

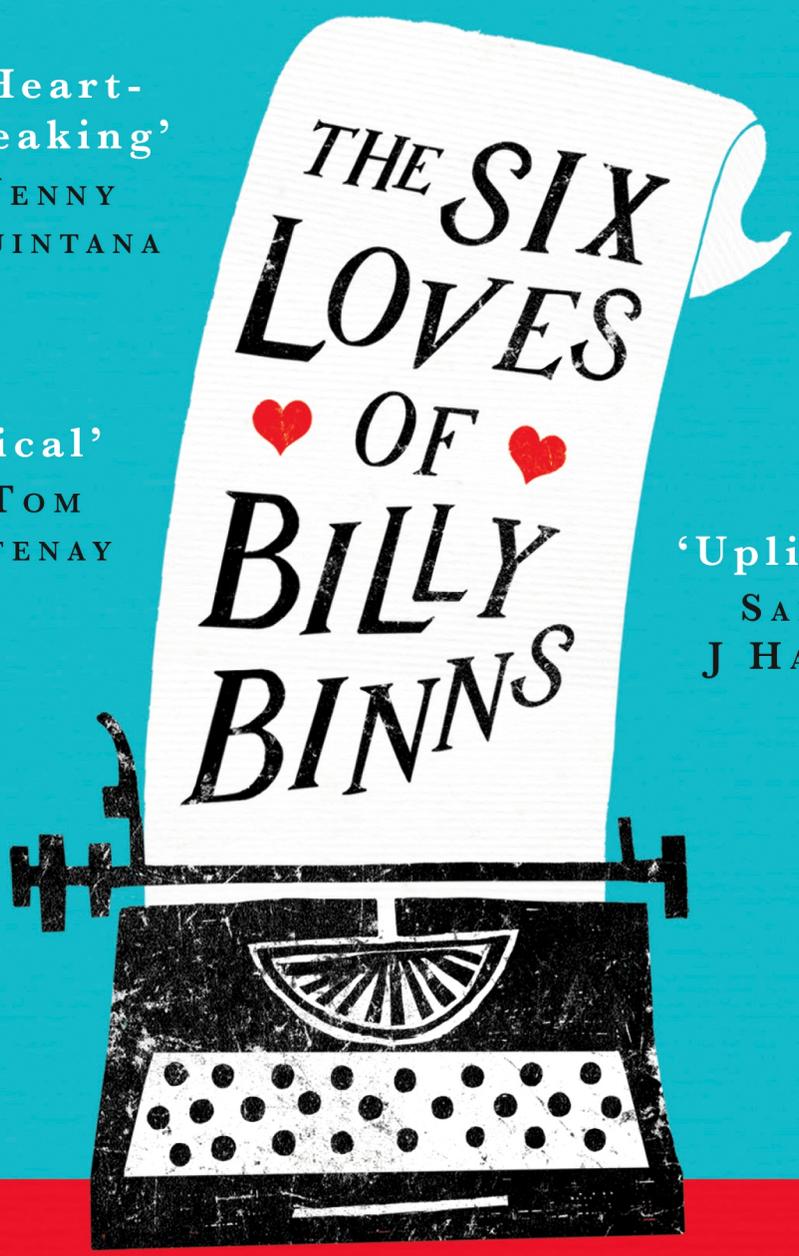
RICHARD LUMSDEN

‘Heart-
breaking’

JENNY
QUINTANA

‘Magical’
SIR TOM
COURTENAY

‘Uplifting’
SARAH
J HARRIS



THE SIX
LOVES
♥ OF ♥
BILLY
BINN'S

How would it feel to fall
in love one last time?

THE SIX LOVES OF BILLY BINNS

Richard Lumsden

*For all sad words of tongue or pen
the saddest are these; it might have been.*

John Greenleaf Whittier

Part One

1.

I have to get this out.
I have to get it down before it's gone for good.
While it's still clear in my head.
While they're all sat beside me, as alive now as they were then, these people I once loved.

Mary.
Hello, Mary. Do you remember me?
You were my first, though there may have been others before you; slips of things, stolen moments behind a market stall or in the straw of a cattle barn, but nothing to match the time we shared together. That first eruption of love when the world shifts and everything glows orange.
You died much too young, of a broken heart if I remember right. Not sure if it was me or someone else who broke your heart, but we were never meant to last, you and me. Too many complications along the way, what with one thing and another.
Still, I loved you, Mary, old girl.

Then Evie.
I loved you, Evelyn Ellis. For a lifetime, if I'm honest. We were the right age for love when we started out. You were my forever girl.
A love that should have lasted to the end, but the world doesn't work that way.
I loved you from the moment I saw you. You might say that isn't true but you'd be wrong about it. I loved you then as I love you now.
These dry embers, buried deep, set alight once again at your memory. A fire that burned quietly for the rest of my life.

Archie.
My little boy.
I loved you, son, as soon as I knew you had sparked into life. Knew you were a boy. I felt you kicking, your tiny feet.

Knew it would be you, Archie Binns. With your scruffy knees poking out of your shorts. Your pockets full of marbles; the catseye and the oxblood, the jasper, aggie and the ruby. Your little hands.

Do you remember how we climbed up trees together?

You know how much I loved you.

I'm not sure if I ever said it to you, not out loud anyway. Not in words so you could hear.

But you knew it, didn't you, son?

Vera.

I was unhappy when I first met you, Vera.

Forty something, was I? Life was on the downward spiral, then you showed up out of the blue. You were so beautiful and you made me very happy.

You caused me trouble too. I paid a price for loving you, that's for sure. For a while I was lost in the wreckage, but isn't that what we hope for when it comes to the end, to know we didn't just pass by but lived through something real along the way?

Everyone should be lucky enough to have a Vera once in their lives. Despite the trouble. Despite the cost you end up paying.

To be taken to the edge and made to jump. To love until it hurts.

Mrs Jackson.

Black Betty.

Didn't think I'd ever get those feelings again, much later on in life. After Evie and Vera and the rest of them. But suddenly there you were. You brought me out of retirement, you might say.

We were old when we met. Not proper old like I am now of course. I was still able to do something about it back when you showed up and we made it good, the two of us, when there wasn't much pickings around.

Some lovely years together, me and Mrs Jackson.

Funny, still calling you Mrs Jackson after all this time.

Mary, Evie, Archie, Vera, Mrs Jackson.

Five of them in all.

Five loves? Is that it?

It doesn't sound much after all this time.

I recall the names but the faces come and go.

When you first meet someone you don't know how long they'll be in your life for. It could be minutes or it could be forever.

You don't know when it starts.

And you don't know when it stops.

Some endings are final, others take you by surprise.

Their last goodbye.

The world drags them away and all that's left is a fading memory, turning to dust like the flesh on these old bones.

I want to remember what love feels like, one last time. To remember each of the people I loved, to see them all clearly again.

I'll start with Mary.

Get it down on paper, all the details, before it's gone for good.

While it's still clear in my head.

2.

It's 1914, and I'm as old as the century.

A boy on his bike up Shepherds Bush Green.

Across the Goldhawk Road with the Bush Hotel on my left. The tram tracks converge and I'm bang in the centre of the world; Hammersmith to the south; north to Wormwood Scrubs; Acton to the west; Holland Park and the city to the east.

The summer air, thick and warm. The wet roads greasy now the thunderstorms have stopped.

There's been a fuss about the killing of an archduke in Austria but that was a while ago and the newspapers have a photograph of a boat sailing down the Panama Canal.

The bicycle wheels drop into the slots by the tracks. I let the tyres hum against the iron rails which Dad helped dig for the first electric trams in London, before jumping back onto tarmac as the tracks cross, where the tramcar wheels catch and shriek.

Past the Empire, the Palladium Picture House. It's ten years before the big Pavilion Theatre gets built, thirty before it gets bombed in the Blitz and sixty before it becomes Bingo.

I'm racing too fast through time and come back to now.

The 107 tram to Acton, crammed to the back railings, pulls away in front of me. I swing my bike across the tracks as the tramcar picks up speed. The wires crackle and spit, drawing electricity through the pantograph on its roof as it veers left down Uxbridge Road.

I go right along the green, past Lyons coffee house, Wellington's laundry, the cycle store, Ellis' bakery, Miles' the dog sellers. Past the Central railway station and the busy Norland Road market.

Tight on the handlebars, out of the saddle to Holland Park.

My legs push against the hill. The mansion houses make it feel like a different part of town. The chain hums in time with the pedals, left into Ladbroke Grove, standing for the climb, then down towards the railway bridge and right into Portobello to Harry Coggins' house.

I lean my bicycle against his gate, my legs twitching from the ride, and knock quietly on the front door hoping it won't be his mum who opens it.

The latch turns and Mrs Coggins peers through a crack in the hallway.

'It's Billy Binns,' she says to the shadows behind her.

Her long black hair is tied behind her neck with a parting above the centre of her forehead. A bright red jewel hangs from one ear, a bird's feather from the other. The

sleeves down her arms are long and loose but a tight black shawl wraps across her chest like something Harry Houdini would wear to prevent escape. Even in the dimly-lit hallway you can see the cleft in her lip, like a scar cutting down hard into the top of her mouth.

Harry Coggins is two weeks older than me, separated by a century. He was born just before Christmas, 1899. I arrived in the middle of the party, early hours of January the first, 1900.

*

It's gone.

Like the Norland Road market demolished for the motorway in the fifties, was it?
I've lost where I was.

I remember what I'm wearing today and what I had for lunch.

I remember a cup of tea at eleven and two digestive biscuits in the saucer.

I remember changing out of my pyjamas this morning and dusky Sylvie swearing as she emptied my piss bag without first checking the valve.

I remember Sylvie is one of the carers here in The Cedars. Slip of a thing in big thick shoes. Afro-hair tied on top of her head and a silver nose ring that looks like it must be uncomfortable. Nineteen at her last birthday, I think she said. I bought her a card from the shop trolley and would have stuck a fiver in it if I'd been able to find one in my trousers. I don't often carry money these days.

I remember the other carer, Ros, who's been here almost as long as I have. Fifty, I reckon she is, with strong arms and a kind face. Her husband left her some time ago but she met someone else on the internet. An older gent who's a writer apparently, though Ros says he's yet to write a book anyone can read.

You're not meant to tip the carers here but Ros and Sylvie deserve a medal if you ask me. Not so much Gordon who just gets annoyed with everyone, or Mrs Akinyemi who never smiles.

I remember my dreams but not where they start.

I recall some of last week and the week before that. Then everything goes into a haze.

Fragments of memories come looming back like red London buses in a pea-souper.

I remember my boy Archie coming to visit on my birthday, but that could have been a while ago too.

Time plays funny tricks these days.

I wait for the next memory.

I wait and I wait.

Some Christmas or other in The Cedars.

I remember because I didn't want to wear a paper hat. Gordon said, 'Wear the paper hat, you grumpy old bastard,' which isn't the proper way for a carer to speak to a

resident. Gordon was unhappy since falling out with his friend who had an identical moustache and picked him up outside in a sports car each evening. Gordon said it was always me spoiling the fun by being miserable. That was a long time ago, when Gordon still had his hair.

All in the past now.

Water under the bridge.

I remember a tea party here where there wasn't a fuss about paper hats. The Queen sent a card even though we'd never met and a smart looking young man in a suit came to sit next to me with a cup of tea for a photograph. Mrs Cutts, or it might have been Mrs Bentley, actually came over from the television set and went all giggly because he was a high-up Conservative, but his face didn't ring any bells with me.

I couldn't recall how the young man knew me but it was nice of him to visit, being so high-up and all. Shame he didn't have time to finish his tea after the photograph was taken, but I suppose that's high-up people for you. Mrs Cutts or Mrs Bentley, whichever one it was, went back to watching the television set as soon as he was gone.

Small breaths come and go. I don't require much air these days. Just enough to keep the powdery blood pumping through the flimsy veins and that's about it. Not much longer now, I reckon.

Ba-bump. Ba-bump.

Inch after inch, slowly round it goes.

A few more trips down to the feet and back, then maybe we'll call it a day.

Long life. Nearly over. Almost done.

The sitting room is too warm and the television set too loud.

Mrs Bentley and Mrs Cutts spend all day staring up at the screen. A few other residents sit like relics in a dinosaur museum. Jimmy Parris, in the armchair next to mine, is easy to get along with when he's not banging on about the Lake District. Mrs Chaudhry and her gaggle of Indian ladies are over by the window while Mr Ozturk combs through his hair that Sylvie washes black for him every month. Mrs Greatorex lifts up a biscuit from her teacup to her mouth. I watch the biscuit break into crumbs and spill down the front of her cardigan.

There are others whose names I don't know, but we're not all here to make friends. I'm the oldest by a long chalk. They tell me I'm the oldest man in Europe but that only makes me feel like a boxing champion about to lose his belt.

Some reckon there's been a mistake with my birth certificate and there's no way I'm as old as they say, but you can't argue with memories.

Forgotten moments keep coming back to my mind and I'd like to get them down on paper before they go again. For Archie to know I wasn't just a bag of skin and bone who pisses out of a tube. I don't want him to be disappointed how I turned out. To know I was once a proper man, despite what he thinks of me now.

Five faces in the darkness.

Each brings a tiny ache, a quiet pain just behind the lungs.

All that history.

The people I once loved. A small handful.

I try to hold them in my head but it's like trying to catch butterflies with a torn net.
It's like they don't want to be remembered.

There were those you'd lie next to for a few moments of bliss, when nothing else matters, sweat boils on your skin and you're the happiest you could ever be. Before the chill of the real world comes back. The regrets and the guilt and the trouble brewing. Knowing it was already over while they lay cooling in the straw beside you.

But that isn't the same as love.

Archie'll know what I mean.

I've loved a few people in this long, long life and I want to remember them now before they're gone for good.

I'm a very old man and I'd like to remember what love feels like once more before I die.

To remember their faces.

To see them all, as clear as -

As clear as -

There's a word.

Ros said to keep going and not stop when you get stuck. Her boyfriend wrote a book once so I reckon she knows what to do. She says not to worry and to fill the gaps in later.

When you're young everything joins up in your head, then you get old and it disappears like trails of smoke.

I can feel the trails forming again.

I'll start at the beginning:

New Years Eve, 1899.

I don't think I can remember this far back, but I remember Auntie Pam telling the story.

*

I'm not meant to be born for another few weeks.

Dad and Ma are at the Hampshire Hog on King Street with Auntie Pam and all the neighbours saying goodbye to 1899. Ma said all the men were sour having to bring their wives with them. She and Dad argue whether the new century starts that night or the next year. Most people think the Twentieth Century doesn't start until 1901 but Dad reckons it starts now because Nineteen Hundred sounds very different from Eighteen Hundred.

When midnight approaches everyone pushes outside to hear the church bells ring the new year in. People are kissing and hugging and Ma starts to feel peculiar and can't find Dad in the crowd. She gets dizzy and makes her way home.

The sun's up by the time Dad comes back the next morning, still pissed, and I'm wrapped in a blanket in Ma's arms. She said Dad's face was a picture.

Apparently he always wanted a boy.

I remember liking hearing this story from Auntie Pam, and it sometimes feels like I can actually remember being born; Dad expecting an earful and finding he's got a son. Ma doing it all on her own with no help other than Auntie Pam because everyone else was stone drunk at the time.

Soon afterwards, Auntie Pam moved to Manchester with her new husband. But when I was nine or ten, she came back to the house one night. I thought I was dreaming about her and woke to hear her voice downstairs, so I might not have been dreaming after all. I got out of bed and it sounded like a row going on.

I sat at the top of the stairs.

Dad, Ma and Pam were in the parlour with the door shut. I couldn't make out what they were saying before Ma started to cry, which always happened during a row, followed by the sound of crockery smashing and Ma shouting Pam was a *trollop*. I didn't have time to hide before Auntie Pam appeared at the front door and looked up to see me sitting at the top of the stairs. I thought she'd be cross with me for not being asleep.

In the parlour I heard Dad say, 'You should have let the little bastard freeze to death.'

Auntie Pam smiled up at me. But I remember it being a sad smile and she waved and went without saying anything else.

Ma was still crying in the parlour but softer than before, so I went back to bed quietly and thought about which little bastard they should have let freeze to death.

I didn't see Auntie Pam for many years after that, until long after I was a married man myself. She wrote me a letter. When I went to see her, she said it was me he was talking about that night.

*

Mrs Greatorex has dropped her teacup. The saucer clatters and rolls across the hard linoleum flooring, putting a stop to these memories of Auntie Pam.

My mind is like trifle these days. A soft mess of colours, but nothing you can get your teeth into.

Nothing that stays fixed for very long.

I once had a pen, I'm sure.

A silver fountain pen. A gift, but I don't remember who from. I can still feel the weight of it in my hand, the smooth strokes across the paper.

If I could find this pen, I'd be able to write these memories down so I don't forget them, but it must have disappeared with all the other things I've lost over the years. When Sylvie has a minute I'll get her to take me back to my room so I can look for this pen and keep going with the memories.

My only jacket hangs on the back of my bedroom door.

It takes me a while to get over to the door. I feel inside the pocket, remembering how I put the jacket on to go out into the garden not too long ago, then wiggle my fingers around until I'm sure the pen isn't in there, before getting back over to the bed and sitting down to get over my disappointment at not finding it.

I'll need a moment to catch my breath after making all this effort.

This has been my bedroom since the Falklands war was kicking off and that feels like a lifetime ago. One of the residents back then said the lower half of the walls were painted *Goose Green* and I don't think they've had a new lick of paint since then.

A small bed against the wall, with a metal hoist which Ros and Sylvie can't be arsed to use as it takes too long to get everyone up. Besides, Ros says I'm as thin as a rake. Gordon says it's for health and safety, especially with some of the heavier ladies, but he isn't the one getting everyone out of bed in the mornings. A window that looks out onto Hammersmith Grove. A clock on the wall and a picture of a Scottish loch by some mountains that I stopped noticing decades ago. A wardrobe, a bedside cabinet, a small table and chair and a little sink in the corner. I watch the drips slowly fall from the tap, one then another, like life passing by. Like the small flow of powdery blood through the veins, down to the feet and back.

Down the corridor the lift pulleys rumble and whine.

Polystyrene tiles across the ceiling like square clouds, bouncing night-time headlights from the passing vans up and down Hammersmith Grove off the walls.

It's been a while since I looked in the drawer in the bedside cabinet, which is easier to get to than the wardrobe because I can sit on the bed at the same time.

In the drawer is an old Golden Virginia tin with the lid left open. It's hard opening things with my knotty fingers these days. Even now I can still smell the tobacco that would have once been in there. They stopped putting Golden Virginia in tins years ago and sold it in paper packs instead.

I used to keep precious things in my old tobacco tin but can't remember what they might have been. As you get older, you change your mind about what's precious.

Behind the tin I find my old maroon army tie, neatly rolled up.

I keep it at the back of the drawer and not hung up in the wardrobe next to my blue tie because it's a bugger to put on. The maroon tie has a single yellow flag on it. It has to be tied so the yellow flag is in the middle of the knot, which is a tall order for old fingers like mine. I gave up wearing the maroon tie with the yellow flag many years ago, leaving just my blue one with the lions or the green one I'm wearing today, which is probably my favourite, despite some ancient gravy stains down the front.

A faded brown envelope with a few old letters inside, written by me. I'm not sure why I bothered keeping those.

I've forgotten why I'm sitting here and what I'm looking for.

I push the maroon tie back inside the drawer and the ends of my fingers rattle something hard against the thin wood. I ease it out to the front and there it is, my old silver fountain pen, cold and heavy in my hand.

Each morning I wake with a sense of excitement at what the day might bring.

Last night, lying in bed, I could almost picture Mary, but she kept slipping from view, like the burning out of an old photograph.

When I woke, the daylight had made a ladder of the blinds on the opposite wall, and I knew I had a clear idea where to start.

The sitting room is quieter today and I have the table by the window to myself. I pull the lid off the silver pen, press the nib onto the writing paper in front of me and scratch out an invisible line.

Ros says there might be a bottle of ink in Mrs Akinyemi's desk. Mrs Akinyemi wears a badge saying *Administrator* but neither she nor Gordon seem to agree who's in charge. Ros says neither of them are, though Gordon is always the one who ticks off Ros or Sylvie when they've done something against the rules.

Mrs Akinyemi doesn't have much to do with residents, and when she does no one can tell what she's saying because of her strong accent and the way she never moves her lips when she speaks.

Ros comes back with a smile and shakes the silver pen like the thermometer they used to put up your arse when you were under the weather.

It still doesn't work so she squeezes the ink until it bubbles onto the nib. She writes a solid black line and draws circles onto the paper to make sure it keeps working.

She's made a right mess of my first page of memories.

I clasp the pen in my twisted fingers and write my first word like they taught in handwriting at school.

I've thought of a proper title so that when it's finished I can give it to Archie so he'll know what it's about.

It's hard to make the pen work because my fingers won't grip tightly enough. I clench it in both hands but can't get the ink to come out.

I push it down hard to force a mark onto the page.

Tap it on the table to get some bloody ink out of the damn thing onto the page.

To get some bloody ink out of the fucking pen on the bastard fucking page.

There it is, the start of the title, faint among the blotches:

THE

3.

I don't remember coming to bed.

It's dark outside and I might have been to sleep already.

A train rattles by in the darkness. Funny how you can't hear the sound of the tracks in the day.

Sylvie took ages scrubbing with the cloth to get my inky fingers clean. No amount of scrubbing will get the black off Sylvie's hands, though there's pink on the inside of her palms.

Beautiful Sylvie.

I remember loving a girl like Sylvie, somewhere along the way.

It's hard when all your friends have gone and you're the last still alive. When no one's around to say what a decent chap you were. That you weren't always a dumb-arse who gets confused where one day ends and another begins.

Lying here, the sound of a train on distant railway tracks takes me back to the trams on the green.

*

A boy riding his bike over tram rails to Harry Coggins' house.

Harry's ma opens the door. Black hair, a bird's feather in one ear and a ugly crease in the top of her mouth like a cut made by a cheese-wire which has been left to heal.

Mrs Coggins never speaks much but says to come inside the hallway.

Harry's twin sister Peg is usually grumpy though sometimes can be nice. You never know what mood she'll be in. They don't look alike but you can tell they're twins when they're stood next to each other. Harry's dad is Irish and no one really knows what he does for a living. Harry says he finds work for theatre entertainers, though Gilbert Gelling's uncle is a ventriloquist and says Harry's dad leeches on starving turns. It isn't proper work like building tram tracks for Mr Wimpey, that's for sure. Harry's ma is from Kent. His dad came over to marry her when she was young, though she's obviously quite old now, nearly thirty apparently, and the house always smells of boiled cabbage.

Mrs Coggins calls to Harry but he's out in the lavvy which means I have to wait while his ma asks after my ma and dad. I say they're well thank you, trying not to look at her scary mouth. Peg walks in and says she's going next door to see Jeannie.

Harry's ma catches me staring at her mouth and bites her top lip under the bottom one. I wonder if she hides it because she knows it makes her ugly. Harry comes in after taking ages in the lavvy and says we should climb the tree at the end of his garden. This is one of the best things about Harry's house and makes up for having to talk to his odd ma.

It's his tree house so he always goes up the rope first.

Two knots to the first branch. It's hard to let go with one hand and grab hold of the plank with the other, especially when it's slippery after the recent thunderstorms. I see Harry take his pea-shooter from the store hole in the tree trunk. He inspects it as I try to get my leg up while clutching the bunch of elderberry ammo in my teeth.

Harry calls out 'Woodlouse!' and blows one at me through the pea-shooter. It smacks on my forehead. He laughs as I struggle to hold onto the rope, not wanting to drop the elderberries from my teeth because then Harry would make me go back down to get more from the bush. When I'm up I tell him he could've had my eye out but he says a woodlouse isn't strong enough to burst an eyeball, and I don't know if he's right so I can't argue with him about it.

The leaves provide some cover from below. This is the best summer we've had in the tree den, mostly because of Peg and Jeannie. Peg isn't pretty but she can give you a nasty thump when she wants. She has the same dark hair as their ma, with their dad's big nose which looks bigger on Peg than it does on Harry. Over the summer she's starting to look more like the girls in Glover's Dairy or the bath house on Lime Grove. The shape of her chest is starting to show beneath her clothes, which means we can make fun of her in a new way. Her friend Jeannie is a year younger but is much prettier than Peg with a bigger chest already. Jeannie has an older sister who's seventeen and isn't afraid of anything. Peg isn't grumpy when she's with Jeannie and just laughs at everything she says.

Harry brings out a cigarette he's taken from his dad's tin with a couple of matches to light it. He gives me the cigarette and sparks the match against the plank. Harry holds his hand around the flame and tells me to put the cigarette in it. The end of the tobacco glows orange and black as it burns. Harry goes first, blowing as quick as he can even though you can't see any smoke coming out, not like the four or five blows my dad gets from one mouthful. It's my turn next and I make two blows of smoke which must impress Harry even if he doesn't say anything about it.

It feels good to be growing up.

We take a couple more sucks on his dad's cigarette before Harry crushes it out on the tree and flicks the end away. We lean back to wait for the dizziness to stop and concentrate on next door's garden. It has a short lawn and a vegetable patch where Jeannie's dad grows potatoes, carrots, runner beans, peas, onions, cabbages and rhubarb. The peas are covered with netting to keep the birds off. An apple tree grows near the end of Jeannie's wall which the girls like to sit under.

Waiting for the girls to appear, Harry tells me he recently saw the remains of a dog which had been run over by a tram and sliced in two halves; head and front paws one side of the track, tail and back legs on the other.

I'm listening to his description of its innards drying red on the tarmac when I hear the two girls come out of the kitchen next door and walk down the path giggling. I knock Harry's arm but he pretends he isn't interested and keeps on with the story about the sliced dog and then yawns like he's not really bothered by the sight of Jeannie and Peg walking past the vegetable patch to the bottom of the garden.

They sit on a rug under the apple tree each eating a small bun in a cake wrapper . Peg has her back to us while Jeannie faces this way. We're quiet in the tree den now, trying to hear what they're saying but too far away to make out words. The girls laugh and Peg looks around quick, waggles her finger into the ground and buries the cake paper. They giggle as Jeannie turns back to look towards the house to make sure her mum isn't coming.

We know what this means.

Jeannie undoes the ties on the front of her dress.

Crosses her hands over.

Harry and I stop breathing.

She holds the bottom hem and lifts it up, arms crossed over, up to her face.

Her white underwear, pressed full with her chest.

Oh my sweet Jesus.

The girls giggle, Jeannie drops it back down and Peg lifts hers. Jeannie reaches out to touch her titties but Peg isn't turned round far enough for us to see that. She's smaller than Jeannie but it's still exciting to glimpse.

It's warm lying up here.

Harry makes a noise as he swallows. Jeannie lifts up her dress again and holds it for longer this time. Beneath the thin underwear I see the dark shadow between her breasts, her arms crossed in front of her face. I try to hold the image so it stays with me forever before she lets it fall.

The girls giggle and whisper something to each other. Harry mutters that he's bored because the other day he watched Jeannie's older sister lift up her petticoat and saw her full mincey which actually had hair on it, honest to god.

I wonder if he's made that up just to impress me.

Jeannie and Peg get up and walk down the garden giggling.

It feels good to be finding out about the secret bits of girls.

To be getting more grown up.

We lift our pea-shooters and try to hit them with our elderberry ammo before they reach the safety of the vegetable patch and disappear back inside Jeannie's house.

Ros has brought in her boyfriend's old typewriter as he uses a laptop now. She reckons it will be easier for my fingers than a messy pen. She knows I won't go near the residents' Toshiba, for those who want to surf the internet in the quiet room.

She brings paper from Mrs Akinyemi's office and shows me how to roll it into the machine.

I don't have any trouble pressing the keys with my fingers and remember what most of the letters are called, though some like % and # will take a little working out.

I like the sound it makes – *tap click, tap click.*

Tap click, tap click, tap click.

Ding.

I'll need a rest after all this effort.

The television set is on very loud today. Something on the news about the President of America. I wonder if there's a problem with the screen as the man's head looks very yellow, but Mrs Bentley and Mrs Cutts don't seem to be making a fuss, and they're the first to complain if it's on the blink.

I'm trying to remember school, but nothing comes to mind. I preferred bunking off to watch the airships going up and down on Wormwood Scrubs. I was twelve when Dad said it was time I paid my way. Mr Finlay gave me a job on his fish stall in Shepherds Bush market and that was the end of my education, which didn't do me no harm I suppose.

I'm looking forward to my morning cup of tea which will give me some time to think about the fish stall. I've worked up a thirst trying to recall what love feels like.

I don't think I've fully captured it yet but it's nice to remember the petticoats.

*

Shepherds Bush market runs under the railway arches between the Uxbridge and Goldhawk Road. In 1914 two new Metropolitan Line stations are built at each end to replace the single one running along the bridge. Trouble's brewing because the stall rents are cheaper than shop rates and the shopkeepers don't like us for taking most of the trade, but we bring in shoppers who like to walk down the market looking for bargains.

My first job of the day is to take a barrowload of fish from the cold-store behind Norland Road market to the new stall in Shepherds Bush. It's a long push across the green and a relief when the boxes are stacked up behind the trestle with the fish out ready for selling.

Clem used to deliver the fish on his horse cart from Billingsgate early mornings until his horse died, though the horse lived longer than Clem's dad who did the job before him. Without a horse Clem was stuck for work so Mr Finlay gave him the job in Shepherds Bush, leaving Mr Finlay to look after Norland Road. Mr Finlay made me Clem's barrow boy after working two years when Jack Burns had been there for four. Jack often has fish go missing when he supplies the hotels in Holland Park. Jack says they fall out of the barrow and get eaten by cats.

He's a bit simple is Jack but he grafts hard and Mr Finlay's not an idiot.

Clem showed me how to gut the fish for richer customers who don't want to do it themselves. Sometimes, when there's a queue, Clem lets me gut the fish although he doesn't let me speak to the customers. Clem does his patter, making comments to the ladies about their nice hair or how he'd better not wipe his hands on their skirt after he's finished with the innards. He even makes jokes about me, calling me his little kipper. If a man's paying, Clem might give them a wink and say something about his fingers smelling of fish even before the end of the day. The customers like his cheeky banter and I'm trying to learn it for the time Mr Finlay puts me in charge of the stall.

I once noticed Clem's sums were wrong as he was making a lady laugh while putting fish into her bag. I said it was less than that. Clem ignored me so I said it again and she asked him to count it back. He told her it was a mistake and gave her some more change. After she went he turned to me with his filleting knife, grabbed my throat and made three swipes like I was a fish he was gutting. He went *tss tss tss* through his teeth and pretended to scoop out my intestines like I was a mackerel. He'd stopped laughing and didn't seem to be making a joke anymore, even though I knew Clem was funny like that. All the same, I thought it best not to mention it again when he got his sums wrong.

When Mr Edwins, the umbrella maker, made a fuss about the smell on our stall, Clem went in and dropped a few gullets behind his walking stick cabinet as a cheeky bit of fun. A day or so later his umbrella shop was smelling bad and Mr Edwins came up to Clem and didn't stop shouting until Clem punched him and made his nose bleed. A constable came over and Clem said it wasn't him who put gullets in Mr Edwins' shop and what right did Edwins have to make accusations? It was not long after Clem had a go at me for pointing out the lady's change, so I thought it best to tell the constable Clem was working on the stall all day and no way could he have put the gullets behind Mr Edwins' walking stick cabinet. There was no more fuss from Mr Edwins after that.

To be honest I felt a bit sorry for Mr Edwins, knowing Clem had dropped the gullets in his shop, but it's important in life to know whose side you're on.

It's a warm Friday, summer 1914.

It's like practising remembering makes the memories come clearer.

I'm sweating after fetching two barrowloads across from Norland Road.

The trestle's full with salt herring, cod, haddock, skate, eels, a dozen crab, three boxes of mussels, queenies and whelks.

It's a warm day and I'm about to find my first love.

*

I'm remembering this now because of a picture.

The picture has something to do with love.

If I close my eyes I can almost see it.

*

Clem calls me over to show me a drawing he saw in the Eagle on Glenthorne Street last night. He gets a piece of paper and sketches a large V next to his fish sums and asks, 'What's it look like, Billyboy?'

He draws another upside-down V over the first and laugh but I don't know what it is yet. He adds a thick stick in the middle of the first V and two small circles either side.

He scribbles a small patch in the middle of one of the Vs.

He's laughing again and I think it's a view through one of the railway arches with something in front, one of Mr Edwins' umbrellas maybe. Suddenly a lady customer asks to be served and Clem throws the drawing down while picking up his filleting knife.

'Yes, my darlin',' he says. 'So what'd you fancy, aside from me?'

I start moving empty boxes as Mr Finlay says never to let customers see you idle. I put out the last of the herring from the melting ice and take another look at Clem's drawing but I still can't see what it is.

It's not an umbrella because the stick would curve at the end.

I put the paper in my pocket to work out later.

And that's when she appears, walking towards me through the market.

She wears a long skirt and blouse buttoned up to the neck, with a tie fastened at the collar. Her light brown hair tied up behind her head, parted in the centre. I picture it falling free and spilling down onto her chest. Her dark eyebrows mirror the perfect curve of her lips while her small nose beautifully bridges the space between. She looks older than when she's under the apple tree with grumpy Peg, and for a moment I wonder if it might be Jeannie's older sister coming towards me.

She stops at Hudson's Confectionery and goes inside. When she comes out she's sucking a large sweet. She approaches the fish stall though no one ever browses at a fish stall unless they've come to buy fish.

'Hello, Jeannie,' I say, realising I've never actually spoken to her before, only watched her over the fence from Harry Coggins' tree den.

She gives a friendly smile but looks puzzled, like she doesn't know who I am.

*

Was Jeannie my first love?

I don't recall seeing her sat around the bed with the others, with Evie and Vera and the rest of them. Her face is already fading before we've even started.

Mary, wasn't it?

I'm not sure I ever loved Jeanie, with her blue eyes and her petticoat and her light brown hair. Not properly. She wasn't my forever girl, that's for sure. You only get one of those in life.

One Evie, if you're lucky.

The memory of Evie's name is like falling off a high cliff.

But she isn't here yet. It's Jeannie walking down through the market towards me, and I just want to remember what love felt like.

*

I don't try Clem's patter about what she fancies aside from me, or having fingers that smell of fish at the end of the day.

Jeannie says hello back and keeps walking. I feel my face go red.

I want to say she looks very pretty under the apple tree; and that it's Harry's idea to pea-shoot elderberries at her and Peg, but it's too difficult to make the words sound right so I just stay quiet. I think about asking Clem what to say but he'd do his patter and send me away for another box of fish so he could talk to her on his own.

Jeannie goes into Mrs Chester's studio for ballroom dancing lessons.

I think about going myself. Holding her hand, seeing her face up close, then taking her to Lyon's for a bowl of soup before walking up Wormwood Scrubs where we kiss in patches of sunlight through the branches and she lifts her dress so I can see the hair growing on her mingey.

Clem smacks me round the head and says we need another crate of eels and two dozen skate from Mr Finlay's cold store in Norland Road.

I rush to Norland Road, hoping to return before Jeannie leaves Mrs Chester's, deciding I won't tell Harry about seeing Jeannie in the market when we're in his tree den as I like knowing things about her that he doesn't.

When I'm back I still keep my eyes peeled for the rest of the day, knowing I must have missed her coming out when I went for the eels.

It's late that day when I sweep down the offcuts. With no running water it's a long walk with buckets from the tap and I have to brush them all the way to the gully near the Goldhawk Road.

If Clem is in good spirits he might look up to the sky and say, 'Looks like rain, Billyboy. The good Lord will wash away our fish-heads and we must give thanks in church on Sunday.' Then he'll tell me to just brush them under the other stalls before the market manager sees.

Even though Clem doesn't go to church on Sundays but spends all day in the Eagle on Askew Road.

Then the boxes and any unsold fish goes back to the cold storage on Norland Road, though Mr Finlay prefers us to sell out cheap at the end of the day.

On Fridays I get my wages. Six shillings for pushing the barrow and helping Clem. I used to get 10d a day but Mr Finlay put my wages up when he saw how well the stall was doing. I've seen Clem put coins into his apron instead of the leather purse on his belt, which must be the extra profits. No wonder Mr Finlay's pleased.

The wages make me feel like a proper working man.

I say goodbye to Mr Finlay and cycle through Brackenbury, under the railway bridge at Trussley Road, past Ravenscourt Park towards Hammersmith Creek. Around the back of Trafalgar Street where rubbish gets blown up from the wharves and boat-building yards behind our house, thinking of Jeannie all the way home.

Ma has a big pan of water on the stove and the tin bath ready in the parlour for my Friday soak. I take my clothes off in the yard to keep the smell out of the house. Dad says one day he'll take me for a pint in the Seven Stars but he's always gone before I get home, which is why he hasn't done it yet.

He has his bath on a Sunday.

Other days I wash from a bucket in the yard and air my clothes in the lavvy overnight. By the end of the week Dad says the smell is so bad my jacket could take a shit by itself.

I slip off my undershorts and step into the tub, sitting down quick and leaning forward to cover my bits when Ma pours in more water from the stove. Hair has started growing down there, which is something I might have in common with Jeannie, if what Harry Coggins says about her sister is true.

Ma rubs soap into my hair with her strong fingers.

I'd like to be left alone now, like Dad is when he's in the tub.

Ma rubs soap into my back and lets me to do the rest. I wash my face, neck and shoulders, under arms, elbows and hands. I keep washing until the smell of antiseptic overpowers the odour of fish.

Ma goes back to her stove.

I rub the soap until it foams and wash around the old Christmas crackers, as Clem calls them. I wonder how to see Jeannie without going to Harry's house and take her up to the Scrubs for a kiss and a glimpse of her mingey.

Annoyingly, my little fellah, as Clem calls it, is getting bigger in the water.

Ma comes over to wipe soapy water down the back of my neck and I lean forwards to keep it all hidden. I'm not sure if she sees the little fellah, but quickly turns back to the sink without doing my knees and says I should do the wiping instead.

We're both quiet for a minute and I decide to get out of the bathtub. I take the towel from the pan rail to dry myself. It's a good feeling getting rid of the fish smell after a week. Ma says to go and sit with Grandma in the front room.

Grandma is very old, fifty-six I think, and hasn't been well since Grandpa died ten years ago. The other grandpa, Dad's dad, was crushed by a cart hoisted off a boat in Limehouse a few years before I was born. A month later his wife joined him in the grave when Dad wasn't much older than I am now.

Dad says it's good I don't have brothers or sisters because some of the houses on our street have twelve people in them while there's only four in ours and it's still a crush. He says he couldn't afford more mouths to feed but forgets I'm a working man too, paying two shillings to Ma's house-keeping on Fridays.

I save the rest in a tin under the bed. When I go with Dad to the Seven Stars I'll be able to buy him and his mates a glass of beer and he'll see I'm a working man just like them.

I go back to the parlour for my fresh clothes.

Ma kneels on the floor washing my shirt and trousers over a washboard in the tub. She doesn't speak and I know something's wrong, and wonder if I should say sorry about my little fellah getting big in the bath. I put on clean socks and shoes and try to think of what else might've made her cross.

I tell her her housekeeping is next to the sink.

She usually says something about me being a working man now, but she just stays quiet and I feel hot inside my head. She turns towards me and I smile at her.

I don't see it coming.

A hard slap across my cheek.

My ear burns red and I want to cry, even before the sting lands. Soap bubbles from her hand drip down onto my clean collar. Crying wouldn't be good right now so I keep it in.

My dirty hankie has been taken out of my pocket and left on the floor, waiting to be boiled. And I know what the trouble is, even before seeing it in her other hand; Clem's drawing, picked up from the stall.

Clem laughing as he says, 'What's it look like, Billyboy?'

The paper's wet and the picture blurred. I know it can't be one of Mr Edwins' umbrellas through a pointy railway arch, and must be something to do with the grown-up world.

I want to say to Ma I didn't draw it and wonder about asking her what it is, but she's looking at me like I'm all grown up now.

She says, 'Go to your room and wait for your father.'

The night sinks by. No time goes as slow as trouble.

Gran shuffles quietly into the bedroom we share, behind the fold-up divider that splits our room in two. I don't go down to ask for supper.

I must be asleep by the time Dad gets home from the Seven Stars because nothing gets said that night.

In the morning I walk downstairs for breakfast and Ma gives me a plate of bacon and bread without any sign of being cross. I catch her looking at my red cheek, which I've been rubbing hard since waking up, to make it look extra sore when she sees it.

Nothing gets said about the picture all day, which means either Ma didn't show it to Dad or he just laughed the way Clem did.

On Sunday Ma and I walk up Trafalgar Street and Askew Road to St Luke's Church and Ma's forgotten all about it, though I'm relieved not to bump into Clem outside the Eagle after all the fuss with the picture.

Inside the church, the congregation are singing, 'It's Only A Step To The Grave.'

4.

Sylvie puts a bowl of cottage pie in front of me, which is never as warm as I'd like it to be.

Someone I once loved made a good shepherd's pie. Steam rising off it like mist on a hillside.

Mrs Jackson was it?

Jimmy Parris reckons they don't actually make the food in the kitchen here. He says it all comes out of a van in metal boxes because it's cheaper than Mrs Akinyemi paying for a cook.

Seems daft when there's a perfectly good stove going to waste. Jimmy talks a lot of nonsense most of the time. You learn to take it with a pinch of salt. He's probably a good thirty years younger than me but it doesn't make much difference when your joints are buggered and you dribble more than you eat. Jimmy's been here a while now too and I don't mind passing a quiet hour with him in the next chair, unlike most of the others in this place. Get stuck with Mr Ozturk or Mrs Bentley and you have to pretend your hearing's worse than it actually is. I wouldn't have minded getting to know Jimmy when we were younger, before we both ended up in here.

You learn not to make friends when someone new turns up. Like those young pilots in the Battle of Britain the older pilots wouldn't speak to until they'd survived a few missions. Most people don't live too long after coming to The Cedars. After the first weeks are over they realise the good years are done and give it all up.

There aren't too many good years when you count them up. You get forty summers as a grown up playing houses, and that's about it. Struggle to buy your first place at thirty. Lose it at seventy and you're not getting another home of your own after that.

Funny how quick it goes.

Jimmy's alright though, even though he can't stop banging on about the Lake District and how beautiful it is up there.

I asked him if it's so beautiful why doesn't he move there, but he pretends he can't hear properly and tells you about the water and the fastest man in the world again.

Same old stories, over and over.

Occasionally visitors might come to give a talk, though there's a limit to the number of times you can listen to small children singing 'Little Donkey'. Bringing tins of bloody soup for harvest festival.

Mornings are best for visitors' talks. Any later in the day they can't be disappointed if we're all dozing in our armchairs.

I remember a man coming in with old maps of west London. Seeing the gradual disappearance of fields as the nineteenth century shifted into the twentieth, when this was the edge of old London. Shepherds Bush Green had the last patch of grass where sheep could graze overnight on their way to market the following day. The extending city, relentless and unstoppable, like waves from an ever-growing ocean.

The map man found Trafalgar Street on one of his old charts, back when Hammersmith Creek flowed from Stamford Brook, through the slum houses where I was born, past the boat-building wharves, across King Street and out into the Thames just beyond Hammersmith Bridge.

Trafalgar Street had gone on the next edition. After the slum houses were razed to the ground and Hammersmith Creek buried below new roads and houses. He wasn't much of a speaker but I enjoyed seeing his maps.

It was like discovering a piece of evidence that your life actually happened.

In my seventies, after the high-rise council flat I shared with Betty was gone, I was sleeping on a bench in Furnival Gardens. One morning I looked over the wall at the Thames and saw the small tunnel in the side of the bank opening into the river. A channel of old railings buried in sand at low tide, the last sign Hammersmith Creek existed. The mouth to a busy waterway that once carried barges to and from the river. I wouldn't mind going again sometime, just to look over the wall and see if the tunnel is still there.

Maybe Archie could take me when he next comes to visit his old man. We'll make an afternoon of it. Take a picnic and flask, maybe.

Remembering Betty Jackson's shepherd's pie makes me feel hungry. Thick and juicy it was, made with mutton of course. I watched her grill cheese over the potato 'til it went brown and crispy. Gravy under the spuds kept it moist without spoiling the cheesy top. Piping hot out of the oven. Had a kick that would tickle the back of your throat too. Her secret ingredient, she said, from her own country.

A little sauce to spice it up.

'Spicy tup,' I thought she was saying in her West Indian accent. I thought *tup* was her word for mutton.

Funny what stays in the mind. Things you'd forgotten.

Sylvie feeds me a spoonful of grey mash. A splash of tepid meat lands on the plastic bib around my neck. Sylvie says, 'Missed some!' and scoops it up into my mouth. There's a tingle in my belly at the thought of Betty Jackson that might be the memory of love but could just be cold lumps of potato going down.

I move the food around on my tongue but it feels like it's been chewed once already so I let my mind go back to where I was, to St Luke's on the Uxbridge Road before it was

bombed in the war and a new ugly church built to replace it, to Ma singing with the congregation.

*

*The end is soon coming, O sinner, beware,
For it's only a step to the grave;
Repent, or you'll miss that bright haven so fair,
For it's only a step to the grave.*

After church, I decide to go over to Harry Coggins's house to see if he understands the picture. Today Mrs Coggins doesn't seem quite so scary when she opens the door. I put this down to me becoming more grown up, having thought about new adult things these last few days.

Grumpy Peg is in this afternoon as Jeannie's gone out somewhere, which is both a shame and a relief as I didn't want Harry ogling Jeannie in her underwear today. Harry and I climb up his tree den and sit on the planks. Harry hasn't managed to steal any of his dad's cigarettes which is just as well because Mrs Coggins makes an unexpected visit down the garden with a jug of lemon squash.

I say, 'Thank you, Mrs Coggins.'

Harry and I never talk about her lip, but then I wouldn't want a friend asking questions if my ma had an ugly scar in her mouth.

Besides, there are more important things on my mind.

We drink the lemon squash.

I take the pencil and paper from my pocket and start the drawing for Harry. He looks unimpressed when I ask if he can see it yet.

I draw the stick in the middle and the two small circles at the base. I do the little fuzzy scribble at the top and ask again if he gets it?

He says, 'Yes,' like it's a stupid question. He takes the pencil and draws raindrops at the end of the stick which makes me think it might be an umbrella after all.

Harry turns away and looks up through the branches at the sky. After a quiet moment he says, 'Have you done it with a girl yet?'

The drawing still isn't clear and I wonder if I should just say yes, but I tell him no.

To my relief Harry says, 'Me neither.'

We sit quiet for a moment. He says, 'Paddy Welsh reckons a girl did him with her hand and promised to show him her fuzzy mingey. She says he can stick it in her one day soon.'

It starts to fall into place, the fuzz and the stick.

'Paddy says there's magic skin on your hips and if you rub circles on it with your finger, it makes your cock go off.'

The thought of Ma seeing Clem's picture makes me feel sick.

Harry says we could show it to Peg but I don't fancy talking to his sister about being a grown-up today.

In my bed later, listening to Gran wheezing behind the screen as she sleeps, I try to find the magic skin Paddy Welsh told Harry about. I move my finger in circles on my hips to see if anything happens and my cock gets bigger.

I turn on my side to stop it pressing against the bed sheet and hold it in one hand while still rubbing circles on my hip with the other.

I try to think of Jeannie but can't see her in her slip and petticoat. I remember her saying hello in the market and hold onto that memory, even if her chest isn't as big as it looks in her underwear.

I see her face, thinking this must be what love feels like.

It's getting warm under the bed sheet.

Both hands moving like when you pat your head and rub your tummy at the same time. The bedsprings squeak like in Dad's bedroom when he gets back from the Seven Stars on a Saturday night.

The memory of Jeannie getting clearer.

Her arms lifting up.

She looks back towards her house, knowing what's coming.

She laughs and crosses her arms to lift her dress.

Crossing her hands over, lifting the hem.

Right arm over the left.

Kneeling on the blanket beneath the apple tree. The skin on her neck, down to where her chest pushes front-ways. The dark shadow between her curves, pressing into the white lace.

A slow wave rising.

A warmth from somewhere deep inside.

I'm scared by its promise but the moment for stopping has gone and I let myself ride on the cool wave.

A warm wetness under the blanket.

Sounds coming back.

Catching my breath as a new cold feeling sinks down through me and I wonder if I might be dying.

An emptiness in the place where the feeling just was, as if something bad just happened.

Across the room Grandma hisses angrily, 'Billy?'

I hold my breath and stay quiet.

'Billy?' she hisses again sharply, like the whip-crack of the belt she'd give when I was small and she could stand straight. 'I know what you're doing. God will send you to hell.'

I pretend to be asleep and listen to the pounding thumps of my heartbeat.

Before morning I come up with a plan to go ballroom dancing with Jeannie and take her to Wormwood Scrubs:

I will cycle, as usual, over to Norland Road to help Mr Finlay unload the Billingsgate cart at five o'clock. My morning hello will not be my normal cheery one.

Mr Finlay will ask if everything's fine and I'll tell him I've been sick in the night but didn't want to let him down. I'll unload the boxes while clutching my stomach to look ill. He'll tell me to go home but I'll say I'm saving to buy a birthday present for my girlfriend.

I'll take two barrowloads over to Clem. When I return to Norland Road for the third I'll tell Mr Finlay I've been sick again. He'll tell me to go home and get myself better. Instead, I'll have a wash in the public lavatories at the Metropolitan station.

I'll need to make sure Clem doesn't see me going into Mrs Chester's.

I'll pay for the lesson with money from the tin under my bed.

I'll say hello to Jeannie and will be standing next to her when Mrs Chester puts us into pairs. Gran once told me ballroom dancing is about flair and romance and counting in threes, all of which I've been thinking about, and ready for.

Afterwards I'll take her to Lyons coffee house on the green. We'll go to the fairground in White City and walk on the Scrubs where I'll draw Clem's sketch to get her in the mood. We'll find a quiet place where she'll lift her slip and her petticoat and rub magic circles on my hips with her finger.

Early morning, and the plan is clear in my head.

I cycle to Norland Road for five o'clock to unload the cart for Mr Finlay.

I'm feeling ill from imagining I'm feeling ill.

Mr Finlay is sat on the side of the Billingsgate cart with his head in his hands. Boxes of fish stacked behind him in the sunlight, their dead eyes staring out from the crates.

People have been talking about the Hun marching through Belgium the last few days, though I've had other things on my mind. The Hun were told not to march through Belgium after all that business with the Archduke. It didn't mean much to me when I first heard about it, but now my plan to go ballroom dancing with Jeannie is hanging in the balance it's starting to look more serious.

Mr Finlay stays sat on the cart.

I'm doing my best to look ill.

I hold my tummy like I'm about to be sick but Mr Finlay just says the Kaiser means trouble this time.

I decide to put off looking ill until Mr Finlay's cheered up a bit, and start loading the first barrow.

'Don't bother, son,' says Mr Finlay. 'Shepherds Bush market's being used as barracks for soldiers heading off to France.'

Jack Burns arrives to load up Mr Finlay's stall in Norland Road. I wait for Mr Finlay to tell him not to bother but Norland Road market is staying open despite the Hun in Belgium and Jack starts stacking boxes with the usual dozy expression on his face.

I ask Mr Finlay if Mrs Chester's ballroom dancing class has been turned into army barracks too, but he just says, 'Come back next week, Billy. We'll see what's happening then.'

Still working, Jack Burns grins at me.

Jack Burns who's a divvy and steals Mr Finlay's fish to sell to doss-houses on the side.

Jack Burns, who Clem says is secretly Mr Finlay's son, after Mr Finlay knocked up Jack's ma a long time ago.

*

Jeannie, fading now.

The curve of her eyebrows and the rise of her little nose growing fainter.

I try to hold her here but she's getting smaller all the time, until she's nothing more than a tiny pinpoint of light, like a distant star in the morning sky.

Soon that will go too.

It may have already burnt-out long ago after traveling through the universe. A trick of the eye after everything else has gone, pressed onto the retina, like the burning filament of a light bulb long after the eyelids have closed.

When I think of the others, like Evie and Vera and Betty Jackson, it wasn't a proper love I had for Jeannie. She was like the slow opening chords to a favourite song, a starter before the main course, an indicator of everything ahead.

This is why I thought of her just now. To remember how it felt, wanting an idea what love would feel like when it happened with the right person.

That first rush.

They can't all be for nothing, these memories.