

BETHANY RIDLEY-DUFF

Peacetime

She'd forgotten to put flour in the cake, but Auntie Niamh insisted that he would still like it. Lydia piled buttercream between the sponges to make up for the lack of height, slathering more on top to add another precious few millimetres. It didn't feel right, using up the eggs and the butter like this, but Niamh said it was a special occasion.

"I can't get the words to go right," Lydia wailed, her hands sticky and cramping around the piping bag.

"Give it here," Auntie Niamh said.

She piped quickly, the letters as clear as if she'd written them with a pen. Even on paper, Lydia's words wobbled all over the place. She watched as Niamh looped the tail of the last 'e', frowning.

"It's not fair you're so good at it," Lydia said indistinctly, licking icing from her finger.

"Lots of practice," Niamh said.

She'd worked in a bakery once, icing the cakes in the display window and making all sorts of fiddly pastries, but then the screech planes had come. She span the cake round, brushing the stray crumbs off the plate. *Welcome Home*, it said, in a pale pink. They'd coloured it with beetroot juice.

"Is he really going to like it?" Lydia said.

"One hundred percent," Niamh said, but she wasn't looking Lydia in the face.

The letter had said to expect him home on Tuesday evening, but Lydia wasn't sure when evening officially started. After Niamh made

them all jacket potatoes (plain, now the butter was gone) and Lydia had settled next to Dad to watch telly, her legs started to get restless. Six o'clock. That was evening, wasn't it?

An hour dragged past, then another. Programmes flickered into other programmes. Lydia brought the cake in and set it on the table so it was ready, but the icing started to glisten and sag in the heat of the electric fire.

"Where the devil is he?" Dad finally said.

"Maybe there's been a—" Niamh started.

The crunch of a door opening. Lydia bolted to her feet.

She'd played it all out in her head, how it would unfold. The door would bang open and shut, James' feet would patter down the corridor, his voice would call out—*I'm home!*—with that familiar sloping pitch, then his face would emerge at the living room doorway, his arms opening wider and wider and wider for Lydia to pelt herself into—

The door banged shut. She heard his tread, heavy on the floorboards.

His face emerged at the living room doorway, tanned and square, light edging along the lines of his cheekbones. His hair was shorn close to his head, no longer the sandy mop he wore in her memories, and he was still in that severe uniform with the brassy buttons and all of the pockets—how scratchy it had felt, when he'd hugged her goodbye all those years ago.

His arms stayed at his sides.

"James," Niamh breathed.

She crossed the room and hugged him hard, Dad following after. Lydia stood where she was, wrong-footed.

"So glad you're home," Niamh whispered. She took his face in her hands and peered at him. "How are you, kiddo?"

"Less of the kiddo. Looks like a proper man in that uniform, he does," Dad said, squeezing James's shoulder. "You OK? We were expecting you sooner."

James managed a small, tight smile. "Yeah, just a bit of trouble on the roads." His eyes slid to Lydia, who was picking at her nails. "That really you, Lyd? Where's my little midget gone?"

Lydia tried to smile, but there was something wrong with how

he said it. Like he was heaving the words out. When she blundered over to hug him, he smelt of that polyester uniform, and of a sharp soap they didn't use at home. His grip around her didn't feel tight enough.

"Do you want a cuppa?" Dad asked. "There's no milk, like, but..."

"I'm alright," James said, untangling himself from Lydia. "Just want to get to bed. Journey took it out of me."

"Course, 'course. Room's all made up for you upstairs."

The staircase creaked as James climbed it, and Lydia looked up and imagined him treading down the landing, turning right into that pin-neat bedroom with the pressed bedding and the pyjamas laid out and his old model planes on the shelves. He moved oddly in her mind's eye. Not like a real person—more like a toy soldier, his wooden legs jerking left, right, left, right, arms pinioned to his sides.

"He didn't have any cake," Lydia said, not moving her eyes from the ceiling.

Niamh settled a warm hand on her shoulder. "We'll wrap it up and keep it in the larder. He'll have some tomorrow, I'm sure."

Lydia didn't see James in the morning, but she knew he was awake. While she shoved her clothes on and braided her hair in the chipped mirror, she heard the floorboards creaking next door in his room. She reached her hand out towards the wall. He'd taught her Morse code when they were younger—well, he *said* it was Morse code—and she used to tap out messages to him after Niamh put the light out. Nothing important. Just *hello* or *Are you asleep?* or *I'm hungry*.

She tapped now. *Sleep well?*

On the other side of the wall, the pacing stopped. She waited. A minute slipped by, then two, and no reply came. She tossed her plait over her shoulder and went downstairs, her stomach coiled in on itself.

Niamh had to collect this week's bread rations, so she walked with Lydia to school. They took the path down the hill and over the viaduct, picking their way across the overgrown tracks. When Lydia was six, screech planes had come in the night and loosed a scattering of blue firebombs, and one had clipped the side of the viaduct and

turn half the track away. No trains had run over it since, but it made a nice shortcut to the school and the city centre, so long as you kept close to the left side.

They skirted the bombed area now, Niamh warning her—as she always did—to keep away from the edge. It looked like a giant had taken a bite out of the bridge, then spat it out into the field below.

“Are they going to fix it now the war’s done?” Lydia asked, peering over.

Niamh grabbed her shirt and pulled her back. “Probably not. This was always an old line. They’ll have other stuff to prioritise.”

“Like what?”

“Buildings in the centre, the roads. The stadium too, I hope.”

“Ooh, that’d be good,” Lydia said. “We could go to the races!”

Lydia had no actual memories of the races. They’d stopped hosting them after the war broke out, even before the stadium got bombed to bits. James was the one who remembered every detail, and he’d described them to her meticulously—the sound of the engines, the dust clouds, the fried-onion smell and the stuffy heat. When he talked of them, his hands would move and his eyes would gleam, and the words would pour out of him like water.

Lydia thought about last night. His low-hanging arms and heavy voice.

“Niamh,” she said. “Why was James so weird yesterday?”

“Weird how, love?”

“He just went to bed. It was like he wasn’t even pleased to see us.”

Niamh squinted into the sun, swinging her carrier bag back and forth.

“It’s just a bit strange for him, I think” she said. “He’s had a tough few years. He’s not going to be—he’s bound to feel a bit unsettled.”

Lydia hopped from one slat of the tracks to the next. “But he’s home. And the war’s all done now.”

“It is, but it doesn’t always feel like that when you’ve fought in it. It’s a bit like—a bit like this viaduct. Nothing else is going to happen to it, but it’s still got that big hole in it back there that needs patching.”

Lydia considered this. “When’ll he be better, then?”

“I don’t know,” Niamh said, her voice soft. “I’m sure he’ll settle,

but we might have to—we might have to prepare for him to not be quite the same, love. We can look after him and support him and make sure he feels safe as safe, but there's some things it might be hard to help him with. But you mustn't blame yourself if you can't make him fully better."

Lydia listened, feeling that somebody had wrapped a hand around her vocal chords.

"Well," she said. Her voice sounded odd. "We'll see about that."

Then she started running before Niamh could say anything else.

The evening brought slate clouds and a chilly rain, but Lydia wasn't going to let it deter her. Once she got home, she ran upstairs and thumped on James's door, ignoring the squeezing in her stomach. She'd always done this. She was making things normal.

He answered a beat later than she'd have liked. Dressed in his comfy jeans and his faded shirt, he looked more like her brother than he had yesterday, but his shorn head still looked strange and raw against the familiarity of the room. He gave her a weary look.

"Hi, Lyd," he said. "Good day?"

Too polite.

"No," she said. "We did decimals and I hate them so I made it all up and Mrs Irving sent me out." She stuck her hands in her pockets. "Come up the hill with me."

James hesitated. "It's raining."

"So? Wear your big ugly mac."

She bolted back down the corridor before he could tell her no, thundering down the stairs and grabbing her own red raincoat from the cupboard. It was too small on her now, the sleeves riding right up her skinny arms, and the zip had jammed. She waited by the door. She tried to fix it. She waited. She tried to fix it.

Eventually, she heard feet on the stairs. She grinned as James came onto the landing, swamped in that slime-green waterproof. He managed only a small smile back, looking like someone had pushed his cheeks into place.

Lydia ran ahead as they climbed the hill. It was easier than making conversation. Once they breached the treeline, she glanced back after every few trunks, just to make sure he was still following.

It would be easy to lose him in here. Easy for him to stop, say something about tiredness, and slink away.

The trees weren't thick enough to keep the rain off, and the air was full of the smell of damp earth and leaves. She struck a right once she reached a splintered oak—she guessed it was an oak—and called back to James to do the same.

From there, it didn't take long to find the right bush, though it had swollen with the years. It took her a moment to pick out the glint of metal beneath the leaves, and another five minutes to drag the trolley from the grip of the twigs and branches and snarling vines. James caught up as she was trying to untangle the wheels, sweating into her waterproof, her hands aching and muddy.

"Help me yank it out," she panted.

"Lydia—"

"Come *on*. I've done most of it, what with you trailing on behind like a tortoise."

Wordlessly, he wrapped his hands around the handle while Lydia gripped at one of the grill sides. In a wrench of snapping twigs and crunching wood, they heaved it out.

She took the handle from him immediately and pushed it up the hill, the wheels rattling on the bumpy ground. She was big enough to steer it now, but she'd never found the knack—even in proper shops, where the floors were smooth lino, the trolleys would veer out of her control. God knows how this one had got up here in the first place. She and James had found it years and years ago, half-tucked in a bush and full of dead leaves, and they'd commandeered it. Sometimes they'd store things in it, or just sit and chat in it, but the best game of all was—

The trees parted around Lydia, opening into a clearing at the crest of the hill. Beyond, the grass swept downwards into a dandelion-spotted valley. The sky was a puddle of watercolour greys.

"Here we are," she said, parking the trolley.

She stuck her leg up over the edge and clambered inside it, sitting down cross-legged. The wet metal soaked through her trousers.

"Push me, then," she said, looking back at James.

He scratched his bare head. "Look, I know you're— I'm just not really in the mood."

Lydia clenched her fists. She scrambled back out of the trolley, landing hard on the grass.

"You get in it, then. I'll push you."

With a sigh, he climbed slowly over the edge of the trolley and sat down inside it. Against his wan face, she saw a cellophane memory—James, younger, his hair plastered to his head by rain, teeth gleaming, bouncing his legs with anticipation, flapping a hand at her to push him now, now, now—

She shoved the trolley with both hands.

It bolted down the hill like an arrowhead, and her throat closed. She'd done it too hard. The trolley jostled and clanked over the uneven grass, rattling, one uncoiled wheel squealing, another dragging left and right—she'd damaged it, dragging it out of the bush like that, and now—

The trolley struck a bump. James lurched out, rolled over twice, then stopped.

Lydia couldn't speak. She scabbled down the hill, slipped, dragging mud over her trousers, righted herself and ran. She threw herself onto the ground at James' side, shaking him.

"James?" she shouted. "Wake up! I didn't mean to!"

He didn't move. Her heart throbbed in her temples. She shook him again, harder, digging her nails into his shoulders. Almost crying, she leaned closer to him, putting her ear to his mouth. What if he wasn't—?

Something poked her in her sides. She screeched and leapt backwards—and then his eyes were open, and his mouth was a gleam of teeth, and he was laughing.

"Can't believe you fell for that," he said, sitting up.

She thumped him hard on the shoulder. "You horrible, evil—!"

"It serves you right. Could've bloody killed me, shoving me at that speed."

She tried to smack him again, but she was laughing too now. He caught her hands and pinned them together, then wrestled her into an easy headlock.

"Snot-nose," she said, writhing against him. "You're not fair."

"Maybe you're just—"

A rumble, somewhere overhead. He stopped, his grip tightening.

Lydia's eyes moved skywards, to where the dark mote of an aeroplane was carving its way through a gap in the clouds.

"James," she said quietly. "It's just a plane."

"I know," he said.

He released her and she shuffled away, rubbing her neck absently. His eyes had clouded. She could feel him shrinking back from her, slipping out of her grip like a lost bar of soap in old bathwater. For a minute, neither of them spoke.

"Was it really bad?" she said.

He jerked his head. Maybe a yes, maybe a no. She glanced past him to the trolley, upturned now, one wheel still spinning in the breeze.

"Maybe if I shove you down the hill again," she said, "you'll knock your head and not remember any of it."

He smiled at her. It wasn't the smile of a few minutes ago, all bright teeth and laughter and crinkled eyes, but it was something.