

Lady Isle Lighthouse flashed her opaque wink back at HMS Dundonald through the mist on the Firth of Clyde, as Dougie pushed the two-wheeler trolley carrying the rum barrel between the large gun turrets on the deck.

‘Morning Sir!’ he said, passing Lieutenant Ritchie leaning over the side looking along Barassie beach towards Troon.

‘Morning Doyle. Another memorable Friday?’

‘Ha! Yes sir. Those who *can* remember sir.’

Dougie continued pushing the barrel down the gangplank onto the pier. Once out of sight, he checked in both directions, then tapped twice on the timber. It immediately started to move from side-to-side. He helped lift it over Joe’s head and placed it safely on the ground with a thud. Joe wiped dust from his commando uniform and squared his sailor’s hat upon his head.

‘How do I look?’

‘Better than at midnight.’

‘Endurance training worked then.’

Dougie removed a bottle of whisky from his uniform.

‘Don’t forget this. Cross behind the concert hall. You’ll make the station in three minutes.’

‘I owe you Doug.’

‘Just get back within thirty-six hours.’

Joe nodded apprehensively, then moved swiftly away along the harbour. Dougie watched him cross into town, then headed back to the ship with the trolley.

*

Joe felt adrenaline rise in his throat as the postal train approached Glasgow Central. Uniformed men and women, standing in twos or threes, contrasted sharply with civilians who moved like worker ants amid the bustle, smoke and steam. Inquisitive faces were everywhere. Wartime vigilance made all suspicious.

The Manchester train was at platform eight. Joe paid the flat-capped *Daily Record* vendor and leapt onto the train. He found an empty carriage and pushed the whisky between thigh and window and lit a Players Navy Cut. His stomach rumbled. He felt a deserter. Any moment his war could end in disgrace. He pretended to read the newspaper, surreptitiously glancing at the compartment door, relieved when a uniform didn't stop.

The porter's whistle finally announced their departure. The locomotive roared, pneumatically spewing a pall of steam back down the track, blocking Joe's view like the large gun discharges in training. As the train lurched forwards, a young lady who reminded Joe of Betty Grable in *Pin Up Girl* paused at the door, filling the compartment with lavender.

'Excuse me soldier, anybody sitting here?'

Her formal English made his stomach churn again. He straightened up clearing his throat.

'No, please'.

He took the girl's valise and placed it gallantly in the overhead seat-rack, as two more young ladies passed and recognised her.

'Carrie!'

'Susannah! Milly!'

'Travelling back today?'

'Yes! Just settling here with this kind gentlemen.' Joe blushed a smile.

‘Come, we’re down here with grandmother. Insisted on *escorting* us. She’ll be asleep soon’.

Carrie laughed and smiled apologetically to Joe who had already removed her case. They left giggling, leaving the half-ajar door rattling regretfully with the tracks. Joe looked at the lonely hills unsure whether relieved or disappointed, then sensed someone standing in the doorway and turned to see a naval Commander old enough to be his father staring directly at him.

*

‘I’ve never broken a law, sir.’

Commander North was inscrutably silent. His battle-hardened glare shamed Joe. This was it. Ignominious dishonourable discharge. His name dirt in Liverpool. His mother broken. His hung head awaited sentence.

‘I lost a son your age. Dunkirk. Never said goodbye.’

Joe’s brow furrowed.

‘War is no respecter of the heart McCardle.’

‘Yes, sir’, Joe accepted dejectedly.

‘However,’ Joe held his breath, ‘as Carlisle is my destination today, I suggest you use the journey to Basingstoke to ponder our greater purpose. War is hell, but defending freedom, the noblest pursuit.’ North rose to his feet. Joe stood to attention.

‘At ease.’ He looked into Joe’s soul. ‘Give me your word once you have seen brother James at Basingstoke you will return and DO YOUR DUTY.’

‘Yes! I will sir, thank you, sir!’.

North nodded and made his way out of the compartment. As the train drew into Carlisle, Joe fell backwards into his seat.

*

As he waited outside RAF Odiham, the little bird Joe kept in his heart was threatening to escape. He’d fought throughout childhood to keep it there to please Jimmy, who said it was a weakness enemies would exploit. He shivered.

‘Little boy blue!’

The familiar Liverpudlian brogue and joshing reference to his naval loyalties revived Joe like water in a desert, as he mirrored Jimmy’s cheeky grin coming through the camp entrance with a moustachioed Sergeant. Gripping Jimmy’s strong proffered hand, Joe handed him the whisky.

‘I brought you this.’

‘Better drink it before you scarper then. This is Davy Lyons’.

He followed them into the officer’s mess. He feasted on beef stew and beer. Soon he’d forgotten about the mission, and was back at the *Bay Horse* pub in their tenement in Liverpool. The bell went for last orders as they sang a popular tune:

I’ll be seeing you

In all the old familiar places...

Jimmy's arm was swung around Joe's shoulder as he held the near-empty whisky bottle in the other. His misty-eyed sentimentality was grating with Joe's persistent clarity. Joe thought of their starkly divergent futures. Jimmy's colour-blindness had confined him to ground staff. Offered an escape from active service. Joe was envious. A wave of melancholy flooded his heart.

He looked at Davy and tapped his wrist.

'Quarter-to-four dear boy!'

Joe leaned in. 'I've got to go kid'.

Jimmy stopped singing and reached inside his pocket. He handed Joe a silver cigarette case that belonged to their father.

'I can't take that. It's yours.'

'Open it.'

Joe lifted the lid and saw the inscription...

To my little boy blue, from Jimmy .

Joe's little bird fluttered against his ribcage.

'It's all you've got of him.'

'I've got memories. You haven't. Give it back when you get home.'

*

All was hell. The night exploded in flaming horror as British warships shelled the enemy's beach fortresses. Unwieldy, flat-bottomed, amphibious landing crafts packed with young ashen-faced

naval commandos, bounced precariously in huge swells, as they neared the beachhead under heavy fire. Wide-eyed with terror, and with seawater and vomit swilling above his boots, Joe clinched his rifle ready to jump into the freezing water as the door was lowered. Gripping the cigarette case in his chest pocket he prayed, as surrounding screams and panic expressed the impossibility of his task ahead. He jumped into the water up to his neck. He held the rifle above his head and tried to block out the mayhem. His radio backpack weighing him down, he waded on, so interminably slowly, towards the beach where a death-squad was primed to meet him. He ripped himself from barbed wire as a mine exploded taking out four Commandos. Suddenly he rose from the water and hit the wet sand. Struggling with numb hands to cock his rifle, he saw enemy gunfire from a loophole in a concrete pillbox. He made the pillbox wall and removed the pin from a grenade, holding it for three seconds, before tossing it into the opening and ducking. It exploded, releasing a pall of acrid smoke. As he spluttered the sulphurous air, he could see bodies everywhere. Hundreds more soldiers were coming onto the beach behind them. He took off his radio-pack and saw three holes in his right thigh the size of half-crowns, as two GIs joined him at the wall, one was hit in the throat and receiving emergency medical attention from the other. Joe saw a stick grenade fly over the pillbox and land nearby. All faded to black.

*

It was unbearable. Three weeks without word. Lizzie hadn't slept more than an hour. Home on leave after hitting his head starting a propellor, Jimmy was sent to the police station daily to enquire about her youngest.

‘If he’s wounded Mam, we won’t know until he contacts us.’

She wouldn't look at him. Anger was survival. She sipped her stout and watched him flirting with the landlord's daughter Mary. His bandaged head like an action wound. A charming cheat, just like his father, she thought.

Just then a roar went up across the bar. Joe was standing on crutches in the doorway.

'Joe!', 'Oh God Lizzie, it's your Joe!', 'Little boy blue!'

A pathway opened like a guard of honour to the bar. Jack was already pulling his pint.

'Thought you were a goner son,'

'Don't get rid of me that easily Jack'. Joe placed his crutches against the bar and put his hand in his pocket.

'No son. You won't pay tonight. Welcome home.'

Joe saw Lizzie secretly wiping her tears. He remembered how she'd visited him in a blinding white-light at Leicester Infirmary, as he recovered from the morphine pumped into him by GIs on the battlefield. She'd called him *my beautiful boy*.

As Joe approached, Lizzie lowered her eyes as if shame had just delivered a lesson.

'Hello Mam'.

She couldn't look at him. Joe wrapped her in his arms and felt her crumple into him as another roar went up.

He thanked everyone, but out of respect for the fallen didn't want to talk about it. He was one of the lucky ones. Jack saw Joe struggling on his crutches.

'Leave him you lot. The man fought for our freedom. Give him the freedom to enjoy his pint.'

Jimmy returned after taking Lizzie home.

'She's snoring like a trooper'.

‘This is yours kid’. Joe held out the silver cigarette case.

As he took it, Jimmy heard a rattle and felt the sharp hole in the lid. He opened it. Inside lay a piece of shrapnel.

‘Saved my life kid.’

Jimmy’s eyes welled.

‘Thankfully ruined that bloody inscription on the inside too.’

Jimmy burst into uproarious laughter as they hugged and moved together to join the singing:

I’ll be seeing you

In all the old familiar places...