in her pocket and her grandad on the seat opposite, snoring gently. Rose hoped he wasn't going to dribble.

She stifled a yawn and looked around the compartment at the other passengers, trying to imagine who they were and what their lives were like. She often did this when she was sitting on a train or bus and had nothing else to do. It stopped her getting bored.

Or thinking about other stuff.

Her eyes rested on a smartly dressed woman across the aisle, working on her laptop. She lived on her own, Rose decided, in an amazing flat overlooking the river, but secretly longed to move to the country and breed guinea pigs. And the smug, pink-faced businessman opposite, who looked like he'd been over-inflated with a bicycle pump – he didn't know his teenage daughter had just got her

tongue pierced and his son was keeping a snake in a shoebox under his bed. The young couple with backpacks and blond dreadlocks, whispering to each other further down the carriage, were on the run from the police. Rose was just trying to decide what crime they might have committed when the girl looked up and caught her eye.

Rose stared down at her book, cheeks hot with embarrassment. She seemed to spend a lot of time feeling awkward these days. She'd felt excited that morning though, when Grandad had picked her up and they'd gone swinging through the early-morning streets in a cab, heading for St Pancras International. She'd felt like someone different, someone who got on trains and set off to foreign countries all the time. Someone who found it easy to talk to boys, went to loads of parties and didn't spend so much time staring out of her bedroom window or making up weird stories about strangers on trains. Someone normal, in other words.

Someone happy.

Not that Rose was *un*happy. She didn't go round bursting into tears in Tesco or anything like that (although she did once feel like crying when a friendly bus driver called her 'sweetheart' and told her to have a good day). It was just that since it happened, since Dad died, Mum had been so wrapped up in her own sadness that you couldn't get near her. Rose felt the same in a way. It was like she and Mum were in two separate bubbles, floating away from each other in space. It had been nearly a year now, and Rose still felt a bit – *alone.*

She wasn't really alone, not literally. She *did* have Mum, of course she did, and Grandad. And her two best friends, Ella and Grace, had been extra nice to her.

But, but, but . . .

Rose's dad was thirty-eight when he died. He had sticky-up hair and a crooked grin. For months after, Rose had had the same dream. She'd be asleep in bed – in the dream – and there'd be a knock at the front door. And she'd wake up – still in the dream – and run down and open the door and there he was. Dad was there, looking just the same. And he'd grin and shrug and say: 'It was all a mistake! I'm here! Here I am!' And he'd hold out his arms and she'd feel the roughness of his jumper on her face and dissolve into the old familiar smell of soap and toast and bicycle oil.

And then she'd wake up, for real this time, and realise it was a dream. Dad had gone and she was alone in her room with the grey London morning seeping through the curtains and no one but her old teddy bear for company. She'd hear Mum getting breakfast downstairs and even the clatter of the plates would sound lonely. Then Rose would get up, get dressed, get on the bus to school. And at the end of the day, she'd come home and there'd still be no Dad, and Mum would still be silent and sad, and nothing would ever change, ever ever ever.

That was when she wanted to go back into the dream. And stay there for good.

Grandad made a little sound in his sleep and shivered. One of his hands was on the table between them: square-cut nails, brown spots on the back, veins standing out. Rose's heart clenched as she looked at it. Grandad was so *old*. He wouldn't be around for ever.

Rose couldn't bear to think what a world without Grandad would be like, so she reached out a hand to wake him. She wanted him to be there with her, to talk about normal stuff, make her laugh, start embarrassing conversations with

strangers, anything. Then, as a funny little half-smile passed across his sleeping face, she changed her mind. She'd let him sleep. Her dad was his son, his boy. He missed him too. And perhaps, like Rose, he was dreaming about a knock on the door.

So Rose got out her phone instead and scrolled through the names. *Home*, *Ella*, *Grace*, *Grandad*, *Mummob*, *Dadmob* . . .

She clicked on *Dadmob*.

No one knew she still sent him texts. Not Mum, not Grace or Ella. Not even Grandad. It was her secret.

She'd sent the first one the day of the funeral. Everybody had come back to the house after the service for cups of tea and sandwiches, and Rose had sat by herself in the chair where Dad always sat to watch the football, a small knot of unhappiness, while the room, the guests, swirled anti-clockwise around her. Someone had dropped a salmon sandwich on the carpet near Dad's chair, which someone else had trodden on (the smell of tinned salmon still made Rose feel sick). She'd got out her phone to try and look busy, and scrolled through the numbers in her contacts. *Home*, *Ella*, *Grace*, *Grandad*, *Mummob*, *Dadmob* . . .

Dadmob . . .

Dadmob . . .

Dad . . .

She couldn't bring herself to delete it. That would make it real, the fact that he was gone. Final. So, sitting there, in his favourite chair, she'd sent him a text instead. Five words:

Hello dad it's me rose

Then a kiss, just one:

x

The thought of the words flying up through the air had made her feel a tiny bit better. So she'd been doing it ever since. She didn't write anything important or weird, just the usual stuff:

I'm on the bus and I'm bored x

History exam today argh x

Sometimes she just put:

x x x

Rose wondered what happened to all the texts she sent. She pictured them flying up, suspended against the blue of the sky for an instant before slithering down and ending up in a drift at the bottom like dead leaves. Then Dad would come along and stare at them for a second, before crouching down to sift through them and reassemble her messages:

I miss you

I'm sad

I don't want to be here if you're not

Sometimes she wondered how she'd feel if she got a reply. It'd probably be from someone who'd taken over the number:

Who r u? Stop txtng me freak!

'Fnuff!' Grandad made a loud snort and woke himself up. He looked around accusingly as if he didn't know where he was and glared at the woman working on her laptop before his eyes came to rest on Rose and his face softened. For a second he looked so much like Dad that Rose felt her eyes prickle.

'All right, Cabbage?'

Grandad was the only one who called her that now. Rose shook her head at him, pretending to be cross.

'You were snoring, Brian.'

When she was little Rose had heard her grandma calling Grandad by his first name and had copied her. This amused everyone so much she'd kept it up.

'When you get to my age snoring's one of the few pleasures you've got left,' he said, producing a plastic box from his bag. 'Have a biscuit.'

'No thanks, Grandad, you're all right.'

He opened the box and Rose got a whiff of custard creams. Their sweet, dusty, old-people smell didn't fit with the glossy new-car scent of the train.

'Please yourself. Look, we're about to go into the tunnel.'

Outside the windows the misty grey fields were now hidden by great blank walls going up on each side. Then there was a gentle *whoomp* and the pressure inside the compartment changed as the train entered the tunnel. The other passengers shifted in their seats and shared glances, as if something exciting was happening. Even the woman with the laptop, and the over-inflated businessman – who probably did the journey several times a week – looked up from their work to stare into the darkness outside the windows.

Rose could see her own face, ghostly in its cloud of dark hair, reflected in the darkness, as if another train were travelling alongside with another Rose on board. Was that train going to the same place, she wondered, or would it veer off somewhere else entirely when they left the tunnel? It was just like an ordinary train tunnel, actually. You'd never know you were going under the sea. *Dad would've enjoyed it though*, she thought. He'd have made up stories about mermaids being disturbed and swimming after the train, tails swishing angrily and hair streaming out behind them

like seaweed. She texted:

In tunnel on way to belgium with grandad to look at war graves?!?! x

There was no signal in the tunnel, of course, but she pressed 'Send' anyway.

She was doing this for Grandad, this trip to Belgium. They were heading for a city called Ypres (you pronounced it 'Eepra', Mum had told her before they left) to visit his uncle's grave. Grandad couldn't fill the hole that Dad had left, but he tried his best and Rose loved him for that. So when he'd suggested the trip, Rose had said she'd go, even though it would mean she might miss Grace's Valentine's Day party. She didn't mind too much about that, actually.

'Have a look at this, Cabbage.' Grandad was rummaging in the old army surplus shoulder bag he always carried with him. His possessions soon covered the table: wallet, house keys (with keyring featuring photo of Rose aged seven looking embarrassed in primary school uniform), football whistle (Grandad coached a local boys' team), tube of stuff to rub on bad backs (smelling of old people), and then . . .

'What's that, Grandad?'

It was an old photograph mounted on yellowing cardboard which looked like it had once been in a frame. As Grandad pushed it across the table towards her, Rose caught a musty smell like old library books. It smelled of the past.

'It's my dad,' he said. 'Your great-grandad.'

Dad's grandad, thought Rose. Did they look alike? She looked at the young face in the photo, searching for similarities.

Grandad seemed to guess what she was thinking. Their eyes met for a second. Grandad was the first to look away.

‘And that’s his brother.’ He pointed to the other young man. ‘My uncle George.’

They were in uniform, the brothers, sitting on a bench in a photographer’s studio with a potted palm behind them, gazing calmly out of the sepia-tinged past into Rose’s eyes.

‘It was taken just before they left,’ Grandad continued.

‘To the war?’

‘Yeah, the Front. Flanders, in Belgium, where we’re headed.’

Rose looked at the faces of the two young men in the photograph and wished she could tell them not to go.

‘They look really young,’ she said.

Grandad sighed. ‘They were, Cabbage. Dad was nineteen, George a couple of years older. Boys.’ He stared at the photo. ‘Just boys.’

Rose fiddled with the silver chain round her neck. It had a tiny heart-shaped locket hanging from it, also silver. Mum and Dad had given it to her the Christmas before last. The locket opened up, but Rose hadn’t yet found anything she wanted to put inside.

‘Your dad was wounded, wasn’t he, Grandad?’

Grandad didn’t seem to hear. He was still looking at the photo, lost in thought.

‘Grandad?’

‘What? Oh, yes, yes. That’s right, wounded. Bit of shrapnel in his bum, gave him gyp for years. But he was lucky, got sent home before the war was over. Whereas Uncle George—’

‘He died, didn’t he?’ Rose had heard the story before.

Grandad nodded. ‘My dad never got over it, not really. Felt bad about it all his life.’

‘It wasn’t his fault!’

Grandad sighed and gently touched the face of the young man in the photograph. ‘Not the point, Cabbage.’

‘But why should he feel bad? It doesn’t make sense.’

‘I know, love,’ he said. ‘I don’t understand either. All I know is, Dad always wanted to go back to Belgium and find out where George was buried. Say goodbye, you know.’

Rose nodded. Goodbyes *were* important. She’d never had a chance to say goodbye to Dad. ‘Why didn’t he?’

‘Life took over, I s’pose. He got married . . . then us lot came along.’

Grandad was the youngest of six boys. Rose had vague memories of two of them, Uncle Norman and Uncle Les. Big, laughing, jokey men who smelled of beer and cigarettes and the stuff they put on their hair and who let you walk around the room standing on their feet. Grandad was the little one of the family – an afterthought, he’d always said.

‘So now we’re doing it for him,’ said Rose. ‘Saying goodbye, I mean.’

‘Yeah.’

The look on Grandad’s face as he put the photograph back in his bag made Rose glad she’d agreed to come.

Whoomp . . .

The pressure inside the carriage changed again and daylight streamed through the windows as the train came out of the tunnel. Now they were passing through a flat pale landscape under a bleached wintry sky. Rose looked out of the window, and to her amazement saw a field containing a single ostrich.

‘*Grandad!*’

Grandad’s mouth fell open and his face took on an

expression of delighted astonishment. He looked like a little kid who'd just been given the most wonderful, unexpected, extraordinary Christmas present.

'An *ostrich*?' he said. 'In *Belgium*?'

'Could be an emu,' said Rose, trying to keep a straight face.

'An emu?!' shouted Grandad. Rose knew that would push his buttons. 'That's never an emu! I know an emu when I see one, my girl! And that – that thing out there – is an ostrich!'

The woman with the laptop and the over-inflated businessman were both looking at them. Rose was beginning to feel sorry she'd pointed it out.

'Oh, I've seen it all, now,' said Grandad, sitting back in his seat with a sigh. 'An ostrich in Belgium. I can die happy.'

He took another biscuit and Rose carried on looking out of the window. They were passing a farmhouse now. With its clean white walls and pitched red roof, it looked like an illustration in a children's book. Next to it was a barn, a field with a donkey in it, and a pond, almost completely round, with two cheerful-looking white ducks.

'Shell hole,' said Grandad, through a mouthful of biscuit.

Rose didn't understand. 'What?'

'That pond. Made by a shell in the war. That's why it's so round. Boom!' he added, unnecessarily, showering Rose with crumbs.

Rose looked back at the pretty round pond with its two happy ducks and imagined earth, trees, soldiers being thrown up into the air by the explosion, leaving the pond-shaped hole behind. She felt sick. How could something so pretty, so normal, so *nice* have come from something so

horrible? It wasn't right.

Grandad was looking concerned. 'You OK, love?'

Rose forced a little smile. 'Yeah,' she said, even though she wasn't.

'Sure?'

'Sure.'

He put his head on one side, looking at her more closely. 'Surey-sure?'

'Surey-sure, Grandad.'

This was a game they'd played since she was little but Rose felt she was getting a bit old for it now.

'Surey-surey sure-sure?'

'Grandad!'

Out of the corner of her eye, Rose saw that the woman had stopped working on her laptop and was listening with a smile.

Grandad grimaced. 'Sorry, love. I just wouldn't want—'

'I'm fine, Grandad. Really.'

Grandad opened his mouth to speak again, but Rose got there first. 'And, no – I'm also sure I don't want a biscuit!'

He grinned. 'I'm glad you came with me, Cabbage. It wouldn't be the same on me own.'

'I'm doing it in history at school, you know – World War One.'

'History? Tuh!' Grandad made a dismissive sound with his false teeth. 'It's not proper history. Not if there's people you know in it.'

Rose thought that was silly. 'You didn't know your uncle George.'

'Not the point. History should be about strangers – kings, prime ministers, people no one cares about. This is too close!'

Grandad was having one of his rants. Getting up on his high hobby horse, Dad always used to say. Rose glanced over at the woman with the laptop but she looked engrossed in her work.

'World War One's not history!' Grandad went on. 'It's life!'

Rose wasn't sure. It didn't feel much like life to her. It felt like it had happened a very long time ago to people with funny haircuts and old-fashioned names like Albert and Walter and Sidney.

'If you ask me,' Grandad was saying, 'you should be doing more long-ago history. The Wars of the Roses' – he made them sound all silly and pompous – 'that sort of stuff. Proper history.'

Rose wasn't listening. They'd just passed another of those perfectly round ponds. She shivered. It was as if this neat, pretty landscape was hiding something horrible, like a bright new carpet covering a filthy old floor.

'Heads up!' Grandad was checking his watch. 'It's getting on for lunchtime. We'll be coming into Brussels soon.'

Rose pulled her eyes away from the window. 'What happens at Brussels, Grandad?'

'We have a sandwich!' he replied, triumphantly.

'And then?'

'We get on another train. To Wipers.'

'Wipers?'

'That's what the soldiers called it, the Tommies,' he said. 'Easier to say than Ypres, y'see. Unless you're French, obviously.'

Ypres. *Eepra.* That name again. It sounded like a little scream.

Fields were giving way to streets and houses now. As the train entered the city and began to slow down, the people in the carriage fell silent. The woman closed her laptop and stared into space, her fingers twiddling her wedding ring. The over-inflated businessman put his phone away and sighed. For a moment he looked so sad Rose thought he was going to cry. The backpackers had stopped whispering to each other and were looking out of the windows on opposite sides of the carriage, each lost in thoughts of their own. The only sounds were the rhythm of the wheels and the hum of the air conditioning.

'Angel passing over.'

It was what Grandad always said at these strange moments when everyone fell silent at the same time. Rose looked around at the faces of their fellow passengers, frozen in that one brief moment in time, and she thought, *Is it an angel? Or is it something else?*

As the train pulled into the station, the silence hung in the air like dust.