

FOREWORD

"We are responsible for what we are, and whatever we wish ourselves to be, we have the power to make ourselves. If what we are now has been the result of our own past actions, it certainly follows that whatever we wish to be in future can be produced by our present actions; so we have to know how to act."

Swami Vivekananda

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CHAPTER 1



July 1945

Inside the car, the seat felt rough and hot. A tuft of stuffing was poking out of the covering beside him. Billy fingered it. It felt like the fur of Noah and Japhet, Mr and Mrs Pawseys' farm dogs, when they greeted him every morning. In Wandsworth there would be no dogs. No pigs, no chickens either. He stroked the stuffing over and over to calm himself as the car moved forward and away from his sanctuary.

Uncle Ted drove, not very well. Billy had so longed to see him, but not strange like this. He searched the lean face in the driving mirror and met its staring eyes. Uncle spat out three questions. 'Billy – been living there all this time? Twelve now, are you? And your sister, seven?'

Billy nodded. Even Uncle's voice sounded odd.

Mother took over. 'I told you that already, Ted. We've all been evacuated since the Blitz. The vicarage could only take me and Jill, so Billy was billeted here. We have sent you our news regularly.' She turned to look at him. 'But perhaps you've been in no state to take it in.'

'No state,' Ted laughed, if that croak could be a laugh. 'Bet you're glad to go home,' he directed at Billy.

'We certainly are,' Mother said. 'I'll say!'

Billy didn't answer and slumped back into his seat. He'd dreaded leaving the Pawseys even more than Hitler invading. Ever since VE Day he'd felt sick at the thought, but hadn't been able to picture it actually happening. It was truly terrible to leave the people who'd loved him and given him a safe home; but it was wonderful to see Uncle Ted at the door, back safe from war. That excitement had muddled his dreadfully sad feelings, and then how different he looked! The Uncle Ted he remembered from before the war had made jokes, played magic tricks, done handstands.

Billy had stood at the door with his suitcase, confused, and made the shortest of goodbyes to Mr and Mrs Pawsey when there were so many words in his heart. His misery about leaving, excitement and bewilderment just couldn't sit together inside of him. It was a wonder he wasn't sick all over the place before even getting into the car.

A car! Billy hadn't been in one since the vicar had delivered him back here four years ago. He wriggled uncomfortably. He'd expected to make his goodbyes to the Pawseys privately, when he was on his own, with Jed the carter collecting him. The arrangement had been for him to meet Mother and Jill at the railway station, where he'd go in the horse and cart. But an officer at the hospital had lent Uncle this car to take the family home, so they'd all come to the Pawseys' to collect him.

It turned a corner rather sharply just then, so that Jill slid across Billy's lap. 'Whoops,' she giggled.

'Mind the eggs.' He clasped the basket Mrs Pawsey had given him close to his middle.

The car jerked into the lane that led to the main road. 'I bet Uncle hasn't driven before,' Jill whispered.

He frowned at her.

'Thank goodness,' said Mother. 'Evacuation's finally over. It's been so long since VE Day, waiting to get away. Such an imposition, expecting me to work another six weeks at that wretched garage. Home! I can't wait to get my shoes onto proper pavements. Just look at those muddy ruts.'

Jill nudged Billy and rolled her eyes. She didn't seem at all in awe of Mother. Then she whispered, 'Who's that little girl crying and waving at you?'

He pushed his face to the window. Sally! Her little figure pushed away from the girls around her as she ran forward, waving wildly and calling. He couldn't say anything; his throat was choked. His hand didn't feel it belonged to him as it lifted and waved. The car passed and left her behind, crying alone.

'Billy?' Jill nudged again. 'Who is it?'

He swallowed hard. 'Sally Youldon, from where I used to live, the first time I was evacuated.'

'Oh, I know. That little girl you saved from drowning? The peasant family?'

'They weren't peasants!'

'Mummy said they were. She didn't like you minding them. Anyway, Sally's all sad you're coming away.'

He swallowed harder. 'Yes.'

Mother called over her shoulder, 'Open the window wider, Billy, please. It's still so hot. I never have liked high summer.'

He wound the handle a few more times. The wind blasted his face as it whistled past the window. It felt as if his heart was sucked out too. He imagined it whisking away to Mr and Mrs Pawsey, then flying past bushes to Mrs Youldon, Sally and Tim. How would they manage without him? He pressed the hard bit of his chest where it hurt. Something vital had surely gone and left his stomach churning up and down with every rut in the road.

'Awfully bumpy, Ted,' Mother complained.

Uncle grunted. 'Better than queuing for a coach for hours, or squashed up on the train, standing all the way.'

'That's true. I had that awful experience in 1940, coming down here with Doreen and the children. Never again!'

The car juddered to a stop. 'Oh, for heaven's sake!' Mother sounded cross already. The farm's herd of cows had begun to cross the top lane, back from milking.

Uncle Ted put on the brake and groaned. 'Just my luck.' The engine spluttered.

'Better not let it stop, Ted. You don't want to crank the handle again.'

As the cows lumbered past, one of them lowered its head, peering straight into the car. Mother and Jill squealed. Its huge eyes penetrated to the back seat to look at Billy's misery. Did cows feel sorry for people, like dogs could?

It mooed, its breath smearing the windscreen. Mother screwed back into her seat. 'Oh make it go away, Ted, do. Great, horrible thing.'

It lurched off as if it had heard. The car engine spluttered again as the line of cows ambled past and into the field. Uncle Ted drummed his fingers on the wheel. Mother sighed.

The wicker basket on his lap scratched Bill's legs below the edges of his trousers. The basket held eggs laid by the chickens he'd fed every day. Tucked underneath to save them from cracking was a green checked napkin from the set Mrs Pawsey used every meal-time. Now she'd have one missing. The paper bags beside the eggs were filled with cakes made with the last of their rations. They'd gone without to send Billy off with all the best of what they had. He'd known he was special to them, just as they had become to him. When Mother unpacked the basket in Wandsworth he'd save the napkin, secretly. Then he'd always have something of the Pawseys'.

'Come on, cows. We want to go home to London!' Jill

chirped, making the words into a little song. 'Lon-don, Lon- don, we're off to London town.'

The last cow flicked its tail before stepping leisurely into the mud lake by the open gate, and Uncle Ted bent to the controls again with shaky hands. He didn't look very sure about which knob did what.

Jill's dark curls brushed Billy's neck as she leant close to whisper, 'Uncle Ted's a bit loopy, isn't he?'

'Of course not!' he muttered back. 'He's just out of hospi- tal, recovering, that's all.'

'Kenneth said—'

He pressed a hand across her mouth to shut her up.

There was a new noise from the engine and the car

lurched forward. The farmer lifted a hand in a wave and the gate shut behind the black and white backsides of the cows.

'We're off!' Jill bounced a few more times, Billy protecting the precious eggs by holding the basket in the air.

Mother gave a triumphant sigh. 'And now back to a civi- lized normality, I trust. Foot down please, Ted. Let's get away from this' – she waved a hand towards the field – 'smell of cows and pigs. Billy's billet.'

Billy scowled at his lap. There weren't ever cows at the Pawseys' and this farm was two lanes away from their small- holding. He kept his eyes on the eggs. Mother should see how unfair she was.

The car turned left at the main road. Billy turned, trying to see out of the back window, but it was set too high on Austin Eights. Outside, all sight of the village would soon be gone, even the church spire.

'Now you can put it right behind you –' Uncle Ted's fingers were twitching through his white forelock. '– your evacuation. They told me to do that about my service, now that war's over.' He leant forward over the wheel as if his ribs needed propping up. 'Easily said when you're a doc in a white coat, safely away from sh—'

'Ted!' Mother put a hand on his arm. 'It is all over.'

A growl came from his throat, 'Over? Rotten war, rotting—'

Mother put a hand over his mouth. 'Shh.'

'Will we get home before dinner time?'

Mother turned to Jill, still bouncing happily up and down

on the back seat. 'No. And pull your bow up. It's slipped right down to your ear.'

Jill took the side lock of hair and shoved the ribbon a little higher. 'Will we have to eat in a restaurant? I've nev-er e-ver ea-ten in a re-stau-rant.' She bounced in time to her words.

'For heaven's sake, child. Can't you sit still?'

Uncle Ted had the car under control now. It began to speed up once on the main road. There were fields outside the car window, and then arches of trees blocking sight of anything else. The trees became skimpier and further apart revealing a set of huts in a clearing. A wooden signpost near the road read 'NAAFI' and someone had scribbled 'Not known here'.

Billy's legs were sticking to the cracked leather seat. It would take hours and hours to get back to Wandsworth, his insides were screwed into a ball, everything was awful. The car sides and roof were a shell around him, like being in an Anderson shelter, but sheltered from where he wanted to be, instead of from bombs. He hadn't felt worse, not even in the cellar with the noise of bombing, Kenneth shaking beside him, and that scary whining squeal of the air raid warning.