Love After Wartime

by Neilcymru

Summary

To the World, Robert Sugden is a divorced, invalided ex-RAF pilot who works somewhere high up in the National Trust. And Aaron Dingle is his handyman, driver and housekeeper who works for him at his home, Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse.

But to those that care about them the most, they are together. There's Grandmother Faith and Wartime friend Patrick for a start, both living at her Blackpool Guesthouse where Aaron was brought up. And there is best friend Adam and his wife Victoria, now running the Sugden Farm (with regular interference from father Jack).

This is a companion piece to my Wartime Robron, “Love on the Home Front”. It is set between 1945 and the 1953 Epilogue in that story. My 40s & 50s take on Robert and Aaron is a romantic work. Here the lads are solid, despite what life throws at them and their loved ones.

Chapter 60 added 9 June 2018 - "Better off without me"
Chapter 61 added 28 July 2018 - "One big happy family"
Chapter 62 added 12 October 2018 - "I Can See Your Future"

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
I wished you'd known me before

Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse, June 1946

People open up in different ways, Aaron knew that. He found it easier to share something personal with someone if their focus wasn't 100% on him. So, in the past, he'd always tried to talk to his Nan when she was in the middle of a household chore. He'd found that approach had worked with his friend Patrick at the training centre during the War too. The young nurse had found it easier to talk about himself if he was busy at some task or, failing that, a hot drink even helped. That had been the way he'd got close to his best friend Adam. They had spent so many times sitting together, hands each clamped around a mug of cocoa. They were fortunate that their friendship was so strong that neither was worried about appearing weak to the other.

But Robert, he was different. Not that he had any trouble talking, far from it. When he was enthused, Aaron found himself hanging on every word. But when it was something personal, something difficult, that was a different story. Aaron knew what Robert needed then. It wasn't someone right in his face, asking him what was wrong, however well meaning they were. What he needed was Aaron's arms around him. He needed to feel safe, so he could to admit to those times when he wasn't strong. And one evening, when Aaron came home, he soon knew it was one of those times.

But the day itself had not started in anything but an ordinary way.

Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse - morning

“Right” said Aaron, pulling on his jacket as he stood by the cottage door, “I'm off now”

“Hey, not so fast” said Robert, looking over from where he was sitting on the sofa, “When will you be back?” he asked as he turned to look into the packing case in front of him.

“Depends” said Aaron, walking over to Robert, “I don't know how long it'll take to fix that radio set”

He plonked himself down on the sofa next to his partner.

“Good, means you won't be under my feet all day” said Robert, flashing the younger man a smile

“What you doing anyway?” asked Aaron, peering into the crate, “I thought you were doing your book-keeping course today?”

“I'm waiting on the post. The next part hasn't come yet” Rob explained, “Thought it was time I sorted out this crate of my old things I bought over from the Manor”

“No need to rush is there? You have only been here a year! “ said Aaron with a smile

Robert took a hardback book out from the top of the crate.

“Right I'm really off this time” said Aaron, standing up and thrusting his hands into his jacket pockets
“Eh, what have you forgotten?” asked Robert

“What?” replied Aaron, “I'm taking the car, I won't need my cap” he said

Robert just looked at him

“Only kidding” said Aaron, he knew what his partner meant. Aaron leaned over and kissed Robert on the cheek before heading for the door.

“You drive carefully” said Robert, looking over his shoulder at the door as Aaron opened it. Aaron shot him a smile back, still with that hint of shyness that Rob found totally endearing.

By 12 o'clock Robert congratulated himself that he had not done so badly. He'd sorted out a pile of books that he was putting outside for Miss Phipps at the Church. After all, as she'd insisted 'everything is for the Red Cross Displaced Persons fund and every donation, however small, would help'. He knew Mr Rutherford at the Manor had taken her at her word, and provided the smallest donation that he could.

The afternoon had seemed to drag. The truth was, he was so used to Aaron being there most of the time, even if he was working in the garden or cleaning the car, that the Gatehouse seemed empty. And it wasn't as if he had a lot to do himself today. His correspondence coursework hadn't arrived, but that was not a surprise. There had been the regular nice letter from Victoria with its usual contents. Telling him how well things were going on the farm. Telling him how grumpy his father still was and suggested it was about time Robert made a visit home so he would have someone else to complain to, for once.

There was also a nice picture. His brother-in-law Adam holding up little Sarah so she could stroke the milkman's horse in Emmerdale. He couldn't help but smile at the sight of Adam beaming and holding Rob's niece tightly as if she were made of china. It was that photo that prompted him to dig that old album out of the packing crate later on.

The first photo caused him to frown. It was his wedding to Christine. He'd have put on the fire there and then if it wasn't the only photo he had of his best man and friend Lewis. Still, he thought, he could discretely tuck it away until he got a new one. Lewis was bound to make an honest woman of his girlfriend Jennifer one day after all. Or they could meet up at one of the RAF reunions. They were always promising each other they'd do that.

The brown envelope he found at the back of the photo album was more of a surprise. The handwriting was definitely his Mum's and it just said “Annie's”. Robert didn't remember packing that away but then that had been the usual rushed affair. He'd taken Christine to see his Dad's farm, on her first visit to Emmerdale after the wedding. She had been singularly unimpressed, restricting her comments to finding it strange that people actually lived like that. Robert's request for some family things had been met with an abrupt, “Take what you like. Some of us have work to do” from his father.

There were a few yellowing newspaper cuttings that caught his eye from the Hotton Courier. One from 1918 reporting the Armistice, plus one from early 1919 reporting “Beckindale boys home from front”. Then one more from 1920 saying that Beckindale was being renamed Emmerdale,
with the local Vicar saying that “A fresh start was needed, given the losses suffered during the War and all those pour souls that the Good Lord had gathered in the flu epidemic”.

Robert hadn't even known that Emmerdale wasn't always the name for his home village. He'd had been a small child when all this had happened, he told himself. And, almost as if to prove his point, a handful of photos tumbled from the envelope. There he was, on the beach at Scarborough with Victoria and his mother. It must have been a good holiday, he didn't even remember his Dad being grumpy! He could still remember that beach. Darting along at the front of the waves, the sand between his toes, Victoria running behind him and giggling.

His expression changed as if a dark cloud had passed over him. He stared over to the end of the sofa and his walking stick lying on the floor next to it.

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Robert has seemed a little distant when Aaron got home. He had told him how well working in the radio shop had gone that day. “Harry's got no-one to help him now, not since his son emigrated to Australia” Aaron explained, “So there could be more work too. So that's good isn't it?” he added

“Yeah. Sounds good” Rob replied.

Robert still didn't seem entirely himself when the pair of them settled down to their evening routine, which was usually the highlight of Aaron's day. They would curl up on the sofa in front of the Radio and listen to the Light Programme, with just Robert's desk lamp to see by. Rob would grab his spot, which was the end of the sofa next to the fireplace, and Aaron would snuggle up against him. He'd stretch his legs across the sofa and place his head on his partner's chest, hooking his arm around his waist as Robert draped his arm across his shoulders.

But tonight, as they lay there, Rob was so quiet. He usually loved the opportunity to point out how good the reception was. Reminding Aaron that “no one has a more up to date set that us in the Village” was one of his favourite points to make of an evening. That or saying how the BBC was going downhill and the programmes weren't a patch on “What we used to get before the War”.

“Look, I'm a bit tired actually”, Robert had said later in the evening, “I'm going to go to bed”

“Sure” Aaron replied, “I'll just wash up, I won't be long”

“It's alright. Don't rush” said Rob as he stood up and reached for his stick, “Actually, could you pack those books up for me?” he asked, pointing to the pile next to his desk, “One of the scouts will be round to pick it up sometime in the week, it's for the Church sale”

Aaron nodded.

“Oh, and there's a letter from Victoria on my desk” Robert added, “Nice photo of Adam and little Sarah”

“I'll have a look” said Aaron. It was obvious that his partner wanted a little time alone.

Robert nodded and headed for the wooden stairs. He was walking awkwardly but that wasn't a surprise. He often did that after he'd been stuck on the sofa for a while.
A little while later, Aaron was sitting at Rob's desk reading that letter. He smiled at the photo of Adam with his daughter and then spotted the other photos on the desk. He hadn't seen pictures of Robert when he was small before. He leaned back in the chair and thought for a moment, pinching the bridge of his nose with his fingers.

He knew Rob was bottling something up. That had been his way of coping, or not coping, with his accident. That had led to him wandering around the Manor House in the middle of the night or waking up anxious with a start. Fortunately, Aaron couldn't remember the last time that Robert had had a disturbed night. It certainly hadn't happened in the Gatehouse and the more distant the War seemed, the more the memories of Rob's accident seemed to fade for him.

But Aaron knew that the accident would never completely fade. Not when you had to be confronted by the consequences every day. He walked over to the foot of the stairs. He could just make out the light under their bedroom door so knew that Robert hadn't managed to get to sleep, even if he had tried. But Aaron knew what he needed to do. He needed to put the saucepan on!

“I could see you were still up” Aaron said, as he walked into their bedroom, a china mug of cocoa in each hand.

Robert was sitting up in bed in his striped pyjamas. He put his detective book down on the nightstand as his partner handed him a mug, “I couldn't get off” he said.

Aaron put his own mug down and unhooked his braces from his shoulders.

“How's your book?” he asked, as he unbuttoned his shirt.

“Soon as I think I work out who it is, they get killed” said Robert.

Aaron had stripped down to his vest and trunks and slid into bed next to the older man.

“Drink your cocoa” said Aaron as he reached over for his own mug.

Aaron took a swig and then stared down into his cup, not looking at Robert.

“Nice photo of little Sarah, wasn't it?” said Aaron, “I think she's looking more and more like her Mum”

“Yeah” said Rob with a smile, taking a swig from his own cup

“You can see the likeness in those old pictures. You and Victoria on the beach” said Aaron

“I...I found them in that crate” said Rob, looking down into his own mug.

“Robert, you know you can tell me anything, don't you?” said Aaron

“It's nothing” said Rob

Aaron turned and just looked at Robert. “Go on “ he urged gently

“You'll think it's stupid” said Robert
“No I won't” said Aaron softly, “I promise”

“Well I was looking at that old photo album and I there's one of me standing there in my uniform”, Robert said, skating over some of the details, “Then I found those ones of me and Victoria on the beach at Scarborough. Years before the War that was. I can remember running along that beach for ages and....” he added before tailing off.

Aaron put his mug down and put his arm around Robert's shoulders.

“You know” said Robert, “Sometimes, when you're out, the door goes and I get up from my desk and I even go a few steps before I realise and....”

“It's alright Robert” said Aaron squeezing Rob's shoulder gently, “Really, it's alright”

“I wished you'd known me before. Before the accident I mean” said Robert sadly

Aaron thought for a moment before speaking. He knew he wasn't as good with words as he wanted to be. But he was determined to make the effort. Robert, was worth the effort.

“Listen” he started, “When I met ya, I didn't see a man with a walking stick. I didn't think about what you could do. Or what you couldn't do. I just saw you”

“I fell for you” he added, “I love you”

Robert let out a breath and forced a smile, “So, you don't mind that I won't be competing in the London Olympics then?” he asked

Aaron just gave a small smile and a tiny shake of the head. He leaned forward and pressed his lips against Robert's.

“The man I want, is right here” Aaron said softly as he broke away.

Robert smiled back at him. He put his mug onto the nightstand and rolled over to look at Aaron

“Same here” Robert whispered, leaning forward for another kiss.

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The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse, Blackpool – August 1945- one morning

“Coming, coming” Faith called as she headed to her front door. Her smiled widened as she opened the front door and took in the sight of the young man on her doorstep.

“Yes love” she said, admiring the handsome, tanned young face and dark curly hair in front of her.

“Hello” the young man said, “A friend of mine..” he started

“Come in love” said Faith, stepping away from the door to allow just enough room for the young man to enter.
“Recommendation from a friend is it?” said Faith as she walked to the reception desk, “I thought I hadn't seen your handsome face here before”

“You at sea then?” she added, noticing the kit bag now standing on the floor, “My son's in the merchant navy. In fact, I've had a lot of sailors…”

She was interrupted by the sound of someone bounding down the stairs

“Danny” Patrick breathed excitedly, running over and wrapping his one arm around the young sailor

“Pat” Daniel replied, curling his arms around the other young man and hugging him tight.

'Oh' Faith thought to herself, 'That friend'

Lunchtime

Patrick stopped at the bottom of the stairs and spotted the post lying on the mat. The first letter looked liked the latest part of his book-keeping correspondence course. Then there was a letter addressed to 'Mrs F Dingle' in what looked liked Aaron's handwriting. A note from her Grandson always put a smile on her face. The last was a brown envelope marked OHMS. That was probably from the taxman and would have the opposite effect entirely.

Patrick put the letters on the hall-stand and checked his reflection in the mirror. He smoothed down his floppy dark fringe and then needlessly checked the safety pin which was clipping his empty left shirt sleeve to his shoulder. He was distracted by the sound of laughter from the lounge.

Patrick walked over and into the room.

“There's no need to go to town on that shirt Mrs D” said Daniel, looking up from the sofa. He was sitting stripped to his vest at the waist, his muscly arms exposed.

“Now Daniel” said Faith, “I believe in being thorough. You read that paper”

“I've finished it” said Daniel with a big grin

Patrick walked over to the fireplace and put the letters onto the mantelpiece

“One from your Aaron. Oh and one from the taxman” he said, turning around and putting his hand in his trouser pocket.

“I'll help you with the tax one later” he added

“Oh, thank you love” said Faith, finally taking Daniel's shirt from the ironing board, “I don't know how I'd manage without you Patrick” she added

“Me neither” said Daniel as he pulled his shirt on.

But Patrick didn't reply.
Patrick's bedroom- the first floor, that night

Daniel found Patrick sitting at his desk when he walked back from the bathroom. He hung Patrick's red dressing gown, which he had borrowed, on the back of the door and sat down on the left side of the bed.

“Come here Pat” he said

“I just want to finish this” said Patrick, looking down at his paperwork

“Patrick“ said Daniel, more firmly.

Patrick sighed and walked over. Daniel slid over to the foot of the bed. He wanted Patrick sitting on his right side. There was something he wanted to say. Or to be fair, something he thought he needed to say.

Patrick was overdressed for a hot August night. His striped pyjama bottoms and a white t-shirt contrasted with Daniel's own vest and short trunks.

“You weren't bothered about earlier were ya? Me larking around with Mrs D?” Daniel asked

“No. It wasn't that” Patrick replied

“It was just a bit of flirting” said Daniel, “I mean, even if she wasn't, you know, a lady she must be old enough to be my Nan!”

“Oh, she wouldn't let that stop her!” said Patrick

Daniel smiled and was quiet for a moment.

“I've missed you” Daniel said softly, reaching across and pushing Patrick's fringe away from his forehead

“I've missed you too” Patrick said, not quite looking up at his partner.

Daniel thought for a minute. He wanted to get this right.

“Listen Pat” he said, “I know when I see ya, that things are a bit, well rushed aren't they?”

Patrick nodded

“Well” Daniel went on, “When I'm at sea, I think about what I want to tell you next time I see you. But it gets lost in the rush sometimes”

“It's alright” said Patrick

“No. It's not” said Daniel softly hooking his right arm around Patrick's shoulders, “You know how much I care about ya, don't you?”

Patrick nodded, “I care about you too” he said quietly

“And it's not just that” said Daniel, running his finger down the scarred side of Patrick's face, “I want you too” he added. And, as if to make his point, he planted a soft kiss on the same side of Patrick's face.
“Sometimes....” Patrick started hesitantly

“Go on” Daniel whispered

“Sometimes, I wish you'd met me before”

“Pat” Daniel said, putting his left hand onto Patrick's left shoulder and his empty sleeve, “You're gorgeous now”

“But, but look at you” stammered Patrick, “You could have anyone. And you go all around the World. You wouldn't have to just settle on....”

“I haven't settled” said Daniel, “I picked you”

“But why?” Patrick persisted

“Didn't you keep that letter of mine?” Daniel asked

“Course I did. I'd never get rid of that. Never” said Patrick, surprised at the question.

“Well, I said it all then” said Daniel, “But perhaps you need to hear it? I picked you cause as well as being gorgeous, you're kind and you're clever, but you don't make other people feel stupid.....”

Daniel took Patrick's hand in his

“and because it doesn't matter where I see you. You always make me feel like I've come home”

Patrick smiled and leaned forward to push his lips against Daniel's.

“Welcome home” Patrick whispered as he broke away. Daniel smiled and leaned in again
Fathers, 'real' or otherwise

Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse- July 1946, one evening

Aaron took his eye away from the telescope and looked at the book laid out on his lap for a moment.

“I hope it's just stars you're looking at” said Robert, stretched out on top of their bed.

Aaron turned away from the eyepiece to look at his partner.

“Oh, I am!” Aaron replied, “You can't see anything else round here. Only the Manor House”

“You could be looking at Mr Rutherford” said Robert

“What, he's about seventy!” said Aaron

“I thought you liked older men” said Robert with a grin

“Read your letter” said Aaron, smiling back and returning to his telescope as Robert did just that.

“Diane says Dad's back is playing him up again”

Aaron decided to give up, “Uh, I didn't actually mean out loud Robert” he sighed as he got up and closed the bedroom window.

“I thought you'd be interested” Robert pouted

Aaron pulled the curtain across and walked over to the bed, “Let me guess” he said as he climbed up onto the bed, “He won't go to the Doctor, he won't take on any more farm hands and he says there's nothing wrong with him even though he's stuck in bed”

“Have you read this?” Robert asked

“Nah” said Aaron, “I just listen to what you tell me” he smiled, leaning forward and kissing Robert on the lips. Suddenly, his Dad's bad back wasn't the top of Robert priorities that evening.

The Barton's Farm- Yorkshire July 1946- later the same night

Victoria woke with a start as she felt a firm hand gently resting on her knee

“Come on love” said Adam quietly, “You go and have a lie down for a bit, I'll sit with her now”

Victoria leaned forward in the armchair and rubbed at her aching back. “I don't want to leave her on her own” she said softly, looking over at the the small bed against the bedroom wall.

“She won't be on her own” her husband replied, kneeling on the floor in front of her.

“What time is it?” Victoria asked, still sitting in the chair
“About half twelve” said Adam

“You’ve got to be up at five” his wife replied

“Come on love, you're shattered” said Adam, “You go and lie down and I'll come and get you in an hour”

Victoria nodded and headed for the door, “Just for an hour mind” she said, “You come and wake me”

“Course I will “ Adam said, even though he had no intention of doing it. He sat back in the chair and looked across at his daughter. His daughter. Regardless of what anyone else may say.

Adam was still smarting from one of his father-in-law's “throw away remarks”. He and Victoria had just been leaving from one of their regular visits to Emmerdale. Visits that were, as far as Adam was concerned, far too regular. Just as they were leaving the living quarters at the back of the Woolpack, he had heard Jack saying to Diane, “When are they going to try for one of their own?”. Adam would have marched back in, but he knew that would have upset Victoria too much so just bit his tongue. Sarah was “their own”. He'd felt that long before he had adopted her.

Victoria walked back into her daughter's room at five o'clock. Her husband was sitting up in the chair, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders.

“I thought you said you'd wake me in a hour” she said as she walked over to him and ruffled his curly hair.

“I must have forgot” said Adam. “Right, I've got work to do” he added, getting up, “When's Dr Ecclestone coming?”

“About nine” said Victoria, sitting back in the armchair

Adam thought for a moment, “Right, I'll make sure I'm working in the yard then when he's here”. He headed out of the room, but stopped in the doorway to look at Sarah. He walked back over and wrapped his arms around Victoria. “It'll be alright love” he said softly, “We won't lose her, I promise”

Adam looked at the open panel on the tractor in frustration. It was no good, he just couldn't concentrate. He dropped his spanner to the yard floor with a loud clang and rubbed his face with his hands.

“Well Mr Barton” a Northern voice said in his earshot, “I'm pleased to say your daughter is well on the mend. She should be up and about in a day or two now”.

Adam's face broke into a smile, “Thanks Doc” he said, as the older man headed to his car. The Doctor turned before opening the door, “Oh, I've left my bill with your wife” he added as an afterthought.

But Adam wasn't thinking about money. He darted into the house and up to his daughter's room, flashing his mother a smile as he passed her in the kitchen. Little Sarah was sitting up in bed, for the first time in days and Victoria was beaming. Only Adam's smile was bigger and he could have lit the room with it.
“There she is” said Adam, the pent up anxiety draining away from his body, “There's my princess”

Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse- August 1946, one morning

“Diane says Dad's back is still no better” said Robert, looking up from the table in the kitchen, “She's even trying to persuade him to sell the farm. She wants me to go up there and talk to him” he added, putting the letter down, “It's times like this I wish we had a telephone”

“What use would a phone be?” said Aaron, looking up from the sink where he was washing the breakfast things, “Your Dad's not even got one”

“I know..” Robert started

“And Victoria's not got one either” Aaron continued, “Who would you ring?”

“Dr Gillespie's got a phone” Robert replied sulkily as he walked over to the sink

“Dr Gillespie?” said Aaron, “Who lives about five minutes away by car ?”

“Aaron” said Robert, “Having a phone would mean we were....”

“...keeping up with the times” Aaron said, matching Robert word for word

Robert grinned “Hey, you asking for a hiding Jeeves ?” he asked with a grin, giving Aaron a quick slap on the seat of his trousers

“Gerroff!” Aaron laughed, “Anyway, this is the time of the working man, so keep your hands to yourself, boss ” he added with a big grin.

Robert grinned back, but then his face became serious. “I'll have to go up there” he said with a sigh.

Aaron nodded as he wiped his hands on the towel hanging next to the sink.

“When you want me to drive you?” he asked, hooking his hands around Robert's waist and pulling him close.

“No” said Rob, hooking his own arms around Aaron, “I mean. Yes, I'd love it if you could come. But, you know.....” he started

Aaron nodded. He leaned forward and kissed Robert on the lips.

Blackpool- Golden Palm Tree Guest House – August 1946 9:30am one week later

Faith put a small plate of eggs and bacon down on the kitchen table in front of Patrick. She started to cut everything into smaller pieces without making a fuss about it.
“I've been looking forward to this, after doing everyone else's breakfasts” said Faith, putting her own plate on the table

“You could always eat yours before you serve up” Patrick suggested

“I need all the time I can get first thing in the morning to make myself look presentable” said Faith with a smile

“Do you think you could look at Mr Fenwick's books for him today love?” she added as she sat down at the table

“Course. Where's his shop again?” Patrick asked

“It's only the next street along, you turn left at the Royal Oak and it's a few doors down. It's a shame he's having to sell up. Morris has been in ladies corsets for thirty years”

“Each to their own” said Patrick dryly

Faith got up as the kettle started to whistle on the cooker.

“I'll get it” said Patrick, getting up as the doorbell rang in the hall.

He returned soon after, followed by a tall, dark haired man with a weather-beaten face.

“Gentleman here, says he's your son” said Patrick, returning to his breakfast.

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“Right” said Patrick, “I'd better go and see Mr Fenwick” he added as he left the table

“See you later love” said Faith, sipping at her tea

Cain waited until Patrick had left the room, “Bit young isn't he mother? Even for you?”

“Don't be daft love” said Faith

“Well, bit cosy isn't it? Breakfast in here. Why isn't he out with the other guests?”

“Patrick's a resident” said Faith, “Anyway, you know he's a friend of ourAaron's. He was the nurse at that training centre he went to remember”

“Have you heard from our Aaron?” asked Cain

Faith nodded, “He's still working for that chap in Hadleigh. You know, the one that had the big house till his wife divorced him”

“He wants to watch himself there” said Cain

“Why do you say that?” said Faith, unsure of what her son was driving at.

“Well” said Cain, “He's living in isn't it mother? What if this feller gets married again? Our Aaron could be out of a job and a home”

“Oh, I think he'll be alright love” said Faith with a smile.

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That evening........

Cain put the phone down on the stand in the hallway of the Royal Oak and frowned. He wasn't sure exactly how he felt. Not now that he definitely knew.

“Cheers Arthur” he said to the landlord as he returned to the bar, “Give us a rum” he said, “Actually, make it a double” he added, rubbing his face with his hand.

“You've known my Mum a long time haven't ya?” Cain asked as the landlord handed him his drink.

Arthur looked around carefully to check where his wife was. Fortunately, she at the other end of the bar.

“Uh, a good few years” said Arthur, “Why?”

“Did you ever meet my Dad?” Cain asked

“Well, there was this feller in here once, years back” said Arthur, “Scruffy bloke with a tache. He said Faith, I mean, your Mum, was his wife. He went over to the Palmtree but she wouldn't let him over the doorstep. They had a blazing row and he stormed off apparently”

“Really?” said Cain, knocking back a swig of rum

“Oh yeah” said Arthur, “Lettie Chorley saw it all. She just happened to be out in the street cleaning her front door”

“Lucky that” said Cain sourly. But his mood hadn't darkened just because of a nosy neighbour.

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The next morning.....

Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse

“Right, you got everything?” said Aaron as he walked briskly into the living room, “There's plenty of time to get you there before the quarter past”

Robert was standing at the foot of the stairs, his walking stick resting next to the front door.

“Come here a minute” he said, opening his arms as Aaron walked towards him. Robert held him tight as he pressed his lips firmly against Aaron's. He broke away and buried his head in the young man's shoulder.

“We'll have to say our goodbyes here” said Robert, rubbing his cheek against the side of Aaron's face.

“I hate being away from you” said Rob, “Even if it is only for a week”

Aaron moved back a little and looked into his partner's eyes.

“You were alright when I went to see my Nan” he said gently, “That week in January”
“No I wasn’t” said Robert. He leaned forward and kissed Aaron again, this time deep and lingering.

“It's just a week” said Aaron as they parted, “It'll fly by. You get your Dad sorted. That's the main thing”

“Do my duty as a good son you mean?” said Robert

“Yeah, do your duty” said Aaron forcing a smile.

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Brighton- Golden Palm Tree Guest House

Cain looked out of the living room into the hall. Patrick was standing in front of the mirror, making sure that his shirt was ridiculously neat.

“Eh son, you got a minute?” Cain said, keeping his voice low

“Where's my Mum?” he asked as Patrick walked over

“Out shopping” Patrick replied as he walked into the living room

“Good” said Cain

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Cain was sitting in one of the overstuffed armchairs in the living room, Patrick opposite him.

“My mother said you were a nurse at that training centre our Aaron went to” said Cain

“Yes, well I was the welfare officer too. I was on loan from the RAMC” Patrick replied

“Have you ever had to tell someone that, you know, someone they know has died? “ Cain asked, not looking up

“It's all done officially in the Army” said Patrick, “We lost some of the mining lads too. Their families only got a letter. I did visit some of them after the War though. I mean it's not much is it, just a letter?”

Cain nodded. It looked like Patrick was the person he was looking for. “It's the same at sea” he said, “Someone official. I've never had to do it myself”

“I take it someone's died then?” Patrick asked gently

“Yeah” said Cain, “My Dad”

“Oh, I'm sorry” said Patrick

“Nah, you're alright” said Cain, “I mean, I haven't set eyes on him since I was a kid. I don't exactly have a load of happy memories neither. But he was still....” he trailed off

“Still your Dad” said Patrick
“And her husband” said Cain

Patrick looked puzzled for a moment, “Your Mum has mentioned him, now and again. I have to say, I thought he already was dead”

“No love lost there. Not since he ran off with that barmaid” said Cain, “My Mum's told me a few times that she hoped he had gone”

The two men were quiet for a while

“One is” said Cain, breaking the silence, “I only found out for sure last night. Shipmate of mine was heading home to Sheffield. He'd heard about some old drunk called Dingle that had died in some accident when he was on his last leave. Said he'd ask about for me”

“And it was your Dad?” Patrick prompted gently

Cain laughed a little, “Yeah!” he said, “He were nicking lead off the roof of a church that had been bombed. Course, he'd had a skinful and he fell”

“One is...” Cain went on, “I've left it too late. I've got to get back to Liverpool now. I didn't know how she'd take it, so I haven't told her”

“Do you want me to tell her, when you've gone?” asked Patrick, though he already knew the answer

“Would ya?” Cain replied eagerly

“Thanks son” he added, reaching forward to pat Patrick on his left arm, before he realised what he was doing.

“Thanks” he said again

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That afternoon

“Go on” get that down you said Patrick, sitting down at the kitchen table and handing Faith a small glass of whisky.

“I don't know why I'm that bothered. I haven't seen the useless article for years” said Faith, “Not much of a husband. Or a father for that matter”

“Well, at least you've got your children” Patrick suggested

“What a daughter I've not set eyes on since she dumped our Aaron here?” said Faith, “And a son who treats this place like a hotel”

“But this is a hotel” said Patrick, “And you've still got your Aaron, even if he has left the nest”

“Yes, my Aaron” said Faith with a smile, “I suppose I'm just feeling a bit alone at the moment” she added, giving Patrick's hand a squeeze

“Oh, I can't see you being alone” said Patrick, kindly. “I'll get that” he added, getting up as the doorbell rang.
“You alright Mrs D?” Daniel asked, walking into the kitchen moments later and putting his kit-bag on the floor.

“Oh Danny!” said Faith getting up and throwing her arms around the handsome young man, “I've had such terrible news” she said

“There there” said Patrick, giving Faith a supportive pat on the back. Perhaps it was delayed shock he thought to himself, the grief suddenly hitting her. Then again, perhaps not, he thought as she continued to hold very tightly onto his boyfriend.

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“I thought she was never going to let go of you” said Patrick, sliding into bed next to his partner

“Aww” said Daniel pushing himself onto his side, “Come on, she had just found out she'd lost her husband” he added, reaching across and hooking his hand around Patrick's waist

“I mean” Daniel said softly, rubbing his hand against Patrick's side, “You've still got yours” he added, leaning over and pressing his lips firmly against Patrick's.

He broke away and smiled, “Well, that's how I see it anyway”, he said leaning forward and kissing Patrick again

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Emmerdale – The Woolpack living quarters

Diane looked over from the kitchen table as Robert walked into the room and sat down. She had been about to ask him how his 'chat' with his father had gone, but the angry expression on her stepson's face told her all she needed to know.

“No luck then pet?” said Diane, walking over to the table and putting a teapot down

“Of all the pig-headed, stupid.....” Robert started, but stopped himself going on

“You don't have to tell me Robert” said Diane, pouring them both out a cup of tea, “I'm married to him!”

“And I suppose I could have ended up with someone worse” his stepmother added wistfully as she sipped her tea

“Who?” said Robert angrily, “Mussolini?”

“Come on love he's not that bad” said Diane, “Well, not most days” she added with a smile. She was pleased when Robert at least smiled back.

“He still thinks he can run the farm you know?” said Robert, “He can't get out of that bed but he thinks he'll manage so long as he can still shout at people”

“I've tried talking to him” said Diane, “So has Victoria. It's his pride, he won't let go and admit he's not up to it”

Robert looked at his walking stick for a moment, now leaning against the side of the table, “Well sometimes you just have to” he said.
“Can you stay for the week?” Diane asked

“I won't fetch and carry for him” Robert insisted, “I've had enough snide remarks from him about my 'hired help' back home as it is”

“I've told him you're very lucky to get anyone” said Diane, “It's not like when me and your Dad were young. People were falling over themselves to get into service in those days. It's not what young people want now”

“I know, I was very lucky there” said Robert, smiling to himself

“I don't expect you to look after him” said Diane, “Just have a look at this offer he's had, go and speak to this lad who's his main farmhand, see how things are really going”

“Don't you know how things are going?” Robert asked

“Well if I did, it would be a first!” said Diane, “You know your Dad”

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“You'll be all right in here will you love?” said Diane.

“This is fine” said Robert, plonking himself down on the bed in the spare room

“I heard what he said by the way, when you told him I'd arrived” said Robert, “That it was about time 'Little Lord Fauntleroy' showed up!”

“He was pleased to see you, really” said Diane, “But you can't expect him to show his feelings” she added, “Men don't” she said with a sigh as she closed the bedroom door behind her.

Robert reached for his leather wallet on the nightstand and opened it up. He took out a photo. It was Aaron, shirtsleeves rolled up and washing the bonnet of his car, smiling for the camera.

Robert thought for a moment. Of holding Aaron in his arms when they said goodbye in the Gatehouse. ’Some men don't' he thought to himself with a smile.

Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse

Aaron looked away from his telescope with a sigh. It had made a change, to be able to lose himself in the night sky for a while without interruptions. But it had not in fact been a welcome one. The cottage was just too quiet. And too empty.

As he padded back from the bathroom and closed the bedroom door, he took Robert's dressing gown from the back of it He held the collar close to his face for a moment. He could just about make out a hint of that cologne Robert had bought on his trip up to London. Smiling he hung the robe back up and smoothed it down a little.

Aaron hopped into his side of the bed. Robert had been right, he thought, they should get a phone. This probably wouldn't be the first time Rob would have to head off home to deal with his Dad. There must be a phone somewhere in Emmerdale. Perhaps one of the other pubs nearby? It would be good if he could hear his voice, while they were apart. One thing Aaron was pretty sure off. If they did get a phone, it would mean Robert's Dad was less likely to. Just to be bloody minded.
Aaron picked the framed photo off from his nightstand. It was a nice picture, just a small group crowded into the kitchen on the day the Bevin Boys were all going their separate ways. Adam had his arm around Victoria, who was holding baby Sarah. Robert was sitting in a matey pose, with one arm around Aaron and the other around their friend Leo. But Aaron knew that hand squeezing his shoulder hadn't just been matey. Not by that time.

“Night Robert” said Aaron as he put the photograph down on the nightstand. He clicked the lamp off and curled up in bed, a happy smile on his face.
Finally put a face to the voice

Blackpool – The Golden Palm tree Guest House- September 1946

Cain Dingle walked into the hallway of the guesthouse and took his pipe out of his jacket pocket. As his mother opened the door to the lounge and emerged into the hall, he briefly caught the sound of female laughter.

“You can't go in there” said Faith, as her son approached her, “The girls are all changing”

“I only want my tobacco Mother” said Cain with a weary sigh, “I've left it on the mantelpiece”

“Hang on love” said Faith, opening the door slightly, “Patrick “ she called, “Pass over our Cain's tobacco pouch”

“How come he can go in there?” asked Cain, as his mother handed him his small leather holder

“Come on love, that's different” said Faith as she headed for the kitchen

“Why?” asked Cain

Faith thought for a moment before answering. “Patrick was a nurse “ she said, “Anyway, Loretta wanted him to look at her sore throat. She thinks she's coming down with a cold”

“I'm not surprised” said Cain, filling his pipe as he followed his mother into the kitchen, “I've seen the costumes they have to wear. They must be freezing up on that stage”

“I've been told it's all very tasteful” said Faith, filling the kettle from the sink tap, “You could go tonight if you wanted, I've got free tickets”

“I'm off at three” said Cain

“Liverpool?” asked Faith

“Uh, no. Leeds first” said Cain.

Faith smiled quietly to herself.

“Pity. You'll miss our Aaron. He's coming up next week” said Faith.

The following week

Robert had not been impressed with Blackpool so far. But he was putting a big effort into trying not to let it show. The closer they got to Faith's guest house, the happier and more enthusiastic Aaron had been and Rob was determined not to rain on his partner's parade.

But all Robert could see as Aaron parked the car, was a short row of weather-beaten houses. He peered through the passenger window at the sign in front of the nearest. The lettering saying “The Golden Palm Tree” had obviously seen better days.
“And you'll really like Sarge. I mean Patrick” said Aaron as he set the handbrake.

“Hmmm?” said Robert, realising that his mind had wandered.

“I said you'll really like Patrick” Aaron repeated.

“Well. There's no guarantee is there? Just cause he's like...well, just because he's.....” Rob started.

“I didn't mean that” said Aaron “I just meant cause he's a nice bloke. And you've got things in common. He likes the movies, especially the American ones”.

Aaron opened the driver's door and got out as Robert got up onto the pavement.

“If the worst comes to the worst” said Aaron, as he unlocked the boot, “You can always talk to each other about book-keeping”.

Robert leaned on his walking stick and peered up the road.

“I thought you said you could see the tower ?” he said.

“Well you could, if my telescope was still here” said Aaron, a broad grin spreading over his face. “It's not that far. Just a few tram stops and we're right at the South Pier”

“I can't wait” mumbled Robert as Aaron picked their cases up.

Before they could get to the door of the guesthouse, it burst open and four young women started down the steps, laughing and joking among themselves.

“Evening ladies” said Robert as the group passed, giving them a smile. The women headed down the street, still chatting away. But a couple turned to look back at the young man.

“Oi!” said Aaron, giving Robert a gentle prod from behind with a suitcase, “Stop showing off”.

The door opened as the two men started up the steps.

“It's my Nan I want you to impress” said Aaron.

“No problem there love” said Faith, now leaning against the side of the front door, her arms folded.

“You must be Robert” she said, extending her hand.

“Mrs Dingle” said Robert, shaking the older women's hand and flashing her a winning smile, “A pleasure”.

“Oh no love. You must call me Faith” Aaron's grand-mother purred, still holding tightly to Robert's right hand, “You know, it's so nice to finally put a face to the voice. After all this time”

“Not a disappointment I hope?” Robert said with a grin.

“Oh no love” said Faith, “Quite the reverse”.

“Nan” said Aaron.

“Yes love” said Faith.

“Can we come in?” said Aaron, feeling a little embarrassed at the way his Nan was looking intensely at his partner.

“Right let me look at you” said Faith, as Aaron put the cases on the floor. “Oh. Come here!” she said, suddenly wrapping her arms around her grandson in a big hug.

“Nan!” said Aaron, now feeling a little embarrassed in a different way.

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“I thought we'd at least be in the dining room” said Robert, leaning over to Aaron who was sitting next to him around the kitchen table.

“I always eat in here” said Aaron sipping from his mug of tea, “Why does it matter?”

“Right” said Faith briskly as she walked into the room, “I've just tidied up the lounge for you. That's the trouble with these theatre girls, they will leave their knickknacks everywhere”

Faith paused as she stood next to Rob, “You wouldn't believe the things I've put my hands on Robert”

“Uh. No. I'm sure I wouldn't” he said eventually

“Are you sure you don't want to come to the show with us tonight?” asked Faith

“I'll be fine here with the radio. Thank you” Robert assured her

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Later that evening.....

“It's supposed to be fruit cordial, but it's got a real kick” said Patrick as he sat in the armchair opposite Robert.

“Where did you get it?” asked Rob, helpfully holding out one glass then another

“Oh. In Wales” said Patrick, “I went to visit the family of one of the lads. One of the ones that didn't go home after the War I mean”

Patrick put the bottle on the table in the lounge and took the glass Robert was offering.

“Cheers” said Robert, as the two men clinked glasses.

“Oh. That's awful!” said Rob as he took a small swig

“Well” said Patrick, taking a small gulp himself, “I didn't say it was nice”

“Isn't there something else we could drink?” Robert asked
“No. Mrs Dingle locks everything away. You have to round here. Some of her guests are terrible”

Robert was thoughtful for a moment and looked around the cramped room. He took in the cheap furniture and concluded that Patrick was probably right.

“Do you like it here?” he asked

“The guest house you mean?” Patrick asked back

“The guest house. Blackpool. Both” prompted Rob

“Well, it's not where I thought I'd end up” said Patrick, “But it's home now”

Robert nodded

“And you know how well, careful, you have to be. If Aaron's Nan wasn't so welcoming, I'd not be able to have Daniel here like I do. And Mrs Dingle definitely likes Daniel coming here. Bit too much. Well, sometimes”

Patrick fell silent and suddenly looked downcast. Robert reached over and patted his upper arm

“Few more weeks. He'll be on leave again” said Rob gently

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Later that night.....

“Night love” Faith called from the staircase as she headed upstairs.

“Night Nan” said Aaron as he opened the door to his room

“Good show?” said Robert, sitting up in bed in his pyjamas.

“Oh yeah” said Aaron, walking over and plonking himself down on his side of the bed. “Dancing girls” he said, easing his boots from his feet, “A few, you know artistic poses “

“Just your sort of thing then?” said Rob as he put his book to one side

Aaron smiled as he started to unbutton his shirt, “Wouldn't say that” he said, leaning over and pressing his lips against Robert's

“Did you go in the pub after?” Robert asked as Aaron backed away a little. A beery aroma was playing around his lips

“We did have one in the Royal” said Aaron as he started to undo his trousers, “Well, maybe two” he added with a grin.

“I hope I'm not in bed with a drunk” said Robert

“Nah” said Aaron now stripped to his t-shirt and trunks, “I'm not in bed am I?” he added with a smile

“Well hurry up then” Robert replied.
Aaron got up and padded over to the washbasin on the dresser, still giving his partner that cheeky grin as he did so.

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A little after midnight......

Robert curled his bare arm around Aaron's shoulder, as his partner laid his head on his chest.

“How did you get on with Patrick?” Aaron asked

“Oh. Good” Robert replied, “We had a chat about films for a bit. He got a bit down though”

“Why's that?” asked Aaron

“I think” said Robert, bringing his right hand up to gently stroke Aaron's cheek, “That he's just missing this Daniel”

“It's like with my Uncle Cain” said Aaron, “He's in the merchant navy and you're away a lot. Months on end sometimes”

“Could be a lot to put up with” said Rob

“Yeah” said Aaron, bringing his right hand across and hooking it around Rob's bare side, “Patrick says he thinks his feller is worth it” he added with a sleepy yawn.

Robert thought for a moment. Alright, so maybe this was just a cheap guest house in the cheap part of town. And maybe the town was a bit on the tacky side and full of boisterous holidaymakers. And maybe you couldn't trust Aaron's Nan if you left her in a room with a man without securing her to a chair beforehand. But this house was someone where they were both welcome. Somewhere safe. Somewhere which mattered a huge amount to the beautiful young man he was cradling in his arms.

So now, it mattered to him. Because Aaron was worth it. Rob smiled to himself as he draped his arm back around Aaron's bare shoulders and they drifted asleep.
“That's fantastic” said Robert eagerly as Patrick passed him over the paper print-out from the adding machine on his desk.

“And you did it really fast considering you've only got...” said Rob, looking at Patrick's empty left shirtsleeve, “...uh, quite an old machine there” he added quickly. Silently, he cursed himself. It seemed to be his morning for putting his foot in it. Fortunately, the other young man hadn't noticed, or at least pretended he had not.

“Yes, it's second hand but I'd never have been able to afford a new one” said Patrick, “I got it from an accountant friend of Mrs Dingle's who was retiring”

“She does seem to have contacts all over town” said Robert

“Yes. Well, among the male half of the population anyway” Patrick agreed

“It's no good. I'm going to have to get one of these” said Rob as there was a knock on the half open bedroom door

“Oh yeah?” said Aaron as he walked over, “What's caught your eye now?” he added, slightly sarcastically.

“Patrick was showing me his adding machine” Robert explained

Aaron looked at the desk and toyed idly with the metal handle on the side of the machine, “Something else for me to fix I suppose” he muttered.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

“Right” said Aaron eventually, “I'm going for a walk. I'll be back for twelve” he added as he headed to the door.

Aaron turned in the doorway. “Nan says she'll serve up in the kitchen” he said, before exiting.

“Is something wrong?” Patrick asked, a concerned look on his face

Robert sat down on the edge of the young man's bed with a sigh.

“Just me. Being an idiot” he said

“I mean, I wasn't flirting. Not really” said Robert, “I was just having my breakfast in the lounge and the four girls were there. And, well, yes they were still in their robes”

“Mrs Dingles not strict about that. Not when they're the only guests. You and Aaron are family after all. Besides, we're not exactly the Dorchester here are we?” said Patrick
“Anyway, I was talking to them about their show at the pier and I said it must be hard work” said Rob.

“Go on” Patrick encouraged.

“And then the blonde girl, Lucille, told me it was and that she'd had a fall last night”

“Lucille, blonde?” said Patrick confused, “Oh, yes she is isn't she. This week”

“So. Then this Lucille....” Rob started.

Patrick sighed, “Lifted up her robe and started showing you her thigh and said it was really sore and then you said you couldn't see a bruise, so she said you could feel how sore it was” he said wearily.

“How do you know?” asked Robert in surprise.

“She tries it on with everyone. You. Mrs Dingle's son Cain. The Milkman. She asked me to have a look first week she was here”

“Really?” asked Rob.

“Yes. And I did” said Patrick, “You've no idea how disappointed she was. When she found out I used to be a nurse”

Robert was silent for a moment.

“Well, Aaron had come in the room by then. The girls all went off and he was fuming. I've been getting the cold shoulder since”

“Just because of Lucille?” asked Patrick, “You know the other girls call her Luce for short? I'm sure you can guess why”

“Thing is. We don't fight. Me and Aaron. Well, hardly ever” said Rob, staring down.

Patrick thought to himself.

“Come on” he said, standing up, “Let's go down to the kitchen and have a cuppa. We won't be disturbed in there”.

Robert nodded and followed the young man out of the room.

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Aaron lifted the mug of tea to his lips and stared out through the cafe window at the sea in the distance. As usual, his first thought was the same, 'Uncle Cain's out there somewhere'.

He was jolted from his brooding by the sound of the door opening and a young couple walking out. The young man hooked his arm through that of the young lady with him and they headed up the street. 'Alright for some', he thought, 'You don't have to hide away' he added bitterly.

He knew Robert had only been flirting. He was the same up at the Manor House with all those
Land Girls during the War. He just wanted the attention. It didn't mean he wanted *them*. He knew that. This morning shouldn't have mattered so much to him. But it did.

And he knew why. He watched as the young couple faded into the distance and it said it all. What if the two of them, hidden away in that Gatehouse wasn't enough?

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“Have you ever had a girlfriend or, uh, anything. I mean before?” Robert asked uncertainly, his right hand leaning on top of his walking stick.

Patrick put his mug down on the kitchen table, “Oh no” he replied. Then he considered for a moment.

“I did get very friendly with an Indian girl when I was in training in the Medical Core. Prisha she was called. We had mixed classes you see, men and women. But that's all it was, friendship. Well on my side anyway. That sort of thing, well, it just wasn't for me”

Rob nodded.

“You were married though weren't you?” Patrick asked, sensing that this is what Robert had wanted to bring up.

“Yes” Rob confirmed, “But it was a huge mistake. I soon found that out. If it hadn't been for me being in the air force I'd have found it out a lot sooner too”

“Do you think it might have worked. With a different woman I mean?” asked Patrick

“I.....I don't know” said Robert, “But then I met Aaron anyway. Then I just knew. *That's* who I wanted. And I know, if I'd met him before *everything* would have been different”

“It's still not easy though, is it?” said Patrick, “For you and Aaron. Or for me and Daniel”

The two men fell silent

“What's he like? Your Daniel” Rob asked.

Patrick looked at the mantelpiece about the kitchen fire and the spread of framed photographs across the top. “There's a good one of him here somewhere” he said, getting up.

“Here we are”, he said handing a picture to Robert, “One of Mrs Dingle's gentleman friends took that”

Robert looked at the picture. Faith was standing centre stage at the top of the steps to the front door of the guesthouse. She had one arm around Patrick on her right, looking smart as always, with the other on a handsome, tanned looking young man with dark curly hair and a big grin.

“Very nice” said Robert

“Well, I think so” said Patrick, with a smile

“Reminds me of my brother-in-law, in a way” said Rob

“Adam? Do you think so?” said Patrick, taking the photo back, “Actually, I think you and your
Victoria look a bit alike” he added as he put the frame back on the mantelpiece.

“Of course. They had their honeymoon here didn't they?” said Robert

“I saw her a bit while she was here” said Patrick, sitting down again, “Well, only a bit. It was their honeymoon after all”

“Yes, well” said Rob, shifting in his chair a little

“One thing about Daniel” said Patrick, shifting the subject back, “I don't have to worry about him and women”

“But Aaron doesn't have to worry about me!” insisted Robert, “He doesn't!”

“Then tell him” said Patrick gently.

Robert looked thoughtful.

“Look” said Patrick, “You're only here tonight. Go out to the theatre together. It is a holiday for the pair of you” he said, standing up.

“I don't think the pier show would be a good idea” said Robert

“We've more than one show on in town” said Patrick, “Well, we've got more than one pier! Just check the evening paper. Pound to a penny, Mrs Dingle can wrangle you some cheap tickets”

They both heard the front door open and close. Moments later Aaron came in. His face didn't seem angry. If anything, he looked a little tired.

“Nan not back ?” Aaron asked

“Not yet” said Patrick. He looked at his watch, pretending he was checking something, “Look. I have to do some work before lunch” he added as he headed out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Aaron put his hands out in front of him on the kitchen table, tapping the wooden surface with his fingers in an absent minded fashion.

“I was thinking” said Robert softly, taking Aaron's left hand in his and holding it gently

“Yeah?” said Aaron quietly

“Well, why don't we go out tonight? You know, take in a show. That sound good to you?”

Aaron smiled and rubbed his thumb over the back of Robert's hand.

“Yeah” he replied, “Not the Central Pier though, somewhere else”

“You're the boss” said Robert with a smile. He leaned forward and pressed his lips against Aaron's. Aaron brought his free hand up to the back of Rob's head, running his fingers through his blonde hair and pulling him in. Just to make the kiss linger all the more.

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That night..................
Victoria heard the kitchen door slam in the distance as she tucked little Sarah into bed. Then the familiar stomping as someone came up the stairs. She found Adam where she expected him to be, staring out of the bedroom window at the night sky. She could see the tension written right across his back as she walked over and stood next to him.

“Another row?” she asked

Adam sighed. “No love” he said, “Same one” he added, hooking his arm around her shoulders.

“I didn't wake our Sarah did I?” he asked

“No” his wife replied, “She wanted her toy rabbit that was all”

Adam allowed himself a little smile, despite how he was feeling.

“I don't understand it” he said, “I've worked at this place for years. Then I was down the mines for crying out loud. And she still treats me like I'm a kid!”

“Well, it's not just because of her is it?” said Victoria, putting her arm around her husband's waist, “You know I blame him”

“It's like that POW all over again” said Adam bitterly, “I mean love, this one's the same. He's nothing. And when I think of my Dad.....” he added

“Hey. Come one” said Victoria, wrapping her other arm around her husband and burying her head in his shoulder.

Adam wrapped his arms around his wife and held her close.

“I don't know what I'd do without you and Sarah” he whispered, “My lovely girls” he added, rubbing Victoria's back gently.

“I don't know what I'd do without you” Victoria replied.

They held each other quietly for a little while.

“Aaron and Robert will be here tomorrow” said Victoria as she moved back a little, still holding tight onto Adam, “We don't want all this to spoil their visit do we? Not when you've been looking forward to it so much” she added

“Nah. Course we don't” said Adam, a warm smile on his face. He leaned forward and pressed his lips against Victoria's.

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Blackpool- The Golden Palm Tree Guest House
Robert hadn't enjoyed himself so much in a long time. True, the variety show they had seen had pretty poor. Yes, the comic's jokes had been terrible. But he knew they were terrible and so did the audience. That had seemed to be half the fun for the people there. And more importantly, Aaron had loved it.

In fact, walking around Blackpool together was just like old times at the Manor House. Aaron's face had lit up with enthusiasm as he pointed out old haunts and it had been a joy to see. It had been perfect. Well, almost perfect. Robert had longed throughout the night to be able to just curl his arm around his partner. Or plant a quick kiss on him, just like the other couples they had walked past in the night had done. If only.

But he was determined to make up for lost time as soon as they got back to the guesthouse. Those girls would be out putting on their show, Faith had gone dancing with her friend Mr Rudge and he was sure he could rely on Patrick to make a discrete exit if needed.

“You have a good time tonight?” asked Aaron, with a huge smile as they walked down the street to the guesthouse.

“Definitely” Robert replied, pushing his walking stick forward. He looked around, checking the road was empty, “And it's not over yet” he whispered.

Robert had no sooner hung his hat on the stand in the hallway when he leaned forward and pressed his lips urgently against Aaron's. The younger man reached up with his firm right hand and held tight to the back of his partner's neck as they kissed.

Robert broke away and looked intently at Aaron

“I know I don't say it enough. But I do love you Aaron” Robert breathed

Aaron looked down, appearing ever so slightly shy,“I love you too. And I know I don’t say it enough either”

“I mean it” said Robert, “You're the best thing that's happened to me. Ever” he added sincerely

Robert had just leaned in for another kiss when the sound of a radio coming from the kitchen broke into the silence of the hallway. The two young men looked puzzled for a moment. The tune was soon recognisable as a tango when the door to the kitchen opened and Faith and Patrick emerged.

Faith looked a vision, in a long dark dress with wispy dark shawl over her shoulders. Her cheek was pressed against Patrick and she had his right hand clasped in her left. They managed the steps into the hallway, Faith's right hand very tightly at Patrick's waist as the radio blared away.

Patrick stopped and started to disentangle himself from the older woman, a big smile on his face.

“I'm sorry Mrs Dingle” he said, still smiling, “I just can't manage the turn” he added, letting go with his one hand.

“Never mind love” said Faith, “You had a go”.

“And I'm telling you” she added, “There wasn't a lad half as lovely as you on that dance floor tonight”.

Faith reached up and ruffled Patrick's floppy dark fringe with her hand. She suddenly seemed to
realise that there were other people in the room. Robert and Aaron had been watching from next to the hall stand. Robert still had his arm draped around his partner.

“And here's my other lovely lads” Faith said warmly. She walked over and wrapped Robert and Aaron up in a big hug.

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The next morning

“Here you go love” said Faith, handing some wrapped sandwiches through the window of Robert's car to Aaron.

“Thanks for the Agatha Christies” Rob said to Patrick, who was standing at the entrance to the guesthouse.

“You're welcome. Drop them off next time you're here. There's bound to be one. Unless you want Mrs Dingle to come and visit you”

Robert smiled at the thought.

“And thanks for our chat” said Robert quietly, giving Patrick a pat on his arm.

Faith was waiting for him as he got to the car.

“Robert” she said simply with a smile, wrapping her arms around him for what seemed quite a long time. She said something to him quietly and Robert replied.

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Robert waved through the small window at the rear of the car as the image of Faith and Patrick on the guesthouse doorstep faded into the background.

“What did my Nan say to you” asked Aaron as they drove along

“She asked me to look after her grandson” said Robert

“I thought I was supposed to look after you. I mean, isn't that my job? " Aaron asked.

Robert smiled back, “Well. How about we look after each other?”

Aaron nodded and smiled back.
**Just like old times**

Adversity pushes some people together. Other people, it pushes apart. Especially if it's a case of pressure being placed on cracks that are already there. And splits can be present, even if people won't admit it to themselves. They will be on display when Robert and Aaron drop in to the Barton farm on their way home to the Midlands. And as for after they leave, well, there is a harsh Winter coming very soon.

The Barton farm, Yorkshire – September 1946, late one night

It didn't take Aaron long to find Adam. His friend was pacing up and down inside the barn, obviously trying to keep his temper in check. Adam spun on his heels as Aaron walked through the door, as if he was expecting a challenge of some sort. But his friend relaxed as soon as he saw who it was.

“Thought you'd like a cocoa mate” said Aaron with a smile, holding out a tin mug in his hand.

Adam ran his hand through his short cropped hair. Then his face broke into a smile as he eagerly took the mug from his friend.

“So” said Aaron, “You want to sit in the yard? Do a bit of stargazing, just like old times”

“Nah. Not outside” said Adam, taking a swig from his mug. “Come on” he added, walking to the ladder to the hay loft. “Let's go up and look out the skylight”

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“She's looking lovely as ever sist” said Robert as he got to the bottom of the stairs into the living room.

“Are you going to be alright up there in our Sarah's room?” Victoria asked

“I'll be fine. As long as you're ok with her being in with you” Rob replied, sitting down on the sofa.

There was the sound of a man and a woman talking and laughing in the kitchen. Victoria pointedly walked over to the door and pulled it closed.

“Well. We did have a spare room. Until you-know-who turned up” she said, nodding towards the door as she sat down.

“Adam's Mum was worried you couldn't manage the stairs, but she didn't want to offer you the sofa, not when you used to have your own Manor House” she added

Robert smiled, “No it's fine. Really” he said, “I'm quite down to earth actually, when you get to know me”

“It's your own fault” said Victoria, “Putting that posh voice on when you read the telegrams at the wedding last year”
“That's my public speaking voice!” said Robert, trying to look mortally wounded

“Well” his sister replied, “Moira thinks you're a cut above, even if you are my brother. She never gets the good tea cups out for me”

Victoria lowered her voice, “You do understand. About Aaron sleeping down here don't you?” she asked Rob nodded silently

Victoria put her hand gently onto her brother's leg, “I mean, if was down to me and Adam. But it's not our house and…”

Victoria stopped talking at the sound of more laughter from the kitchen.

“No. I understand” said Robert. He looked thoughtfully at the kitchen door for a moment. “I have to say though sis. It looks like the fact that this isn't your house is getting to your husband a bit”

“It was fine. We were all fine. Until he showed up” said Victoria looking over to the kitchen.

“Come here” said Rob quietly, curling his arm around his sister's shoulders.

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Adam looked up at the night sky. “All I wanted” he started, “Is for one day this place to be ours. Mine and Victoria's. And Sarah could grow up here just like I did with Holly and Hannah” he said

“If she does have a brother or sister I mean” Adam added, looking down

“Victoria's not...?” Aaron started

“No” said Adam, shaking his head, “I mean we thought she was but....” he tailed off

“False alarm?” Aaron offered

Adam nodded. “I know Victoria was more upset than she let on” he said. “I was too though” he added looking down sadly.

Aaron said nothing, but hooked his arm around his friend's shoulders.

“I'm beginning to think I never should have come back” said Adam, “I mean, I used to argue with Mum about what we should do. But nothing like we do now. It's since that bloke came here, acting like he owns the place”

“I'm surprised you didn't punch him at dinner” said Aaron

“Hah!” said Adam, “We'd be out on the street before he was. Mum's just daft when it comes to him. And he's just the senior farmhand, it's not even as if they're........I mean, I don't know if they're even......”

Adam stopped and fell silent for a moment.

“Anyway” said Adam, “I have to think of my girls, not just me. I can't just walk away. I wouldn't just walk away”

“Course you wouldn't mate” said Aaron
“Do you have to go back tomorrow?” Adam asked, the pleading note in his voice apparent.

Aaron thought for a moment, “Robert's on all these committees in the village. He'll want to be back for one of those. But we could stay one more night if you'd like”

“Course I'd like that. It would be great” Adam beamed

“I really miss you mate” Adam added. His smiled faded a little as he stared out into the night

“Me too” said Aaron, giving Adam a squeeze on his shoulder, “Me too” he added quietly

“I mean. It's not the same is it, letters?” said Adam, “I wish you were nearer”

“Robert's talking about getting a phone soon. Well he was” said Aaron, “Is there one round here anywhere? We could talk then at least” he added, taking his arm from around his friend's shoulders.

Adam nodded, “There's one in the pub in the village. Mrs Walker lets people use it now and again”

“I'll ask him if he's still keen” said Aaron, “He's got this list in his head of things he wants, but it keeps changing. He had his heart set on a roll-top desk the other week. Then it was a drinks cabinet shaped like a globe and now he really wants an adding machine. It's only because he's seen the one Sarge has got at my Nan's”.

“Sarge gave us a smashing wedding present when we went there on our honeymoon. It's this silver clock, I'll show you later” said Adam with a smile.

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“So. Is he going to take the offer?” Robert asked, “Not that I would wish Dad as a boss on anyone”

“We'll see how things go. I've said lets get through Christmas first. I mean this is Adam's home. He doesn't want to walk away just because his Mum is letting one of her farm workers poke his nose into how the farm is being run”

Robert was silent. 'I hope that's all he's poking in' he thought to himself.

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Later than evening.....

“Adam. Your wife wants ya!” Robert called up into the hayloft from the barn floor

Adam rolled his eyes to Aaron and headed towards the ladder. He gave his brother-in-law a quick pat on the back as he headed out and towards the farmhouse.

“Well come down then” said Rob, leaning on the side of the ladder towards the loft.

“Why don't you come up?” asked Aaron, a cheeky grin on his face.

Robert looked at the rickety ladder in front of him and frowned.
“You'd have to carry me down after” he replied.

Aaron climbed down the ladder and stood next to his partner.

“I think my hayloft days are over” said Rob

“That's a shame” said Aaron, hooking his arms around Robert's waist.

Rob looked carefully over his shoulder, just to make absolutely sure Adam had shut the barn door behind him.

“You know it's separate rooms tonight?” Rob asked, looking down at the younger man and swaying from side to side just a little

“I think I'll manage” said Aaron with a smile, now swaying a little too. He leaned upwards to press his lips softly against Robert's.

“Actually, is it alright if we stayed one more night?” Aaron asked as they broke away, “We'd still be back for your Red Cross committee. It's just that Adam's a bit down and...”

“No. That's fine. I can't say Victoria's too happy either” said Rob, leaning in for another kiss.

“Thanks” Aaron mumbled quietly, as he buried his head in Robert's shoulder and gave him a hug.

The middle of the night

“It's alright. It's alright” Adam said quietly. “Where did you say it was?” he asked, pulling back the blankets and swinging his legs out of the bed and onto the floor.

“Bottom of the stairs” whispered Victoria, looking down at their half-asleep daughter in the middle of the bed, “I know cause I stood on it when I pulled the curtain across for Robert”

“Bottom of stairs” said Adam as he rubbed the side of his sleepy face and padded over to the bedroom door.

He had just walked to the top of the stairs, cuddly toy rabbit in his hand, and was about to open his bedroom door when he heard it. It was coming from his mother's room and the sound was unmistakable. It was the sound of a man and a woman laughing.

Adam's face hardened into a cold glare. He looked towards Moria's door, shook his head and went back into his own room.

He was still awake an hour later, while Victoria and little Sarah were fast asleep and curled up next to him. On the mantelpiece in the bedroom, a small silver carriage clock ticked away.
The Golden Palm Tree Guest House – August 1945, late one evening

Faith looked at her glass and noticed that it was disappointingly empty. “I'm sure I've got another half bottle in the lounge” she said, standing up from the kitchen table.

“Oh, I've put you young people in the bridal suite” she said, fixing Adam and Victoria with a sly smile as she left the room.

“That just means there's a pink and a blue towel next to the wash basin” said Patrick, finishing his own glass.

“Oh thank you Patrick” said Victoria, as she unwrapped some brown paper around a small box and took out a small silver carriage clock.

“Yeah. You didn't have to do that Sarge” said Adam with a smile as he sat with his arm draped around his new wife's shoulders.

“Oh come on. You are the first of my lads to get married” said Patrick

“Hasn't Leo tied the knot yet then?” asked Adam as Faith walked back into the room.

“End of this month” said Patrick, “They had an announcement in the personal column of the Times and everything”

“Oh, that's the sort of guest I wish I could get here” said Faith as she sat down at the table with a small bottle of sherry in her hand, “Real quality”

“Not that you're not both welcome of course love” Faith went on looking at Victoria, “Very welcome” she added with a huge smile as she shifted her gaze to Adam.

“Top up anyone?” Faith asked

“Just a small one” said Victoria, “We want to be heading up soon” she added. Her husband just looked at her with a warm smile.

In fact the pair soon downed their very small drinks and headed out of the kitchen after a brief exchange of ‘good nights'.

Faith stood up and put her hand on Patrick's shoulder.

“Well I would if you wouldn't” she said in a husky voice as she watched Adam in the distance starting to go up the stairs

“Mrs Dingle!” said Patrick, trying very hard to pretend he was shocked.

Faith just smiled and ruffled Patrick's floppy fringe.
Cold words and warm hearts

Hadleigh Gatehouse – February 1947

Aaron took another potato out of the small pile next to the sink and started to peel it. He frowned as he heard the cottage door open into the living room and the sound of voices. Why had Robert come back? Aaron was all set to get the car out soon and pick him up from the Doctor's surgery in the village.

He heard his partner speaking, “Thank you Lauren. Really, there was no need”. Aaron kept frowning. Robert was being charming again.

“Well, see you on Thursday then” said a brisk female voice.

Aaron kept peeling until he heard the telltale sound of Robert's walking stick on the stone slabs of the kitchen floor.

“Thought I was collecting ya” said Aaron, working away at the sink.

“Dr Gillespie's daughter gave me a lift” said Robert as he sat down at the kitchen table.

“That was nice of her” said Aaron, his tone suggesting that he was not being totally sincere.

“It's freezing outside” said Rob

“It's freezing in here” Aaron replied. If anything, his tone suggested it had just got a little bit colder.

Robert sighed. It looked like it was going to be of those evenings if he wasn't careful. He walked over to Aaron and hooked his arms around his waist.

“I'll warm you up if you like” said Rob, resting his head onto Aaron's shoulders.

Aaron smiled as Robert brushed the side of his head against his a little.

“Maybe later” he said, reaching over for another potato to peel.

Rob smiled. He gave Aaron a quick kiss on the cheek and let go of him.

“Oh, I did a great swap with old Gillespie” he said enthusiastically as he sat down again, “I gave him some Scotch for this hamper from his sister in Canada that he didn't want”

“Why? What's wrong with it?” asked Aaron

“Aaron. There's nothing wrong with it” Robert replied

“Why’s he getting rid of it then?” Aaron persisted

“Cause he wanted my scotch!” said Rob, “You know what he's like. He drinks like a fish and eats like a bird”

The lads fell silent.

“Hey” said Robert, “He's got a fantastic chess set. I was thinking we ought to get one”
Aaron sighed very quietly and shook his head slightly

“Where's that going to go then?” he asked, turning around

“By the window next to my desk” said Robert

“You mean where that fish tank is going to go in the Summer” said Aaron

“Oh, I've gone off that idea” said Rob as he got up, “Come and look at this hamper” he added heading into the living room.

“We'll be glad of these tins with this cold spell dragging on” said Robert, as he crouched down and peered into the small basket by the door.

“I thought it wasn't going to last. They said so on the radio” said Aaron, looking at a small tin of maple syrup with a puzzled expression

“Ha!” said Rob, “Well you know what I think of that!” he exclaimed.

Robert beamed as he looked through the small hamper. Aaron couldn't help but be caught up with his enthusiasm. When Rob was in one of these sort of moods it was infectious. And that smile of his still got to him. Every time.

Aaron smiled and leaned over, just to ruffle Robert's blonde hair a little.

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The Barton's Farm, Yorkshire – February 1947

Adam sat in the hayloft in the barn, shivering despite the thick coat he was wearing. The argument was still echoing around and around in his head. He kept trying to shut it out but the words kept taunting him again and again........

“I wish my Dad was still alive!”

“So do I, he'd have never got us into this mess!”

“Oh, so it's my fault it's a bad Winter!”

“You were supposed to be planning ahead”

“I did plan Mum! I did. And you ignored everything I said. You and that flaming lover boy of yours!”

“Don't you dare. Don't you dare throw him in my face”

“Well he didn't walk out and leave you because of me”

“You didn't exactly make him feel welcome”

“No. But you did didn't ya? And you wonder why our Hannah won't come home!”
And it went on and on. In this bleak Winter, the Barton's Farm is a far from happy place. But then how could it be? With the seemingly unrelenting cold, it's bad enough losing the farm produce frozen into the ground. But now some of the livestock has gone. And each loss is breaking Adam's heart just a little bit more.

Some families would huddle together. Draw from each other's strength to ride out the storm. But Adam knows, deep down, that this family has finally broken. Sometimes harsh words can just be too harsh.

“I built this farm up with your father. I have always put it first! I thought you'd do the same”

“I've got to put my family first Mum! I have to think about my wife and my daughter!”

“Victoria's daughter you mean”

And that was the end of the argument. Some things you just can't respond to. Not when the other person knows perfectly well just how much those words hurt you.

Adam wiped a tear from his eye and thrust his hands even deeper into his coat pockets. He didn't hear the barn door open, or the sound of someone climbing up to the loft. But he heard the words.

“You'll catch you death out here” said Victoria softly. She reached over and put her hand gently on the back of her husband's neck.

“Did you?” Adam started, taking a breath, “Did you hear all that?”

Victoria sat down on the hay bale next to him and hooked her arm through his.

"We've just had words too” she replied

Adam turned his face to his wife and looked at her sadly

“I can't do this any more love” he said, “It'll break me and then it'll break us. I'm not letting that happen”

“It's a tough time for everyone” said Victoria gently

“It was nearly as bad before Winter” said Adam, “I thought we'd be alright when that chancer left but....” he tailed off and stared down sadly.

“Listen” Victoria started, “I know he's stubborn and I know he's stuck in his ways”

“You mean your Dad I suppose?” asked Adam

“But you know we can go there anytime” said Victoria, “He's always saying he'd much rather have his son-in-law up at the farm”

Adam nodded.

“And Diane would be over the moon. He’d finally move into the pub if we take the house. Me and you and our Sarah”
“I don't care where we go. Just as long as we're all together” said Adam
Victoria smiled. She leaned forward and kissed Adam on the lips.

“But not till Spring. We can't leave Mum in the lurch. Even after everything” said Adam

“We probably won't be able to go till then anyway. The way the weather's going” said Victoria

“I thought it wasn't going to be so bad. They said so on the radio” said Adam

“Ha!” said Victoria, “I'll believe that when I see it!” she exclaimed.

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The Golden Palm Tree Guesthouse Blackpool – February 1947

“How's it looking down there love?” said Faith, turning from the kitchen sink as Patrick walked in from the door to the cellar.

“Not too bad actually” said Patrick, “I'm surprised we've so much coal still really” he added, walking over to the sink.

“Ah, well that'll be thanks to Oswald” said Faith with a smile

“Oswald?” asked Patrick

“You know, the coal man. He's one of my gentleman friends. He always liked to slip me a little bit extra”

Patrick thought for a moment.

“You know, that explains a lot. I wondered why he was winking at me every week. I thought it was a nervous twitch at first. And then I thought............”

Patrick stopped as the sound of female laughter rang out from the lounge and into the hallway.

“Do we have to have those showgirls here?” asked Patrick, “I thought they'd closed that theatre for the rest of Winter”

“They're down to two shows a week in a dim light” said Faith, “Which is a godsend for a couple of the girls”

“Anyone, come on love” Faith added, picking up the tea tray from the kitchen table, “Let's all get back in the warm”

As the pair walked into the hallway, they heard the sound of a male laugh from the lounge.

“Your Daniel is a big hit with the girls” said Faith, “Especially Lucille”

Patrick said nothing
“I'm going to tell her her fortune later” said Faith as she walked into the lounge.

“I'm predicting an unfortunate accident myself” muttered Patrick

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Faith sat at the table in the lounge, carefully shuffling a pack of cards.

“Now, you can't just tell from which card is dealt” she explained, “I need to concentrate. Get the right impression”

Lucille just smiled from her seat at the table. Patrick said nothing and tapped his fingers against the dark green tablecloth as he sat next to Faith.

Faith dealt the Jack of Spades. She put one finger into the card, closed her eyes and started to emit a deep humming sound.

“Are you alright?” said Patrick, putting his hand gently on her arm.

Faith opened her eyes and turned quickly to him, “It's alright love, just focusing” she replied, closing her eyes again.

“I see a talk, dark stranger” said Faith

“Is he carrying a scythe?” asked Patrick.

“He's very handsome” said Faith

Lucille looked across at Daniel, sitting in one of the lounge chairs and reading the paper, “Has he got curly hair? I love a man with curly hair” she asked

Daniel grinned and went back to reading.

Faith dealt the second card. One of the jokers this time. She closed her eyes again.

“Oh but he's toying with you” said Faith. Lucille looked disappointed, “He's going to toss you aside like a........”

“An oily rag?” Patrick suggested. Daniel hid his face behind the newspaper.

“Yes. That sort of thing love” Faith agreed as she dealt the third card. This time the seven of diamonds.

“Oh. I'm getting a strong feeling now” she said, “You're going to have fame and fortune”

Lucille brightened at this.

“I can see you up there on the big stage. The leading lady. Not here. Far away. The London stage. Yes that's it. Definitely the London stage”

“Oooh” said Lucille in excitement, “Perhaps I should start packing”

“I'll help you” said Patrick.
Behind his newspaper, Daniel tried hard to suppress his laughter.

-

Later that night......

Patrick swore under his breath as he failed for the third time to get the top button on his pyjama top through its hole.

“Let me do it” said Daniel as he pushed aside the heavy blankets from the bed and paddled over towards his partner.

“I don't usually wear the top” said Patrick, “But in this cold...” he added

Daniel just smiled and buttoned up the front of the pyjama jacket. When he finished, he curled his arms around Patrick's waist and pulled him close. He pressed his lips against Patrick's and kissed him deeply.

“You weren't jealous earlier were you? You know, of that daft girl?” Daniel asked softly.

“No” said Patrick, “It's just. Well.........”

Daniel looked a little surprised. Patrick usually wasn't lost for words.

“I think she's a trouble maker” said Patrick, “And who needs that? I mean, aren't things difficult enough as it is? For lads like me and you”

Daniel thought for a moment and nodded. He leaned in for another kiss.

“She's not going to cause any trouble” Daniel said softly

Patrick rubbed his arm across the back of Daniel's pyjamas

“Where did you get these by the way?” he asked

“What?” said Daniel, “Oh. Mrs D said I could have them. Used to belong to one of her...”

“Gentleman friends” the lads said together.

“Come on. Let's get into bed” Daniel said eagerly

“I can't stand this cold” said Patrick as he slid under the covers, “Those girls wouldn't have been stuck here for a start. They'd have moved on when the panto finished”

“Yeah” said Daniel as Patrick cuddled up against him, “But then I wouldn't have got stuck here too would I? I might not get a new ship till March” he added, running his fingers through Patrick's hair at the back.

“That Lucille practically threw herself at Robert when he was here” said Patrick, hooking his arm around his boyfriend

“Robert? asked Daniel
“You know Mrs Dingle's grandson Aaron? He's his feller”

“Oh” said Daniel sleepily

“They live in Hadleigh” said Patrick

“Is it inland?” Daniel asked with a yawn

“The Midlands, just south of Yorkshire” said Patrick

“Oh” said Daniel quietly, “No wonder I've not heard of it” he said, drifting off.

Patrick smiled and gave him a gentle squeeze.
You don't miss being 'Lord of the Manor'?

Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse – March 1947

One thing Aaron had to acknowledge about Robert, he could definitely organise. It was just a shame that it seemed like Aaron usually had to be the one to do all the work.

“Right, that far enough for ya?” Aaron asked, as he pulled the sofa back a few more inches.

Robert looked at the now empty space on their living room floor. He leaned on the back of one of the lounge chairs that were lined up in the middle of the room.

“Uh-huh. That'll be good” Rob replied

“Won't the mattress be a bit far from the fire?” Aaron asked, “I mean, wasn't that the whole point of this? Getting near the heat” he added, walking over to his partner.

Robert looked thoughtful for a minute. When he replied his voice was quiet, “No. We don't want to be too close. And we have to make sure that guard stays on. Last thing we want is an accident. Last thing”.

Aaron nodded. He put his hand on top of Robert's and gave it a gentle squeeze for a moment.

“I've put those blackout curtains up again, like you asked” Aaron added in a bright voice, trying to lighten the mood.

“See” Robert replied with a smile, “I told you we were right to hang on to them. It'll help to keep the cold out a bit more”

“Anyway” said Rob, already moving through the plan in his head, “Let's get that mattress over” he said, walking awkwardly over to the bottom of the stairs where the mattress was leaning against the wall.

“Robert” said Aaron, as he took hold of one end

“What do we say if someone comes round?” Aaron asked, “You know. If they see this, won't they think...” he added as they slowly walked the mattress over to the gap on the floor.

Robert stopped, “Aaron” he said, “No-one is going to come round. They closed up the Manor House before Christmas. It's not as if we're going to get any visitors”

They positioned the mattress on the floor in the gap in front of the fire.

“Right, I'll fetch the blankets and everything” said Aaron

“Not so fast” said Robert, stepping over and hooking his hands around Aaron's waist.

“Robert” Aaron sighed, “I've got to make the bed”

“So. We'll only mess it up again won't we?” said Robert with a grin.
Aaron looked back up at Robert and smiled. Robert leaned in and pressed his lips against his partner's.

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Later that evening......

The bed wasn't exactly comfortable, laid out on the floor like it was, but at least it was a bit warmer than the upstairs. Robert was sitting up in bed, his pillow pushed up against one of the sofa seats now acting as a headboard.

He looked down at his very thin copy of the Times, “Minister of Fuel says British climate is to blame” he read out in a loud voice.

“What was that?” said Aaron, walking over from the kitchen with a mug of cocoa in each hand. He put them down on the floor before rushing back and making sure the kitchen door was closed solidly.

“The coal shortage. The extra rationing. It's all down to the natural climate, apparently” said Robert sarcastically.

“Well I don't remember it being as cold as this before” said Aaron, climbing into his side of the bed. He handed Robert over his mug.

“I wish I could get you to wear pyjamas” said Robert, looking his partner up and down.

“What's wrong with my long-johns?” said Aaron, “I'll be warm enough”

Robert went back to his paper.

“It's daft going to bed at this time” said Aaron

“Don't blame me. I didn't get the BBC to stop the radio early” said Robert.

“I didn't say you did” said Aaron.

The lads fell silent. Robert pulled a face as Aaron took a loud slurp from his cocoa mug.

“I'm bored” said Aaron

“Why can't you read your gardening book?” asked Robert

“What's the point?” replied Aaron, “Can't plant anything for ages can I?”

“I thought you promised me a nice big marrow?” said Rob, looking at Aaron with a cheeky grin

“Shut up” said Aaron with a smile.

“Why don't you read the Parish magazine” Robert suggested

“What, your fan club newsletter” said Aaron, rolling his eyes
“What do you mean?” asked Rob, as Aaron turned over onto his side and stretched out to pick up a small magazine from the floor.

“Listen to this right” started Aaron, lying with his back to Robert so he could hold the magazine under the small lamp on the floor, “Mr R Sugden was reappointed as Chairman of the Red Cross Committee for the following year, thanks to a vote of 11 to 1 by the Parish Council” he read out loud, “Who was the 1 against?” Aaron asked, looking over his shoulder at his partner

“Nicola. Who d'ya think?” Robert replied

Aaron turned back and flicked through the magazine a little more. He started to read out loud again, “Mr R Sugden was elected as Chairman for the committee to oversee the building of the new community hall by a unanimous vote”

“Unanimous?” Aaron asked, looking puzzled, “How did you buy her off for that one?”

“I didn't” Robert said with a sigh, “They've put her in charge of running the youth club when it starts. You'll see that later on, 'Mrs N King appointed unanimously’ “

“Why her?” asked Aaron

“Well, they were worried the youth club could get out of hand” said Robert, “You know, young people might actually end up enjoying themselves. So they thought that if anyone could put a stop to all that, Nicola could”

Aaron nodded. Robert put his empty mug down on the floor next to his side of the bed.

“Why didn't you bring the biscuits?” Robert asked

“What biscuits?” said Aaron, still looking through the magazine

“The ones in the tin” said Rob

“Someone ate them” said Aaron, not turning around

“Oh really?” said Robert, “And would that someone be about a foot away now and wearing long-johns?’”

“Might be” Aaron mumbled, “Ow. Geroff!” he said with a smile as he felt a sharp slap on his behind.

Aaron rolled onto his back. Robert had propped himself onto his side and was smiling down at him.

“Well, behave then” said Robert

“Yes, boss” said Aaron with a grin.

Robert leaned down and pushed his lips eagerly against Aaron's. He broke away and ran his left hand through Aaron's hair.

“Actually, you can't be my boss” said Aaron, still smiling

“Why not?” said Robert

“Cause I've been here, what, two years now. And I've never been paid. Not once”
“You get to live in don't ya?” Rob asked

“Robert. We're sleeping on the floor tonight!” Aaron laughed

Robert gave a small shrug. “Well. You get plenty of other benefits” he said

“Name one!” Aaron persisted

Rob arched forward, “I'll do better than that. I'll show you” he said softly, leaning in for a long, passionate kiss.

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The next night

Aaron was cuddled up against Rob, his head on his chest. The embers of the fire were giving the living room the dimmest of lights.

“Do you know what this reminds me of?” said Robert quietly, his arm curled around Aaron's shoulders.

“What?” replied Aaron in a soft voice

“Me and you. Up at the Manor House during the War. Spread out on the floor of my old study” said Robert.

“We used to talk for hours, just lying there” he added

“ You used to talk you mean”, said Aaron, “I just listened”

“Hey! That's not true” said Robert, “You used to talk loads. Once you stopped being so shy with me”

Aaron was silent for a moment, gathering his thoughts before he spoke.

“It wasn't just me being shy” Aaron started, “It was more than that”

“Go on” Rob said softly, giving Aaron an encouraging squeeze.

“I never thought something like this could happen. Me and you” said Aaron, “If I hadn't seen Sarge that one time at the training centre with his Daniel. And if I hadn't spoken to him afterwards all those times. I don't think anything would have happened”

“Not if it was just down to me. I think I'd have been too scared” said Aaron

“I was scared too” said Rob, “When I knew that I'd fallen for ya. But I didn't let that stop me. I couldn't. Not in the end”

Aaron smiled. He lifted his head from Robert's chest and shifted onto his side so he could look at him
“So you don't miss being 'Lord of the Manor' like you were back then?” he asked

Robert reached over and ran his hand gently down the side of Aaron's face, then curled his long fingers around the back of his partner's neck.

“This is where I belong. *This* is home” said Rob

Aaron leaned in, pressing his lips against Robert's.

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Blackpool - The Golden Palm Tree Guest House - end of June 1947

“Are you sure you don't mind doing Mr Cosgrove's love?” Faith asked as she bustled from the yard into the kitchen, two shirts hanging over her arm. “You always get such a nice crease on yours” she added.

Patrick looked up from the ironing board.

“No. It's fine. You know I like to keep busy” he said quietly.

Faith put her free hand gently onto the back of Patrick's shoulders.

“I know it seems a long time apart love, but it'll be November before you know it” she said kindly.

“I know, but *six months* “said Patrick sadly, “I thought things would be easier after the War”

“I think we all did love!” said Faith. “Now, I know what'll cheer you up, pass us that letter on the mantelpiece, it's from our Aaron” she added as she sat down at the kitchen table.

“Of course, you can tell Robert did the envelope” said Faith as Patrick handed her the letter, “Just look at that beautiful handwriting”

“He must have a *lovely* touch” she added with a smile as she opened the letter and started to read.

Patrick went back to his ironing.

“Oh that's good news! He says they're coming up at the end of August. Robert's sister and her husband are moving into her Dad's farm to run it for him so the boys are going to help them settle in. Says there's been trouble back at home with Adam's mother” said Faith

“They're going to Emmerdale then coming on here. I'm sure that rings a bell” she went on

“Well, Robert is from Yorkshire” said Patrick as he picked a wooden coat hanger up from the table and hung it from the edge of the mantelpiece.

“Are you sure?” asked Faith, “He's got such a nice voice”

“It'll be the family farm they're taking over” said Patrick, putting the ironed shirt onto the hanger, “It'll definitely be in North Riding” he added
“My late husband was from Yorkshire. But you'd never mistake him for Robert” said Faith, “Not even in a very dark cellar”

Faith was quite for a moment, a sly smile playing across her lips. She then seemed to snap out of her thoughts and got back to reading the letter.

“Oh, they're getting a telephone. That'll be handy!” Faith read on, “It says here that Robert has been trying to pin down the man from the GPO”

Patrick looked up from the ironing board, a little surprised.

“No. Hang on” said Faith, “It goes over onto the next page. 'to pin down the man from the GPO for a definite installation date’.

Patrick thought for a moment, “Have you got any spare room? I think we're full in August”

“Oh you're right” said Faith, “Mr Cosgrove will still be here. Then there's the two boys at the variety theatre”

“There's that commercial traveller in the attic room” Patrick added

“No. He'll be gone then love. Off to Lytham”

“Then there's Lucille and the other rejects from the Windmill” said Patrick, “They'll still be here”

“I don't mind going into the attic room for a bit. Then the boys could have mine” he added

“Oh could you love? That would be kind” said Faith.

“Do you know what we should do when the lads come here?” she asked

“What?” asked Patrick

“We should have a seance !” said Faith with a smile.

Patrick smiled and shook his head as he carried on ironing one of Mr Cosgrove's shirts.
She's named after her you know

The Sugden Farm, Emmerdale – August 1947

Robert sat perched on the end of the bed. He looked out of the window in front of him and stared out at the fields in the distance. He was so lost in thought, he barely noticed the person sitting down next to him. But the hand that reached over and gently massaged the tension at the base of his neck felt safe and familiar.

“Is this a bit strange for ya?” Aaron asked, “Someone else moving in here?”

“No, it's not that” replied Rob, “I mean this was Victoria's home too”

“Still. Must be a big change. Your Dad moving into the pub” said Aaron dropping his hands into his lap.

“Oh. He may not be living on the farm, but he'll still be running it!” said Robert, “That's why he turned that offer down to buy the place. Still, Adam already knows what he's like. There's a wrong way and my Dad's way”

“I know” said Aaron, “But it must be better than being at his Mum's. All that arguing wasn't doing him and Victoria any good was it? This is a big chance for the pair of them. A fresh start”

“I thought she'd got that when she got married again” said Rob

“You know what families can be like” said Aaron

Robert was silent for a moment. He was staring out at the newest part of the farm. The wooden barn that you could see from the bedroom window. Right where the old one had been. Aaron noticed where his partner was looking and without saying anything took his hand in his.

“So, was this your's then?” he asked, looking around the barely furnished room.

“Yes” said Robert with a smile, “Not that you'd know it. The wallpaper is the same mind. Dad was too mean to have it done again. Said it was better to spend money on the farm. He was always arguing with Mum about that sort of thing....” he added, before falling quiet.

Rob started again, “I've not been here for years. I always stayed at the pub if I was staying overnight. The farm manager had this last. The one that fell out with Dad. Actually, I mean the latest one that fell out with Dad”

“Well Adam's going to do his best to get on with him. All he wants is a proper home for Victoria and little Sarah”

“She's named after her you know?” said Robert, “Sarah. I don't remember if I've ever said. This place was a proper home then. When Mum was alive”

“Well” said Aaron softly, “I think your Mum would be glad it was staying in the family”

“Yeah. She would be” Robert agreed, managing a smile.

“I used to do a lot of thinking, sitting up in this room” he added
“What about?” asked Aaron

“Getting away mostly!” his partner replied.

Aaron smiled. He leaned forward and pressed his lips gently against Robert's.

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Blackpool – The Golden Palm Tree Guesthouse – August 1947

“Well, how do I look?” said Faith as she stood in the doorway to the kitchen and struck a pose, her hands on her hips.

Patrick looked up from his book on the kitchen table and took in what his landlady was wearing. Instead of her usual figure hugging top she was sporting a floral blouse with a stiff white collar and matching cuffs. The medium length skirt had also been replaced by a long one and a black crocheted shawl was hanging around her shoulders.

“That's not your usual look Mrs Dingle” said Patrick as Faith gave a twirl.

“It's for the séance tomorrow” Faith explained, “You've got to lay on a bit of a show. I was given this get-up by a lady friend of mine”

“Who was she? Mrs Pankhurst?” said Patrick

“I was a suffragette I'll have you know” said Faith

“Nonsense” Patrick replied, “You're far too young” he added with a grin.

“Flatterer” said Faith with a smile as she headed to the mantelpiece

“I chained myself to the railings outside the Town Hall in 1914” she added proudly as she clicked a cameo broach to the front of her blouse

“Really?” said Patrick, looking up from his book with interest

“Oh yes” said Faith, “I wasn't there very long though. This nice young policeman came along and released me”

“Is that why you've got those old handcuffs in the tool box? A memento?” Patrick asked

“Uh, yes. That's right love” said Faith quickly

“Actually” Faith went on, “I won't go with the shawl. It'll be too hot in that front room” she added as she slipped it from her shoulders and onto the back of the chair.

“So who's sitting in on this meeting?” Patrick asked

“Well, probably our Aaron and his Robert. My friend Mr Rudge, he's coming round special. And Renee and Lucille” said Faith as she sat down.
“Hope it stays fine for you” said Patrick dryly as he returned to his book.

“Why don't you sit in love?” asked Faith, “It's better than brooding. And, well, it'll just be a bit of fun really”

“Sit in a circle and all hold hands? Not really equipped am I?” said Patrick

“We'd fit you in somehow” said Faith kindly, giving Patrick's sole hand a squeeze

“But it wouldn't be a circle then would it?” Patrick replied, “It'd be a letter 'Q'“

“Oh, I don't think the spirits would mind” said Faith. She was interrupted by a loud knock at the front door.

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“What are you doing here?” Faith asked as she opened the door and regarded the man standing there.

“And hello to you too Mother!” said Cain as he walked in and put his kit-bag on the floor, “I've come to stay haven't I?”

“But we're full” Faith explained.

“You're never full!” her son replied, surprised

Just at that moment, Lucille walked out of the lounge with one of the other showgirls and headed for the stairs. She gave Cain an appreciate look as she walked past.

“I don't mind sharing. At a push” Cain said with a grin as he watched Lucille walk up the stairs.

“Our Aaron is coming tomorrow and his....boss” said Faith, “Can't you head on to Leeds a bit early?”

“Bit of a sore point, Leeds” said Cain with a frown as he started to walk to the kitchen. “I don't mind kipping down in the front room once everyone's gone to bed”

“Anyway. I'll have to stay now our Aaron's coming here won't I?” Cain went on, “Alright son” he added with a nod to Patrick.

Faith sighed and started to fill the kettle.

“Why the fancy dress?” Cain asked, noticing what Faith was wearing for the first time. “You're not starting up that old game again are you Mother?” he said as he relaxed in one of the kitchen chairs.

“Tomorrow night” said Faith, “Just for a bit of fun”

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The following lunchtime
Cain walked into the kitchen carrying a tray stacked with plates.

“So what do you think of our Aaron's boss?” said Faith looking over from the sink as she washed-up.

“Alright, I suppose. I mean he's still a boss isn't he?” said Cain. He thought for a moment as he put the tray down on the kitchen table.

“Is it right? You've got him sharing a room with Aaron?” he asked

“Yes love” Faith replied, wondering where this line of questioning could be going.

“Well I'm not surprised”

“Aren't you?” said Faith, casually continuing with the dishes

Cain walked over and leaned with his back to the sink.

“You know my mate Harry. The one who works in that hotel in Liverpool?”

“No, but go on” said Faith

“Well he says they're all the same. That type” said Cain

“What type?” said Faith

“You know. Rich people” said Cain, “They're all mean as anything! Larry says it's always the ones that are loaded that are the worst tippers. And they're the ones that always argue over the bill”

Cain folded his arms and looked smug, “You mark my words Mother. He'll be expecting a flaming reduction for having to share a room when they leave”

Faith smiled and looked at her son, “I'm sure you're right love”.

Cain nodded and left the room, passing Aaron as he did so.

“Close the door a minute would you love” said Faith

Aaron frowned, slightly puzzled, and did as he was asked.

“Now” said Faith, drying her hands on the towel near the sink, “Your Uncle was asking about you and Robert sharing a room”

Aaron put his hands into his trouser pockets and looked down a little.

“What did you say Nan?” he asked

“Well he thinks Robert is just too mean to pay for his own room” said Faith. She walked over and put her hand on her grandson's arm. He still stared at the floor.

“And we can leave it at that if you want love” said Faith gently, “But you know it's not a problem for me. You two can be yourselves with me. And with Patrick of course. I know it means being, well, discrete with the other guests and if you think you should be like that with your Uncle as well, that's up to you. Alright?”

Aaron nodded. “I think we'll leave things as they are. I could see Uncle Cain's face when Robert
was telling that Lucille about the Manor House. I don't think he'd be happy if Rob was knocking about with you!"

“Hey!” said Faith, ruffling her grandson's hair, “Don't put ideas into my head!” she added with a sly smile. Aaron grinned back at her.

“Where is Sarge by the way?” asked Aaron, “Robert's brought some HG Wells for him”

“Back later love. Dropping off some accounts he's been doing” said Faith

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That evening.......  

Patrick walked into the kitchen and found Faith just gulping back a small glass of brandy. She had changed into her old-fashioned blouse and long skirt.

“Oh, you've caught me” said Faith with a smile, “Just getting in touch with the spirits a little early” she added, holding up her empty glass.

Patrick smiled back and put his hat on the kitchen table.

“You're very late love” said Faith, “I'm just about to start the gathering”

“I went for a walk” said Patrick, smoothing down his fringe

“There's a letter for you on the mantelpiece” said Faith as she poured out another small brandy

“Oh. Thank you” Patrick replied. He took his jacket off and hung it on the back of the chair before walking over

“It's from Canada” said Faith, “Could I have the stamp afterwards? Bernard collects them”

“Does he?” said Patrick, sitting down at the table and trying to peel open the back of the envelope with difficulty. He sighed. “Could you open it please Mrs Dingle? It's really been stuck down”

“Yes love” Faith said briskly. She opened the envelope and took out a letter before handing both back to the young man.

“Take my advice Patrick. You encourage your Daniel to get a nice boring hobby likes stamps” said Faith, checking her hair in the mirror above the mantelpiece

“Do you think so?” said Patrick, starting to read his letter

“When you've known fellers as long as I have” said Faith, “You'll find hobbies are a godsend. Men with hobbies don't wander”

“Well he's always liked animals. He had lots of pets when he was little but being on a ship most of the time he.......” Patrick voice tailed off.
Faith turned around, “Nothing wrong is there love?” she asked. Patrick looked stunned.

“Is it about Daniel? He's alright isn't it?” asked Faith

“Oh he's alright” said Patrick, “He's just not coming home”

“What do you mean love?” Faith asked gently

“They got stuck in Canada with engine trouble so he signed on for a different ship. He won't be back until New Year now” said Patrick.

Faith was quiet for a moment. The sound of people talking in the front room now echoed through the hallway and into the kitchen.

“I'm sorry love. I'm going to have to start the séance” said Faith. She leaned over and put her hand on Patrick's shoulder.

“Look, I know it means another six months away. But I'm sure he wouldn't have signed on if he didn't have to”

“Are you?” said Patrick, “Well you're more sure than I am!” he added as he got up, wiping a tear from his eye.

Faith watched as Patrick headed through the hall and up the stairs. She turned to look at the picture of her, Patrick and Daniel on the mantelpiece.

“Now look what you've done!” said Faith to the photograph.

“Men!” she exclaimed to the room in general. She smoothed down the front of her old-fashioned blouse, picked up her brandy, and headed for the lounge.

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“This a long visit then Cain?” asked Mr Rudge, filling his pipe

“No” said Cain as he put a sleeping bag and pillow onto the sofa, “Couple of days and I'm back to Liverpool”

“This feels a bit daft to me” said Robert leaning over to Aaron sitting in the chair next to him, “I mean it's not very scientific is it. It is 1947 after all”

“Don't take it so seriously” Aaron replied quietly, “Nan doesn't do any harm”

Robert shrugged and walked over to the large table in the lounge and sat down.

“Am I alright by here?” he said, flashing a big smile to Faith as she walked into the room and sat down at his left, plonking her brandy glass onto the green baize cloth.

“Yes love” said Faith, reaching over and giving his hand a squeeze, “I want you next to me” she added, “I think I'm already picking up good vibrations from you”

Cain shook his head as he sat on the other side of his mother.

“Can you put you pipe out please Bernard” said Faith, “Then you sit opposite me and...”
She was interrupted by the sound of chatter as Lucille and Renee came into the room. Lucille headed towards the empty chair next to Robert but Aaron was too fast for her and had already slid into it.

“Shouldn't we be sitting boy, girl, boy, girl Mrs Dingle?” said Lucille with a pout as she put her hand on her hip.

“It's a séance love, not a dinner party” Faith replied

“You come and sit next to me” said Cain with a big grin

Lucille smiled and sat down in between Cain and Mr Rudge.

“You close the door and turn off the big light would you Renee?” asked Faith

Renee nodded and did as she was asked but said nothing. But then, she never did say much. There wasn't a massive need for conversational skills when you were posing in “Picturesque Scenes” in the Central Pier Review. She sat down in between Aaron and Mr Rudge.

The atmosphere started to change as they sat there silently, with just the light from the lamp tucked away in the corner of the lounge to see by.

“First, everyone link hands. We must form a circle. An unbreakable circle” said Faith

Robert smiled to himself. Faith hadn't let go of his left hand since she first grabbed it.

Aaron couldn't resist a small smile as he took hold of Rob's right hand. He leaned over to take Renee's hand as well. It felt like someone had just put a cold fish into his palm. Lucille smiled broadly as Cain's rough hand curled around her own.

Faith started to breathe deeply, her eyes now tightly closed. Then she spoke, her voice now deep. “This voice is not my voice. This body is not my body”

'Credit where credit's due', Robert thought to himself. She knows how to put on a bit of a show.

“We are all in a mist. The mist between the departed and those in this mortal realm” Faith went on

“I can see a table. I can see a circle of people sitting at that table”

Robert was beginning to catch the mood a little, despite his natural scepticism.

“Someone is coming” said Faith, “Someone is walking to the table” she added before falling silent.

She breathed in and out, saying nothing for what seemed like an age.

“They're here!” she suddenly said dramatically.

Lucille gasped. Cain gave her hand a squeeze.

“It's a lady. She wants to talk to someone here. She's been away from someone she loves for a long, long time”

“Who is it?” said Lucille. But Mr Rudge shushed her quickly.

“I see a letter. I see the letter 'S' “ said Faith
Robert and Aaron exchanged a quick look. Robert's face was hard to read in the dim light. Aaron thought he caught a flash of anger, but he couldn't be sure.

Faith said nothing. The tension kept building around the table.

“Simone! Is that you?” Mr Rudge suddenly blurted out

“Yes Bernard. It is me” said Faith.

Robert let out a small sigh of relief.

Later than evening

“Well that was a bit of a coincidence, wasn't it?” said Robert sarcastically as he sat on the bed and started to unbutton his shirt.

“What do you mean?” said Aaron, he was putting his boots neatly next to Patrick's desk.

“Your Nan's boyfriend's late wife popping up like that’ said Robert, “I mean, her of all people. And her telling Mr Rudge it was alright for him to get married again”

“Who were you expecting. Queen Victoria?” asked Aaron

Robert leaned back on the mattress and thought for a moment, “Oh I don't know. Rudolph Valentino would have been nice”

“Who?” said Aaron

Robert smiled and shook his head.

“I've just got to go and speak to Sarge” said Aaron, “Where are those books?”

“In my case. Is something up? He's been in his room all evening. In the attic room I mean” said Robert

“Daniel's been away for three months. He was supposed to be back in another three and Nan said Sarge was already struggling a bit. Now he's not back to New Year” said Aaron as he took two hardback books out Robert's suitcase.

“I'll try not to be too long” said Aaron, reaching over and giving Robert a quick kiss before leaving.

Aaron sat on the side of the small bed in the attic room, with his right arm around Patrick's shoulders and Daniel's letter in his left hand.

“Listen Patrick” said Aaron quietly, “I know it's tough. I'd hate it if I was away from Robert for
“But your Daniel *is* coming back and you can tell from all that nice stuff he wrote in the letter how he feels about ya”

Patrick was silent

“I mean, we'll be up here again soon. Bound to be. Or if you want a break you could come up to Hadleigh. We can show you the Manor House and everything. That'd be good wouldn't it?”

Patrick nodded.

“Go on. You get yourself to bed. Robert's looking forward to chatting to you tomorrow, I know. You'll get all his movie references. Most of them go over my head” said Aaron with a smile

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just before midnight.............

Faith gave a small tap on the door of the lounge and was about to tiptoe in when she saw that the lamp was still on and Cain was awake.

“Oh. Thought you'd be asleep love” she said heading for the mantelpiece, “Bernard left his pipe in here earlier”

Cain looked up from his sleeping bag on the sofa.

“I thought he'd gone home” he said

“Well, I'll just put it aside then” said Faith, heading for the door.

As Faith pulled the lounge door behind her she bumped into Lucille heading towards her. She looked her up and down and took in her short silk nightie and long legs.

“Bit of advice love” said Faith, her hand on the front of her dressing gown, “Wear a robe. At least leave them *something* as a surprise”

And with a smile she headed up the stairs to her own room

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“You were a while” said Robert, looking up from his book as he sat tucked up in Patrick's bed.

Aaron just nodded as he stripped down to his vest and short trunks and climbed into the left side of the bed.

“Can I tell ya something?” said Aaron

“Sure” his partner replied, putting his book down on the nightstand.
“Sometimes” said Aaron, “You can really annoy me”

“Oh. Can I now?” asked Robert, “What's brought on this little romantic outburst?”

“Let me finish” said Aaron, taking Robert right hand in his.

“Sometimes you come home and you're going on about your committee meetings, or about some new gadget you want to get....”

“I hope this ends better than the start” said Rob

“...or you're moaning that the movies aren't what they were before the War..”

“Well they aren't” said Robert

“...or you're moaning about the Government again. And sometimes, just sometimes that annoys me”

“Sure that's everything?” asked Rob

Aaron shook his head

“But the thing is “ said Aaron, gently caressing Robert's hand with his own, “If you weren't there. I'd.....I'd be lost’

“Is that what you wanted to say?” Rob asked gently

“I'm just trying to tell you that I love ya” said Aaron

Robert smiled

“It just didn't come out like I planned” added Aaron with a grin.

Robert leaned forward and planted a deep kiss on Aaron's lips, his hand still tight in Aaron's.

“Well” Rob breathed, “I could say all the ways you annoy me. But I'll cut to the chase. I'd be lost without you too”.

“I couldn't manage nine days without you. Let alone nine months” he added, gently running the back of the fingers on his left hand down Aaron's cheek.

Aaron beamed, as Robert leaned over for another deep kiss.
“I might take a handsome young man with me”

Hadleigh Village – November 1947

Dr Gillespie's Surgery

“So” said Robert, as he pulled his braces back up from his waist and clipped them over his shoulders, “Check up again in, when now, February?”

“Hmmm?” said Dr Davison, looking up from the file in front of him, “Well actually, I'd like to discuss some options with you”. The young Doctor indicated the empty chair in front of his desk.

Robert frowned and sat down.

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Hadleigh Village Library

“I'm afraid I've been rather naughty Mr Dingle” said Miss Phipps as Aaron walked up to the library counter and placed his book down on it.

Aaron looked across at the tall, gangly, middle-aged woman and tried to imagine what terrible thing she could have got up to. His mind went completely blank and he was lost for something to say.

“Uh. Have you?” he eventually offered.

Miss Phipps looked to her left and to her right to see she wasn't being overheard.

“We've just had the new Agatha Christie in today” she said

Aaron was still unsure how he was supposed to react.

“Err. Right” he replied

Miss Phipps leaned forward and lowered her voice, “I haven't even put it out on the shelves. I've put in under the counter!” she whispered.

Aaron leaned forward and lowered his voice, as that what seemed to be expected at this moment.

“It's alright” he said quietly, “I won't tell anyone”

“I thought you could take it for Mr Sugden. I know he's such a fan. It's Mr Daventry you see” Miss Phipps continued in a soft voice
“What about him?” Aaron whispered back

“It’s one of his rules. No reservations” said the Librarian. She looked around again as if she was expecting a Police raid at any moment, “Of course. If you were to take it out on one of your tickets” she whispered

“Our little secret” Aaron said quietly and gave her a discrete nod.

Miss Phipps visibly relaxed and took a hardback book out from under the counter and stamped the inside cover.

“And which of our little gems have you gone for?” she asked as Aaron passed his own book over.

“Essential Gardening Tips for Autumn And Winter” she read out aloud, “Oh, you do keep the Gatehouse well” she sighed as she stamped the inside of the book.

Aaron took out his wallet and handed over two library tickets.

“Such a lovely garden” said Miss Phipps, “I wish someone would come round and have a good go at mine!” she sighed

Aaron just smiled.

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Dr Gillespie's Surgery

“But Dr Gillespie has never mentioned having another operation” said Robert

“Well, to be fair. He is rather stuck in his ways. Look, you don't have to decide now. But I'd like to refer you to an old colleague of mine in London, Dr Baker. He's done a lot of work with these sort of injuries. He'll examine you and, well, let you know how the land lies”

Robert thought for a moment, squeezing the wooden handle of his walking stick hard.

“How soon?” said Rob, “To go up to London I mean” he asked

“Could be the end of next week. Shall I go ahead?” the Doctor asked.

Robert nodded.

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Blackpool – The Golden Palm Tree Guesthouse – November 1947

“Where did you say you wanted these after?” Patrick asked, looking up from the pillow case he was ironing.
“Cupboard at the top of the stairs love” said Faith, turning over her newspaper, “No point dressing the beds again while the rooms are empty”

Patrick nodded.

There was a loud clatter as a handful of letters dropped onto the mat in the hallway. Faith looked at Patrick, but he kept ironing. She knew that was a bad sign. There was a time when he rushed to the letterbox to see if there had been anything from Daniel. Now, he didn't seem to bother.

It didn't help that business was so quiet at the moment, she thought to herself as she walked briskly to the door. Patrick liked to be busy and there was always something he could do if there were guests about.

As she walked back to the kitchen she noticed her Football pool's envelope was still on the hall stand. She checked through the letters. “Bill. Bill. Postcard” she mumbled. She read the message from her regular commercial traveller and turned over to look at the saucy cartoon on the front. “Cheeky Devil” she thought to herself with a smile.

“Patrick” she said, as she walked into the kitchen and put the letters on the table, “Can you pop my Vernons letter in the post for me later?” she asked, as she pulled on her apron, “I ought to get tea started, even if it is just us and Mr Anstruther”

“I'll go now. Get some air” said Patrick, folding the pillow case over.

“Put your jacket on love” Faith called as the young man walked away. But he didn't seem to hear.

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Miss Rudge was just about to go into the Royal Oak when she spotted Patrick approaching the postbox at the other side of the street.

“You get the drinks in Lettie” she said to her companion, “I want to pass on a message!” she added as she marched over the road. But Mrs Chorley was too nosy not to hang on outside the pub door.

“I want a word with you!” said Miss Rudge as she walked to the postbox

“Oh, is that right?” Patrick replied, sounding disinterested.

“You're the lodger at the Palm Tree aren't you?” the angry woman said, “That Dingle woman’s place”

Patrick's eyes turned to his left side for a moment, and the jumper sleeve that was pinned to his shoulder by a safety pin.

“How did you guess?” he said sarcastically, “It's my accent isn't it? Dead give away”

“Well tell her to keep her greedy hands off my brother. Bernard is perfectly happy at home with me!”

Patrick didn't know much about Mr Rudge's home life. He looked at his sister standing in front of him and decided that her statement wasn't that likely.
“I mean” said Miss Rudge, “Everyone knows that place of her's is only two steps up from a knocking shop!”

Patrick pretended to look puzzled. “In which direction? I thought number 14 was a laundry. And you can't mean old Mrs Hanley at number 18”

“You know perfectly well what I mean!” said Miss Rudge angrily

“Do I now?” Patrick said, starting to head back home.

But Miss Rudge was being persistent, “I mean. Why my brother? She must have had half the men in Blackpool as it is!” she said to Patrick's back.

Patrick was seething inside now. He turned around. “Well it averages out doesn't it?” he said through gritted teeth, “After all, some women can't give it away can they?”

Over at the pub Mrs Chorley had to strain to hear. The pair were walking too far away for her liking.

“Tell to get herself some other bloke!” said Miss Rudge, “Tell her to start acting her age!”

“I will” said Patrick, “And I'll tell you what you can do too. You can.....”

Mrs Chorley cursed as the door to the pub opened behind her and the rest of the young man's sentence was lost as the noise from the bar spilled out into the street. She'd gone and missed it now! But the angry look on Miss Rudge's face gave her at least a general idea.

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Hadleigh Gatehouse – one week later

“Operator” said Robert, leaning back in his desk chair, “I want to call Whitehall 1412” he said

“Oh hello Mary” he added with a smile, “Didn't recognise your voice for a minute. What? I know plenty of people in high places, I'll have you know”

Robert angled his chair to look over at Aaron who was topping the fireplace up with coal. Or at least, he had been. He had stopped now and was staring at Robert with one of those looks on his face.

“Oh anyway. My call. Thank you” Robert said quickly.

Aaron shook his head and finished topping up the fire.

“Lewis! Good to speak to you” Rob said into the phone as Aaron headed for the kitchen.

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Aaron walked back into the living room and plonked himself down on the sofa with a mug of tea in one hand and his book in the other.

“That is fantastic. Yes I've got all that” said Robert as he looked down at the pad in front of him, “Thanks again” he added as he hung up.

“Don't I get a tea?” Rob asked

Aaron looked up from his book and sighed, “What did your last servant die of?” he asked

“He's still alive!” said Rob with a smile, “I'm looking at him right now”

“Oh, ha ha!” said Aaron sulkily, putting his mug on the floor and going back to his book.

Robert got up and walked a little awkwardly to the sofa and sat next to his partner. Aaron kept reading.

Rob reached turned to his side and ran the back of his finger gently down the side of Aaron's face.

“Gerroff” said Aaron, but he couldn't keep the smile from his lips.

“Thing is” said Robert, moving his finger slowly back up towards Aaron's cheek, “I have to go to London for a few days”

“London?” said Aaron

“Uh huh” Rob replied, “And I was thinking” he added, as he moved his hand up to the top of Aaron's head and started to run his fingers through his dark hair, “I might. Just might take a handsome young man with me” he said, moving his hand down to the back of Aaron's neck.

Robert leaned over and planted a soft kiss on Aaron's lips, pulling him towards him.

“If he's good that is” said Rob with a smile as he leaned in again.

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Blackpool – The Royal Oak - the next evening

Faith walked into the bar of the pub, her coat tight around her shoulders. She paused deliberately as she reached the table where Mrs Chorley, Miss Rudge and the landlord's wife were all sitting down.

“Miss Rudge” said Faith with a frosty voice

“Mrs Dingle” the other women replied in an equally cold manner.

“Blimey” said Arthur to his customer at the bar, “And I thought last Winter was freezing!”

He stopped as Faith had now walked up to him

“Go on through love” the barman said with a nod
“Oh you are kind, Arthur” said Faith, putting her hand on his arm. She looked back over her shoulder at the three women sitting by the door and gossiping.

“Look at ’em” said Faith with a sigh, “All they need is the cauldron”

“Tell me about it” Arthur said wearily

“Sorry love” said Faith, giving his arm a pat as she left.

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“Hello Mrs Dingle. It's nice to hear from you” said Robert.

“Now now, Robert. Don't be so naughty” said Faith, “I've told you. Call me Faith”

“Oh. Uh. Alright, Faith. Shall I pass you over?” Rob replied

“Hi Nan” said Aaron eagerly as he perched on the end of Robert's desk.

Robert smiled and squeezed his partner's leg just above the knee. He got up and headed over for the sofa as Aaron slid into his chair.

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“Has it been that long?” said Aaron, his voice sounding guilty, “No, you're right Nan it must be”

Robert looked up from his paper, puzzled.

“I...I know I promised but with one thing and another” said Aaron, “Hasn't he heard anything?”

“No love” said Faith, “And I know it's difficult. It was the same when your Uncle used to do those long hauls but even so. I was hoping you come come up, just for the weekend”

“Thing is Nan” said Aaron, “We're just about to go up to London”

Faith sighed, “Well love, I'm running out of ideas. He was alright when we were busy but you know what November can be like. It's so quiet. I won't have any of my theatricals until December. Then there was that run it with Bernard's sister of course. That didn't help”

“What run in?” asked Aaron

“Oh it's that spinster sister of Mr Rudge's. Been living in and doing his housekeeping since his wife died. She made a few catty comments about me and the Guesthouse so Patrick told her what he thought of her. Swore at her in the street by all accounts”

“Sarge?” said Aaron, “That doesn't sound like him!”

“Exactly love” said Faith

“Uh. What did he say, do you know?” asked Aaron

“Well” said Faith, “I probably shouldn't tell you. Not my sweet and innocent grandson” she added. She thought for a moment, “I don't know though” she started.
Robert was standing in front of the desk mouthing “What's wrong?”

“Hang on a minute Nan” said Aaron, covering the mouthpiece of the phone.

“It's Patrick. Nan's worried about him and wants us to go up for a visit”

Robert thought for a moment. “Give me the phone” he said

“Faith, it's me again. Look, do you think Patrick would like to come up to London with us for a few days?”

“I don't know love” said Faith, “Won't it be expensive?”

“No. No” said Robert, “We're staying in a flat in Chelsea. Belongs to an old RAF friend of mine but he'll be abroad. There'd be plenty of room. We're going up on the 18th”

“Well I'll ask him love. I'm sure the break would do him good” said Faith

“Well tell him he'd be helping us out too. I've got a couple of appointments when I'm up there. He can keep Aaron company while I'm busy” said Robert. Without thinking about it, he'd put his hand onto Aaron's shoulder and was gently rubbing it as he spoke.

“And tell him not to worry about the train fare. I'll cover that. I'll just past you back to your Grandson” said Rob

“OK Nan?” asked Aaron, “You ring us tomorrow evening. Any time after seven and we'll sort it all out then. Bye Nan”

Robert kneeled down on the floor and put his arms onto the wooden rest on the chair.

“That was generous of ya” Aaron said as he hung up the phone.

“Well. I was thinking too” said Robert, “We should have gone up, or asked him down here”

“These appointments?” said Aaron, running his fingers through the top of Robert's blonde locks

“Uh huh” Rob replied

“Anything I need to know about?” Aaron asked, concern showing on his face

“Nothing. I promise” said Robert

“Good” said Aaron. He felt just a little strange looking down on his partner for a change. He stroked his hair a bit more.

“I think it will be good. For all three of us” said Rob.

Aaron smiled and leaned forward. Just so he could plant a soft kiss on Robert's forehead.

TO BE CONTINUED.
“This place is really posh” said Aaron, as he walked into the living room from the hallway of the flat, “Your mate must have a few bob” he added

Robert looked up from the cupboard he was checking on the floor, “Lewis?” he said, “Well, to be accurate it's Mr Holbrooke senior who's got all the money”

Aaron nodded as Robert closed the cupboard doors.

“I've packed all our stuff away” said Aaron, “What time's Patrick supposed to be here?” he asked

“Around six I hope. He'll telephone when he's at Euston” said Robert, “I've told him to get a taxi here”

“He'll miss going on the Underground” said Aaron

“Well. I thought it would be easier. He'll have his case to carry today and I thought, you know, with the arm.....” Robert tailed off as he opened the next set of cupboard doors.

“What are you looking for?” Aaron asked

“I'm trying to find where Lewis keeps his drinks. He did say to help myself to anything here” said Rob

“That's nice of him” replied Aaron

“Believe me, it's the least he can do” said Robert, “I don't think he put his hand in his pocket once during our time in the RAF”

“Have ya checked in here?” asked Aaron as he opened a wooden cabinet facing the sofa.

“That's not what I think it is, is it?” Rob asked in surprise

Aaron looked inside the cabinet for a moment.

“Yeah” said Aaron, “It's a television”

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An Hour Later

Robert and Aaron were both sat on the floor in front of the sofa. “I don't understand this” said Robert looking at the tiny screen “Why are we seeing Alexandra Palace again?”
Aaron looked up from the newspaper on his lap, where he was squinting at the small print, “They don't broadcast anything now, not until the evening. This is just a test film. You know, so they can show people in shops what it's like”

“How do you know?” Robert asked

“I read about it when I was in Harry's shop last. I told you about it” Aaron replied

Robert shook his head

“It was in Radio Retailer magazine. I told you not to get excited cause you can only get a signal down here”

“Nope. Doesn't ring a bell” said Robert

“Robert. I definitely told ya!” insisted Aaron

“I must have switched off” said Robert, “It's not my fault you've got a boring voice” he added.

Robert flashed Aaron one of his winning smiles. On this occasion it did not have the effect he wanted, as Aaron still hit him in the face with a cushion.

“Oh. Playing rough are we Dingle?” said Robert with a big grin as he grabbed Aaron's arms and pushed him so his back was up against the sofa.

“Geroff!” said Aaron, laughing as he did so and making a token effort to get free.

“You going to behave?” said Rob, smiling broadly again

“Yeah I will. Let go!” Aaron replied

“Promise?” said Rob, still holding tight to Aaron's arms.

“Yeah. Promise” said Aaron

“Good lad” said Robert. His grip on Aaron's arms softened, but he didn't take his hands away. He leaned forward and pressed his lips against the younger man's.

The phone in the hallway started to ring.

Robert sighed as he broke their kiss. “Go on” he said softly, “You'd better answer that. It'll be Patrick”

Aaron smiled and slipped out of his partner's embrace. He stood up and darted into the hall.

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Later that evening........

Patrick seemed his usual self to Aaron, just a bit quieter than he normally was. Not that it mattered, as he and Robert were keeping the conversation going anyway.
“I thought that taxi would take longer than that” said Patrick. “I had a look in the station at the map of the Underground and Chelsea looked a long way to me”

Robert smiled and put his whiskey tumbler down on the table, the drinks cabinet having finally been discovered. “Of course, you've not been here before have you? Ah, well the thing is....” he started

“That map” interrupted Aaron, “It's not like distances. It's just to show stops and where to change. It's more like a circuit diagram. The stations are much closer really!”

Patrick didn't look any the wiser. Robert looked slightly annoyed, as his thunder had just been stolen. He picked up his whiskey again.

“Anyway. So what I've decided” said Rob, seizing the initiative, “Is that we'll stay in tonight and watch this television business” he added, indicating the cabinet opposite with his glass.

Aaron rolled his eyes, “Course. He's got the next few days planned down to the last minute!” he said with a grin.

“Aaron” said Robert patiently, “It's the Royal Wedding tomorrow, in case you've forgotten. Someone has to plan”

Aaron leaned over from the sofa towards Patrick, who was in the chair next to him.

“He'd have planned it all even if there wasn't a Wedding” he said

“Ow!” he added as Robert gave him a sharp poke in the side.

“Well, I don't mind what we do. Not really” said Patrick

Aaron gave his side a rub and looked at his partner. “Bully” he mumbled, but grinning as he did so.

“Everything will be heaving in the morning” said Rob, “So I think we should go over to Buckingham Palace in the afternoon, joins the crowds. Then head up to Piccadilly, find somewhere to eat and I thought we'd go to the cinema in the evening?”

“When's your appointment?” Patrick asked

“Oh” said Robert, shifting slightly on the sofa, “That's Friday morning. I've got to go up to Oxford Street. It won't take long. We can sort that out on the day, but I thought I'd meet up with you boys in the evening. Sound good to you?”

“Yeah. Great” said Aaron. He smiled at Robert, but when he turned to look back at Patrick, that smile had faded.

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In the evening, the television had just sprung into life in time for some sort of short ballet. None of the lads were engaged by the spectacle but the novelty of being able to watch a small screen in a living room was very strong.

“You mark my works” said Robert, “I think this is the future” he said. He was lounging on the sofa now, his arm curled around Aaron's shoulders.
“Do you think so?” said Patrick. The programme had changed into something more talkative and less structured. The topics seemed to keep changing as it went on.

“I can't see this replacing the cinema” he added, “I mean. Who'd want to watch a film on a tiny screen like that?”

“Well, Patrick” said Robert, “I think they'll have bigger screens”

“Nah” said Aaron, snuggling up against Robert's side, “It'd get much too hot if that set was any bigger”

“Anyway” he added, “I told ya. We can't watch it in Hadleigh anyway. Not until they build another transmitter nearer to us”

“And when they do, I want one of these” said Robert

“He means that an all!” said Aaron with a grin, “I wouldn't hear the last of it if someone else in the village beat him to it!

Robert smiled as they all watched the screen.

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1:30am

Try as he might, Aaron just couldn't get to sleep. He sat up in bed and looked down at the reason why. Robert was lying next to him, his face pressed into the pillow and his blonde hair ruffled up. Aaron looked over to the small leather folder that was lying on the chair not far from the bed. If he just opened that he could find out where Rob was going on Friday. That could put his own mind at rest. Or, sadly, open up a whole new set of worries. With a sigh he eased himself down onto the bed and rolled onto his side. He looked across at his partner's handsome face and, just for a moment, tried to imagine him no longer being there.

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Chelsea, Lewis Holbrooke's Flat – 20 November 1947, mid-morning

Robert's plans could always be changed. Well, at least they could by Robert. So an early morning cuddle had, inevitably, led to breakfast being pushed back and their trip into the heart of the city pushed back a little more too.

“The thing is” said Patrick as they sat at the table, “It was the memorials going up that started me thinking. I mean, some are just putting names onto the Great War ones. Some are building new ones of course...”

“Three guesses who's the chairman of the Hadleigh Committee” said Aaron, leaning in to put a rack of toast down. He ruffled Robert's hair as he headed back to the hallway. Rob ignored him and kept reading the letter in front of him.

“And I know you had to deal with Government officials, over the mine and the Land Girls” Patrick added
Robert read the end of the typed letter in his hands....

“.....yet there is still no recognition for those men and working working to support the War effort on the Home Front. I had the privilege to serve alongside many such young men after returning from France in 1940. All worked long hours in dangerous conditions and, tragically, some lost their lives in the service of their Country. I hope you will give this matter serious consideration. Yours sincerely Sergeant Patrick Seaton RAMC (Rtd) “

“I thought you could tell me where I was going wrong” said Patrick, “I've written all over and I get the same brush off, well give or take a few words or so. I mean, I'm not asking for me....”

Robert reached over the table and gave Patrick's hand a gentle squeeze, “I don't think you're getting anything wrong” he said kindly.

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That evening

“I still say it could have been anyone in that coach, we were that far back” said Aaron grumpily as they walked up the steps to Pall Mall.

“Aaron” said Robert, “We were there. That was the main thing” Robert replied, refusing to let his enjoyment diminish

“Right, I think we'll head to the Lyon's Corner House now and then onto the cinema” said Rob, pushing his walking stick forward.

“I don't know why he's asking us” said Aaron, turning to Patrick, “It's all already decided”

“What are we going to see?” Patrick asked

“Dark Passage” Robert replied, “It's the new one with Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. We've got to see it because I am a huge fan of.....”

Rob looked at Aaron and clocked the frown on his face.

“....of Humphrey Bogart. Great actor” said Robert quickly. Aaron stopped frowning.

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London – Harley Street, 21 November 1947 – morning

Robert was buttoning up the front of his shirt. The examination this time had been a lot more thorough.

“And if it's successful?” Robert asked as he re-fixed his braces
“Well” Dr Baker boomed in a deep voice, “You should regain a lot of your mobility. You'd still need your stick, for long distances. But around the house, that sort of area, would be lot easier”

“I've got a driver right now...” Rob started

“Oh, I'd hang on to him if I were you” said Dr Baker, “As long as you need a car that is”

“Well you do where we are” said Robert, neatly arranging his jacket, “Very much on the rural side”

“Ah!” said Dr Baker, as if this was some big revelation. “Now after the operation, we wouldn't keep you in the hospital long. But you'd need to recuperate for a while. Would you be able to arrange suitable care at home?”

Robert smiled, “Oh, I think I've got someone who can look after me” he said. He always has up to now, he thought to himself.

“And perhaps a spell at the seaside. Fresh air. Exercise to get that mobility back. I'm rather fond of Cromer myself” said the Doctor.

“The seaside you say?” Robert replied.

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A gentleman's outfitters- Jermyn Street – lunchtime

It was strange how your priorities change. Robert could remember walking down this street a few years ago and looking in the windows of the menswear stores that peppered its sides. Then his thoughts had been, “would that look good on me?” Now, in the exact same street he had found himself asking “would that look good on Aaron?”. Still, he told himself as he walked into the store, why shouldn't he spent some money, and clothing coupons, on Aaron for a change. He'd pretty much given up on getting him into a pair of pyjamas, but then something on the counter caught his eye.

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“They're American you say?” Robert asked, looking at the packets now spread on the glass top counter.

“An American design sir” the young assistant replied primly, “But they are one hundred percent British”

“Really?” asked Robert

“A factory in Nottingham I believe sir” the young man said, stressing the name of the city as if it were a dirty word.

Robert opened his wallet and checked through his coupons, “I'd better take three” he said, taking out some large paper notes as well.
“Very good sir” the assistant replied as he started to fill in a receipt by hand. “I hope they give sir every satisfaction” he added.

Robert smiled. So did he.

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Fortnum & Mason Tea Rooms – 1:30pm

London may be big. But some people in it move in very small circles. After all, if Robert had come here with Lewis there would have been a good chance that they would have bumped into one of his London friends.

But the last thing Robert expected to do was recognise someone himself. Not that he saw her. Not that he even turned round and looked at her. But he knew. He just knew.

It was the attitude that gave it away more than the actual words. The impatience. The anger of her not getting her own way. The little girl lost voice she switched too when her barrage had failed.

Even the reply from her husband was familiar. Not so very long ago, that would have been him. Giving in with bad grace as he said, “Alright, we will go and see your damn sister in Cornwall!”.

But now, all of it washed over him like the sea gently brushing the rocks as he sat there and finished his cup of tea. He stood up, grabbed his walking stick in one hand and picked up his small shopping bag in the other.

And as he headed for the Underground station he thought to himself. As far as he was concerned, that almost meeting, might as well as never happened.

Chelsea, Lewis Holbrooke's Flat – 21 November 1947, evening

“Yeah, I'm sure he'll love it” said Aaron, putting the large whiskey bottle back onto the living room table.

“Well, he's getting far more back that I've drunk” Robert replied with a smile, “So. You boys have a good day?” he said as he flopped down onto the sofa

“Yeah, it was great” said Aaron, sitting next to him, “I remember that teacher who stayed at my Nan's, Mr Allerdyce, he said he loved the Natural History Museum when he was small”

“I think it wore Sarge out a bit though, he's having a lie down” Aaron added

“Is he alright?” Robert asked

“Yeah. He really appreciated you having a look at his letter by the way”

The lads fell silent.
“How did your business appointment go?” Aaron asked, not looking directly at his partner

Robert thought for a moment, “Actually, I went to see a Doctor”

Aaron looked sharply at him now. Suspecting it was one thing, but he was still surprised.

“Why?” Aaron started, “Why didn't you say?” he said, stumbling over his words

“Because” said Robert hooking his arm around Aaron's shoulders “I didn't want to get my hopes up, let along yours”

“Was it good news?” Aaron asked, staring down at his hands in his lap.

“Well” said Robert, “I can have an operation on my hip and my leg. It won't make things perfect. But it could make things a lot better”

“Better for us” he said softly, reaching over with his free hands and taking Aaron's in his.

Aaron beamed. Robert leaned over and kissed him on the lips.

“Oh” he said as he pulled away slightly, “I, uh, got you a present too” he added

“Have ya?” Aaron asked

“I'll let you have it later” said Rob, as he leaned over again.

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1:30am

Aaron was padding back from the bathroom when he noticed the light coming through the bottom of the living room door. He opened it slowly and saw Patrick sitting in his pyjamas, reading by the lamp next to the sofa.

“Can't you sleep?” Aaron asked as he sat down next to him.

“It's that lie down I had earlier” Patrick replied, “And, well, other things I keep thinking about”

Aaron sighed, “Listen” he started, “I'm sorry we didn't come up. I mean we planned to but, well, things just sort of got in the way”. Aaron stopped, disappointed in how that had sounded.

“It's not that I don't care” Aaron tried again, “That we don't care” he added.

Patrick nodded

“And Nan said her theatricals will start booking in soon. So Christmas and New Year will be busy even though Daniel is still......” Aaron said before stopping

“It's not much of a Christmas though” said Patrick, “Me and your Nan and some strangers. Your Uncle Cain if he turns up. Mr Rudge if his sister lets him out”

Aaron thought for a moment.
“Well, actually” he said, “Robert's got to sort some dates out and speak to some people. But we could end up in Blackpool for Christmas and we might have to stay a while”

Patrick's face brightened as Aaron spoke.

“Don't say anything to Nan” said Aaron, “The dates could slip. But even if they do, we'll come up for a long break”

“Robert's committees will have do without him for a while” Aaron added with a grin

“Actually, talking of Mr Rudge...” Aaron said

“Yes?” Patrick replied

“What exactly did you say to his sister? When she was having a go about Nan” Aaron asked

Patrick looked a little bit embarrassed. Then he told his friend what he had said. Aaron just laughed.

“Come on” he said, putting his hand of Patrick's forearm, “Let's both get to bed. Long train journeys tomorrow” he added as he stood up.

Patrick nodded and stood up. He looked Aaron up and down.

“Those look new” Patrick said, looking at the striped shorts that Aaron was wearing with his white vest.

It was Aaron's turn to look a little embarrassed.

“Oh, yeah. Robert got them for me. They're this new thing. Boxer shorts” he explained

“Very nice” said Patrick with a smile.

Aaron just grinned back.
''It's change and I find that hard”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse – Sunday 7 December 1947

When Robert was in one of his organising moods, Aaron knew the best thing to do was let him get on with it. Especially when he was explaining, at length, just how clever he had been. One way or another. He'd learned that his role right now was mainly to give the occasional nod, or just to say “Right” at the appropriate moment. As he consoled himself, at least it meant he was getting to eat his breakfast while it was hot. Robert had already lifted his toast to his mouth twice now before suddenly stopping and making another point about his schedule that he had on the kitchen table in front of him. Or, to be more accurate, the one that Rob had insisted 'really needed to be typed, Aaron'. And, to be fair, at least the new typewriter was getting good use. Aaron had been fully expecting to have to box it up and put it up in the attic alongside Robert's now-neglected camera equipment and that fish tank that had, in the end, never had to house any fish.

But Aaron had another reason for sitting quietly. Quite simply, he was going to miss this. Just the two of them, sitting in their kitchen having breakfast. Aaron listing the jobs that he would be doing that day and where they would take him. Perhaps just into the village, or a longer trip to the radio shop in town. Robert would joke that he was glad, as it meant he would get a break from “staring at his grumpy face”, and he wouldn't mean it for a moment.

“So” said Robert, “As we know 'D-Day' is Thursday and, all going well, they'll let me out on the seventeenth and we can head over to you Nan's”.

“And you know about all the stuff we're taking. You've got that list right?” Rob asked

“Yes Robert” Aaron replied with a small sigh

“Well we will be there at Christmas, so there's the stuff to go to Blackpool and the stuff for Emmerdale and...”

“I'll leave that at Adam and Victoria's ” said Aaron

“And you remember about the spare key for Florrie for when we're away? She said she wouldn't mind checking on the place. It's just with old Rutherford pulling out of the Manor House....”

“I've remembered Robert” said Aaron

Robert smiled, “I'm going on a bit aren't I?”

Aaron just smiled back as he got up from the table and headed for the cooker.

“Aw” said Rob as he finally bit into his breakfast, “My toast has gone cold now!”

Aaron reached over and ruffled Robert's blonde hair. He'd already put some fresh bread under the grill.
“Here we are love” said Faith, as she walked into the tiny room next to the kitchen holding a mug of tea in each hand.

“Oh, you have done well” she added as she passed a mug to Patrick, who was smoothing down the blankets on top of the small camp bed now laid out next to the wall. The room had had a thorough clean.

“I think Robert will be alright on this” said Patrick as he took one mug and sat down on the low-bed, “It's quite sturdy”

“Oh it is” said Faith, lowering herself onto the bed next to him, “Of course, it's for camping really”

“I can't see you roughing it under canvass Mrs Dingle” said Patrick

“Can't you love?” said Faith with a sly smile

They sat there drinking their tea for a moment. But the silence was broken by the sound of some young women noisily leaving the Guest House and slamming the front door behind them.

Patrick shook his head. “I don't know why you have people like that here” he said

“What, theatricals you mean?” said Faith, “It's good money. They'll be staying well into the New Year”

“No, I don't mean that” replied Patrick, “I meant those girls in particular. Especially that Lucille”

“What happened to Renee?” Patrick asked, “I mean, at least she was quiet”

“Oh. Extended break love” said Faith, “It was starting to you know, show ” she added, mouthing the final word and gesturing to her stomach.

“You didn't have to rush to get the room ready” said Faith, “We're not expecting the boys until next week”

“Well. It's something to do” Patrick mumbled, staring into his tea.

Faith sighed and put her mug on the floor.

“Right then young man” said Faith, hooking her arm around Patrick's shoulders, “I think you need cheering up. And if there is one thing I know how to do, it's how to put a smile on a feller's face. I've never failed”

“Haven't you?” Patrick asked

“No love” said Faith. She thought for a moment. “But then, as it's you, I was thinking we could hop on the tram later and go to the cinema instead”
Blackpool – The Bijou Cinema – that evening

Faith breezed into the cinema and started to inch her way down the back row of the stalls.

“Mrs Dingle” said Patrick, standing at the end of the row, “Let’s go nearer the front”

“Oh” said Faith, smiling towards the burly middle aged man who was sitting half-way along the back row. She turned and inched her way back towards her young companion.

“Sorry love” said Faith, “Force of habit” she added as they headed down the aisle to the middle of the cinema.

“Why did that lady in the box office give you that filthy look?” asked Patrick as he settled himself into his seat

“How long have we got before the cartoon comes on?” asked Faith as she sat at the end of the row.

“Ten minutes” said Patrick, looking at his wrist-watch.

Faith thought for a moment, “I’ll tell you when we get home”

“I hope I’m going to enjoy the main feature” she added

“You will. It is definitely your sort of film” said Patrick

“Is it?” asked Faith

“Yes. It’s got men in it” said Patrick with a smile.

“You know me too well!” said Faith with a grin, patting the young man on the leg.

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse – Tuesday 9 December 1947

Aaron couldn’t settle. He’d stripped down to his vest and boxer shorts ready for bed, but too much seemed to be tumbling through his head. He sat down on the stool next to his telescope and played idly with the settings on the side. Robert seemed to be taking ages in the bathroom tonight. After what was probably in fact only a couple of minutes, his partner walked in.

“You know. I have checked and re-checked that list and I’m sure....” Robert started to say.

But Aaron had walked over and wrapped his arms around him in a very tight hug. His head was pressed tight against the front of Rob’s pyjama jacket.

Robert wrapped his own arms around Aaron. “Hey, come on” he said, keeping his voice soothing, “I’ve told ya. There’s no need to worry”
Aaron relaxed the hug a little so he could move back and lift his head.

“Can't help it though can I?” he answered

“Aaron” Robert said, his voice firm, “I've already had the bad operation. The one right after the crash” he added, moving his hand behind Aaron's waist and locking his fingers together.

“If this goes to plan” said Rob, “Think of the stuff I'll be able to do”

“You won't have to wait on me hand and foot” he added with a smile

Aaron nodded, but he couldn't keep the concern from his face, “You're not going to need me anymore then are ya?” he said. He smiled, but it was clearly forced.

“Aaron” said Rob, this time gently, “I'm always going to need ya” he said

“And I don't just mean to chauffeur me around” Robert said with a grin.

“Look” he went on, “Once I'm recovered, sure, I'll be able to do more things. But we'll be able to do more things. Together. That's got to be good, right?”

“It's just” said Aaron, trying to find the words, “It's change and I find that hard. I hated it when I got called up to go down the mines. Straight off I mean. I'd have never have coped without Adam. And coming here. Me and you. I was scared about that, but it's been so good and I don't want to lose that. I don't want to lose you”

“You won't” said Robert in a whisper. He leaned forward and pressed his lips against Aaron's in a long, deep kiss.

“In fact” said Rob with a cheeky grin as he moved back slightly, “You might find that I'm a bit more energetic. You know, in certain areas”

It was Aaron's turn to flash an impish grin, “Ha! Well that would be a change”

“Hey! Behave!” said Robert, and to make his point gave Aaron a quick slap on the seat of his boxer shorts.

Aaron laughed, then leaned forward and pushed his lips back against Rob's.

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Emmerdale – The Sugden Farm – Thursday 11 December 1947

Aaron sat at the kitchen table. He tried to read the Hotton Courier for the umpteenth time but kept looking at the clock on the mantelpiece. The hours seemed to be moving painfully slowly.

Victoria turned around in her chair and followed his stare, “Is it still only twelve?” she asked, “What time did the hospital say we could ring?”

“Four o clock” said Aaron, nervously tapping his fingers on the top of the table.
“Right” said Victoria, as she continued darning the dark sock in her hand. “Why is it Leeds anyway? I thought this consultant was up in London”

“Robert insisted” said Aaron with a smile, “It's like he told that Doctor. He's having to pay for all this so why shouldn't it be done close to home”

“Didn't he want to wait until its free then?” said Victoria as she stitched away, “That doesn't sound like our Robert. He doesn't like spending anything if he doesn't have to”

Aaron smiled, “Yeah. But he doesn't like waiting either. It's months before it all goes free and he didn't know how long he'd have to wait for them to do it”

Victoria nodded as they both fell quiet.

“Aaron?” Victoria asked

“Yeah?” Aaron replied, looking up from the paper

“You got to know Adam very well. When you were both miners didn't ya?”

“Uh, yeah?” said Aaron, wondering where this line of conversation was going

“Well. Did you ever notice anything funny?” Victoria asked

“About what?” asked the young man, very confused now.

“About his feet” said Victoria and she took a sock from the pile on the table and stuck her hand in it.

“Look at that” she said, showing him a gaping hole in the heel “All these are the same” she added pointing to the pile on the table, “What's he do with them?” she asked

Aaron thought hard about the times they'd been in the dormitory in the training camp and when they shared a room at the Manor House. But as far as his best friend's feet were concerned, he came up with a blank.

“Can't you ask his Mum?” Aaron tried

“Actually, that's a sore point” said Victoria putting the sewing down. “Adam's really tried with her. They've not spoken for ages so we thought we'd go over for her birthday. So, Adam wrote to her a couple of weeks before, you know, bit of an olive branch and she didn't even bother to reply”

Victoria stopped as there was the sound of a van pulling up in the yard outside the window.

“Don't say anything mind” she said to Aaron, “Cause he's pretending he's not bothered, but I know he is”

“Course not” Aaron replied as the door to the farmhouse opened noisily.

Adam bustled in, all wrapped against the cold in his thick jacket and flat cap.

“By 'eck it's parky out there love!” he said, flashing his big cheeky grin, “Dinner ready yet?” he asked, as he rubbed his hands together.
Later that afternoon.....

Aaron sat on the sofa in the living room, trying not to think about the operation. Little Sarah was sat on the floor in front of a small table, busily crayoning away at some drawings. Every so often, she would shoot a look towards Aaron, the expression on her face saying “And who are you again? I didn't invite you”.

“Get away with you! I'm working” said Victoria with a laugh as she stood over the sink. Adam had leaned in with some dishes and grabbed a quick kiss on her neck as he did so. He smiled as he flopped down on the sofa next to his friend, reaching over to give his daughter a gentle pat on the head as he did so.

“So do you think Robert will be all right? Staying up at your Nan's I mean?” Adam asked

“Yeah. It's a good spot, you know, for when he can exercise after” said Aaron

Sarah picked up a drawing and walked over to the kitchen towards her mother.

“And Sarge will be there, so that's good” said Aaron, “And it's good for him too. Keep his busy. He's been really down since his feller's been away…”

Aaron stopped when he saw the look of surprise on Adam's face. Then he cursed himself. It hadn't struck him before that Adam didn't know about Patrick. But then, why should he? Adam had only seen the Sarge once since the training centre days when he had his honeymoon in the Golden Palm Tree.

Adam looked over to Sarah, who in the kitchen showing her mother her very important drawing.

“Do you mean Sarge is like. Well, you know. Like you?” said Adam in a low voice.

“Well, yeah” said Aaron, lowering his voice, “Does it matter? I mean, you know you can't tell anyone…”

“It doesn't matter to me. Sarge is a nice bloke. I just wouldn't want anything bad to happen to him cause of it” Adam replied

“Or to you mate” he added quietly as he reached over and touched his friend's arm “So who's this feller?” he asked

Aaron knew he could trust Adam, there was no question of him not. But he decided not to go into too much detail. It was still Patrick's business after all. “He's in the merchant navy. You know, like my Uncle Cain. So he's away at sea a lot”

“What's he like? You met him?” asked Adam

“Yeah he's alright” said Aaron. He looked at his friend for a moment, “Actually, he looks a bit like.....”

“Right you two!” Victoria cut in from the kitchen, “It's half three. You'd better head off”

“Thanks love” said Adam, standing up, “We can go and call from the Wheat Sheaf, that new pub on the Hotton road”
“Are they ever getting a phone at the Woolpack?” asked Aaron

“Ha! We'll have to wait for 1950 or something I think mate” Adam laughed, “Come on, let's get you there”

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Adam was waiting in his farm truck, parked just around the corner from the pub. Aaron had been quiet on the journey but Adam knew he was just keeping a brave face on things. After all, it was an operation. It was still a risk. And Adam knew he would have felt just the same way if it had been Victoria.

His wife was worried about her brother too. She had hidden it of course, going on at Adam about his socks instead for some reason or another that he couldn't work out. But at least it meant someone in her family had been concerned Mr Sugden had seemed very matter of fact about the whole thing. This was despite, as far as Adam was aware, him never having had an operation in his life.

But as Aaron walked back from the pub and over to the truck, Adam already knew the news was good. It wasn't just the broad smile now plastered across his friend's face, but the walk was lighter, the tension in his shoulders had gone.

“All good?” Adam asked as Aaron slid into the passenger seat next to him.

“Yeah, all good!” said Aaron, letting out a sigh of relief.

Adam gave Aaron a pat on the shoulder and beamed

“Right mate” he said, “Let's get home”

Chapter End Notes

I wrote this update before the ED episodes of 13 July 2017 went out. No spoilers, but I was in two minds whether to post it.

What I will say is (1) I know that this 1940s AU has subscribers and regular readers and I am happy to update it just for them. Some may drop out now and I hope that isn't because of this AU. (2) The 1940s RobRon, Vadam and Faith for this and the first story in the series are the ED characters but they are shaped by the events of the time (obviously the War being the major one). Their lives have been markedly different from on-screen and they can continue to go down their path (3) I was determined that when the Whites appeared in this story that they would never appear as characters and never get a line. Chrissie (of Christine here) was there as a means to an end to give Robert the money he needed to set up an independent life for him and Aaron in the harsh legal climate of the time. I am very glad that I have kept them out and this story will always be a Rebecca free zone (she is the nervy, artistic sister buried down in Cornwall. She is staying there. The lads wont be going to Cornwall. Ever.
Finally, I thought it would be unfair to leave the story on the last chapter when Robert was due to have a serious operation to try and put right some of the damage done to him in his wartime plane crash. In the Epilogue to the first story, we did see everyone, still together in 1953. I'm happy to keep filling in the gaps, if people still want to read them.

Thanks to everyone who has supported this series. I can't call it a big success in hits and kudos but it is always heartening when the readers who do enjoy it get in touch. The people who like it seem to like it a lot and that has been very encouraging for me as an amateur writer.
Blackpool – The Golden Palm Tree Guesthouse – Thursday 17 December 1947

The room next to the kitchen was small. But Aaron could tell that a lot of effort had been put into making it as comfortable as possible. And at least this way Robert would not have to worry about trying to manage any stairs for a while. Yes, it was a big disappointment that he would not be able to share the room with him. But then, as his partner would be recovering from his operation for a while, he needed his own bed over the coming weeks in any case.

Aaron looked up from the electronics magazine he was reading, just to take in the view of Robert, now tucked up in the low-lying camp bed. He looked so peaceful, lying there with his blonde hair now all scrunched up. It was a welcome contrast to how he'd appeared in the hospital just a week before.

Aaron started to read again but was distracted by a familiar voice saying sleepily, “Hey, what time is it? I don't remember going to bed!” Aaron got out of the chair, lowering himself down on the floor so he could sit cross-legged next to the bed.

“You fell asleep in the car on the way from the farm” said Aaron, reaching over and taking Robert's hand in his. “You were dead to the World” he added

Robert rubbed his fingers gently against Aaron's. “Who put me to bed?” he asked, looking down and noticing his striped pyjamas.

“Me and Sarge did” Aaron replied, “course Nan offered to do it...” he added

Rob smiled at this comment. Aaron grinned back at him. Yes, this was a big improvement, he thought.

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Leeds General Hospital- Friday 12 December 1947

Aaron sat quietly on the chair right next to Robert's bed. After a moment, he leaned over to Adam, sitting on the chair next to him.

“I...I didn't think he'd look as rough as this, did you?” Aaron asked

“Well, I didn't expect him to be dancing around the ward with the nurses” Adam replied, trying to lighten the mood a little. “Mind you, I don't think it's likely, not with that old dragon” he added, nodding towards the severe looking nurse sitting at a table in the centre of the ward.
“I'm just not used to him being so quiet” said Aaron

“Look” his friend replied, “They’ve had to dose him up haven't they? He'll be back to his old self before you know it. Ever better perhaps”

Aaron nodded. But the truth was it hurt to see Robert like this. It brought back far too many difficult memories. Of all the broken night's sleep and the anxiety that Rob had suffered when they had lived at the Manor House during the War. At least then he could reach out and touch him. Wrap him up in his arms and try and ease his troubles away.

But here, now, he couldn't even do that. Frosty ward nurse or not, the woman visiting her husband in the next bed along was holding his hand as she chatted quietly to him. But Aaron knew that, however unfair and however much it hurt, he would have to wait before he could reach out to his own partner.

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Emmerdale – The Sugden Farm, Thursday 18 December 1947

“Here it is” said Adam, walking over to where Robert was sat at the kitchen table and handing him a messy drawing.

“She did want to come and wave you off” said Victoria, standing at the sink with her arms folded, “But it's the only morning Diane can have her and we want her to get to know at least one of her Grandmothers”

“It's very nice” said Rob, trying to work out what the picture was supposed to be, “Very, uh colourful” he added.

“Isn't it Aaron?” Robert added as his partner walked into the kitchen from the yard, “Sarah's picture, it's very colourful”

“Yeah” said Aaron, looking over his shoulder, “What's it supposed to be?”

“Oh come on!” said Adam, feeling a little defensive of his daughter's artistic talent, “It's obvious!” he added as he leaned in between the two other men.

“ That's Daddy on his tractor” said Adam, pointing to one side of the picture, “And that's Mummy hanging out the washing” he added, gesturing towards the other end.

“And Uncle Robert is over in the corner. The one with the stick. Good likeness isn't it?” Adam said with a smile.

Aaron looked at the corner of the picture. “Yeah, that's definitely Robert” he said, “He's the only one not doing any work!” he added with a grin

“Hey!” said Robert, smiling broadly as he did so.

“Right!” he then added, putting his hands face down on the kitchen table. Aaron could tell that Rob was about to work through one of his 'lists'.
“Before we go. Aaron, did you give Victoria the presents we brought from Hadleigh?”

“No Robert, I fed them to the horses over in the stables” said Aaron with a sigh.

Robert shook his head as he leaned on his walking stick and stood up, “It's going to be a long drive to Blackpool at this rate!” he added.

“Well, thanks to both of ya for putting up with grumpy here for a week” he said. Aaron pulled a face as his partner said it.

“You're welcome” said Victoria as she came over and gave her brother a hug.

“And thank you for visiting me too” Robert added.

“I'm sure Dad would have come” said Victoria as she let go of her brother, “I mean his back has been playing him up again”

“And he has been very busy on the farm still, hasn't he Adam?” she went on.

“What?” her husband asked.

“I said Dad's been very busy on the farm still” said Victoria.

“Uh, yeah he has” said Adam, putting his hand on the back of the kitchen chair and not looking at the other two men, “He's been trying to sort out a few things. Like that problem with the drainage in the lower field” he mumbled before falling silent.

“Come on boys, I'll see you out” Adam suddenly said, giving Aaron a quick pat on the arm as they all headed for the door.

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“Right, they're on their way” said Adam as he plonked himself down on the kitchen chair and removed his left boot.

“What are you doing?” his wife asked as she continued to dry the breakfast things.

“My feet are killing me love” Adam replied as he took his right boot off and relaxed in his chair with a contented sigh, stretching his legs out in front of him.

Victoria looked over at him, and at the large gaping hole in the heel of his right sock.

“Hey!” said Adam, as the tea towel hit him in the face, “What have I done now?” he asked with a grin.

Victoria just shook her head.

“I'll put the kettle on” she said with a sigh.
Lucille seemed to have a knack for annoying the other residents of the Guest House. Deliberate or not, it had the same effect. Unfortunately for all concerned, as long as their show was running, her and her three friends would be staying.

“No sign of your regular sailor guest?” Lucille asked as Faith walked into the lounge carrying a teapot on a tray

“You know, that lovely David” she added

“Daniel love” said Faith as she sat down

“Oh you know who I mean. That nice one who was half-Portuguese” Lucille added

“Spanish” said Faith as she started to pour out the tea, “No. He's away at sea. Long haul” she replied.

“I though I'd told you” Faith added. Lucille gave a small shrug.

As she continued to fill up the cups on the table, Faith looked over to Patrick. He was sitting by the fire, reading with his back to the room. There was no way he couldn't have heard Lucille's remarks. She watched as Patrick put his book down for a moment, before nervously rubbing his forehead with his hand.

“Right” said Faith, pouring out another cup of tea, “That one's for Robert”

“I'll take it in to him” said Lucille brightly, getting up from the table

“Er, no you're alright” said Aaron, very quickly grabbing the cup and heading for the door.

“Oh, tell him I'll bring him some lunch in at twelve love” said Faith

Aaron nodded as he headed out of the room.

“Why are you so keen to be helpful? All of a sudden” said Loretta to the young woman sitting next to her.

“I just thought Robert might like a bit of female company for a change” replied Lucille, as she started to idly file her nails

“And who am I love?” said Faith, “Old Mother Riley?”

Lucille carried on with her finger-work, “Well I meant someone closer to his own age Mrs Dingle”. She didn't see the glare from Faith that this comment had earned her.

Patrick looked up from his novel. He turned in his chair and peered over at the two young dancers.

“What show is it that you're in again Lucille? Is it the artistic modeling again?” he asked

“No!” said Lucille, not bothering to look up, “We're in the pantomime. Me and Loretta are doing a double act”

“I thought the ugly sisters were usually played by men” said Patrick
“It's not Cinderella!” said Lucille with a sigh, “It's Jack & the beanstalk. The Dame in that is Jack's mother”

“Who've they got for that love?” Faith asked

“Oh, I don't know” replied Lucille, “Some clapped out old Nancy boy or other” she added dismissively

It was Patrick's turn to glare.

“We're a comedy song and dance duo actually” said Lucille

“It must get very hot for you” said Patrick, “Up there on stage in that cow costume every night” he added as he returned to his book.

Faith smiled and sipped her tea.


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Blackpool – The Golden Palm Tree Guesthouse –Wednesday 24 December 1947

Aaron closed the door of the outside toilet and quickly darted to the kitchen. Not for the first time he was grateful that the facilities were near the kitchen door and not right down the end of the back yard. Especially on a cold night like this. It was those bottles of brown ale that were to blame for his frequent trips this evening. Still, as he told himself, he trusted them far more than his Nan's so-called fruit punch. As far as he could tell it only qualified as fruit because a couple of slices of apple seemed to have been tossed into the alcohol at the very last moment.

Still, the little party had gone down well with the guests. The showgirls and Bobby and that other young lad from the Variety Theatre all seemed to enjoy themselves. Even Robert had put in an appearance at the beginning before pleading tiredness. And he had been tired, Aaron could see that. Even so, he had still had those girls hanging on his every word as usual. And Bobby.

As Aaron left the kitchen, he saw Patrick heading out of the lounge

“Not throwing in the towel are you Sarge? It's not even eleven” said Aaron as he caught up with the young man at the bottom of the stairs.

“I've got to get up early” said Patrick, “I said I'd help Robert with his dressing and it's got to be done, Christmas or no Christmas”

Aaron nodded.

“Of course, some people seemed to have forgotten that anyway” said Patrick, a trace of bitterness creeping into his voice.

Aaron chided himself. Having Robert here for his recovery was supposed to have given Patrick a bit more to do, as well as being a nice way for Aaron to come home for the holidays. Faith had hoped it would stop him brooding on Daniel's absence so much. But, Aaron had been doing a lot of the running around himself. Not because he had to, but because he enjoyed having his partner lean
on him. He wanted Robert to need him and it was hard to let that go.

“It was the same with my Uncle Cain” Aaron offered sympathetically, “I mean, when he used to sign up for these long hauls....”

But Aaron could see his words were not having the desired effect. What he hadn’t said was that at least his Uncle had sent the occasional card saying where he was going to be. It might have been India or Hong Kong but, well, at least him and his Nan knew.

He sighed and decided to be more hands-on instead.

“Come here” he said, wrapping his arms around Patrick in a hug. He gave him a quick pat on the back of the shoulders before letting go.

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Later that night...........

Robert was sitting up in bed in the small room next to the kitchen. “Come in” he said as there was the sound of a short knock outside.

“Thought you'd like a cocoa” said Aaron as he opened the door a little. As he did so, the sound of laughter and music from the radio rang into the room from the distance.

Robert put his Dorothy L. Sayers detective book onto the floor with a sigh, “Might as well. No chance of getting to sleep with that party still going on”

Aaron smiled and picked up two mugs from the floor outside the door and brought them over.

“What time is it anyway?” Robert asked

“About ten to twelve” Aaron replied as he pushed the door closed to help deaden the noise.

Aaron picked up the cushion seat from the small chair and plonked it onto the floor next to Robert's bed. He wasn't planning on leaving soon. They were already spending too much time apart while Robert was recuperating as far as he was concerned.

Aaron handed a mug to his partner and bugged up as close as he could to him on the floor. There was ever such a slight glaze to his eyes. Just enough for him to be merry.

“It won't be long now” said Aaron, “Patrick gave up a while back and even Nan's not got the energy she used to have”

“Don't let her hear you say that!” said Robert with a smile.

“Someone ought to talk to that Daniel” said Aaron, “When he shows up. If he shows up”

Robert was unsure, so sipped his cocoa for a while.

“Mr Rudge went off at ten, he had to”
“Oh, why's that?” Robert asked

“His sister said she was putting the bolt on at half past, whether he liked it or not” Aaron replied

“I'm sure your Nan would have squeezed him in somewhere” said Robert with a grin

“We're full” said Aaron

“Oh come on” said Robert, “There must be another luxury suite like this tucked away” he added, indicating the tiny room with his mug

“Hey!” said Aaron, “This room has a lot of memories for me, thank you”

“That right?” Rob asked

Aaron leaned over a little as he slouched against the side of his partner's bed.

“I had my first kiss in here” said Aaron

“Are you sure you should be telling me this?” said Robert, “The Doctor told me I wasn't to get excited”

“It wasn't like that” his partner replied with a grin, “It was me Nan's New Year's Eve party, end of 37”

“Go on” said Rob, intrigued

“Anyway. Wendy Fairfax said she wanted to speak to me. Said it was really important. So we came in here. Course Nan was just using it for storage then. So we sat down on a couple of orange boxes”

“Very romantic” said Robert

“Shurrup!” said Aaron with a grin, “Anyway, one minute she was talking, the next she threw herself on me and kissed me”

“Uh, is that all of it?” asked Robert

“No” said Aaron shaking his head, “I got this massive splinter in my thumb from that orange box. It really hurt!”

“Then what happened?” his partner persisted

“Nan got it out with some tweezers. I was fine then” said Aaron. He looked down idly at his right thumb for a moment. Robert just shook his head and smiled.

“Do you want to know what I think?” said Rob, carefully moving himself around to look more closely at Aaron

“What?” the young man replied, sitting up straight on the seat cushion

“I think that was just your subtle way of getting kissing into the conversation” said Robert

“That right?” said Aaron with a grin. Robert leaned forward, his lips getting closer and closer to his partner's.
“Hang on a minute” Aaron said in a whisper. Robert looked confused for a moment.

Aaron glanced down at his watch and waited as the hands ticked around.

“Merry Christmas” Aaron said, then pushing his lips against Robert's. He hooked his hand onto the back of Rob's neck and pulled him in.

“Merry Christmas” Robert replied with a warm smile as Aaron broke away and smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Old Mother Riley was a comedy character on stage and in series of films from 1936 onwards. The character was an Irish charwoman, played by Arthur Lucan. In an uncanny similarity to today's Mrs Brown's boys, Old Mother Riley's onscreen daughter was played by his real-life wife.
Blackpool – The Golden Palm Tree Guest House – Friday 9 January 1948

Faith was sitting at the kitchen table, sewing some buttons back onto the cuff of a man's jacket. Robert was sat on one side of her in his pyjamas and dressing gown, reading the newspaper.

“Nearly done love” she said to Bobby, who was sitting on her other side. “Where are you off again? Bit early for you pair isn't it?”

“Emergency meeting at the theatre” Bobby explained, “Takings have really plummeted since Christmas. I mean, you try and bring people a little culture.....”

Robert smiled at this remark. It wasn't the word he'd have chosen to describe the tatty variety show that Bobby was appearing in. But he was happy to keep that thought to himself.

“By the way, Robert” said Faith in a husky voice, “If there's any little thing you want doing while you're here, you only have to ask. And I mean, anything”

Aaron looked across from the sink where he was washing the breakfast dishes and just shook his head.

“No. Thank you, Mrs....uh, Faith” Robert replied, “Aaron and Patrick have got everything covered between them”

Aaron turned back to the sink and scrubbed away at the breakfast things, “Actually” he said, “I was thinking Sarge could show me how to change your dressing”

“There's no need” Robert replied, turning over his newspaper.

“Yeah” said Aaron, putting one plate on the draining board and starting on another, “But then I could do it whenever and we wouldn't have to bother Sarge”

“Really, it's fine how it is” insisted Rob, shifting in his chair slightly. His partner couldn't see the frown that had appeared briefly on his face, but Faith could.

Trevor, the other young man from the Variety theatre had just walked in carrying the rest of the breakfast plates on a tray.

“Leave it to Patrick love” said Faith, “He was a nurse after all. And he does like to keep his hand in”

“Hah! Hand. That's a good one” said Trevor as he plonked the tray on the work surface next to Aaron.

“You what?” said Aaron in a hard voice

“You know, a joke. Cause he's only got one..” Trevor started
“Trevor!” said Bobby in an exasperated voice.

“What?” the other young man replied, oblivious.

“All done love” said Faith, passing Bobby his jacket and giving Trevor a cold stare

“Come on, let's get gone” said Bobby as got up. He prodded Trevor in the back of his shoulders and guided him out of the kitchen.

“Really, I can't take him anywhere!” Bobby said with a forced smile as they left.

“When are they leaving again?” Aaron asked, once the two men were out of earshot.

“End of February love” said Faith, “But if their show gets pulled, it could be sooner”

“Good” her grandson replied as he carried on with the dishes.

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Saturday 10 January 1948 – late afternoon

Robert rolled the dice onto the tiny table next to his bed.

“Right, one, two, three, four” he said, then frowned as he moved his counter down the snake and back several rows.

Aaron picked up the dice, a cheeky grin now on his face. Both he and his partner looked up from the board as they heard the sound of rushed, heavy footsteps stomping down the staircase, swiftly followed by the noise of the front door being slammed very loudly.

“Who's that making all the racket?” asked Rob

“Can't be any of the guests” said Aaron as he sat cross legged on the floor by the table, “They've all gone off to work”

“Well Patrick's hardly that noisy is he?” said Robert, reasonably

“Nah. Anyway, he's down the Library” said Aaron, rolling the dice onto the table again

“One, two, three and hah!” said Aaron, “I win! Again” he beamed

Robert shook his head. “I don't know why you're so excited” he said

“Just because you keep losing” his partner replied

“Aaron. It's snakes and ladders. It's hardly skill now is it?” he added, rolling his eyes

“Yeah?” said Aaron, “Well you still haven't taught me to play chess like you promised”

“Well, did you pack my chess set when we left home?” asked Robert, folding his arms

“Course I didn't!” his partner replied
“Why not?” asked Robert

“For the same reason I didn't pack the coal scuttle” said Aaron, “We didn't need it!”

The pair both then looked up as they heard the sound of the front door opening and closing in the hall.

“That will be Sarge” said Aaron, getting up the floor and heading for the door of the room.

“Where are you going?” asked Robert.

“To see if he's got a chess set!” Aaron replied as he darted out of the room.

The young man walked back into the room moments later, “Yeah, he'll bring it down now”

Robert smiled broadly at his partner.

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Patrick was just heading past Mrs Dingle's room, the door of which was ever so slightly ajar. Faith was in the room and she definitely sounded upset.

Patrick put the wooden box in his hand on the floor and tentatively knocked on the door, “Mrs Dingle?” he asked, “Are you alright?” he added.

“Oh, come in love” said Faith. She was sitting on the end of her double bed in a black night dress, her dressing gown on top. She had clearly been crying.

The young man walked into the room and sat on the bed next to her.

“Well?” Faith started, dabbing at her eye with a handkerchief, “Aren't you going to ask me what I'm doing in my night things at this hour?”

Patrick thought for a moment, “Did your alarm clock not go off this morning?” he offered.

Faith smiled despite herself, “No love” she said.

“Mr Rudge?” the young man tried again. Faith nodded this time.

“We've had a row” the older woman said, “He's got things too cosy, that's the trouble. He's got that daft sister of his waiting on him hand and foot at home. Anything, well extra he comes here when he feels like it.”

“And, well, a girl wants more than that sometimes. Not just someone who comes and goes when he pleases” she added.

“Well, I can understand that” said Patrick quietly.

“Oh. I didn't mean your situation love” said Faith, reaching over and taking Patrick's hand in hers. “Bernard's only two streets down, not halfway to New Zealand or anything.”

“Do you think I'm being daft? Being so fussy at my...” asked Faith, stopping to correct herself. “Well, at my time of life?”
“No, of course I don’t” said Patrick, “Mr Rudge just sounds like a lot of men to me. He wants to have his cake and eat it”

“Oh, he doesn't come round here for cake love” said Faith with a grin.

Saturday 24 January 1948 – lunchtime

Robert was sitting up on his camp-bed, stripped down to his striped shirt and white trunks.

“Thanks for doing this again” he said.

“You're welcome” said Patrick, “I'm sure Aaron could do this in half the time though. Just hold the end there please” he added. Rob held the top of his dressing around his thigh so the young man could straighten it with his hand.

“It's my own fault. I overdid it again” said Robert, “I only went to that postbox on the corner and back. Well, perhaps I went a bit further”

“It's early days” said the other young man, checking his handiwork, “Just think where you'll be in another few months. You wouldn't have managed the corner without your stick before”

Rob nodded. “These scars aren't going to go away are they? I mean, at least no-one has to look at them...” he said, before coming to an abrupt stop.

Patrick said nothing.

“I'm sorry” Robert sighed, “It's just, after all this time. I don't even notice your scar, not really”

“It's alright” Patrick said

“No, it's not” said Rob. He reached forward and squeezed the young man on his right shoulder, “Neither of us had, well, an easy War, did we?”

“Daniel says he never notices the scar”, said Patrick, “Well, that what he used to say”

Robert thought for a moment as he let go of Patrick's shoulder.

“Aaron's never seen mine. Not even after all this time” he said quietly

“Is that why you didn't want him to do your dressing?” his friend asked

Rob gave a small nod. “Thing is” he started, “No one has. Not unless they were a Doctor. Or a nurse” he said.

“I thought you were married when you had your crash?” Patrick asked

“Yeah, I was!” Robert scoffed, “But we were separated before that. She never saw me. And with Aaron, I've just been that bit careful”

“I know it doesn't help” Patrick replied, “Just saying there are people worse off than you. But I've
seen far worse scarring and burns on people who survived accidents like you”

“I know that, I do” said Rob, “But looking down, all I can see is my hip and my leg and what it looks like to me”

“I’m sure it doesn’t make any difference to Aaron” said Patrick, “Really. He's a caring person. I know he is. And you can see how he feels about you”

Robert nodded

“How are the chess lessons going?” Patrick asked in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Rob looked over at the chess set, now laid out on the tiny table next to his bed. “Slowly!” he replied

“I've gone through the rules and we've had a couple of games. Course, Aaron spends more time complaining that I'm making things up as I go along than he does thinking about what he wants to do” he added.

Patrick smiled.

“You know, I think he pretends that he doesn't understand what I mean half the time. Just so he can get a bit of an argument going” said Robert

“But, that's my Aaron” Rob added with a broad smile.

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Monday 26 January – lunchtime

“How you getting on with that love?” Faith asked as she handed her grandson a cup of tea.

“Nearly done Nan” Aaron replied as he worked away at the wiring on the small electric fire.

As his grandmother walked to the table, the sound of male and female laughter echoed into the lounge from the hallway. Faith closed the door into the room before sitting down.

“Where did you drag up that Trevor from?” she asked, turning to Bobby as she poured him out a cup of tea.

“Lucille seems to like him” he replied primly.

“Well no-one would call her fussy” said Faith, topping up her own cup.

Bobby sighed, “The business isn't what it used to be” he said, “It's been like this for me since I left ENSA. And say what you like about Trevor, he's what the ladies in the audience want”

“I suppose” Faith said grudgingly as she sipped her tea

“He puts me in mind of one of those Greek statues” Bobby added

“Dances like one and all” Aaron muttered to himself as he started to re-attached the plug to the fire.
He'd had the dubious pleasure of seeing the lads act.

“What happened to that young man you used to do the routines with. That lovely young Victor?” Faith asked.

Bobby looked sad for a moment. “Oh, he died. Last year” he said in a quiet voice

“Oh I am sorry love!” said Faith, reaching out and taking his hand, “And him being so young. What happened? Was he ill?”

Bobby shifted in his seat and looked over to where Aaron was working.

“It's alright” Faith said softly, “You can say anything in front of our Aaron”

Bobby took a deep breath before starting, “Well, there was this trouble with a girl in the troupe when we were up in Newcastle...”

“A girl, that doesn't sound like Victor” Faith said, surprised.

“She'd started chasing after this new lad in the show. Really went over the top about him. But, well, Victor had got there first, if you know what I mean” Bobby explained

“Go on love” Faith said softly

“And one night, at the digs, she caught them. You know. Together” he went on

“And she turned up the next day, all emotional. Then she lost her temper and she told the troupe manager. Of course, this other lad said it was a one-off and all down to Victor. That he was innocent. It wasn't true though, it had been going on for ages. Then she threatened to go to the police so they sacked Victor”

Aaron stopped working and stared into the middle distance. He was still listening to Bobby's words but the wasn't really in the room any more. He was back in the Miner's Training Centre in the Midlands a few years ago. He was talking to Patrick on a very difficult day when Aaron had been emotional, when he had lost his temper and when he had made a threat.

“.........so when someone went round to the digs that night it was too late” said Bobby

“Oh love” said Faith, squeezing Bobby's hand.

“He was terrified of going to prison” he continued, “He'd been once, before the War. He couldn't do it again”

Aaron got up from the floor and mumbled something about needing a different screwdriver. As he reached the lounge door he heard Bobby's last words on this topic.

“She told everyone that she didn't know reporting him would have meant going to jail. But that's no excuse is it?”


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11:30pm

Aaron sat on the side of Robert's bed looking downcast. His partner was sitting up and holding his
hand gently in his.

“...and when I found out about what that Don was doing I made sure it stopped” Aaron said, his voice quiet. “I’d never have told anyone”

“Aaron, I know you wouldn’t” Rob said kindly, “And Patrick must have believed you. Afterwards I mean. He’d hardly have ended up here otherwise would he now?”

“But what Bobby was telling my Nan” Aaron added, “It makes you think. About what could happen to anyone. Anyone like us I mean”

“Come here” said Robert softly as he leaned forward and stretched his arms out. Aaron hunched up closer to his partner on the bed and let Robert wrap himself around his shoulders.

“We'll be alright, me and you” said Robert, “I promise”

Wednesday 28 January 1947– evening

“I know you were expecting it, but it must be a disappointment”, Faith said to Bobby as they both walked into the lounge.

“What's a disappointment?” asked Aaron, looking up from his copy of 'Chess for beginners'.

“Oh, the lads show has finished love” said Faith as she headed for the sideboard.

“Go on, get that down you” she added, passing a glass of brandy to Bobby, now sat down next to her grandson.

“It's good when you've had a bit of a shock” said Faith as she poured a glass for herself.

“Well, it's a bit of a surprise for me too” said Faith with a smile, as Aaron gave her a look.

“Oh, free booze going is there? Can I join you?” said Trevor as he walked into the room. He had sat down at the table before anyone could reply,

A little while later...

“Of course, it was Trevor's hornpipe that did it” said Bobby

“You what love?” asked Faith, refilling her glass

“When we did the sailor routine in the show!” said Bobby, “That's what got Lucille going when her lot came in to watch one night”.

“She was telling me about that one that comes here, Dennis...” he went on

“Daniel love” said Faith

“That's it” said Bobby, “Anyway I warned her. They're not to be trusted. Any of them!”. It was
obvious that the drink had loosened Bobby's tongue and discretion had been thrown out of the window with great force.

“I've knocked around with a few sailors in my time” he went on, “And they were all the same. If they're not at it with some tart on shore they doing it at sea with someone on the crew. Well they've got it on a plate out there haven't they? Can't trust them an inch!”

“Daniel's not like that” Faith insisted. But Bobby seemed to carry on regardless, “Anyway she told me she'd worked it out in the end. This Daniel was mooning over that regular of yours, Patrick”

“What, him?” said Trevor. Aaron didn't like the unkind look that had appeared on Trevor's face, or the way he had said 'him'. He shifted in his chair and knocked back some more brandy.

“Oh, yes” said Bobby, “Of course, it took ages for the penny to drop. She's like that, Lucille. Not much going up on here is there? I mean she wouldn't be knocking around with Casanova here otherwise” he added, indicating Trevor with his glass

Trevor scowled, “So that Patrick's got a feller at sea as he?” he asked. Faith pointedly ignored him. Aaron remained silent.

“Well it's no surprise he never comes back is it?” Trevor went on, “I mean. Would you if you had Boris Karloff waiting for you back home?”

He didn't get the chance to say any more as Aaron had shot out of his seat. He grabbed the young man by the front of his sweater and snarled into his face, “Go on!” he said, “One more word out of you, just one more word”

Everyone was silent for a moment. Bobby looked down at his drink, trying to pretend nothing had happened.

“Aaron” said Faith, her voice firm, “Let him go”

Aaron released his grip and walked over to the fireplace, his anger still raging. Trevor was scowling again as he straightened his sweater, but said nothing.

Faith stood up. “Patrick is a lovely young man” she said as she stared down at Trevor, “And he's worth ten of you any day”

Trevor remained quiet.

“Come on” said Bobby as he got up, slightly unsteadily, “We'd better sort our things out if we're off tomorrow” he mumbled as he walked out of the room, Trevor in tow.

Faith walked over to her grandson, who was leaning with one hand up on the mantelpiece.

“He's got no right having a go like that Nan. He hasn't!” said Aaron

“Forget about it love. And about him. I'll tell Bobby not to bring him again”. She gave her grandson a gentle rub on the back of his shoulders.

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Saturday 31 January 1948 – late afternoon
Robert was enjoying the chance to be out of his room. And as Aaron had pointed out, if they put the chess set on the small table in front of the fire in the lounge, at least they'd be warm. Also, they'd be undisturbed. Patrick had headed out on a long walk, just to 'clear his head'. The showgirls would be doing their matinee. And the two lads had, thankfully, now gone. Trevor had left in a silent and sullen mood. Bobby, though, had been apologetic and Faith had promised him he would be welcome back.

“Right” said Robert, moving his pawn to the opposite end of the board, “I'll have my Queen back”

“You can't have it” said Aaron as he sat on the sofa next to his partner, “I took it ages ago. Remember?” he added

“Aaron” said Robert with a sigh, “It's the rules”. He leaned over the board to take his chess piece but Aaron had grabbed it. He was holding it tightly in his right hand, a mischievous grin plastered over his face.

“Oh, like that it is Dingle ?” Robert said with a smile. He leaned over quickly and grabbed Aaron's arms, pushing him firmly back into the corner of the sofa.

“They didn't have this in my chess book!” said Aaron, trying to push his partner away in a half hearted fashion.

Robert just held tight and leaned in, pushing his lips softly against Aaron's. Well, he told himself, there was more to life than Chess sometimes. He kept the kiss going as his grip on his partner's arms became more and more gentle.

“So?” he said, breaking away and looking down at Aaron's bright face. “You going to let go of my piece?”

“What?” said Aaron confused, “Oh, yeah!” he said hurriedly, putting the queen back onto the table in front of them. He smiled at Robert, his face looking just a little bit embarrassed.

Robert smiled too and sat back, hooking his arm around the young man's shoulders. Aaron leaned back into the embrace, the game forgotten for now.

“So. Did you have a word with him?” Robert asked

Aaron sighed a little “No. Nan talked to me and she said she knows him much better. So she's going to have a bit of a word now. Just so he knows how things have been. She said I could still be a mate without, you know, interfering “ he replied

“I'm sure she's right” said Robert, gently rubbing Aaron's shoulder with his hand.

Both lads looked up as they heard the front door open and shut.

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Patrick hung his hat, coat and scarf up on the stand in the hall. He checked his reflection in the mirror and unnecessarily smoothed down his white collar peaking out from his sweater. He checked his empty sleeve was pinned up straight which, of course, it was.
He opened the kitchen door to the sound of low conversation. Whoever Faith was talking to had his back to him.

“Visitor for you Patrick” Faith said, a big smile on her face.

The man in the chair turned around quickly and stood up. The neatly trimmed black beard was new, the powerful frame perhaps a little bit lighter. But there was no mistaking those eyes, or that smile.

“Pat” said Daniel, the emotion clear in his voice.

The embrace that swiftly followed was strong and warm. Patrick buried his head into Daniel's shoulder and hooked his arm around his waist, holding him as tight as he could.

“I thought you weren't coming back Danny” Patrick said quietly, “It's been that long” he added.

Daniel moved his head back so he could kiss Patrick on the side of his neck. Then he pulled him in close again. If his back had not been facing Faith, she would have seen that he was holding back tears.

“It won't happen again Pat. I promise” said Daniel quietly.

Faith started to make an exit, putting a gentle hand on the back of the sailor's shoulders as she reached the two young men.

“I'll just leave you two boys to get reacquainted” she said.

And with a smile, she walked into the hall and pulled the kitchen door quietly behind her.

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Chapter End Notes

Boris Karloff was a British actor, mainly known for his high-profile horror roles including the monster in Frankenstein (1931) and its numerous sequels.

Aaron saw Patrick with Daniel one night in the Miner's training camp during the War. When he thought Patrick was unwilling to give sufficient help to a grief-stricken Adam, Aaron threatened to report him. Although he had not meant to say it, he bitterly regretted it. Especially when a third party overheard and used it to harass Patrick. Aaron put a stop to this harassment, violently. This is told in Chapter 6 “No one wants a telegram these days” and Chapter 7 “Aaron Dingle, blackmailer?” of the first story in the series, Love On The Homefront.
There's being sensible, then there's feelings

Blackpool – Golden Palm Tree Guest House – Sunday 1 February 1948

“Morning” said Patrick as he walked into the kitchen and sat down at the table next to Robert.

“Morning” Aaron replied, as he continued working on his fry-up at the cooker.

“Have you seen what this Government has done now?” Rob said, looking up from his newspaper.

“Here we go!” Aaron mumbled to himself. Fortunately, he did not hear any more on whatever had irritated his partner today as his grandmother had just that minute walked back into the room, an empty laundry basket under her arm.

“I know what puts that smile on a young man's face” she said with a big grin as she walked behind Patrick towards the pantry. The young man looked embarrassed as she went by, pausing to ruffle his floppy dark fringe. Aaron just shook his head and moved the bacon around the pan.

Daniel walked into the kitchen and, with a couple of friendly nods to the other lads, sat down on the other side of Robert. He let out a large yawn as Faith walked back into the room.

“Feeling a bit tired Daniel?” Faith asked, “Perfectly understandable” she said, still grinning as she patted his shoulder.

“Nan” said Aaron

“Yes love” Faith replied

“Do you want your cuppa in the lounge? You know, where there's more room” he asked as Patrick got up and headed to the sink.

“Oh no love” said Faith, “I'll just squeeze in here between Danny and Robert” she said as she sat down between the pair and poured herself a cup of tea from the pot.

She looked first at Daniel. Then at Robert, who shifted slightly and tried to focus on his paper. Then she sipped her tea.

“Lovely” she said

Patrick picked up a mug from the draining board and leaned close to Aaron.

“We have to get her and Mr Rudge back together!” he whispered.

Aaron looked across at his grandmother, sitting at the table with a dreamy look in her eyes.

“Definitely” he whispered back to Patrick

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Blackpool – Golden Palm Tree Guest House – Wednesday 4 February 1948 – early evening
“And check” said Patrick, moving his rook across the chess board

Robert looked exasperated. “I thought you said you hadn't played for years” he said

“I haven't” the other young man replied, “Oh, last person I played was back in the training centre during the War. You remember Leo?” he added turning to Aaron.

Aaron was sitting snugly in the chair next to the fire and reading his electronics magazine. He looked up and smiled. The centre seemed a lifetime ago now. Robert just looked at the board and frowned.

Faith walked in and headed for the empty chair opposite Aaron, some knitting in her hand.

“This is nice” she said “No guests” she added as she settled into her chair.

“Just my boys” she said as she started to knit, looking around the room with a smile.

Robert stopped scowling and moved his queen to take Patrick's rook.

“Talking of the centre......” Patrick started. He moved his knight and took Rob's queen almost absentmindedly. Robert frowned again.

“I had a letter from Sam the other day. You remember, Sam Dingle my orderly?”

“I didn't think he could read and write. Well he couldn't back then, could he?” said Aaron, trying to remember.

Robert made his chess move.

“Well, it wasn't from him as such” said Patrick, “Check” he added as he moved his knight again.

“It was from his young lady. He's been stepping out with one of the women who works in the kitchens at the sanatorium. They're getting married in the Spring”

Rob made another move.

“Check. And mate in four” said Patrick

“Are you sure?” said Robert, looking at the board.

“Alice she's called “ said Patrick, “I think it's nice he's found someone”

Aaron nodded and looked across at his grandmother.

“What are you knitting there Nan?” he asked

“It's a scarf for Mr Rudge” Faith replied, “I've decided I'm going to knit it until he comes to his senses and begs me to take him back”

Robert looked over towards her, “You'll have to get some more wool” he said sarcastically.

Faith just smiled, “There's not many fellers round here who can resist me when I set my mind to it Robert “ she said, her voice going husky as she said the young man's name.

“Uh, cup of tea Nan?” Aaron said, getting up quickly in the hope that his grandmother's
conversation wouldn't become any more cringe-worthy.

“Oh, thank you love” said Faith with a smile

“Another game?” said Patrick to Robert

“Definitely” Rob replied

Faith put her knitting down for a moment and looked at the fire

“That could do with a good poke” she said

“It's not the only one!” Robert said to Patrick in a quiet voice as they set the chessboard up again.

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Aaron walked into the kitchen to find Daniel sitting at the table with a notepad and several newspapers spread out in front of him.

“Do you want a cuppa?” Aaron asked, as he headed for the stove, “I'm doing one for Nan anyway” he added

“Yeah, thanks” said Daniel. He was working his finger down some very small print in one of the papers and frowning.

“And of course, I wanted a bit of break from the clever people in there too” said Aaron, leaning against the sink, his hands thrust in his trouser pockets.

Aaron suddenly realised that he had accidentally implied that Daniel was on the stupid side. At least, that must have been the impression Daniel had got, given the puzzled look on his face.

“I just mean all that chess and that” Aaron said quickly. “What are you working on in here?” he asked, trying to change the subject.

“You were a miner in the War weren't you?” asked Daniel, “You were at Pat's centre”

“Yeah, that's right” said Aaron, pulling up a chair a sitting down

“So, did you get certificates and stuff when you left? Could you have stayed on as a miner, if you wanted”

Aaron thought for a moment, “I don't know. I got out as soon as I could. But yeah, we did all get something official when we left. And I did my own apprenticeship before the War”

“Course” he said leaning over, “It's alright with my job now. I'm well in with the boss” he added, giving Daniel a wink. He got up as the kettle started to whistle.

Daniel nodded. “Thing is” he started, “I did loads of stuff during the War. I mean, you had to, when you were at sea then. I worked in the signals and did repair work and all the electrical stuff but on paper, on paper right, they say I'm a casual labourer”

“Nothing wrong with that” Aaron said kindly as he filled the teapot. He understood now why Daniel might have thought he was having a dig at him.
“I went round the Labour Exchange yesterday and they told me I should stick to working on the ships. And cause I'm just a labourer all that's going is the long haul jobs. Where they just want some idiot to hump crates around”

Aaron handed him a cup of tea and poured one for his Nan.

“Do you have to go back to sea?” Aaron asked

Daniel shook his head, “No. I could stay here and hump crates around in a warehouse. But I can't do that for the rest of my life”

“I mean” Daniel said sadly, looking down at the paperwork in front of him, “What am I going to tell Pat? I've promised”

Aaron did not know what to say, so just gave Daniel a supportive squeeze on the shoulder before leaving the kitchen. As he headed to the lounge he thought to himself. He couldn't see a solution, but he thought he might know someone who could. Someone who liked organising things. Someone, who was a bit, well, clever.

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Robert and Aaron's night-time routine for this long stay was well established. Aaron would make “popping in” to the small room next to the kitchen last as long as possible. Just so they could snuggle up on that cramped camp bed for a while. To enjoy being close and each others company. Just like being home at the Gatehouse in Hadleigh. Well, almost.

Robert was just relaxing, his head laying on Aaron's chest as his partner sat hunched against the wall, his arm around the other young man's shoulders.

“You will have a think about it won't you?” Aaron asked, “I mean, for Sarge's sale as much as anything”

“I said I would didn't I” Rob replied, “And I'll see what we can do for Patrick. Even if he does cheat at chess”

“Hah!” laughed Aaron, “He beat you fair and square!”

“He had an unfair advantage!” said Rob, pouting a little

“What?” asked Aaron

“He didn't have to sit there while your Nan undressed him with her eyes all night!” said Rob with a grin.

Aaron smiled and squeezed Robert's shoulder a little.

“Shouldn't you be going to your room?” Rob asked

“In a minute” said Aaron

“Yeah, in a minute” Robert agreed, cuddling up against him.
“Four brown ales please Arthur” Aaron said to the landlord, as he and Daniel walked up to the bar.

“Evening son” said the man sitting at the bar next to him

“Oh, evening Mr Rudge” said Aaron

“How’s your Nan keeping?” Mr Rudge asked

Aaron looked around before answering, “Couldn't you two, you know, sort your differences out?” he asked

“Not so easy son. It's family isn't it?” Mr Rudge replied. He nodded to the corner where his sister was in animated conversation with Mrs Chorley.

“Scuse me lads” he said, getting up from his bar stool, “Got to see a man about a dog” he added, as he headed to the Gents.

“Couldn't he marry this spinster sister off to someone?” Robert asked as Aaron passed him his drink.

“I mean, she can't be that bad can she?” he added.

Aaron nodded his head towards where Miss Rudge was sitting. Robert followed his partner's look.

“Oh” said Robert, “Forget I spoke”

“She might be a nice person, even if she is a bit....” said Daniel, trying to be kind

“Well she's not” said Patrick, who had already noticed that Miss Rudge was glaring at him.

“Patrick will you stop going on about it! I've said no!” Daniel said angrily, before stomping across the road and heading for the guesthouse

“That place has really gone downhill recently. The people they get staying there now” said Miss Rudge.

Patrick turned to see Miss Rudge and her brother standing outside the pub. She had been taking a deliberately long time to do up her coat and scarf, just in case she missed any of Patrick's private conversation.

“I mean the War was terrible, but at least we had standards around here then” she added, just as
Aaron and Robert came out of the pub.

“I'm not surprised you miss the War” said Patrick angrily

“I mean, the blackout must have been a godsend, with your face” he added, before walking away.

Robert grinned. Miss Rudge fumed to herself for a moment. “Come along Bernard” she said huffily as she headed away from the pub. Mr Rudge gave Aaron a small shrug as if to say “What can I do?” and followed his sister.

Robert turned to Aaron but he was frowning.

“What's the matter?” he asked, as they slowly headed down the street towards his Nan's.

“It's your idea. About Daniel staying here for a while and getting his qualifications”

“Aaron, it's a good idea. I know it would mean Liverpool for a while but he'd have far more options then for his next job at sea. And that course I found would be ideal for him’

“Yeah I know. It's just, well he can't afford it. There's digs and the fees. Sarge said he's more than happy to pay, but...”

“Well I thought he'd jump at the chance. I mean, if he wants to avoid a long separation again it's the sensible thing to do”

Aaron paused as he put the key in the door of the Guesthouse

“Well there's being sensible, and there's feelings isn't there?” he asked.

Robert frowned a little, unsure of what he was getting at.

--------

Later that evening...

“Knock why don't you!” Robert snapped angrily as Aaron opened the door to the small room by the kitchen.

“Oh, sorry “ Aaron mumbled. He had just caught a quick glimpse as Robert had been sat on the camp bed, pulling on his pyjama bottoms.

Aaron paused for a moment in the hallway. He knew his partner wasn't being coy with him. This was about feelings too.

After a moment, he gave a short knock on the door and heard Rob tell him to come in. Robert was sitting up on top of the bed. He flashed Aaron a smile as he walked over to him, as if his brief snap had never happened.

“The lads haven't fallen out, that's something” said Aaron, lowering himself down on the side of Rob's bed.

“Well, they're curled up together on the sofa in the front room anyway” he added.
“I'm sure they'll sort things out” said Robert

Aaron thought for a moment.

“You know, we can both move into one of the upstairs rooms now. I'm sure you'd be fine. Look how well you did tonight. Well, all this last week really” he said

“Sure. We can do that. In a few days or so” Rob replied, his voice sounding uncertain.

Aaron nodded, deciding not to push it any further for now.

“Well” he said with a smile, “I'd better say goodnight”

Robert smiled back too as Aaron moved closer to him on the bed and pressed his lips against his partners. Aaron hooked his hand over to the right side of Rob's torso as he did so, just above his waist, and pulled him gently towards him, just a little.

“This going to be a long goodnight?” Rob asked cheekily as Aaron broke away

“Yeah. Might be” said Aaron, his voice soft, as he moved in again. As he did so, he let his hand drift down to Robert's hip and the top of his right thigh.

As they kissed, Rob hooked his left hand around Aaron's right. He didn't push it away from that side of his body as such, just gently maneuvered it to where he felt more comfortable.

Aaron noticed, but acted as if he didn't. Nobody had said anything to him, they didn't have to. He hadn't been with Robert these last few years without being aware of the side of himself that Rob liked to keep hidden. The physical side of himself.

For a moment, he thought of saying something right then. But he held back. This was something he wanted to get right. This was something that mattered.

It wasn't about what was the sensible thing to do. It was about feelings. Robert's feelings.

And Aaron knew. He just knew. He couldn't hurt those feelings without hurting his own.

He pressed his lips against Rob's again, bringing his hand up to the back of his head.

Yes, this was looking like it was a long goodnight after all.............
In the back yard behind the guest house there was a small lean-to opposite the kitchen window. To tell the truth, it had not been used much since Aaron was a teenager. Faith had insisted her grandson fix his bicycle there, in a vain attempt to keep his oily hands prints from ending up all over the place.

Faith leaned casually against one of the wooden pillars at the front of the lean-to, her arms folded.

“How are you getting on Daniel?” she asked, “I just knew you’d be good with your hands”

The young man was sitting on a bench at the back, an upturned bicycle in front of him and holding a detached tyre.

“Your inner tube’s definitely gone Mrs D” the young man replied

“Fancy” Faith said with a smile

“I’ll just see if your frame is still in working order” Daniel added, “It’s rusted up a bit here and there”

“Well no one's perfect love” said Faith, “I'll go put the kettle on” she added before heading towards the kitchen.

---

Aaron looked up from the table as his grandmother started to fill the kettle.

“I could have done that for ya Nan” he said, putting his magazine to one side

“I know you could love” Faith replied as she headed for the stove

“I thought you got rid of my old bike when they were collecting scrap metal for Spitfires” said Aaron, “Why do you want to use it now?”

“I don't love. What I want is to give Daniel something to keep him busy for a while”

“Why?” her grandson asked

“So that when I send Patrick out there they'll have a proper talk” said Faith.

“Haven't they sorted that argument out about that course?” Aron asked

Faith sighed, “No. And if they don't, that young man is going end up signing on for another long haul. And he'll break Patrick's heart if he does”

Aaron nodded.
Faith looked out of the window towards Daniel, “I mean. Why makes things more difficult? Don't you lads have enough to be dealing with?” she said wistfully.

She walked over and rubbed Aaron's shoulders with the back of her hand affectionately.

“Anyway love” she said, smiling again, “You take Daniel out a cuppa in a minute. I'll tell Patrick to head to the yard on my way out”

“Where you off to then?” Aaron asked

“I'm going to the whist drive at St.Marks, with a friend” his grandmother replied

“Mr Rudge?” Aaron asked, hopefully

“No love. Mrs Axelby” said Faith as she headed for the door, “The vicar will probably be the only man there” she added, the disappointment in her voice obvious.

---

It had seemed to be going well from where Aaron was sitting. He hadn't been spying on Patrick and Daniel out in the yard, but every time he headed to the sink he could see that they were talking.

“I'm just going to go up and have a bath” said Robert, as he appeared in the kitchen doorway in his dressing gown.

“What about a hand?” Aaron asked, looking up from his magazine.

“Aaron, I'll be fine!” Robert snapped. He sighed and forced a smile, “I just thought I'd do it when your Nan was safely out of the house”

Aaron smiled back as his partner headed into the hallway. He returned to his magazine but his concentration was abruptly broken by the sound of a spanner crashing noisily to the floor. By the time he got to the window, he just saw Daniel stomping out through the back gate.

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Aaron put two cups of tea down on the kitchen table and sat next to Patrick.

“He'll come round Sarge” he said, sliding a cup over towards the other young man.

“We were going round in circles” said Patrick, “So I tried to make a bit of a joke about things. But he took it the wrong way”

“It's my fault he's gone off somewhere” said Patrick sadly

“Nah. I'm sure it isn't” Aaron replied, giving the other young man's forearm a squeeze, “I have spoken to him myself...”

“Have you?” Patrick asked, surprised
“Well, just a bit” Aaron admitted, “He thinks he's letting you down”

“It's only money Aaron” said Patrick, “I could cover it with a bit of my Army pay-off and....”

There was a very loud thump from the room above. Aaron looked worried and rushed out of the kitchen, Patrick in tow. “Rob!” Aaron called loudly as he rushed up the stairs to the first floor, “Are you alright?”

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“Don't push the door open” said Patrick firmly, as he tried to catch up with Aaron

“What?” Aaron asked confused, as he put his hand on the doorknob on the bathroom door

“He might be lying behind it” said Patrick

“Oh. Right” said Aaron

“It's alright” Robert called from inside the bathroom, wincing as he did so, “I just slipped. Nothing serious”

Aaron and Patrick looked at each other. Neither of the young men were convinced.

“Let me just check Robert” said Patrick, “I'll come in now”

Inside the bathroom Rob was sitting on the floor next to the bath. He went to reach for the side with his right hand but his elbow started to throb painfully, “Give us a second!” he said. With his left hand he grabbed his towel which was hanging from the end of the sink and coyly covered himself up.

“What have you gone and done?” said Patrick as he walked in and crouched down in front of the prone young man.

“I slipped. I think I've broken my arm!” said Robert

“Let me see” said Patrick, gently taking hold of Rob's right arm, “Can you move it at all for me?”

Rob moved his arm and winced slightly

“No. I don't think it's broken. I think you've hit your funny bone” said Patrick

“This doesn't seem very funny to me!” replied Robert

“Is your other side alright?” asked Patrick

“Yeah” said Rob, “I'll be fine in a minute. Just need to get my breath back”

“Well let's get you out of here and lying down shall we?” said Patrick, “Then I've give that nice Dr McGann a call, get you checked out”

“I'll have to get Aaron in here to help you up” Patrick said quietly

Robert nodded. “Can you just?....” he said, putting his hand on the towel, right on his left hip.

“Not with one hand” said Patrick, “Sorry” he added
“Look” he went on, “You hold that towel there and I'll get Aaron to put your dressing gown on your shoulders. Save moving your bad arm, alright?”

Rob nodded.

“We'll put you in Aaron's room too, as it's nearer” said Patrick, “Aaron” he called. The young man was in the room in an instant.

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Aaron gently helped Robert sit down on the side of the double bed in his room. He sat on Rob's left side, his right hand resting on the back of his partner's shoulders. Robert was clutching the towel to his mid-section with his left hand. Aaron knew this wasn't due to being bashful, Rob just didn't want him to see his hip. As the young man sat there, his dressing gown draped over his shoulders, he subtly shifted the towel a little to cover the upper part of his thigh.

“How's your right arm now?” Patrick asked

“Still throbbing. Not so much though” said Rob

“Alright” said Patrick, “I'll just go over to the Royal Oak and ring for the Doctor”

“Patrick, there's no need, really” said Robert

“Yes there is” said Patrick briskly as he walked into the room.

“You can't argue with Sarge, not when it's medical” said Aaron as the other young man left the room.

“But I'm perfectly ok” Rob insisted

Aaron thought carefully for a moment. Very softly, he placed his left hand on top of Robert's, just where his partner was holding his towel in place.

“Well you are and you're not, aren't you Robert?” Aaron said gently

Rob was silent

“Why don't you let me check your hip. Just to see you're alright” Aaron continued, keeping his voice soft and encouraging.

Robert thought for a moment. “But I didn't land on that side” he said

“Let me check anyway, just to be sure” said Aaron

Robert thought again, staring down at his lap. After a minute or so, he didn't say anything. He just slowly pulled the towel over his left side and waited, not sure how Aaron would react.

Aaron rested the finger tips on his right hand on Robert's left hip. Very slowly, and softly, he ran them down the length of the long scar running down Rob’s side.

“That's healing nicely” said Aaron, “Well, it looks like it is to me. I mean, Sarge would know for sure...”
“Has he said anything? About this?” Rob said quickly

“Course not” said Aaron, keeping his fingers resting lightly on Rob's side. “He wouldn't. He's told me that you're coming along well, that's all. But I know that don't I?”

The other scars were not as neat as the recent one. They looked like they had been done in a rush, in difficult conditions. Which, of course, they had been. They'd been done on a man who's journey from crashed plane to operating theatre and out again had been all too quick. These scars were faded and, to Aaron's eyes, not new. You couldn't live with someone for several years and not notice something like that. Even if your partner always tried to hide them from you. Even if you never said anything because you knew it upset them. Because those scars for Robert were like that walking stick. A reminder of how things had changed. A reminder of a crash that had haunted Rob for a long time and would never, completely, go away for him.

Aaron moved the towel back onto Robert's thigh. Not because he thought his partner should cover himself up, but because it made him feel a bit more comfortable. Almost without thinking, Rob put his left hand back on top of the towel. Aaron put his right hand back on top of Rob's and held onto it gently.

“And it's great that you're getting better Robert. It really is” said Aaron, “But there is something you ought to know”

Rob looked up and stared into Aaron's face.

“I already think you're perfect” said Aaron. And with that he leaned forward and pressed his lips against Robert's, all the time holding on to his partners hand.

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“Was that that nice Dr McGann leaving here?” said Faith as she walked into the hallway, just a little unsteadily, “I did wave when I was coming across the road, but he shot off in that car of his”

“Perhaps he didn't see you Nan” said Aaron

“Who's poorly then love?” said Faith, hooking her arm through her grandson's as they headed to the kitchen.

“Robert slipped getting out of the bath. Bashed his arm” said Aaron

“Slipped in the bath!” said Faith, “There was no need for that. I told him I was more than happy to rub him down with a sponge” she added with a grin

“Uh well, he's fine now” said Aaron, “Anyway, he's moving back into my room from now on”

“I thought you were looking a bit pleased” said Faith, “I know I would be”

“Nan!” said Aaron, embarrassed

Faith hooked her arm away from Aaron's.

“Now, you remember love. He's still recuperating. So you might have to, you know, put a bit more effort in on your side. There's a good lad” she said, giving him a wink and a pat on the arm before heading for the kettle.
Aaron shook his head and headed into the small room next to the kitchen.

“So. Where did you get off to?” said Patrick casually as he walked into the lounge. He sat on the sofa next to Daniel, keeping his voice even as if the young man had gone for a walk rather than stormed off.

Daniel ran his hand through his curly hair before speaking.

“I had to make some telephone calls. I went down to that call box, the one in the high street”

“Bit of a walk” said Patrick. He was already feeling a bit nervous about how this was conversation was going to go.

“Had to ring my landlady in Liverpool. You know, old Mrs Yates. The one I stay with overnight before I set off. I've told you about her”

“Yes, you might have” said Patrick. He leaned forward on the sofa so he didn't have to look at Daniel as he spoke to him. 'So that's it' he thought to himself bitterly.

He felt a strong hand resting on the back of his neck, gently giving the top of his shoulders a rub.

“Well” said Daniel, “I'm going to need some proper digs aren't I? If I'm going to do this course of yours”.

Patrick turned around and took in the big smile on his partner's face. Right now, that smile was wonderful. But then Daniel hooked his fingers around the back of Patrick's neck and gently pulled him towards himself.

If anything, that lingering kiss was even better.

That night....

Robert was sitting up on the left hand side of the bed in his pyjamas, looking across to Aaron as he got ready for bed.

“So he'll stay in Liverpool and come up here at weekends” said Aaron as he striped down to his vest and boxer shorts.

“I mean that will be good, for both of them won't it?” Aaron went on as he slipped under the covers next to Robert.

Robert hooked his arm around the younger man as he cuddled up against him.

“I've missed this” said Aaron softly, “It's like being back home. Well almost “

“Why almost?” asked Rob
“Well, we still have to be a bit, you know, careful here don’t we? Not now I mean, when it's just Nan and the other lads here. But it’s still a guesthouse, it’s not like our home”

“True, it may not be home” said Robert,”But it still has some of the home comforts doesn't it?”

“That right?” said Aaron, grinning at his partner

“Definitely” said Robert, leaning in and pressing his lips against Aaron's.
Sunday Night At The Movies

Blackpool – The Golden Palm Tree Guesthouse – Thursday 8 April 1948 – 7:00pm

“Are you sure you boys won't come?” said Faith as she buttoned up her coat, “We're only going over to the Royal”

“Uh no. Robert's headache is really bad. I better stay with him Nan” said Aaron, leaning on the banister at the bottom of the stairs.

“Aw. Poor lad!” said Faith sympathetically, “Well at least I'll have one handsome young man to escort me” she added, hooking her arm through Patrick's.

“Which is more than that cow Cynthia Rudge can manage” she added as the pair headed to the door. As the front door closed behind them, Aaron darted quickly up the stairs,

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Aaron opened the door to their bedroom and paused in the threshold, his hand still holding the doorknob. He looked over to Robert, lying on the bed with the pillows plumped up behind him.

“How's the headache?” Aaron asked, a big grin on his face

“What headache?” said Robert, grinning back

Aaron closed the door behind him and headed over to the bed.....

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The Royal Oak – 8:00pm

Considering she claimed she wanted to avoid Faith like the plague, Cynthia Rudge had still somehow ended up sitting at the next table along from Patrick and his landlady. Not that she was talking to Faith. It just seemed she was talking loudly and the fact that Faith could hear every word was a bonus.

“I'll say this for you Lettie” Miss Rudge said to Mrs Chorley sitting opposite her, “At least you have standards at Bay View. I mean some people will let a room to just anybody”

Patrick leaned over to table towards Faith, “Do you want to go Mrs Dingle? You don't have to listen to her all night”

“In a minute love” said Faith, “When we've finished our drinks”

“I mean” said Miss Rudge, warming to her theme, “The War hasn't been over five minutes yet. Five minutes! And there are some round here who let flaming Italians stay under their roof”

“What's she going on about now?” Faith asked
Patrick looked angry, “I think she means Daniel. He's not even Italian. He's half Spanish!” he said in a low voice.

Faith leaned forward, “I think I know which half too love” she said with a big smile, “Very passionate your Spaniards”

Patrick looked embarrassed but smiled, the anger from his face gone.

“And now. Now. “ said Miss Rudge, “The Americans are going to give them all that money. Not just to them, but to the bloody Germans as well!”

“She means the Marshall plan. It was in Robert's paper. We'll be getting money too” said Patrick, as he finished his brown ale.

“Right I'm ready to go” said Faith, knocking back the remainder of her brandy and standing up.

“What about us? That's what I want to know” said Miss Rudge, “Some of us have been going without for years “

Faith leaned in to their table as she headed for the door

“Oh they're only sending money Cynthia. Not fellers “ she said with a smile.

Patrick followed Faith to the door while Miss Rudge scowled at the pair of them.

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The Golden Palm Tree Guest House – Saturday 10 April 1948

“Who's your letter from?” asked Aaron as he dried off the breakfast things with a tea towel

“It's from Miss Phipps” replied Robert, “I wrote to her last week. I wanted to find out how everything was at home before we head back”

“Oh, you are organised Robert!” said Faith as she breezed into the kitchen, pulling her coat on

“They want me to stand for the Council. Dr Gillespie is retiring” said Robert with a smile

Aaron sighed, “Well that's just going to mean more work for me” he said. “If you get in” he added as he walked over to his partner

“What do you mean?” said Rob, “And less of the 'if' thank you”

“I'll have to widen our front door for a start” said Aaron, “To get your big head through” he added with a grin, ruffling Robert's blonde hair with his hand.

“I think Robert would be wonderful” said Faith as she walked over to him, “You can tell he's a leader. It sticks out a mile. He's so....masterful” she added, putting her hand gently on Robert's shoulder.
“Uh. Yes, well” said Robert, shifting in his chair, “We can sort all that out when we're home next week”

“Right” said Faith, patting Robert briskly on the shoulder, “I'm going to love you and leave you. I'm off to see Mr Rudge” she added as she headed for the kitchen door.

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“Nan” said Aaron as he caught up with his grandmother in the yard.

“Yes love?” said Faith, leaning for a moment on the upturned bicycle standing by the lean-to

“Are you sure that's what you want?” said Aaron, “Chasing after Mr Rudge” he added, thrusting his hands into his trouser pockets.

“I mean. It's not as if he's made any effort” said Aaron, staring down towards the floor of the yard.

“Look love, it's getting too quiet here for my liking” said Faith, “You'll be back home next week. Danny's only here at the weekends. And it's too early for my theatricals”

“Your commercial traveler's coming on Friday” Aaron offered

Faith sighed, “Yes love. But I don't think long evenings discussing Horace's rumbling appendix are really me”

“Anyway. I've no intention of seizing up from lack of use like this thing!” she added, tapping the upturned bicycle.

“Nan!” said Aaron

“Besides” said Faith, “Bernard is going to make an big gesture today” she went on as she headed for the gate

“He just doesn't know it yet” she said with a smile before leaving.

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As Aaron walked back into the kitchen, Robert was just pouring out a cup of tea for Patrick.

“Daniel not up yet?” Robert asked

“Uh no. He's a bit tired” Patrick replied

“Say no more” said Robert with a grin.

Aaron shook his head. Maybe it was a blessing that they were heading home next week. His Nan was obviously starting to rub off on his partner!
Mr Rudge's house – two streets away from the Guesthouse

The front door was on the latch, so Faith let herself in. She could hear some uncoordinated banging coming from the first floor and Mr Rudge singing to himself, if you could call it that.

“Only me” Faith called cheerily as she mounted the stairs

“Oh, hello” said Mr Rudge, taking his head from out of the airing cupboard, “I'm trying to sort the hot water out” he added, indicating the tank with his spanner.

“I was hoping to get you alone” Faith purred, as she paused at the top of the staircase.

But she had spoken too soon. The front door opened and slammed shut as Miss Rudge walked in. She angrily put her shopping basket down and marched up the stairs.

“And what exactly is going on here?” she demanded

“Oh come on Cynthia. You must have seen a man with a tool in his hand before?” said Faith

“I told you I'd fix it this morning” Mr Rudge said to his sister

“So what's she doing here?” said Miss Rudge

Faith looked around, pretending she didn't know who she was talking about.

“She just, popped round” Mr Rudge replied lamely

“Throwing herself at you more like!” said Miss Rudge, “Some people have no pride” she added

Faith turned to Mr Rudge, “Well I can see you have your hands full right now” she said. She started to walk down the stairs, luckily there was enough room for both her and Cynthia's ample frame. Just. Faith paused as she passed Miss Rudge

“Nothing worse that a clapped out old boiler is there?” she said with a smile. Miss Rudge just seethed.

“Anyway Bernard” said Faith as she got to the bottom of the stairs, “You must come round sometime. I'll cook your a proper meal for a change ” she went on

“You do, and it'll be over my dead body!” Miss Rudge said to her brother

“There you are love. Added incentive for you” said Faith.

“I'm warning you Bernard” said Miss Rudge

Mr Rudge looked angry, “That would be very nice Faith”, he replied. Monday evening suit you?”

“It's a date love” said Faith. And with a smile, she left.
Robert drummed his fingers on the top of the table in the lounge and let out a deep sigh. Aaron looked up a moment from his Chess book, but said nothing.

“What did you used to do on a Sunday, when you lived here before?” Rob asked

“Not much” said Aaron, “Sunday was bath night usually. I'll let you scrub my back if you're bored” he added with a smile.

Robert thought for a moment, “Maybe later” he replied.

“Anyway, you can't have spent all night in the bath. There's not enough of ya” he grinned.

“I used to do my stargazing” said Aaron, “It's great here on a clear night. None of your smog or anything. Just like at home”

Robert smiled to himself. It was nice to hear Aaron talking about Hadleigh as 'home'. He got up and headed for the sofa, flicking quickly through the paper lying there.

“We could go to the cinema” said Rob, “Cry Wolf is on at the Rialto”

“Who's in it?” said Aaron

“Errol Flynn” his partner replied

“Aw, he's rubbish!” said Aaron, “I mean, he can't act can he? He's always the same”

“Still, nice to look at” Robert replied with a big grin. Aaron shook his head and went back to his book.

“Do you and Daniel want to go to the cinema with us?” Rob asked as Patrick walked in.

“To see what?” Patrick asked

“Cry Wolf with Errol Flynn” Rob replied

“Is it a Western?” Patrick asked

“No, it's a thriller I think” said Robert

“Daniel only likes Westerns. I'll ask him anyway” he said, heading for the door.

“Where's it showing?” he asked, pausing in the doorway.

“The Rialto” said Rob

“We might not get in” said Patrick, “They're the only place that shows new films on a Sunday round here. We might have to go to the Globe, it's only round the corner”
Later that evening..........

Patrick had been right. The Rialto had been sold out and they ended up watching 'Mrs Minniver' at the nearby Globe.

“I'm going to go up now. Bit tired” said Patrick as he hung his coat up in the hallway. Daniel frowned, “I'll bring us up a drink” he said as he put his hand on his partner's shoulders. Patrick smiled and headed up the stairs.

“Is he alright?” asked Robert, “I'd thought he'd have enjoyed the film. It got loads of awards” Daniel sighed, “I think it was the Dunkirk bit” he said, “He told me on the way out it was nothing like that. And he should know. He was there” he explained, before heading to the kitchen.

“Look like I'm the only one who enjoyed it” said Rob as he followed Aaron into the lounge, hooking his hands around the young man's waist.

“It was alright” said Aaron, grudgingly, as he looked up at Robert, “Better than when you made me see Gone With The Wind. My backside was numb after watching that”

“Can always put that right for ya”, grinned Rob, giving Aaron a quick slap on his rear

“Gerroff” said Aaron, wrapping his hands around Robert's waist and pulling him close. Rob pressed his lips against Aaron's. The merits of the film could wait for now.

1:00am

How do you deal with a bad memory that is barely a memory at all? Patrick had not wanted to talk about why the film had unsettled him. In any case, Daniel was not sure he'd know the right thing to say anyway. So, instead, he settled for cuddling up against his partner as soon as the lights went off and wrapping him up in a big hug. It was not long before Patrick was fast asleep, even if that was not to last the night.

He remembered being on the beach, up to a point. He remembered waking up in the hospital. He even thought he remembered the boat. He was pretty sure there was a fisherman. And a blonde young solider in the hospital told him he had woken up a few times on the journey. Not that he remembered that. Well, not until now.

“Where's your medic son? I thought one of you lads was a nurse?”
“He IS our nurse. Oh God! Look at his arm!”
“Calm down son. I was in the last lot. I've seen blokes survive worse than this”
“It was supposed to be clear! They told us that part of the beach was clear!”
“Come on son. Just keep his head up. I'll get you home. I'll get you ALL home if it's the last bloody thing I do!”

Patrick sat up in the hospital bed in alarm. Only it wasn't the hospital bed. He had to get out. He had to! He felt like he was suffocating. He pushed the nightstand roughly away, causing a loud
thump as it hit the floor. He heard a loud voice nearby saying “Pat, what's the matter?”. He turned around, startled, tried to steady himself by grabbing at the bed with an arm that wasn't there and collapsed to the floor with another loud thump.

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They could hear the thumps and the raised voice in Aaron and Robert's room.

“I can't leave it” Aaron hissed to Robert as he grabbed his vest from the top of the covers and pulled it back on. He quickly padded over to the door and into the hallway.

He could see Patrick and Daniel in the bathroom. As he got closer he could see Patrick was sitting on the edge of the bath in his pyjama bottoms and t-shirt. There was blood down the front of it. Daniel was in his vest and trunks and very gently holding a wet flannel to his partner's face.

“Is everything all right Sarge?” Aaron asked, “We heard shouting and a thump” he added, giving Daniel a careful look.

“Bad dream, wasn't it Pat?” said Daniel, not looking at Aaron, “Just a bit of a fall too”. He put his left hand on Patrick shoulder to hold him steady and brought the flannel back a little, to check whether the nosebleed had stopped. It had.

“Ok. Long as you're sure” said Aaron

Patrick nodded. “Yeah. Thanks Aaron” said Daniel, looking over to the young man for a moment, “We'll get you in a clean t-shirt in a bit” he added, looking at Patrick again.

Aaron started back to his room, but left the bathroom door open. As he was about to go into his room, he was waylaid by his grandmother.

“What's wrong love?” Faith asked, “I heard loud voices and a big thump”

“I'd have rushed out sooner, but my hair looked a fright” she added, patting her hair at the back of her neck.

“Bad dream and a fall Daniel said” Aaron replied, “Sarge's nose was bleeding too”

“Aw, poor lad” said Faith, “Still” she added, looking into the bathroom, “He's in good hands”

Aaron followed his grandmother's gaze. Daniel was sitting on the edge of the bath, his strong right arm curled around Patrick, holding him gently while the other young man leaned into his shoulder.

“Yeah. I think he is” said Aaron with a smile

“Night love” said Faith as she headed back to her room.

“Night Nan” said Aaron, as he headed back into his bedroom and to Robert.
Aaron padded over to his bed, peeling his vest off as he did so. He pulled back the blankets and climbed back in, quickly sliding over to the middle.

“Everything alright?” Robert asked, his voice soft.

Aaron thought for a moment. He decided not to mention Patrick's bad dream, not right now.

“Yeah, Sarge fell ” replied Aaron, his own voice just above a whisper, “He had a nosebleed but Daniel's looking after him” he added, moving his fingers lightly over Rob's bare chest as he did so.

“That's good” said Robert, smiling broadly, “Weren't you looking after me?”

“Was I?” said Aaron with a grin, moving his hand gently up onto the side of Rob's neck, “I can't remember where I'd got to”

“Don't worry” said Robert, pressing his lips against the other young man's, “It'll come back to ya” he added as he broke away, just for a moment. He quickly leaned in again.

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6:00am

Daniel put a hot mug of tea on the nightstand on Patrick's side of the bed and walked round to his own. He took a slurp from his own mug before sitting on the bed and giving his partner a gentle shake.

“Patrick” he said quietly, “I've brought you a tea”

“What time is it?” said Patrick tiredly

“Just gone six” said Daniel

“Why so early?” asked Patrick, pushing himself up into a seated position

“So we can have a bit of a chat. You know I've got to go at eight”

“You didn't go downstairs like that did you?” asked Patrick, reaching for his mug

“What's wrong with this?” asked Daniel, looking down at his vest and trunks

“If Mrs Dingle had been there you've never have got out of the kitchen in one piece!” Patrick replied

“Ok” said Daniel with a smile, “I'll put my trousers on, next time” he added. He put his mug down and slid back into the bed, hooking his arm around his partner to pull him close. Patrick put his own mug down and snuggled up against him. They sat quietly in the dark for a moment.
“So, what did you want to chat about?” Patrick asked

“This nightmare of yours” said Daniel

“Yes” Patrick replied cagily

“Has it happened before?” asked Daniel, “When I've not been here I mean?” he added, his voice betraying a hint of guilt

“No. Not like that. Not before” said Patrick

“You would tell me Pat? If it had happened? You know you can tell me anything” said Daniel

Patrick sighed, “Well never as bad as that then” he said, “I've tried to forget all that, from the start of the War. It was that film that did it I think”

“You know I wouldn't go today if it wasn't for this course, don't you?” he asked

“Yes, I know” said Patrick

“And I'm back Friday night, that's not so long is it?” said Daniel

“No” said Patrick with a smile, “Not so long” he added, pushing his head down onto Daniel's chest and curling his arm around him.

Daniel brought his other arm around and gently ran his fingers through Patrick's floppy fringe for a moment, before wrapping him up in a hug

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8:00am

Daniel poked his head around the lounge door. He was wearing his dark black coat and had his kit bag in one hand.

“Aaron” he said, “I'm off now. You boys have a good trip home ” he added

Aaron got up from the table and walked over.

“Daniel” he started, “Make sure you look after Sarge won't ya?” he said

“Yeah, course I will” said Daniel, frowning slightly

“Thing is” said Aaron, “He thinks it's his job to look after everyone else. He was the same in the camp. But that doesn't mean...”

“Aaron” said Daniel, “I'll look after him, I promise” he said, holding out his right hand.

Aaron put out his hand out and shook Daniel's

“And good luck with your course. If you want any help anytime on the electronics stuff, give us a ring. Nan's got the number”

“I will. Thanks” said Daniel with a smile. “And good luck looking after your 'boss'” he added with a wink.
That evening...

“This is ridiculous this is” said Robert, as stared down at the Chess board on the kitchen table

“What is?” asked Aaron, looking up at his partner

“Why do we have to go in here? Just so your Nan and Mr Rudge can canoodle on the sofa in the lounge like a couple of youngsters”

“Well I don't want to watch them” said Aaron

“Aaron. I didn't say I wanted to watch them. It's just more comfortable in the lounge, that's all”

Aaron said nothing and made his chess move.

“Anyway, it's nearly ten. She must have worn his defences down by now” said Robert, as Patrick walked into the kitchen with a mug in his hand.

“You're only in a sulky mood cause you're losing, for a change” said Aaron with a grin

“No I'm not” said Robert, pouting slightly

Patrick paused as he headed for the sink and stared at the board for a moment.

“Yes you are” he said matter-of-factly

Aaron kept grinning.

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“Top up Bernard?” said Faith, reaching for the small bottle of brandy on the table in front of them.

Mr Rudge smiled and held his glass out.

“Oh, I shall be getting you into trouble” said Faith as she looked at the clock on the mantelpiece

“Why's that then?” said Mr Rudge

“It's nearly ten. Won't your Cynthia be putting the bolt on at half-past?” asked Faith

Mr Rudge put his glass back down on the table. He reached into his left trouser pocket and, with a self-satisfied smile, put a metal bolt down onto the table.

“And I thought you were just pleased to see me” said Faith with a sly grin.
Thursday 15 April 1948

“Oh I can't believe you're going home. You've only been here five minutes!” said Faith, wrapping her arms around her grandson in a hug.

“Nan, we've been here since December!” said Aaron

“Right that's the last case in the car” said Robert with a smile as he walked through the front door into the hallway.

Aaron smiled as his Nan let go of him. He couldn't help but think back to helping his partner through that door only a few months ago. And here he was now, walking without his stick. Oh, he'd still need it for long walks. And he could still forget running for a tram. And, truth be told, Aaron couldn't say Robert looked better, not to him. It was more that he seemed like himself so much more of the time. Like the Robert that Aaron had fallen for way back at the Manor House. The Robert that just shone, and still did.

“And don't think you're getting away without a hug young man!” Faith warned as she wrapped her arms tightly around Robert.

“Come on now Mrs Dingle. Let him go. You'll have him back under the Doctor if you're not careful” said Patrick, as Faith seemed to be showing no sign of releasing Rob.

“Of course, you know what I'll have to do” said Faith as she finally released the young man, “I'll have to come and open a Bed and Breakfast in that Hadleigh of yours” she added

“Oh. There's no tourist trade round our way is their Aaron?” said Rob quickly

“Nah Nan” said Aaron, “It's really, really quiet. It's just a tiny little village and...”

“.and farms” said Robert, “Sometimes we don't see people for days, do we Aaron?”

“Weeks” said Aaron

“Anyway” said Patrick, cutting in, “You couldn't leave your home Mrs Dingle. What about all your friends here and your regulars?”

“Oh, I suppose you're right” said Faith with a sigh as they all headed for the doorway.

“I'll ring you tonight at seven” said Aaron, “You be over at the Royal” he said as he opened the door to the driver's seat of Rob's car.

As they drove away Robert waved through the rear view window. Faith was standing one step up from Patrick, her hand on his shoulder as she waved back.

“They'll be back before you know it” said Patrick, as Faith wiped a tear from her eye.

Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse - That evening
“Yes Nan. The cottage is all in one piece” said Aaron as he perched on the end of Robert's desk in the living room, the telephone in his hand.

“Yeah. Loads to be catching up with” he added.

Rob smiled as he sliced open another letter from the pile in front of him.

“Yes. Speak to you soon. Oh and thanks again Nan. For, you know, looking after us. Bye” Aaron added before hanging up.

“You're right about loads to do” said Robert, “That estimate for the new porch has come. Plus I've got three sets of accounts to go and pick up tomorrow”

“Don't you mean I have to pick up?” said Aaron

“No. It's only in the village. I can walk there and back, I'll just take my stick. Long as the weather's alright” said Rob

Aaron smiled and folded his arms “Then I'll start on the garden”

“I thought Old Tom was going to do ours, when he was doing the Manor?” said Robert

“Well *that* looks like it's been neglected to me” said Aaron, “There's some man walking around the grounds, but he's not doing any work”

“Still” said Robert, putting his hand on Aaron's side and gently rubbing his hip “Good to be home, isn't it?”

“Definitely” said Aaron, steadying himself on the desk as he leaned over and pressed his lips against Robert's.

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The Golden Palm Tree Guesthouse – Friday 16 April 1948 – 10:30pm

“Now, before I forget” said Patrick as he climbed into his side of the bed, “You know Mr Fosdyke is here now. That commercial traveler”

“Yeah, what about him?” asked Daniel, as he rolled onto his side and looked down at his partner

“Well we have to be, you know, *discrete* when he's about. Keep that door locked for one. As far as he's concerned there are two single beds in here”

“Uh huh” said Daniel as he softly ran his fingers down the side of Patrick's face

“We've been spoiled a bit the last few months. With just the lads being here. Oh, and the theatricals”

“So” said Daniel, moving his hand away, “Do I have to be, uh, *discrete* in here?” he asked with a smile.
“No, you're fine in here” Patrick replied, smiling back at him.

“Good” said Daniel, “Grrrr!” he added as he nuzzled the side of Patrick's neck.

“Did you just growl?” asked Patrick, as Daniel backed away

“Might have done” said Daniel, looking a little sulky

Patrick brought his hand up to the side of Daniel's face and ran it along his closely cropped beard.

“Must be the beard. You're going all animal on me” he said.

They were quiet for a moment.

“You been alright this week? No bad dreams?” Daniel asked

“I've been fine” Patrick insisted, “There's no need to ask”

“Course I have to ask Pat. Course I do” Daniel said, his face serious.

“Cause I love you” he added, leaning in and planting a deep kiss on Patrick's lips.

“But don't worry” he said softly as he broke away, “It can be our secret” he added before moving in again.

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse – 10:30pm

“You took your time. I thought you'd never got off that phone” said Robert, putting his detective book on the nightstand and sitting up in bed.

“Nah, I finished an hour gone” said Aaron as he started to unbutton his shirt, “I wanted to finish in the kitchen, especially if we are going away tomorrow”

“How you feeling now anyway?” he asked, putting his shirt on top of his trousers which were folded over the stool next to his telescope.

“Just overtired” Rob sighed, “Ok, you were right the village and back was too much for a first long walk”

“Yeah. But you're getting there aren't you?” Aaron said with a smile and he slid into bed.

Robert turned onto one side.

“Did Adam say why he wants us to visit? The girls are alright aren't they?” he asked

“No one's sick or anything” Aaron replied, “He couldn't say much because he was using the phone in the Wheatsheaf “

“Aaron. He must have said something. You said we'd go pretty sharpish”
Aaron turned onto his side to face his partner. He thought for a moment.

“Him and Victoria, they've fallen out. All because of some daft girl in the village causing trouble”

“Has he been messing my sister around?” asked Rob

“No. No. He wouldn't” said Aaron, putting a placatory hand onto Robert's arm. “He said she's called Katie?” he added

“Oh good grief” said Robert, “Not flaming Katie Addyman?”

“Dunno” said Aaron, “He said she was the barmaid at the Woolpack”

“Oh she is. When she's standing up” said Rob sarcastically, “I went out with her once”

“Did ya?” said Aaron, lowering his gaze a little.

“For all of five minutes. And before the War” said Robert, gently putting his left hand under Aaron's chin and lifting it slightly.

“Ancient history” said Robert with a smile, leaning forward and pressing his lips to Aaron's.
One thing the living quarters of the Woolpack is certainly not a stranger to is anger. And this evening was no exception.

“Right. That's everything locked up” said Diane as she headed for the stove to put the kettle on

“So have you given that tart her marching orders?” her husband Jack demanded, as he put down his paper.

“No Jack I haven't!” his wife replied

“Look love, we agreed…” Jack started

“No Jack. You agreed” Diane shot back, “It's still my name above that door out there remember”

Jack scowled but said nothing.

“Anyway pet” Diane said, keeping her voice quiet this time, “According to her, it's Adam that's been doing all the chasing”

“She wouldn't have needed that much encouragement” said Jack

“She's a good barmaid Jack. She's popular with the customers....” Diane started

“Huh!” Jack snorted, “Oh yes. She's popular with the men. It's the wives that can't stand her!”

Diane shook her head and said nothing.

“It's bad enough one divorce in the family thanks to Robert. But two!” said Jack, exasperated

“Now love” said Diane walking over to her husband, “Who's said anything about a divorce?” she asked putting her hand on her husband's shoulder, “We've got to leave them to work things out for themselves”

Jack nodded, “Adam seemed such a nice lad too” he said

Emmerdale – The Sugden Farm, Sunday 11 April 1948

“She's lying. You've got to believe me” said Adam, the sadness etched right across his youthful features. But his wife just sat silently on the other side of the kitchen table.

Victoria shook her head, She didn't have to believe him. She wanted to. More than anything. But she'd been here before. Oh, not with Adam. It had been a smooth talking handsome Polish airman who had caused the heartache last time. She's walked down this painful road before and had not intention of doing so again if she could help it.

“Vicky” said Adam, his voice pleading as he reached over the table to try to take her hand.
Victoria didn't reply. At least not in words. But he knew her answer when she got up from the table and walked out of the room. She reappeared several minutes later to dump a pillow and a blanket on the living room sofa.

“Tell Sarah your back's bad so you're sleeping down here” Victoria said coldly, “No point in upsetting her as well” she added before heading back to the stairs

Adam sat silently at the kitchen table. He knew the tears would be starting, so he didn't even try to hold them back. What was the point? He slumped forward, his head in his hands.

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But there is someone missing from this part of our story. A young lady. Admittedly a very attractive one, with long blonde hair and blue eyes. Though, truth be told, they should be probably be green. Just to match the jealousy that had made her be the cause of all this trouble. Because Adam is telling the truth. She is lying. But we'll hear more of her later....

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Saturday 17 April 1948 – The road from Hadleigh to North Riding

“...that's a promise !” said Robert angrily, “Why are you pulling over?” he added, confused as Aaron slowed down and parked the car at the side of the road.

Aaron sighed and put the hand-break on. He turned in his seat and stared at his partner

“What?” Robert asked

“Robert” said Aaron, “We're just going to talk to them, alright? No-one is thumping anybody”

“All I said was...” Rob started

“I know what you said” replied Aaron, “And we're not having any of that. Do you want to put your hip out? Do you want to be stuck in bed for weeks on end again ?“ he asked

Robert thought for a moment, “No. Course I don't” he replied, “Maybe you'd understand more if you had a sister. Well you could have half a dozen for all we know, if what you Nan says about your mother is true”. Inwardly, Robert swore at himself. He hadn't meant to say that. None of this was Aaron's fault, he knew that.

Aaron looked out through the windscreen at the empty country lane and glared.

“Look, I'm sorry” said Robert truthfully, turning to look at Aaron, “It's just after everything Victoria went through with Pavel...”

Aaron took a deep breath before speaking, “Ok, so I haven't got a sister. That I know of ...” he began

“Aaron, I..” said Robert
“And Victoria's your sister so of course I care about her. But Adam's my best mate too. If he says this Katie is just a troublemaker, I believe him” said Aaron

“He wouldn't muck Victoria about. All he's ever wanted is his own little family. He wouldn't throw that away. He wouldn't “

Robert felt as if Aaron was trying to convince himself as much as him. He knew how much Aaron thought of his friend. He'd told him how he'd helped him get through his fear when working in the mines during the War. How he'd stuck with him when he'd found out that, well, Aaron's tastes weren't conventional. And to be fair, he'd stuck with the pair of them. So, if Adam wasn't as much of a shining knight that Aaron liked to think he was, that was going to hurt.

Robert reached over and gently took Aaron's hand in his.

“I just want to listen to what they both have to say. I don't want us to take sides. This....this could just be a rough patch they're going through. And we could help them get through it”

Robert rubbed his thumb softly over the back of Aaron's fingers.

“They always seemed so good together. Adam and Victoria. You know, like they belonged” said Aaron, his head hanging towards his chest. His voice was starting to crack a little.

“Like me and you?” said Robert, his voice soft

“Yeah. I suppose!” said Aaron with a nervous smile as he looked up.

“Well” said Rob, keeping his voice low, “I'll make sure the only side I'm on is ours. Ok?”

“Yeah. Great” said Aaron

Robert looked over his shoulder carefully and stared down the country lane. It was deserted. They would have heard a car and precious few came down this road in any case. He looked through the driver's side window and the windscreen before a final check through the passenger side window. A cow had wandered over to the side of the field and was staring over the top of a thick bush at them. But then, she seemed fairly unshockable.

“Come here” said Rob in a tender voice, leaning forward. Aaron turned to look at him as Robert pressed his lips against his partner's and kissed him deeply. He broke away and slumped back into his seat, doing the same quick checks that they were not being watched. Well, you couldn't be too careful could you?

“Right” said Robert, “Let's get going”

Aaron smiled and started up the car.

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Now being jealous is one thing. It doesn't automatically mean you are going to act on that jealousy. You can go on seething quietly to yourself for years if you put your mind to it.

But let's say you are one Katie Addyman, barmaid at the Woolpack in 1939. And then let's say it's suddenly 1948 and you are still the barmaid at the Woolpack and, much to your own disbelief, you are still Katie Addyman. Not that you're some old maid, far from it. You can ask several of the lads
in the village on that point. Or a fair few from the RAF base that operated during the War for that matter.

And all that attention from the young men can be a welcome boost to the ego. After all, when the landlady's husband says his daughter is too good to work in a bar, it tells you what he thinks of you. Not that she didn't know already. He'd made damn sure her short lived romance with his son had been just that. Short lived!

Still Robert had had a soft spot for her once. And that had turned out very useful once.

And she could even put up with Victoria landing on her feet with her second husband. Even when he was so good looking. Just as long as no one rubbed her face in it................

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Emmerdale – The Woolpack, Sunday – sometime back in February 1948

“When she going?” Jack asked, as he sat at the kitchen table, annoyed

“Jack, she's only just got here!” said Diane, as she emptied the steaming kettle into the best china teapot.

“Well I'll say this” said Val as she breezed in from the bar, “It may not be the coaching inn you made out it to be” she added as she sat at the table, “But it's still a nice little pub”

“Oh I'd rather be behind that bar that in a fish and chip shop any day” said Diane with a smile as she started to pour the tea out into the best china cups. In her mind 'one-all' had just flashed up.

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“Won't you have to be opening up soon?” said Val, as she turned over yet another page in the photo album in front of her.

“Oh no” said Diane, “Anyway, Katie can manage the early customers, can't you pet?” she asked

Katie nodded and sipped her tea. Jack had long since left the fray.

“That's our Robert's gatehouse” said Diane proudly as she turned the page, “In Hadleigh” she added, hoping she had made it sound as exclusive as possible.

“Oh, isn't that lovely?” said Val.

Katie seethed.

“Still. A bit of a comedown after being Lord of the Manor I'd expect. You know, after the divorce” replied Val, mouthing the last word. In her mind, she'd scored a point.

“You can see the car and garage there can't your pet? Or is it a bit small? Did you remember your glasses” asked Diane
It was Val's turn to seethe. Diane decided to push her advantage home, “And of course he's got his own staff. A man to drive him around and do all the chores. Well, he'd have to wouldn't he? He's on that many committees”

“And that's Victoria and her Adam on their wedding day” said Diane, just managing to stop herself from adding 'which you could have been at if you'd bothered to come'.

“And that's them at the farm with little Sarah” she added.

Val smiled, “Oh, he's a handsome lad isn't he?” she said, “I'm glad she found someone after that rotten Pole mucked her about”. This time, points weren't being scored. Val was glad.

Katie didn't say anything. She just smiled. But deep down, that was a different story.

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That evening.....

If only Katie hadn't popped into the ladies before going home. She could have been long gone before Val was helping her sister wipe down the tables and collect the last of the glasses. Things could have turned out differently then.

“ You? My new barmaid?” Diane asked incredulously

“And why not?” asked Val, “How much longer do you think that blonde piece will be pulling in the customers anyway. She's already the wrong side of thirty”

“You're no spring chicken yourself pet” Diane replied

“I've kept me figure!” Val shot back. She looked down at her dress, “At least that's one thing you can say for rationing” she added

“Beside, the way that girl was shoveling in your cake she's be bigger than your Robert's cottage before long!” Val went on

“She's very popular” said Diane, feeling as if she should at least say something in Katie's defence

“Yes. And your Jack's told me why!” said Val, “Give it a few months and there wont be a bloke who hasn't had a go”

“Don't be vulgar” said Diane, primly as she started to wipe down the top of the bar

“Come off it pet. How long before she gets in the family way? What was it our Mam used to say, 'Keep throwing balls at the shy and you're bound to hit a coconut eventually' ?”

“Our Mam never said that” said Diane, looking puzzled

“Am I thinking of Auntie May?” asked Val also looking a little confused, “Anyway, you're the one always saying family first “

“Yes, well” said Diane, trying to be non-committal.
Katie had heard enough. She marched out of the pub. She would have slammed the front door behind her, if it hadn't been so heavy.

“Adam!” Aaron called towards his friend as he saw him walk into the barn, his shoulders hunched down. But he hadn't seemed to hear him.

Aaron took off his cap and tossed into the driver's seat of Rob's car, “I'll got and speak to him” he said to Robert. His partner nodded and headed to the kitchen door.

“Adam?” said Aaron from the doorway to the barn. His friend had his back to him and was leaning against one of the wooden pillars to the hayloft. Adam sniffed and wiped his hand across his face before turning around.

“You got here then?” said Adam unnecessarily as he turned around, keeping his eyes towards the floor.

Aaron walked over to his friend and put his hand gently on his arm.

“She wants me to move out Aaron” said Adam, his voice breaking as he did so, “What am I gonna do?” he added as the tears started to well up.

“Come here mate” said Aaron as he wrapped his arms around his friend in a tight hug. Adam buried his head into his friend's shoulder and hugged him back.

“Uncle Rob!” said an excited young voice as Robert's niece rushed towards him, arms outstretched.

Rob beamed and lifted Sarah up and held her on his right side.

“Hey look at you!” said Victoria as she walked in from the living room, “Are you alright with her like that?” she asked as she walked over to her brother.

“For a bit” Rob replied, “Haven't you noticed, no stick?” he added

“So I can see!” said Victoria happily.
Robert and Victoria were sat on the living room sofa. Sarah was happily drawing away on the kitchen table, in a small world of her own.

“But why would she lie?” said Victoria, her hands cupped around a mug of tea.

“Huh!” scoffed Robert as he put his mug onto the table, “Knowing her, plenty of reasons”

“It makes it worse being her” said Victoria, putting her own mug down.

“Pavel told me he'd slept with her. When I was pregnant with Sarah” said Victoria sadly

“Oh God! He didn't did he?” asked Rob

Victoria shrugged, “It was our last big row” she said, “He was killed a couple of weeks later. Might have been true, might have not. He said a lot of things like that” she added, lowering her gaze from her brother's face.

“Oh, sis” said Robert kindly, wrapping his arm around his little sister.

“I thought Adam was different” said Victoria with a sniff, “She said it's been going on for months. And Diane saw them kissing outside the pub so...”

Rob brought his other arm around and gave her a hug.

“I can't believe it” she said, pressing her head against Robert's chest.

“Well, I can't believe it either” said Robert gently. Frankly, he wasn't sure either way but right now his sister needed reassurance.

“I'll find out the truth” he said, holding onto his sister tightly, “You leave it to your big brother”

And Robert was determined. He was going to find out the truth. And given who was involved he had the leverage to make sure he could.

But to find out about that, we'd need to go back to the very start of the War. For a bit of Robert's ancient history.

TO BE CONTINUED
Hello, you must be going

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Emmerdale – The Woolpack, Sunday 18 April 1948 – 5:00pm

Katie muttered to herself as she dipped the wooden-backed scrubbing brush into the nearby bucket. True, the stone floor in the entrance did need a clean but she knew the real reason why she was here. This was Diane's way of telling her that she may have kept her job, but she was being kept on a short lead!

“We're not open till seven” she said, as a shadow fell across her. She didn't look up while she kept cleaning. But whoever this man was, his leather shoes were a cut above what the men around here usually wore.

“Oh, I'm not a customer” Robert said smoothly, “I'm family”

Now Katie looked up. The suit was expensive too and you didn't see many farmers wearing a fedora either.

“Family?” said Katie, raising an eyebrow, “You'd think you'd be round here more often” she added sarcastically

“I see Diane's picked out a good job for ya” said Rob, “Well, you must be the best scrubber for miles”

“What do you want Robert?” asked Katie

“We're going to have a chat, me and you” the young man replied

“Well I don't want to talk to you” said Katie. She started to clean the floor again, acting as if Robert was not even there.

Rob just sighed. He reached inside his jacket pocket and took out a stuffed brown paper envelope. He dropped it onto the floor casually, just in front of where Katie was scrubbing.

“Bring back any memories?” Robert asked.

“Fine!” said Katie angrily, “We'll talk!” she went on, dumping the brush into the bucket with a hard splash. She got up and marched into the bar.

Rob smiled and bent over to pick up the envelope. He took off his hat and followed her into the room.

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And now, some ancient history. Or, at least as far as Robert Sugden is concerned it is
Emmerdale – The Sugden Farm – middle of 1939

“It doesn't matter what I do, it's always going to be wrong as far as you're concerned, isn't it?” said Robert angrily.

“Robert, will you listen to me? Just for once!” Jack retorted from his seat at the kitchen table, “She's making a fool of you” he added

“You'd say anything to split us up!” Robert shot back as he paced the kitchen

“Of course, you know all the flaming answers!” said his father getting up from his chair.

“Jack!” said an angry, elderly female voice as she walked into the kitchen, “I'll have none of that language thank you!”

“Now sit down and try and keep a civil tongue in your head” said Annie as she walked slowly over to the kitchen table.

“And you Robert” she added

“Gran....” Rob started

“Sit down!” said Annie firmly.

Robert reluctantly sat at the table opposite his father, but shifted sulkily in his chair so he was not looking directly at him. Without noticing it, Jack had done exactly the same. Annie sighed and shook her head, before sitting in between the pair of them. She turned to her son.

“I've heard quite enough arguments in this house between you and your father. God rest his soul. So what's this all about? I take it you've some objection to Robert's young lady?” Annie asked

“He won't give her a chance!” said Robert, bitterly

“Robert! Let your father speak” said Annie

“She's just stringing him along Mam” said Jack

“Oh. Know that for certain do you?” asked Annie

“She's been seeing that lad of Billy Hopwood's behind Robert's back. The one who was in Borstal”

Robert looked at his father, shocked, “No...no she hasn't!” he insisted

“I've caught them son” said Jack, this time keeping his voice calm, “More than one. They were using the old barn in the lower field”

“It's not true” said Rob quietly

“More than once son” said Jack, standing up

“I've got and go and look at the drainage” he mumbled as he headed for the door. Robert was silent.
“Now Robert” said Annie, “If your young lady is mixed up with that Hopwood lad, you steer clear of her. They're a rotten lot”

Rob didn't know what to say.

“You'll find the right one. One day” said Annie, giving her grandson's hand a quick pat.

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Later that night......

Robert sat on the side of his bed, looking at the small silver neck chain in his hand. True, it hadn't been that expensive. Not for what it was. But it had still taken him weeks to save for it. Looking back, perhaps it had been a bad sign the way Katie's face had lit up when she saw it in the window of the pawn shop in Hotton high street. Just a bit too keen. Just a bit greedy. All those hours helping out in the Woolpack and for what? He opened the drawer in his nightstand and put the chain away. He'd take it back to the pawn shop and forget about, he decided. And then, he'd forget about her. Or at least, try to.

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Emmerdale – The Woolpack – in the middle of the War – New Year's Eve

The pub was packed. Well that was to be expected at New Year's Eve. But this year it was busier than usual, thanks to the blue uniformed RAF serviceman swelling the ranks of the customers.

“I'd almost given up on you Suggers!” said Lewis as Robert squeezed his way through the throng to the seats against the wall.

“I had to wait for my shift to finish. And for a lift. There is a War on you know!” Rob told his friend.

“Not tonight there isn't. It's eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we may...” said Lewis

“Oh. Don't finish that sentence eh?” said Robert as he sat down, “You got them in then? As you've been sat here waiting”

“Well actually.....” Lewis started

“Alright!” Rob replied, rolling his eyes, “I'll go in a minute”

“Good man!” said Lewis, who quickly downed the remainder of his pint that he had been slowly drawing out while he waited.

“I have to say” he went on as he put his empty glass on the table, “Your old girlfriend has been doing her bit for morale!” he said as he nodded towards the corner of the bar.

Robert looked over and saw Katie, plonked down on the lap of a serviceman, his cap on top of her
blonde hair. Rob just shook his head. 'Ancient history' he thought to himself. Besides, he was a married man now, even if he hadn't been able to see Christine for New Year. Or Christmas for that matter.

Katie gave Robert a smug smile as she walked over and picked up the empty glasses from the table in front of him.

“Is there a lap in here you've not sat on tonight?” said Rob sarcastically

“What's the matter Robert?” Katie asked, “Not jealous are you?”

“You what?” snorted Rob, “I don't think my legs could take it these days!”

Katie said nothing. She just kept smiling smugly and headed for the bar.

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“Well Katie surpassed herself tonight!” said Jack as he bolted the front door, “Did she have to throw herself at that many lads?”

“Oh come on pet” said Diane as she walked up towards her husband, “How many of those lads will be here next New Year?” she added quietly

Jack sighed and put his arm around Diane's shoulders, “Yes. You're right love” he said wearily.

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Robert was in the spare room for the night. He's only had time to strip down to his vest and uniform trousers when he heard Diane calling for his father. By the time he got downstairs Jack was in the back room, his arm around his wife's shoulders as she sat at the table, ashen faced.

“What's the matter?” Rob asked as he walked over. The black metal cash box was lying on top of the cloth, empty.

“Someone's stolen the takings” said Diane

“How much has gone?” asked Robert

“Oh. I don't know” said Diane, “All the notes are missing. I've not been to the bank since before Christmas”

“Did anyone come back here?” asked her husband

“Of course not Jack! I'd had seen. We don't let people behind the bar!”

“What about Katie?” Jack persisted

“She was in the bar all night Jack. You said yourself, you couldn't miss her the way she was carrying on!” said Diane.
“Are you sure you haven't just put the notes somewhere else?” Rob suggested

“First thing I thought of pet” said Diane, “I've been right through that kitchen cupboard”

She fell quiet for a moment.

“I'll have to tell the Police” said Diane, “And the brewery”

Robert sighed, “Look, if it's just a matter of making up what's missing you know I can....” he started

“We'll manage without your wife's money thank you Robert” Jack snapped.

Robert seethed. He'd only wanted to help.

“Look love. There's nothing we can do now, let's go to bed eh?” said Jack to his wife

“I'll uh, go to the Police tomorrow” Robert offered quietly, “I can cycle over to Sergeant Parkin's cottage”

Diane nodded quietly.

Robert headed out of the room and started up the stairs to the bedrooms. He paused for a moment. Something was niggling in the back of his head. Something his stepmother had said about Katie. He frowned and carried on up the steps. It would come to him, he was certain.

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Emmerdale Farm – The lower-field Barn – New Year's Day

Katie looked around the yard in front of the barn nervously, just to check it was deserted. She pulled the door open and shut it quickly behind her.

“You took your time!” said a familiar voice. It wasn't the one she had been expecting though.

“What are you doing here?” Katie asked

“What am I doing? In my Dad's barn” replied Robert, “Shouldn't I be asking you that?”

“I'm on my way to work. I came in out of the rain” said Katie quickly

“Oh is it raining?” said Rob, “I didn't see a cloud in the sky earlier. Still, I suppose you're more of an expert. All that time lying on your back in fields”

“It's holding off now” said Katie, turning to leave.

“He's not coming you know that don't you?” said Robert, just as she had started to open the door. Katie paused.

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“Why did you take it? Just for him?” asked Robert, the sarcasm gone from his voice. He was sat on a bale of hay, a stuffed envelope now in one hand.

Katie was silent.

“He ran a mile when he saw me outside here” said Rob, “Is he on the run from the Police or something?”

“No” Katie sighed, “The army. He's avoiding his call up”

“Call up?” said Robert, confused, “I'd have thought he'd have been called up long since”

“He would have been” said Katie, “If he hadn't been in prison when War broke out”

“Prison?” said Rob, “You don't half pick 'em do you Katie?”

“I picked you once” said Katie, a wry smile playing on her lips.

“Correction” insisted Robert, “I picked you. Then you picked me clean while you carried on with Little Caesar behind me back”

“Who?” asked Katie.

“Andy, because he's...” started Rob. He shook his head. Film references were just wasted on some people.

“How far do you think this would have got him anyway?” asked Robert, holding up the envelope.

“Does it matter?” said Katie with a shrug.

“Tell him to turn himself in. The more he leaves it the worse it's going to be” said Rob

“And I suppose you'll tell Diane I stole that money” said Katie, “They'll kick me out on my ear”

“What else can I do?” asked Robert

“Fine. As if it won't be hard enough to look after the baby as it is.....”

“Katie? You're not, are you?” asked Rob

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As it turned out, she wasn't. She didn't even have the excuse that she thought she was. But that lie meant she kept her job. Robert made sure the takings were stuffed right at the back of a different kitchen cupboard. Just so that Diane could breathe with a sigh of relief that she must have put them there without thinking. And of course it gave Jack a chance to complain about her being slapdash, so he was happy.

And then everything and everybody moved on. There were far more important things to think about than the continued non-appearance of his long-past girlfriend's baby. There was Victoria and Pavel. There was Christine and her fancy man. There was baby Sarah and the Manor House. There was the crash and the fear. And then, there was Aaron.
What did it matter to Robert that Katie Addyman never became Katie Hopwood as she wanted? What difference did it make to him that she was jealous of his sister's happiness and was now worried she was going to be pushed out of her job? That was her business surely. Nobody asked her to make it his. But she did, all the same.

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Emmerdale – The Woolpack, Saturday 10 April 1948

“I'll be round to see our Victoria in the morning. You can count on that!” Diane said angrily as she stood on the steps of the pub entrance.

“But she's lying!” pleaded Adam, “Nothing's been going on”

“That's not what Katie told me. Or what I saw” said Diane. She made a deep sigh, “How could you Adam? After the way Pavel treated her” she said sadly

“I haven't done anything” said Adam. But the landlady turned her back and went into the pub.

Adam stood their stunned for a moment. He turned around and started to trudge back to the farm. Surely Victoria would believe him, wouldn't she?

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Emmerdale – The Sugden Farm, Saturday 17 April 1948 – late afternoon

“Come on” said Aaron, handing his friend a mug of cocoa, “Just tell me what happened, alright?” he added gently as he sat down on a hay bale next to Adam.

Adam took a deep breath.

“Last Saturday I drove over to me Mam's. We've not heard from her for ages now” he said

“Did you speak to her?” Aaron encouraged.

His friend shook his head, “I got up to the end of the lane and he was there. That flaming fancy man of hers. That farmhand. I mean, I'd throw him out myself but Victoria's says then I'll get into trouble and what about her and Sarah and.....” Adam said, sadly

“Go on” said Aaron, his hands wrapped around his own tin mug

“When I got home, I didn't tell her. She'd been a bit down herself. Don't say anything right? But she wants another baby and well, she thought she was pregnant but it was a false alarm”
“Letting her down all the time aren’t I!” Adam said bitterly, wiping a tear from his eye with his hand.

“Hey!” said Aaron, putting his hand on Adam’s arm, “You’ve not been married five minutes”

“I don’t mind. I don’t” said Adam, “If it’s just the three of us, I’d be happy. But what sort of husband am I? Can’t even give her what she wants. He could, couldn’t he. That bastard....” he added.

“Listen” said Aaron insistently, “Rob’s told me about Pavel. And he may have got Victoria pregnant and he may have married her but there is no way he was ever a proper husband to her. So you forget about measuring up to him, right?”

Adam nodded. “Anyway. That night I went to the pub, just for a couple of pints and I was fine until Diane asked me how me Mam was getting on. So I went out the front, just for a bit of air. That’s when she followed me”

“This Katie?” Aaron prompted.

“Yeah. And she sat down and asked me what was wrong. I didn’t think anything of it. She’s like that with all the customers. Well, the blokes anyhow”

“So I just said it was family trouble. I didn't want her knowing our business and then she said Victoria didn't deserve me and kissed me” said Adam.

He looked sharply at his friend, “I didn't kiss her Aaron. I didn't!” he said.

“But then Diane was shouting at the pair of us and Katie came out with this pack of lies. Saying we were bound to get caught one day. But none of it was true. None of it”

Adam’s mug fell to the barn floor and the tears started to flow again. Aaron wrapped his arms around his friend again and waited until he had collected himself.

“You believe me. Don't you?” said Adam eventually. The pleading in his voice was obvious to Aaron.

“Course I do mate. Course I do” said Aaron.

“So...so, why doesn't Victoria?” asked Adam sadly.

Aaron had no answer to that.

But while the lads had been in the barn, Robert had been talking to his sister. And he did know.

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That night.............

“Right” said Aaron as he walked into the spare bedroom, dressed in his vest and boxer shorts.

“Victoria says your Gran used to swear by this” he added as he put a tiny bowl of nasty smelling paste on the nightstand next to Robert.
Rob frowned as he forced himself to sit up straight.

“All down your leg?” Aaron asked as he sat down on the edge of the bed

“Yeah” said Robert

“Course, this is all your own fault” said Aaron as he dipped his hand into the bowl.

“How do you work that out?” asked Rob

“Showing off, weren’t ya?” said Aaron as he gently rubbed the salve into the back of Robert’s bare calf.

“I only picked little Sarah up for a bit’” Robert pouted

“You carried her right round the yard” said Aaron, as he continued his massaging

“Well, yes I did do that....” Rob started

“Twice” said Aaron as he dipped his hand in the bowl again and shifted a little further up the side of the bed.

Aaron smiled as he gently rubbed the ointment into the back of Robert’s thigh and to the edge of his trunks.

“Right” Aaron added, “Let's get your pyjama bottoms on. Don't want you ruining the sheets. We are guests after all”

Aaron smiled as Rob pushed his backside up from the bed so his partner could hitch his pyjamas up to his waist.

“Good lad” said Aaron as he got up and walked round to his side of the bed. He padded over to the washstand and dipped his hands into the bowl. He turned around as he wiped his hands on the towel. Robert was looking thoughtful.

“You've got that look in your eye” said Aaron

“What, have I?” said Robert, a little distracted, “Well, actually with my leg I was thinking we wouldn’t....”

“No!” said Aaron, smiling bashfully, “Not that look!” he added as he climbed into his side of the bed

“I mean your I've decided' look” said Aaron, “You have haven't ya? You're going to sort this mess out aren't ya?”

Rob gave a small smile, “Yeah, I have decided. And it's already sorted. I'm just going to tie up a few loose ends tomorrow”

Aaron beamed. He leaned over and kissed Robert on the side of his cheek.
The light coming on at the bottom of the stairwell didn't wake Adam. He couldn't sleep in any case.

“What's up?” he asked. The blanket tumbled from his bare torso as he sat up on the sofa, “It's not Sarah is it?” he asked anxiously.

“No” said Victoria as she walked over and sat on the middle of the sofa. Adam thought she looked beautiful sitting there, with his dark hair untied and framing her face. But them, she *always* looked beautiful.

“I've talked to Robert” said Victoria, “And, well, I'm sorry I didn't believe ya. It's just that after Pavel.....”

Adam leaned close, “I wouldn't do that you Vicky” he said softly, “Never. I love ya” He brushed her hair away from her face with his hand and moved in to press his lips against hers.

Victoria smiled as Adam moved back a little.

“As long as you believe me. That's all that matters” said Adam, “But what about your Dad? Diane said he wanted to skin me alive and....”

“It'll be sorted” said Victoria, interrupting him, “Robert's *promised*” she added with a smile as she stood up.

“Now” she said, extending her hand to her husband, “Let's get back to *our* room”

Adam beamed.

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Aaron was in one his favourite places. Curled up in bed, his head resting on the side of Robert's chest and his right arm snaked around to his waist.

And Robert was in one of his best places too. Lying with his arm around Aaron and explaining to him how clever he had been.

“Thing is. There's *two* rotten people to blame for this” said Robert, “And neither of them is my brother-in-law”.

“Which two?” mumbled Aaron, more to show he was listening than anything.

“Well Katie, obviously” Rob started, “The other one, well I won't say he's my ex brother-in-law cause he was no husband to Victoria, not in any way that counted”

“If things hadn't been so bad first time, she wouldn't have been so scared about it happening again” he said

“And Katie, well I know she can tell a convincing tale. She told me enough way back! And Diane didn't help much either. The way she told it she practically walked out into the street into an orgy!”

“Yeah. Why would she do that though? I thought she and your Dad liked Adam? “ Aaron asked
“They do” said Robert, “I think she was worried too. Thought it was Pavel all over again. She’ll put things right too”

“How do you know?” asked Aaron

“Because Katie is going to own up tomorrow” said Robert, “She just doesn't know it yet” he added with a smile as he gave his partner a gentle squeeze.

Emmerdale – The Sugden Farm Monday 19 April 1948

“But why didn't you tell us you'd had this big row with her pet?” asked Diane, as she sat at the kitchen table. “About her flirting with Adam all the time”

“Because...” said Victoria, not knowing how to reply, as it was in fact the first she'd heard of it.

“You wanted to sort it out yourself, didn't you Sis?” said Robert, from where he was leaning by the fireplace.

“Yes, I did” said Victoria, “He's my husband. I thought it was down to me to mark her card for her”

“Well I'd have never believed her if I'd known” said Diane, “At least she owned up in the end”

“Must have been her guilty conscience “ said Rob. 'That and a downright threat from me' he thought to himself.

“Course your Dad says he always knew she was lying” said Diane, “Well he's saying that now” she added as she stood up.

Robert smiled quietly to himself. Some things never change.

“Are you sure about giving her a reference though pet? After this business?” Diane asked

“No. Definitely” said Robert, “She won't make any fuss then. Or cause any more trouble. It's a clean break then. Less chance of gossip. After all, she's been behind that bar long enough. People would understand her wanting a change”

“If you think so then Robert” said Diane with a sigh, “Course, I forget he had all that staff at the Manor House during the War” she added, leaning over the table to her step-daughter.

Robert smiled to himself. Well, Katie had to have some incentive to tell the truth. Especially as she'd convinced herself she was for the push anyway.

“Why don't you all come over for your tea this evening?” said Diane as they all walked into the yard, “Will you be still here Robert?”

“Uh. No. I've got to get back home. You know, work” her stepson replied
“Oh and one last thing” said Diane as she walked to the passenger side of Robert's car, “If either of you hear from your Auntie Val, don't tell her I need a new barmaid!”

Aaron strolled over from where he had been talking to Adam near the barn.

“Mr Sugden?” he said

Victoria gave Robert a quick nudge when he didn't answer.

“What?” said Rob, “Oh, yes Aaron?”

“I'll go and fill the tank up on the way back. Save time for the journey home” said Aaron

“Yes. Good idea” said Robert

Aaron gave Rob a big wink before he climbed into the driver's seat.

“Eh pet” said Diane, “I bet you didn't account for all this drama when you agreed to work for our Robert did ya?”

Aaron just smiled and started the car.

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Robert waved through the back window of the car as they drove out of the yard in front of the farm. Victoria had her hands on little Sarah's shoulders, who was waving away. Adam had his hands around his wife's waist and was leaning it to give her a quick peck on the cheek.

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“See “ said Robert with a grin as they headed home, “I told you I'd sort everything out”

“Bighead !” said Aaron, but his smile was kind as he said it.

Chapter End Notes

Little Caesar is a 1931 US crime film starring Edward G Robinson. Robert was making a sly reference to Andy Hopwood's criminal leanings (in this 1940s AU he never became Andy Sugden).

Although it was only briefly mentioned, the fact that the young 1940s Robert had a short relationship with Katie and that she ended up as barmaid in the Woolpack is noted in the first story in this series.

Hopefully a bit for all regular readers in this update. Some very retro Emmerdale, a brief crossover with Love On the Home Front and, despite this being very much Robert's chapter, some Robron smuffiness.

Also, whatever happens in the ED storyline, 40s Robron and Vadam are remaining
solid. And 40s Adam has been a longstanding supporter of his best friend Aaron and his choice of partner, despite knowing how difficult it is for them in that time period.
Keeping up appearances

Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse – first week in May 1948 - one morning

Aaron had found that Robert's enthusiasm could be engaging. Infectious even. But then, on other occasions, it could be just a little bit irritating. So he was glad to be working away in the front garden for the moment. Besides, plenty needed doing.

“Right, I'm off into the village to see Dr Gillespie. I'll be having lunch there” said Rob as he stood over the young man.

“Got your walking stick?” Aaron asked, not looking up from the flower bed.

“Yes!” said Robert, rolling his eyes in a good natured fashioned at this tiny bit of nagging.

Aaron sat back on his heels for a moment, “I don't know why you're so excited about this Council thing anyway. Isn't it just more work for nothing?” he asked, “Don't you have enough to do with all your committees?”

“Aaron. I like to be busy. You know that” his partner replied, “Besides. Nicola King's been pushing for the nomination. And if she gets it, there goes my Chairmanships”

“She wouldn't use that to force you out would she?” asked Aaron as he worked away with his trowel. He paused for a moment, “No. You're right. Course she would”

“Exactly” said Robert, “And, yes, she'd probably be a good councilor. She'd get things done” he conceded

“Everyone would hate her, but she would get things done” he added

“Think she's got a chance then do ya?” said Aaron, trying to sound more interested than he was

“Well, they're an old-fashioned lot round here” Rob replied, “I don't think they're ready for women on the council”

“Yeah” said Aaron sarcastically, “Where would it all end?”

He continued working for a minute. Robert's shadow was still over him.

“I thought you were going” said Aaron, looking up

“In a minute” said Rob with a smile, “It's quite nice this. Watching you work up a sweat”

“Shut up!” said Aaron with a bashful grin as he went back to his work.

Robert headed down the lane at a brisk pace. Far quicker than he could have managed this time last year. The stick, well, that was just to remind him not to overdo it, again.

He was right about them being an old-fashioned lot in Hadleigh. Unfortunately.
Aaron had just scoffed his lunch of a corn beef sandwich washed down with a mug of tea. Normally, he'd have drawn it out. Waited until Robert had tutted about it being 'alright for some' and 'who says there's no rest for the wicked!'. Still, he could always drag his tea out later.

He'd been working in the back garden for half an hour before the man had wandered over. He had seen him before, walking around the outside of the Manor House with a clipboard and an attitude of uncertainty. Now he was leaning on the back gate, with a map spread out in front of him.

“You see” said Mr McCoy in his light Scottish accent, “On all the copies of the lease they gave me, the Gatehouse was part of the property”

“No. Robert, I mean, Mr Sugden” said Aaron, “He owns it outright now. The Manor House land stops along here” he said, pointing down at the map, “Right up to this wall”

The older man checked his clipboard. “Rutherford, White, Peterson” he muttered to himself, “I don't seen to have a Mr Sugden on my list”

“He was married to Mr White's daughter” said Aaron, “Are you definitely taking over the place? Your Trust I mean” he added, not wanting to dwell on Christine at all.

“Hopefully. Anything to stop the Government getting it. Then it could end up as a rest home, or an approved school. Or worse” said Mr McCoy

“Do you know, during the War they actually had land girls and miners billeted there! Lovely old house like that” he added

“Get away” said Aaron with a broad smile

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Second week in May – one afternoon

Robert was used to that frown and he knew what it foreshadowed. That was one of Aaron's faces. The one that told you that a sulk had just started that would probably still be going at bedtime. Aaron put the shoes he was polishing back on the floor and stood up.

“Please Aaron” said Rob, “It's only for the look of things” he added as his partner smoothed down the front of his dark green apron.

Robert walked back into the living room and sat at his desk in the far corner while Aaron went to answer the Gatehouse door. He knew Robert was right. He knew that the more chores people saw him doing to more they would convince themselves that he was just Rob's handyman and driver. But that didn't mean he had to be happy about it.

“Ah, about time too. Knocking for ages!” said the red-faced, military looking man at the door.

“Roger!” the small elegantly dressed, white haired lady next to him hissed

“Sugden at home?” the man snapped
“Is it about the porch?” Aaron asked

“What?” the man demanded

“Is it about the quote for the new porch? Are you from Hendersons?” asked Aaron, knowing full well that the man wasn't.

“Do I look like a damn navvie?” the man barked

Aaron gave a shrug.

“Leave this to me dear” the lady said, “Is Mr Sugden at home? If so, could you please tell him that Major and Mrs Witherby would like a word”

“Certainly Madam” said Aaron, now all politeness and smiles, “I'll just check”

Aaron closed the door. Major Witherby seethed while his wife looked at him and just shook her head. Very shortly after, Aaron opened the door again, widely this time.

“Please come through Madam” said Aaron stepping aside to let the couple into the cottage's large main room.

Robert stood up from the seat next to the fireplace and flashed one of his warm smiles.

“Mrs Witherby” announced Aaron, as the couple walked over to the centre of the room.

“And 'er husband” he added sarcastically as he headed to the kitchen.

“Mrs Witherby, a pleasure” said Rob, extending a hand, “I don't think I've seen you since, oh, the last fete at the Manor house?” he added

Robert waited for Mrs Witherby to sit on the sofa opposite before sitting down. Which was more than her husband did.

“That man of yours is damn impudent if you ask me!” said the Major

“Roger!” his wife snapped at him. She turned to Robert, all smiles, “You'll have to forgive my husband. He was in India for far too long. He doesn't appreciate the difficulties of getting staff these days”

“Well Aaron may be a little bit rough around the edges......” Robert started. There was a loud crash of something falling on the floor in the kitchen. Rob got the feeling that that comment would come back to haunt him.

“But I couldn't manage without a driver” Rob added, “What with the old leg”

“Oh I understand entirely” said Mrs Witherby, “Mr Sugden was invalided out during the War. From the RAF” she said, turning to her husband.

Major Witherby snorted. That obviously cut no ice with him.

“And there's the garden of course....” said Robert

“Of course. And quite charming it is too” said Mrs Witherby, “I keep telling my husband it's hard enough now just to find someone willing to put their hand to a few extra duties”
“Oh, Aaron's very flexible” said Rob with a sly smile, “When it comes to work” he added quickly.

“Be that as it may......” the Major started, leaning forward

“Oh yes, the matter in hand” his wife said, cutting him off, “We wanted to talk to you about the vacancy on the Council............”

Aaron was sitting in the kitchen with his feet up and reading the paper. As far as he was concerned, he'd done his butler duties for one day. He'd taken them in some tea on a tray hadn't he? What more did they want? He'd left the door open just a little. He couldn't make out the conversation that Robert had had with the Witherbys, but he did hear them leave.

“...and of course. It's no reflection on you far from it” Mrs Witherby, “It is good of you to be so understanding”

Aaron expected Robert to walk into the kitchen right away. When he didn't, he kept reading. He didn't look up when Robert did walk in, minutes later.

“What did they want then?” he asked, flicking over the paper, “I mean. I know it's not my place to ask...” he added sarcastically.

“What? Oh, it was about the Council” said Robert, his voice sounded distracted

“Nominated you have they then?” said Aaron, flicking over another page.

“No. They don't want me after all” said Rob, sounding more quiet than usual.

Aaron looked up, surprised. He was about to say something but his partner looked miserable.

“I'm going to go up and have a lie down. I've got a headache coming on” Rob said

“Do you want anything for it? Or...” Aaron started

“No. I'll be fine. I just need a bit of rest” Robert replied.

Rob walked out of the kitchen and headed to the stairs. Aaron wanted to follow him straight away, but something made him hang back. He could understand Robert being, well, disappointed that he wasn't going to run for the Council. But something those Witherbys had said must have hit a nerve.

He decided to do something practical. Keep himself busy for a while and then go and tackle his partner. Give him a little space first. The car, that was it. Robert always liked it when Aaron was getting the car sparkling for him. True, Rob's preference was usually for Aaron to clean the car in the height of Summer so he'd have to take his shirt off and strip to his vest. But even so, it needed doing after the drive up to Emmerdale.

It was lucky that he did decide to scrub down the car. If he hadn't, Miss Phipps wouldn't have stopped as she cycled by and spoken to him.
“Hello Mr Dingle. Back from you travels I see!” Miss Phipps said cheerily. Aaron looked up with a start. For a middle aged spinster on a rickety bicycle, she seemed to have a knack for appearing out of nowhere.

“Oh, hello” said Aaron

“I saw Mr Sugden in the village last week” Miss Phipps enthused, “I must say his recuperation has worked wonders. Where did you venture again? The lake district?”

“Uh. No, Blackpool” Aaron replied

“Ah ! All that lovely sea air!” said Miss Phipps, “A good blow to clear all the cobwebs away. I know I could do with one!” she added

Aaron said nothing. He'd started to twist the shammy leather nervously in his hands without thinking about it. He had the impression that Miss Phipps wanted to say something.

“Actually” said Miss Phipps, lowering her voice a little, “I did want to ask. Has Major Witherby called round?”

“Yeah, earlier on” said Aaron, “Rob...Mr Sugden said it was something about the Council’

“Well, I have to say I think it's most unfair” said Miss Phipps, “I mean, everybody round here knows Mr Sugden is divorced. Why should that make a difference?”

“Oh, right” said Aaron quietly. As Miss Phipps kept talking he looked up to the first floor of the Gatehouse. Not that he could see their room. Just the window of the room that was his. Well, as far as everybody else was concerned it was his. He'd only ever slept in it the once. And that was when Robert had had that bad bout of flu. He realised Miss Phipps was still talking to him.

“...so I said to the Major. If you're that concerned put a picture of Mrs Sugden on the election address” she said, “At least then people would understand why he divorced her” she added dryly.

“After all, lots of these Wartime romances didn't last in the end did they?” she asked

And with a quick nod, she cycled away.

“Mine has” Aaron thought to himself, as he headed back inside the Gatehouse.

Aaron had a quick wash in the bathroom before going in to see Robert. If anything, he had overdone the carbolic soap this time! But he wanted to smell clean after working away on the car.

He found his partner lying on the right side of the bed, staring towards the door. The curtains had been pulled across but it was still too early in the day for darkness. Aaron walked around to his side of the bed and climbed on. He reached over and gently ran his hand through Rob's blonde hair, but his partner didn't react.
“Do you want a cuppa?” asked Aaron. But there was no reaction.

“Egg on toast?” he tried again, “We've still loads that Victoria gave us from the farm”. Still nothing.

Aaron had to raise the stakes a little. “Do you fancy a game of chess later? I'll let you win again” he said with a grin.

Robert turned around sharply, “You've never let me win!” he pouted, “I've beaten you fair and square. I taught you how to play, remember?” he added, sitting up on the bed.

Aaron smiled. This was more like his Robert.

“Tea?” Aaron asked again.

Rob sighed. “Go on then!” he replied.

Aaron leaned over and gave Robert a quick kiss on the cheek before heading out of the room.

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“They said it wouldn't go down well with the farmers round here” said Robert, sitting up on the bed now, a mug of tea in his hand.

“The divorce?” Aaron prompted. He knew that was what Rob meant, but he wanted to encourage him to open up a little.

“Yeah” said Robert, “I know exactly what they mean though. They mean people like my Dad!” he went on, a bitter note creeping into his voice.

“I've told you what I think” said Aaron, “You already work too hard for people around here”

“I did you mean!” said Rob

“I don't think Nicola will be able to force you out. Now I've though about it, it's like you said. She might win a seat on the Council, but she'll never win any friends”

Robert gave a half smile.

“I'm not still trying to act like the 'man at the big house' ‘ he insisted, “I mean, it was just....” he tailed off

“Go on” said Aaron gently, putting his mug down on the nightstand.

“It was just, when I came back here after the crash, I felt like nothing Aaron. I mean, it was still Christine's house, even if we had separated. But then, I got into the swing of things. Started running the estate properly for the first time and I felt like I mattered”

“Do you know what that Major said?” he said suddenly, putting his mug down on his nightstand.

“I heard him when he was our doorstep before he left. He said 'Good God woman, the man's an adulterer! He cheated on his own wife”

“How'd they know that. All the details I mean?” said Aaron, shifting a little uncomfortably
“It was in the Derby Telegraph” said Robert, “It was all a put up job. She was the one doing the cheating. Before the separation I mean. You know I had to, well, pretend”

Robert reached down and took Aaron's left hand gently in his, “There was never anyone, not after I found her with her fancy man”

“Not until you” Rob said softly.

Aaron lowered his eyes a little, “There's only ever been you, for me” he said quietly, pressing his hand into Robert's.

Rob leaned over and pressed his lips against Aaron's for a kiss. As he moved away, he kept holding tight to Aaron's hand.

“This is the first time here, that I've not felt wanted” said Robert, “I mean, I was used to that back at home! But it was different here. Even after I left the big house”

“Do you want to move away?” said Aaron, “Cause, I don't care where we are. Just so long as we're together”

Rob beamed for a moment. “But where would be go?”, he asked, his face now serious, “At least here, we can be us. At least here me being the 'disgraced divorced man' stops people asking other questions”

Robert let go of Aaron's hand and curled his right arm around the young man's shoulders, pulling him close.

“It's not just about being together is it?” he added as Aaron leaned into him and buried his head in Rob's chest, “It's about being safe”

“You're right” said Aaron, hooking his arm around Robert's waist.

“And, so what if they don't want you for the Council?” said Aaron, “They'll want you for something else. They're bound to. Cause you're ten times better than everyone else round here”

“And if they don't want you. I will. I'll always want ya” said Aaron

Rob smiled, hugging Aaron just a little more.

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Hadleigh Library - Third Week In May – one weekday lunchtime

“Oh, we've not let you down with our stock have we?” said Miss Phipps, as Aaron handed over Robert's Library books for return. She was nodding towards the brown paper bag he had under his arm, from which three large hardback books were protruding.

“They're movie annuals” said Aaron, “From well before the War. I got them in that second hand bookshop in town as a present for Rob...”. He stopped himself quickly. He'd let his excitement at his find get to him a little.
But if Miss Phipps noticed his slip, she glossed over it, “What a kind thought” she said briskly, “Oh, you must excuse me” she added, looking into the body of the library.

Aaron followed her gaze It was that middle aged Scotsman who'd wandered over to the cottage the other week. He was sitting at a table, various hefty old volumes spread out in front of him. He was trying to attract the librarian's attention.

“That's Mr McCoy from the National Trust. He's trying to do some research on the Manor House. I think he's bitten off more than he can chew if you ask me!”

“Yeah. He's beep up to the Gatehouse” said Aaron

“I think he needs to get himself some proper help. I mean, we can only pick the books out for our borrowers, we can't read them for them”

Aaron thought for a moment, “Actually......” he started

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse – That afternoon

Robert was beaming as if Christmas had come early.

“Oh thanks Aaron” he said, “These are great!”, he said flicking through the Movie Annual for 1929, laid out on the living room table in front of him.

“Well don't say I never get you anything” said Aaron, standing with his hands on the back of Rob's chair.

There was a knock on front door.

“Alright, I'll get it” said Aaron, cheekily ruffling up Robert's hair before he headed for the door.

“Oh hello again” said Mr McCoy in a friendly fashion as Aaron opened the door, “I was hoping to catch Mr Sugden”

Aaron was about to answer but Robert had already headed over to the door.

“Mr McCoy for you” said Aaron, making himself scarce and heading for the kitchen.

“Thank you Aaron” said Rob, extending a hand towards the Scotsman, “You're working at the Manor House aren't you?”

“Quite correct” the older man replied, “And Miss Phipps in the library tells me you're just the man I'm looking for!”

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Aaron made a point of walking back into the room and carrying a laundry basket up the stairs. He wasn't being nosy. Well, not as such. After all, he was the hired help and that's the sort of thing you had to do, wasn't it? And he was wearing his dark green apron. Mr McCoy and Robert seemed to be getting on as well as planned, he noted, smiling to himself.

Aaron was tidying up the chest of drawers in their room when he heard the front door close. It was not long before he heard Robert quickly bounding up the stairs.

“Hey!” said Rob enthusiastically, plonking himself down on the edge of the bed, “Guess who's just been offered a new job?”

Aaron picked Robert's clean socks out of the basket and put them into the top drawer, “Uh....Arthur Askey?” he replied.

“No!” said Robert, “Be serious will ya?”

“Well, must be you then” said Aaron, getting up and sitting next to his partner.

“That Mr McCoy from the National Trust. He wants me to do an audit of the Manor House and help him write the guide book. That's good isn't it?”

Aaron looked at huge smile on Robert's face.

“Yeah, sounds great” he answered, smiling back.

“I feel like celebrating now” said Rob, “What shall we do?”

“Oh, we'll think of something” said Aaron.

Robert smiled and leaned over, pressing his lips against Aaron's in a kiss, bringing his hand up to the back of his partner's head, gently pulling him a little closer.

“What was that you said the other day?” Rob said softly, as he stroked the back of Aaron's neck with his fingers, “About me being ten times better than anyone else round here”

Aaron flushed a bit. “I was just trying to cheer you up” he mumbled.

“Lot to live up to” Robert breathed, as he leaned in for a deeper kiss.
Firsts (Part One)

The first time I met my nephew

The beach at Blackpool, one Summer long before the War

Cain walked over to his mother, an ice-cream in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other. He paused to observe his unfamiliar young nephew. He seemed happy enough, building away at a sandcastle a short distance away.

“There you are Mother” said Cain, handing over the ice-cream to Faith as he relaxed into his deckchair.

Faith gave him a smile of thanks. She eased back into her own chair and stared over towards the pier and the Tower in the distance.

“Oh, if only I had a place at this end of town. The money'd be rolling in” she said wistfully.

“Come off it Mother” said Cain, “You're lucky to have the place you've got now”

Cain looked across at Aaron again, who was still playing contentedly in the sand, while stealing the occasional glance towards his Grandmother and Uncle.

“So did she just walk out and leave him with ya?” said Cain. He put his bottle down on the sand and began to take off his boots and socks to let his feet breathe.

“Oh she left a note, asking me to look after him. Said she couldn't cope with with all the arguments with his Dad and couldn't cope on her own either”

“You hanging on to him then?” Cain asked, “I mean, it's not really your thing is it? Children” he added sourly.

“His Dad doesn't want him and no Grandson of mine is going in a home!” Faith insisted, “Besides, he'll be fine with me at the Guesthouse. He'll be in school before you know it”

“Don't think he knows what to make of me” said Cain

“Why don't you take him down for a paddle, that'll break the ice a bit” Faith suggested

“I don't you?” replied Cain, who had just got comfortable.

“I don't want to go hitching my skirts up on this beach thank you” his mother answered

“Huh! Not what I've heard!” said Cain.

His mother fixed him with a glare.

“Alright! Fine” said Cain. He leaned down and rolled his trouser legs up his calves.

“Not as if I don't see the flaming sea enough!” he muttered under his breath as he padded over to his nephew.
“Hey, our Aaron” said Cain, “You want to have a paddle in the sea?”

Aaron looked at his Uncle and over to the water. He looked uncertain and frowned.

“It's alright, I'll hold your hand!” said Cain.

Aaron took Cain's hand and they walked over to the sea. Aaron still didn't look sure until the waves turned and tumbled over both his toes and his Uncle's. Then he started laughing as if it was the best thing he'd ever seen.

A little while later, Cain had carryied his nephew up the beach, big smiles on both their faces. Aaron had been plonked down on a towel next to his Nan and was happily tucking into the sandwich she'd made for him.

“Aw. Course I'm keeping him” said Faith, leaning over and ruffling Aaron's hair, “He's family”.

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The first time I went back into the World

A Children's Home in Bristol, a few years before the War

Patrick was sitting on a wooden chair in the hallway. He could have walked straight out if he'd wanted to. But, to be fair to him, Mr Bedford always at least tried to make an effort when one of the boys was leaving the Home.

“Right then Seaton, let's have a look a you!” the middle-aged man said as he walked into the hallway from his office.

Patrick stood up.

“Yes, yes. Very smart!” said Mr Bedford, “You keep that up my lad. It'll always keep you in good stead, in the Army and in life. What branch was it again? Mrs Bedford did tell me”

“The Medical Core sir” said Patrick. Everybody had to call Mr Bedford 'sir' in the Home. Still, it would be the same in the Army, he told himself.

“I'll be a field nurse, once I've finished my training” he added.

“Ah!” said Mr Bedford, as if this explained everything, “Well I doubt you'll have to go into action. There'll never be another War. The people wouldn't allow it. Oh, talking of my good lady...” he added, wandering back into his office.

He emerged a moment later with a small metal lunchbox

“Some refreshment for the train. I'll say this for my wife, she knows how to feed a chap” said Mr Bedford, “Precious little else unfortunately” he added under his breath.
“Anyway. All the best Seaton” said the older man, thrusting out his right hand.

Patrick shook his hand. He started to speak, as the warden steered him to the front door.

“Sir I did want to ask. Now that I'm leaving. It's about my sister. When I came here they told me she was being sent to a family in Australia, but they wouldn't tell me anything and...”

Mr Bedford frowned, “Well, I think it's best to leave well alone don't you? After all, she's have her new family now. New start and all that. I'm sure the authorities know what's best”

Patrick nodded. But he was not so sure that they did.

“New start for you too” said Mr Bedford, “Now off you go. You just work hard and...”

“Eustace!” the sound of a loud, deep female voice rang from the Home and into the grounds, causing the Warden to wince.

“..and if you'll take my advice, you'll steer clear of women!” said Mr Bedford

“I'll do my best sir” said Patrick, smiling to himself.

The warden hurried back to the building. Patrick walked down to the end of the drive. He turned as he got to the main road, just for a final look at the Home when he heard a familiar, young male voice nearby.

“Don't I get a good bye then?” it said.

Patrick turned. It was Will. He wasn't one of the lads in the Home, even if he was not that much older than them. He just came in to do the garden and all the odd jobs. He was tall, dark haired and had a light tan from the hours he spent trudging the grounds. He was also, Patrick thought, gorgeous. Not that Pat would have dared have told him that he thought that. Or tell anyone else. Not for a minute. Well, you couldn't, could you?

Will was confidently leaning on his spade.

“Where you off again?” he asked, flashing a big smile, “Going to be in pictures wasn't it?” he added, his smile showing he was only teasing.

“I've going into the Army” said Patrick

“A soldier then?” asked Will

“Yes. Well, an Army Nurse” said Patrick

Will looked Patrick up and down. Patrick felt uncomfortable at the attention, he always did.

“Nurse eh?” said Will, “Yeah. I think you'll do alright Patrick” he added with a nod.

Then he leaned over and gave the young man a gentle pat on the upper arm, “Yeah. You'll do alright” he added kindly. He flashed his beautiful smile once more, turned around and headed up the garden.

Patrick watched him go. He felt just a little bit more confident now. Then he looked up at the Home one last time. And then he left.
The first one in our family to make something of themselves

Blackpool- The Golden Palm Tree Guesthouse – A couple of years before the War

“You've gone to town a bit, haven't you Faith? Just for four of us” said Mrs Axelby, as she lowered her substantial frame into one of the living room chairs and took in the ample spread on the table.

“Well, it won't get wasted” said Faith as she handed her friend a cup of tea, “Anything we don't eat I'll keep for my theatricals. They can have it cold tonight”

“Anyway, it's five of us. My son's here this week” she added as she sat down.

“Oooooh, we are honoured” said Mrs Axelby, “Where's Mr Rudge got to? He was here a moment ago”

“He's washing his hands” said Faith delicately, as her son walked into the lounge.

“Blimey. Is that feller ever coming out of that privvie?” said Cain, “I had to drag my backside upstairs” he added as he sat down at the table.

Faith sighed as she put her tea cup down on the floor There went the chance of having a 'refined” celebration for a change, she thought as she stood up.

“Sure you're not spoiling our Aaron?” said Cain, lifting up one of the tea towels covering the spread and greedily eyeing what was underneath.

“No I'm not” said Faith, slapping her son on the wrist. “Anyway. Why shouldn't I treat him?” she added, leaning on the back of her son's chair, “He's the first in our family to make something of himself. He's worked really hard to finish this apprenticeship”

“I don't know where he gets it from. Not from your father, that's for sure” she added, “He was no good with his hands”

“Unless they were round someone else's wallet” said Cain, folding his arms

“Or undoing a corset” said Faith with a sly smile.

Aaron beamed when he walked into the lounge. He hadn't been expecting a party. In fact, he felt a little bit bashful at being the centre of attention like this.

“I haven't seen your sister for a while Mr Rudge” said Mrs Axelby
“Lucky you” Faith muttered to herself.

“She's moved to Lytham” said Mr Rudge, “To look after Mother. I don't think she'll be coming back to Blackpool again”

“Do you like your present?” asked Mrs Axelby, turning to Aaron.

“The telescope, yeah it's great” said Aaron, “Thanks Nan” he added, turning to his grandmother.

“Well I know it's not new “ said Faith, “But it's in lovely condition. It'll do for your star gazing I'm sure”

“Well I hope that's all he uses if for” said Mrs Axelby

“What do you mean Beryl?” said Faith, puzzled

“Well. There are plenty of houses nearby” her friend replied, “Don't you go looking in on any young ladies now” she told the young man.

Faith thought for a moment, “Oh, I'm sure he'll behave on that score” she said.

“I'll do me best” said Aaron with a smile.

His Uncle leaned over as the ladies chatted, “I'll, er, have a quick look at your telescope before you go” he said, “Just out of interest of course. Check the range and that” he added.

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The first time that I met Patrick

Bristol Docks – the middle of the War

Daniel walked jauntily along as he headed to the Warehouse. He wasn't officially “on duty” until seven, so if he was going to be stuck inside all night he may as well stretch his legs while he got the chance. Still, perhaps it had been too cold for an evening walk after all, he thought.

Even with the streetlights all off, there was still just enough light to see the two young ladies coming out of the pub. And spot the appreciative looks they gave him as he went by.

“Ladies” he said, as he walked by, flashing them a smile. Of course, he was only being polite. He wasn't surprised that they were in a pair. They wouldn't serve a lady on her own in that pub.

He wasn't that far from the other pub now. The one that ladies didn't go in at all. He started to pick up speed. True, he wasn't on duty yet but he knew he'd get it in the neck if anything did go missing. As he crossed the road, he spotted a man in a hat and long coat. He seemed to be acting fairly suspiciously. Daniel paused for a moment at the end of the lane. The man was standing staring at the pub opposite him. That pub.

He was obviously plucking up the courage to go in when the door opened and light spilled out into the alleyway. “Oy! Curtain!” a loud, angry voice bellowed at the two departing sailors. They'd
neglected to pull the blackout curtain across the door as they left. They were laughing at something as they headed down the lane away from Daniel.

He didn't think they were laughing at the young man standing outside. But all the same, Daniel could see his shoulders sink as he turned away from the pub and started to walk up the lane towards him, his head down. In fact, this young man was now so keen to get away from the place that he careered straight into him.

“Careful mate!” said Daniel as the young man slipped on the cobbles.

“Sorry” the man mumbled. He stooped down to pick his cap up which had fallen to the floor. As he did so, Daniel crouched down as well and picked it up for him.

“There you go” said Daniel, giving him a smile. Close up, he could see why the young man's overcoat was hanging a little awkwardly now.

“Thank you” Patrick replied, not looking up. He was holding his cap nervously in his hand.

“Freezing tonight isn't it?” said Daniel, in a cheery voice. He was trying to take in the details of the young man now standing in front of him. He had that nice, floppy dark hair with a fringe. It made him look like those University types he sometimes saw wandering about in the city centre. Well, before the War anyway. Probably all called up by now! But that coat, that just said 'army' to Daniel. And the face, well, that was very nice close up he thought. And the scar along one side? Well, what was that in the end? It was only a scar, wasn't it? All in all, it was a face that Daniel thought he'd like to get a longer look at.

“What? Oh, yes very cold” said Patrick, snapping Daniel out of his thoughts,”I...I have to go” he added nervously.

Daniel felt a wave of disappointment rising up. Then he noticed the piece of paper on the floor.

“Don't forget your note” he said brightly, bending over to pick it up. Even in this light he could make out what it said. Just the name of this pub and the name of the street. The note itself had been screwed up. Several times from the look of it. He handed it back to the young man.

'Poor lad', Daniel thought to himself. He seems so lost. And it was such a waste, look at him. But them, he knew, things were a bit different at sea. You had a few more options then, if you wanted. And if you were careful. It must be different in the Army. It must be.

But then options weren’t always nice ones were they? Sure there were lads on his ship that were, well, interested. But truth be told, they were usually too much like those two lads that had walked out of the pub earlier. A bit too loud and cocky. A bit too sure of themselves.

But as he told himself, he had to be realistic. What were the chances that he'd find the kind of lad he really wanted to find? Someone not so brash. Someone a bit kinder.

“You billeted near here?” Daniel asked

“No. I'm on the other side of town” Patrick replied. Danny was pleased that at least he didn't look like was going to run away as he had a moment ago.

Right. That was it. Daniel had decided. He was going to 'take charge' for once. He had a guts full on board of being told he 'lacked initiative'. What did they mean anyway? It wasn't as if he could march up on deck to the Captain and say he'd decided they were sailing someone else!
“Well we can't have you walking back in the cold” said Danny, “Not on a night like this. I'm in the Warehouse just round the corner. Let's get a hot drink inside you first eh?”

He put a gentle hand on the back on the young man's army coat for a moment and steered him down the lane past the pub.

As they turned the corner into the next lane, Patrick stopped for a moment.

“Well. As long as you're sure” he said, “I wouldn't want to put you out, or anything...”

Daniel looked at him for a moment as he thought. He wasn't completely sure but perhaps, just perhaps, this lad was just that bit different.

“Yeah. I think I'm sure” Daniel said with a smile. He put his hand on the young man's back again and they headed to the Warehouse.

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END OF PART ONE
Firsts (Part Two)

My first day at work at the Training Centre

Miner's Training Centre, the Midlands – the middle of the War

Patrick had taken an instant dislike to Mr Pollard, the Controller of the training centre. He later found out that by doing so he had merely been saving time. It was probably the way he was lovingly rolling off the many rules and regulations that were in force. Several of which he must have made up himself. Not that that bothered Patrick too much. After the Home and the Army all of that was water off a duck's back.

The rudeness though, really didn't help. Not to him, but to anyone who worked in the camp. And the less important they seemed, the ruder Mr Pollard seemed to be. He'd been foul to that poor Dingle lad who had been sweeping up the bin area.

“.....and this is the Welfare Office” said Mr Pollard. His announcement was completely unnecessary, the sign on the door had said that. “I'm sure you'll be busy on that score. Nothing but trouble the lads that come here”.

“I thought there was only about a dozen. You've not started properly yet have you?” Patrick asked

“Dozen too many if you ask me!” the Controller replied, raising his eyes to the Heavens.

Patrick sighed. It was obvious that Mr Pollard thought that the most efficient way of running the training centre was to _not_ take in any young men to actually train.

“Well that sign will have to be changed for a start” said Patrick, sitting down at what was now his desk. He had decided to fight fire with fire. Or at least rules with rules.

“What the devil for?” Mr Pollard asked.

“It has to have my name and rank” said Patrick

“But the man only painted it last week!” the older man spluttered

“It's Army regulations” said Patrick patiently

“But this isn't an Army base!” Mr Pollard shot back

“But I'm a serving NCO. Even if I am on loan” said Patrick, “Of course, you could find yourself a civilian welfare officer and MO.....” he started. It was an idle threat in fact. Patrick had spent six months in that Army Records office in Bristol as it was. And even then they'd tried to force him to be invalided out. The job itself may have been tedious, but there had been some compensations to working there. One massive compensation in particular.

“Fine!” said Mr Pollard, “I'll get it repainted”

“And the orderly I was promised?” Patrick persisted
“Oh because of your.....” the Controller started to say, pointing at the young man's empty left uniform sleeve. He stopped himself before he added anything crass.

“I'll see what I could do. Can't promise anything right away though” said Mr Pollard. He turned sharply on his heels and marched out of the room.

“Regulations!” he said loudly as his passing shot as he walked down the corridor.

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Patrick cursed as he stood in front of the mirror in the infirmary examination room and failed to do his tie up for the fourth time. He should have practiced more when he was in the hospital. But there was so much to sort out then! And there had always been a room-mate back at the billet.

“Well I don’t know what Mr Bedford would say” he said to himself, his voice quiet.

“Morning boss” someone said behind him. It was the young man he'd seen sweeping up yesterday.

“Right. You want me to do the hospital first. Or the other rooms?” he asked.

“Oh. Morning, it's Sam isn't it? Well I...” Patrick started

Without saying a word Sam had walked over to the young man and started to do up Patrick's tie.

“Now I always gives the hospital a proper clean” said Sam, as he finished helping Patrick, “You know cause of germs. So that takes longer like” he added as he stepped back.

Patrick clipped his tie to his shirt front.

“Is that your job round here. Doing the cleaning?” he asked

“Oh no” said Sam, “I put the rubbish out as well”

“Well, you'll be getting you call up soon I suppose” said Patrick

The young man hung his head a little, “Nah. Don't want me” he said.

Patrick thought for a moment.

“Would you like to help me, in the infirmary?”

“What, making the beds and that?” asked Sam

“Yes. And with some of the patients, when I need a bit of help”

“Cause of your arm” said Sam, but it was said in such a matter-of-fact way that there was obviously no malice in it.

“Yeah I'd like that” said Sam, “Don't think the big boss would though” he added, sounding downcast again

“Ah” said Patrick, “Well I can appoint you myself. Army Regulations you see”
“Can ya?” said Sam, brightening again

“I can now” said Patrick with a smile.

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*The first time I went back after the accident*

Hadleigh – June 1948

Robert had taken to his new job as a temporary auditor and archivist with relish. A little *too* much relish as far as Aaron was concerned. He didn't mind the living room table and Rob's desk being covered with books and paper. And at least it had given Robert the opportunity to get the typewriter out of its semi-retirement. It was Rob's constant need to *tell* Aaron each fascinating fact that he was digging up about the Manor House that was becoming a minor nuisance.

In fact, Aaron's idea of taking the car out for a drive and then a short country walk hadn't had the effect he'd wanted. All that he was getting was the same conversation with different scenery.

Not that it had been hard to drag Robert out into the open air. “Come on you” he'd ordered, handing Rob his stick, “This is Doctor's orders. You're not getting enough exercise”

“Oh, I wouldn't say that” Rob replied, leaning forward and giving Aaron a quick kiss, “What about last night?” he whispered

“That doesn't count!” said Aaron, with a shy grin, “You're supposed to get a good walk in”

“But it's boring walking to the village and the back all the time” Robert pouted

“I know it is” said Aaron, “That's why I'm taking you in the car. We'll go over to the edge of the old estate. Have a walk about there for a bit”

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Which is how they'd accidentally ended up where they were now. On the way, Aaron had tried to contribute to their discussion about the history of Hadleigh Manor House. But it was more Robert's *lecture* really.

“Thing is” said Robert, “There's nothing, you know, specific to talk up. The old house was Tudor, but that got burned down in the Civil War. The new one. Well I mean the *Georgian* one of course. Nothing much happened there”

“Did Charles the first ever hide in the Manor” asked Aaron

“Uh, I don't think so. Why do you ask?” said Rob, confused.
“I just remembered something one the lads said during the War” said Aaron, “Leo was going on about 'The Royal Oak' and how.....”

It was funny how he just happened to be talking about one of his mining compatriots right at that moment. If he'd been looking more carefully he'd have noticed that they'd come to the end of the drive. The one that took them to the mine. Of course, it's not as if he'd ever walked here. They used to come here on the back of a lorry. All the lads from the Manor House. Oh and another one for the older men who were billeted in the village. He arrived in a lorry and went home in a lorry. Except for the last time he left. The time he left in an ambulance.

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Aaron was staring through the locked metal gate over at the entrance to the mine shaft. The old huts were still here, though that cold Winter last year had obviously done them no favours.

“You alright” said Robert, putting his hand gently on Aaron's shoulder

“It's funny isn't it?” said Aaron, “Three years I've been here now and I've never thought to come back. Not once”

“Why would you?” said Rob kindly, “It's bound to bring back, well, unhappy memories isn't it? After what happened”

Aaron nodded. “Yeah” he said, a small crack in his voice, “Not all bad though. Not all of them......”

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The Peterson Colliery, Hadleigh- towards the end of the War

“Are these the showers?” said Adam as he put his helmet on the bench, “They look more like stables to me. All these wooden doors”

“They're Victorian” said Leo as he sat down and took off his boots, “They're modesty boards. We had the same thing at school”

It hadn't been a full shift. It was more a 'reconnaissance' day today. Taking the lads, and the men, around the workings. Getting the feel for the place. And getting filthy in the process.

“Victorian!” scoffed Dafydd as he caught the end of the conversation, “This is like something from the Dark Ages. And the rest of the mine. It's all very old fashioned”

“Do you think it's not safe?” asked Aaron, concerned. Dafydd had worked in a coal mine for a short time, just before he'd been called up. He had only done clearing work but he that was more experience than the other lads had, and they respected him for it.

“Well I may not have your know how ” said Don sarcastically, “But I don't think any mine is safe”
he added in his rough Scottish accent

“Thank you for that Donald” Leo drawled, “I don't know where we'd be without your ignorance”

“Oh, think you're being funny do you?” said Donald angrily. He turned on the young man and pulled back his own arm. Then he yelped.

Dafydd's voice was slow. As if he wanted every word to sink in. “No fighting in the pit” he said slowly, his massive hand around Don's wrist, “It's dangerous”

“Come on mate” said Sammy as he walked over, “Let the bleeder go. He's got to work tomorrow”.

Dayfdd shrugged and released him. Don massaged his wrist and looked sullen, but was silent.

“Where did you get off to Sammy?” said Adam quickly, trying to change the mood in the hut

“You know that old dear in the Admin hut?” said Sammy, as he started to unbutton his overalls

“Aw Sammy!” said Aaron “Not her as well? She must be seventy!”

“No mate. Not her” said Sammy, “But this is where you boys go wrong. It's not who she is, it's who she knows. She's bound to have daughters, or nieces. Or a Land Girl staying at her cottage”

“Alright. Who does she know then?” asked Aaron

Sammy smiled broadly, “She's only got the lady school teacher who was sent out with the evacuees in the village. I mean that's not just mature is it boys? That's clever!”

“And you don't think she'll see through the Feldman charm do you?” asked Leo, “You know. Seeing as she is clever”

“Oh I like a challenge mate” said Sammy with a laugh. Some of the other boys joined in. Aaron just shook his head and smiled.

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The Old Peterson Colliery, Hadleigh – June 1948

“What?” said Aaron, confused. He wasn't sure whether or not Robert had just spoken.

“I said I thought we ought to go home” Rob repeated softly.

“Yeah” said Aaron quietly, wiping the tear from his eye that he hadn't even noticed.

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Aaron was unusually quiet that evening. He was stretched along the sofa next to the fireplace
while the radio hummed away quietly in the background.

Robert put down the book he was reading on the living room table. Mr McCoy and Hadleigh Manor in the 1760s could wait for the rest of the evening. Aaron was what was important right now.

“Budge up then” he said, giving his partner's shoulder a gentle shake as he stood over him. Robert sat down on the sofa and was pleased when Aaron instinctively lay straight back down again, his head in his lap.

“Bought a few things back today didn't it?” Robert prodded him, his voice soft.

“I haven't thought about the mining lads for ages” said Aaron, “And it must be, three years, now since they got killed. Sammy and Dafydd. And I could have been gone too if I'd been further back. Or if Adam hadn't dragged me back to the cage straight away”

Robert reached down and stroked the side of Aaron's head with his fingers.

“That is” said Aaron, “I don't really think about back then. I always think of Adam being on the farm with Victoria and little Sarah now. Cause he seems so happy there. And with Sarge, I don't think of him back in the centre. I just think of him at Nan's in Blackpool. It's like he's home there. Do you see what I mean?”

“I think so” said Robert, “I don't think of the RAF much. I mean Lewis is always badgering me to go to one of the reunions with him. But, well, I don't know”

“I know that Pavel wasn't exactly your mate but did you lose any friends? I mean, Sammy and Dafydd they weren't my mate like Adam is, but they were good blokes”

“Ah, well I was lucky” said Rob, gently running his fingers through Aaron's hair. “My best mate. Well he got right through the War”

“Did he?” asked Aaron, “Where was he?”

“Oh, he was a Bevin boy. You know down the mines” said Robert, “He's a sort of handyman somewhere now. For some posh feller with a fancy house. Orders him about all the time apparently. Well, you know the type don't you? Must be terrible for the bloke” he went on.

“Oh, I don't know. Doesn't sound too bad to me” said Aaron, snuggling into Rob's lap.

“Yeah” said Robert softly, “Not too bad at all” he added with a smile.

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The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Blackpool – June 1948

“Is your hand alright now Danny?” said Faith as she walked into the lounge.

“He's fine. No bones broken!” said Patrick, before the young man had time to speak. The lads were sitting on the sofa, Patrick with a towel draped over his right leg which Daniel was resting his left hand on while his partner gently wiped its back with a warm flannel.
If he was honest, Daniel's hand had stopped throbbing a while ago now. He was just enjoying the gentle attention he was getting from Patrick. You could always rely on Pat to be, well, kind.

“I wouldn't have asked you to drag this from under the stairs if I'd known it was going to fall apart like that” said Faith as she knelt down on the floor in front of the partially broken wooden chest now in front of the sofa.

“What are you looking for anyway?” asked Patrick as Faith started to rummage in the contents.

“If we're going to put up with Bernard's sister coming for tea” Faith replied, “I'm sure I put a silver cake stand in here ages ago”

“Bit fancy. Just for her ?” asked Patrick as he folded the towel on his leg over Daniel's hand and began to pat it.

“Well, if she starts mouthing off I can always hit her with it” said Faith with a grin.

“Alright now?” Patrick asked, turning to Daniel.

“Yeah, great” Danny replied, giving him a warm smile. But he kept his hand resting on the young man's leg.

“Oh, this takes me back!” said Faith as she took a large black photo album out from the chest and flipped through.

“Look at our Aaron!” she added, showing the lads a picture of her on the beach in a deckchair with her hand around the shoulders of a very young Aaron.

“That was the first Summer he came here” said Faith, “I could turn the heads of all the fellers on the beach back in those days” she added wistfully

“Aw. You still can Mrs Dingle” insisted Patrick

“Flatterer!” said Faith with a smile as she returned to her rummaging. But she felt bucked up all the same.

But Daniel decided that that display of loyalty deserved a reward. He leaned over and gave Patrick a kiss on his right cheek.

Patrick turned to look at him and saw the look in his eyes.

“Yes. You're definitely better” said Patrick, patting Daniel's hand very gently.

Daniel just smiled.

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END OF PART TWO
“I'm In Charge Of Hugs”

Blackpool - The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – June 1948 – one Saturday afternoon

“Oh, thank you love” said Faith as Patrick put a mug of tea down on the small table in front of the sofa. She took out another knife from the case of cutlery in front of her and started to polish it.

“You're keen aren't you? I thought the Bride of Frankenstein wasn't coming round for tea till tomorrow?” Patrick asked

“Now, Patrick” Faith said with a smile “Get that out of your system. I'll want you there to keep the conversation going. God knows Bernard won't be much help”

“But I can't stand his sister” said Patrick, “And she cant stand me!” he added as he walked over to the lounge table where Daniel was sitting.

“Well. That's something you've got in common then” said Faith as she started on another piece of silverware.

“How are you getting on?” Patrick asked, putting his hand on the back of Daniel's shoulders. He didn't need to ask really. He could tell from the expression on Danny's face that the circuit diagrams spread over the table were proving a bit of a challenge.

Daniel sighed. “I'm going round in circles here” he replied, “This is supposed to be a radio transmitter right?” he said, pointing to one piece of paper.

Patrick decided to take his word for it.

“I took one apart in class last week, I was fine then. I'm much better doing the physical stuff”

Faith looked over from the sofa with a sly grin. She said nothing and continued to polish away.

“I need a bit more practice, that's what it is” said Daniel, “Mrs D?” he asked

“Yes love?” said Faith

“Have you got any old equipment I could have a go at?” Daniel asked.

Faith smiled and was about to reply, but she could see that Patrick had narrowed his eyes at her.

“I'll take you round Mrs Hanley's at No.18 after lunch” said Patrick, rubbing his hand across Danny's shoulders without really thinking about it, “I know her set's not working. She was telling me when I was round there yesterday”

“Why were you round there?” asked Faith

“Oh, she called me in when I was walking past. She'd had trouble again with, her you know “ replied Patrick, mouthing the final words.

Faith nodded as if that explained everything.

“Poor old soul” she said to herself
Hadleigh Manor House - June 1948 – one Sunday afternoon

Aaron smiled to himself as he walked through the back entrance to the Manor House and headed for the kitchen area. It was strange how he hadn't set foot in the place since Robert had moved out three years ago. Not that Rob had much either. He'd been in a couple of times to see old Rutherford to collect his accounts and listen to his latest moans, some of which Rob felt he needed to pass on to Aaron, whether he was interested or not.

But then, it wasn't as if Aaron had ever felt as if the Manor House was, well, home. It was where he first met Robert, so, yes, it was always going to be special. And they had spent many happy times there, curled up in each other's arms in Rob's study or, even better, in his bedroom.

But the Gatehouse, that was special. Even though it was Robert's, Aaron felt as if they'd moved in together. And, unlike the Manor House, they could be together. No having to sneak back to his own room in the small hours. They could close that front door and hold the World at bay.

But even if that Manor House wasn't home, it was still full of memories.

“Brought your lunch over Mr Sugden” Aaron said loudly, putting a basket down on the end of the large wooden table.

Robert looked up from the sheets of paper he had spread over the worktop and put down the metal slide rule in his hand.

“It's alright” said Rob, with a big smile, “McCoy's not here. He's not long since headed into the village”

“Ahh” said Aaron, grinning back, “Lucky I brought my lunch too then”

Aaron was sat at the end of the table now, washing down his sandwich with a bottle of lemonade and looking at Robert sitting next to him. His partner had his sandwich in one hand and was jotting down some numbers on a small pad with a pencil.

“Anyway” said Rob, continuing his lecture in between bites of his sandwich, “They want to turn this part of the House into a cafe”
Aaron just kept watching him. It was good to see Robert so animated with his new project.

“Apparently you've got to have a cafe. You could show the visitors the Laughing Cavalier upstairs and they'd still be disappointed if they didn't get a cuppa before leaving” said Robert

“So I'm going to supervise that” said Robert proudly, “It wouldn't take much work. I thought I'd get Hendersons. You know, they're coming to do our porch anyway and....” Rob started, “What are you staring at?” he added

Aaron smiled, a little shyly, “I was just thinking back, that's all”.

“That right?” said Robert, sitting back and folding his arms, “Well whatever you're daydreaming about, I hope I'm in there somewhere” he added with a grin.

“I was just thinking about that radio set, that's all” said Aaron, “The one we fixed on this table”

“Oh that!” said Rob, “We'd have done that in half the time if you'd not been so shy!”

“Ah well, I was impressed by you.......then!” said Aaron cheekily

“And you still are!” said Robert, smiling smugly

“Big head!” said Aaron, moving sharply out of the way before Robert could poke him in the ribs. He smiled back at Rob and took another swig from his lemonade.

Fixing that radio set really broke the ice between Rob and Aaron. And Robert had been right, Aaron had felt shy at that point. Also, thanks to working together, it was the first time he'd ever held Robert. Even if it was only accidental!

As for the times they held each other just because they wanted to. Well, they happened not so very long after. Even if Aaron had been convinced they would never happen at all...........

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Hadleigh Manor House – during the War - one evening after the shift at the mine

“I'm pretty sure it'll be in one of the boxes in here” said Robert, carefully putting his walking stick against the wall as he walked into the musty room.

Aaron closed the door behind him, “What are we looking for again Mr Sugden?” he asked. He was pleased he'd been able to get the sentence out without tripping over his words. There was just something about the blonde young man in charge of the Manor that made him go tongue tied. Fortunately, Mr Sugden could talk for the pair of them.

“Robert, please” said Rob as he knelt down on the floor in front of a wooden chest. Then he gave Aaron a smile. One of those smiles. The ones that made Aaron feel like he’d just been caught a little in the Sun, for just a moment.

“It's a small metal toolbox. You try that one” he suggested, pointing to a crate nearby.
“The thing is” he said, “Some of these storage rooms haven't been used for years. And we had to clear out a load of stuff so you and the rest of the pit lads could all have your rooms”.

“This it?” asked Aaron, taking out a small metal toolbox that had been under some spare blackout material.

“Oh, well done Aaron!” said Robert pleased, “I thought it'd be the last place we looked. We can get started on that radio now”

Aaron wasn't so pleased. He'd wanted to keep Robert to himself for a bit longer, even if it was just rummaging around in a cluttered storeroom. Fixing the radio meant going back to the kitchen area. Where some of the other lads would be.

And he wanted to make the most of Rob's company. Especially, as he told himself, that was the most that he could ever hope for from this handsome young man. Just a little company.

“You know, when they said we were coming here. I thought, I mean, I just assumed...” Aaron started. Inwardly he swore. He could feel his words rushing ahead of him. Mr Sugden was going to think he was some sort of idiot at this rate.

“Yes, go on?” said Robert encouragingly, leaning back on his heels.

“I thought we'd be in the servants quarters. As it was a Manor House I mean” said Aaron.

“Ah, well the Land Girls got there before you. We had to clear most of the servants rooms for them too. They weren't used much when my father-in-law ran the place”

“Cause of people getting called up?” Aaron asked as he stood up.

“No, this was before the War” said Robert as he stood up and started for the door “Apparently he was too mean to fork out for a full....”

Rob had slipped on something and suddenly lost his balance. He was tumbling backwards towards the floor, his arms flailing. But Aaron had leaped forward like a shot.

“Hey! Careful now Mr Sugden” said Aaron. He may have been shorter than the other young man, but his arms were more than strong enough to catch him before he fell too far. He gently helped him back on his feet.

“Thank you Aaron” said Robert, “I still forget I need that stick, sometimes” he said.

Aaron realised he was still holding onto Rob, one hand on his right arm, the other on the small of his back. He released the older man quickly and mumbled, “I'll just get it for ya”.

He darted to the corner and back, handing Robert his walking stick.

“Oh. Tool box” Aaron mumbled again, bending over to pick the metal box up from the floor.

“Uh, right. Well, let's get started “ said Rob.

Aaron nodded quietly and headed for the door. Robert stood for a moment just watching the young man as he left the room. He ran his hand through his blonde hair for a moment and thought. Well, at that exact moment, he wasn't exactly sure what he thought. In fact, something had just started. He just didn't know what it was yet. But it was definitely something.

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“Well, this is nice” said Patrick, as he sat at the table in the lounge. Not that he meant it for a moment.

Mr Rudge said nothing. His sister said nothing, for now. But that only meant everyone else was having a brief respite from whatever offensive thing she could say next.

“Here we are” said Faith, deliberately brightly as she walked into the room with a small jug in her hand.

“Cream for you Patrick?” she asked. The young man nodded and Faith poured some onto the jelly on his plate.

“Well, I know what you like don't I?” said Faith, turning to Mr Rudge and pouring some cream on his plate.

“For you Cynthia?” she asked his sister

“Not for me” the other woman replied, “I'm watching my figure”

“No one else bleeding is” Patrick muttered to himself under his breath.

Faith looked from Patrick, to Mr Rudge and then to his sister.

“Well, this is nice “ said Faith.

“I saw that sailor of yours coming out of two doors down the other day. That Italian” said Cynthia, her tone of voice implying that at the very least he had been committing a burglary.

“Do you mean Daniel, he's not Italian love” said Faith, “He's British. His Dad was Spanish mind”

“Well it's all the same isn't it? They're all foreign” said Cynthia, “Anyway, I saw him coming out with a radio. Bold as brass he was!”

“He's fixing it for Mrs Hanley. He's being doing this electronics course” said Faith

“He doesn't seem bright enough to me” said Cynthia, “I wouldn't trust him with a broken mangle”

Patrick glared and was just about to speak when Mr Rudge finally said something.

“Barcelona” said Mr Rudge, before scooping up some jelly

“What's that Bernard?” asked Faith

“His Dad, he was from Barcelona. Daniel I mean. He's got family there I know. He told me when he gave me some Spanish stamps that time”

Faith was relieved. Mr Rudge's intervention seemed to have closed the topic of Daniel down. However, she hadn't accounted for his sister's inventive mind. Or her ability to switch targets when it suited her.
Cynthia toyed with the jelly on her plate. “I'm surprised you've never thought of getting yourself an artificial arm?” she said suddenly, turning to Patrick.

There was the sound of three silver spoons being dropped onto their plates. Mr Rudge let out a small groan.

“Pardon?” Patrick said eventually

“Well, I was reading about Douglas Bader in my Picture Post. He flew planes in the War and he had two artificial legs”

“He didn't move the controls with his feet though did he?” asked Patrick, sarcastically “It's just...it's not the same.....” he added quietly.

Miss Rudge started to tuck into her jelly. Patrick had stopped eating his and was tapping his fingers slowly on the table top.

“I'll put the kettle on” Patrick mumbled as he headed out of the room.

Faith watched him leave. She turned to Miss Rudge, “This Picture Post article Cynthia. Did it say anything about artificial brains?”

Mr Rudge choked on his jelly.

“Careful Bernard love” said Faith, patting his hand.

“Oh, just uh....” said Mr Rudge as he tried to get his breath back, “Went down the wrong way, that's all”

His sister just glared at the pair of them.

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Later........

Daniel had had enough of going through his course notes, even if his final examination was sooner than he liked. But at least it had meant he had had a good reason not to join the others for tea. And he had looked at his notes. For a bit, anyhow.

Now, however, he was lying on his side of the bed. He had just got half way through a chapter of “Black Day at Raccoon Creek” when he heard Patrick tap at the door and him saying “It's me”. That gave him time to put his cowboy novel away before padding over to the door to let his partner in.

“Still hard at it then?” Patrick asked as he locked the bedroom door behind him. Daniel's course notes were spread out over Pat's desk in the corner of the room.

“I've, uh, done a bit” said Daniel as he climbed back on to the bed., “How was the tea party?” he asked quickly as he plumped up his pillows and sat upright.

“Terrible” Patrick replied as he sat down on the edge of the mattress. Danny could tell from his voice that he wasn't joking. He didn't like the way his shoulders seemed to be sagging a little either.
“I don't see why anyone would fight over Mr Rudge” said Patrick, “It's like two bald men fighting over a comb”

“Still, Mrs Dingle likes him so...” he added with a shrug.

Daniel sighed. “Come here you”, patting the mattress next to him. He lifted his right arm so Patrick could lie down and snuggle up against him. Patrick slipped out of his shoes and lay down with his head on his partner's chest.

“Thing is...” Daniel started, as he moved his hand up to run it through Patrick's hair, “If Mrs D is lonely, we could always get her a dog. For company”

“Do you think that would be a replacement for Mr Rudge?” asked Patrick, “Lying about all the time, eating her out of house and home, pawing at her in bed....no, I see what you mean now” he went on

Daniel laughed,” No! I mean it. They're great dogs are. Real loyal. It's just an idea, you think about it”

“Oh huh” said Patrick quietly

Daniel thought for a moment, “Talking of dogs, did that sister of his say something to ya?” he asked

“A few things” Patrick admitted, “Oh. She thinks I should get an artificial arm” he added. He squeezed Daniel's waist a little with his hand as he spoke. He had already decided that Cynthia's comments about Danny would not be repeated.

Inwardly Daniel fumed and muttered, “Daft cow” under his breath. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know about these medical things. But one thing he did know was that Patrick knew his stuff. So Danny did what he always did when he was lost for words but wanted to provide a bit of comfort. He made sure he was holding on to Pat just a little bit tighter. Just a little bit more affectionately.

“I told Mrs Dingle that woman couldn't stand me” said Patrick

“Well she's daft then isn't she?” said Daniel, arching himself down so he could kiss Patrick on the top of his head.

“Fancy not liking you” said Daniel softly, “My lovely lad” he added.

Patrick smiled. He didn't know why Danny kept saying he wasn't good with words. Sometimes he said just the right thing.

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Hadleigh Manor Gate House - June 1948 Sunday night

Aaron was sat up in bed, reading his copy of “Improving your chess”. Robert was taking his usual, ridiculously long time in the bathroom. You'd think he'd been down a coalmine today, rather than
just going through some, admittedly, dusty rooms in the Manor House.

Still, he seemed to be thriving on all his new work. Aaron could tell he was in a playful mood too, when he walked in moments later in his pyjamas and leaned on the bedroom door as he closed it behind him. The sly smile on his face told him that.

He was still smiling when he climbed into his side of the bed and rolled over onto one side, staring up at his partner.

“Did you want something?” said Aaron, pretending he was still reading. Robert leaned forward a little. As he did so, Aaron realised he’d splashed on some of that expensive cologne he still had from London.

“Well not something” said Robert softly as he slipped his right hand below the covers, “More, well, someone” he added as he curled his hand across Aaron's middle.

Aaron rolled his eyes theatrically and put his book down. He then slid down into the bed so he was level with Rob.

“What’s that you’re reading?” asked Robert, “Improving your chest? Hmm, seems alright to me” he added, rubbing his hand across Aaron's torso.

“You had a good day, didn’t ya?” Aaron asked, ignoring this cheesy comment, “Back up at the ‘big house’” he added as he rolled onto his side to look at Rob.

“Oh-huh” said Robert, running his left hand briefly through Aaron's hair.

“Well” he went on softly, “I do have happy memories of that place. You know. When you lads moved in I mean”

Aaron smiled

“And it’s nice I’m going to be working there for a while. Getting things done. But you want to know the truth?” he asked, resting his hand gently on Aaron's neck.

“Yeah” said Aaron quietly

“Being up there, or here with you?” said Robert as he moved closer, “No contest” he added softly as he pressed his lips against Aaron's.

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Blackpool - The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – June 1948 – late Sunday night

Daniel smiled down at Patrick. “Ok?” he whispered softly

“Yeah” Daniel whispered, reaching up and running his hand through Danny's neatly trimmed beard.

Daniel leaned down and pushed his lips against Patrick's before rolling onto his back on his side of
the bed.

Patrick leaned over and hooked his arm across his partner's bare chest. Daniel just put his strong right arm around him and they lay there quietly for a moment.

“Do you know what I wish?” said Patrick

“What's that?” Daniel asked

“Sometimes. I wish I could hug you properly” said Patrick quietly, giving Danny a squeeze with his hand.

Daniel thought for a moment. Then he brought his left arm around, wrapping that around Patrick too.

“Aw Pat” said Danny gently, “That's alright. I've told you haven't I? It's like being on ship or in the Army. Not everyone does everything“

“So I'm in charge of hugs” he whispered. And to prove it, he held tight onto Patrick, who smiled.
The grass is greener

Patrick wasn't expecting a hug from Aaron when he walked through the front door of the guesthouse, but it was nice all the same.

"Was that Dr McGann I saw just leaving?" asked Patrick

Aaron headed towards the kitchen, "It's Robert" he replied as the young man followed him, "He was sick twice when we were driving here this morning"

"What did the Doctor say?" asked Patrick

"Just a bug. But he's got to stay in bed for the next couple of days" said Aaron as he filled the kettle "Not much of a start to our visit is it?" he added with a sigh

"Well your Nan's been looking forward to seeing you. And if Robert's better by Sunday we're having a party for Daniel" said Patrick, as he sat down at the kitchen table, "If he shows up" he added.

"He passed his course then?" said Aaron as he put the kettle on the stove.

Patrick nodded.

"Thing is" said Aaron as he sat down, "I had to tell that Doctor half a story. You know. Just so he wouldn't, well, 'know'"

"I'm sure you did the right thing" said Patrick sympathetically, "It's not as if we've got much choice really"

Aaron nodded, "Doesn't mean I have to like it though, does it?" he said, slightly wearily, rubbing his face with his hands.

"Well, what didn't you tell Dr McGann?" asked Patrick

Aaron folded his arms, "I just said Robert had told me he'd felt sick the night before. Like he'd said it this morning. I didn't say he'd told me in the middle of the night, when I was lying in bed right next to him. Or that he'd hardly slept a wink all night"

"Well, I don't think that would make any difference" said Patrick, "From a medical point of view I mean"

"You know, last year Robert had this really bad flu" said Aaron. "And I called our Doctor out and all the time he was in our bedroom I was worried. You know, worried that he was going to spot that it was our bedroom"

"I mean. I was sleeping in the spare room cause Rob was so rough and I've moved some of my things out but I was still worried. And I didn't want to be thinking about that. I just wanted the Doctor to see he was alright"

Patrick thought for a moment. "There's not much of Daniel's in my room. He usually lives out of
his kit bag” he said.

“I don't think you could even call it 'our' room “ Patrick added quietly.

Aaron was about to speak, but at that moment the kettle started to whistle on the stove and his grandmother walked in through the back door.

“Hello love” said Faith, as she gave Aaron a hug, “And where's my lovely blonde young man?”

“He's upstairs in bed Nan. He's not well” Aaron replied

“Aw. Poor thing” said Faith

“The Doctors been round. He's given him something to take” said Aaron as he filled up the teapot.

“Oh, I've not missed Dr McGann have I?” said Faith, disappointed, “Is that tea for Robert?” she asked.

Aaron nodded in reply.

“Perhaps I should take it up? See if he wants anything” said Faith, patting her hair in at the side.

“Uh. Not just now Nan” said Aaron quickly, “He's already feeling very weak”

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That evening.........

Robert felt a hand resting gently on his hip through the bedclothes. He pushed himself up and smiled as he realised it was Aaron.

“It's time for your medicine again” his partner said quietly, shaking a brown bottle in his hand.

“Ugh do I have to?” said Rob, sitting up, “What time is it anyway?” he added.

“I told you, it's time for your medicine” said Aaron smiling indulgently as he poured some foul looking liquid onto a spoon. He was used to this kind of performance from Robert when he was ill.

Aaron held the spoon out, but Robert kept his lips determinedly closed.

Aaron let out a sigh. He had been the same whenever his grandmother had made him take something horrible when he was ill. But at least he had an excuse then. At least he had only been little!

“Come on” he urged, but Rob's mouth stayed closed in a frown.

“Open up for the choo-choo train” said Aaron with a silly grin.

“Aaron, I'm not five !” Robert protested, rolling his eyes. That gave Aaron just enough time to put the spoon in his mouth.

“Aw! That's still disgusting” said Rob, pulling a face.
“Must be doing you good then!” said Aaron. He leaned forward and put his hand on Robert's forehead, brushing his blonde hair back.

“You're temperature's better than lunchtime anyway” said Aaron.

“I've been asleep since that Doctor left” said Robert, “What have I missed?”

“Not much” said Aaron, “I'm just about to play chess with Sarge in the front room. And Nan's been knitting a scarf. It's for Mr Rudge for Winter, or it's to strangle his sister with. She's not made her mind up yet”

Robert smiled and sat back against the pillow.

“Any other guests here?” he asked

“Just two dancers from one of the shows. It's their first time staying here” Aaron replied

“Dancers eh? Men or women?” asked Robert, “Not that it matters much” he added with a smirk.

“Hey” said Aaron, “You're supposed to be ill”

“Well I've got to have something to think about, if I'm going to be stuck here on my own” said Robert “Sure you don't want to risk it?” he asked, patting the empty side of the bed next to him.

“I'm staying in my old room” said Aaron, “Till you're better anyway. Oh, there's a party on Sunday afternoon for Daniel cause he passed his course by the way”

Robert nodded.

“So” said Aaron taking Rob's hand in his, “You have a rest. I'll come up when I've finished my chess game, alright?”

“Yeah, fine” said Robert, “See you in five minutes then” he said with a grin

“Hey!” said Aaron, “I can always send Nan up to keep you company if you like? She can do her knitting up here just as easily”

“Uh, thank you but no” said Rob, “I'll just have a quiet lie down”

“Anyway” he added, giving Aaron's hand a gentle squeeze, “I like the nurse I've got”

Aaron smiled as he got off the bed. He leaned over and kissed Robert on the forehead.

“So, are these dancers men or women?” Rob asked as he lay back down in bed.

“They're women!” said Aaron with a sigh as he turned at the door.

“I'd better make sure I get better then” said Robert, “Oh, for this party for Daniel I mean” he added quickly.

“Course” said Aaron, shaking his head and smiling.

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Thursday lunchtime
“He’s managed it all then” said Faith, as her grandson walked into the kitchen with a tray in his hand.

“Uh huh” said Aaron as he headed to the sink.

“I like a man with a good appetite” said Faith, leaning back on her chair, “Shows they like to keep their strength up for other things, if you know what I mean” she added with a sly smile.

“Aw Nan” said Aaron, a little embarrassed.

“Shall I pop up for a bit?” Faith asked

“No, you're alright” said Aaron, “Sarge is there. They're picking holes in some detective novel”

“Who's coming over on Sunday, to this party?” he added, trying to move the topic away from his partner.

“Mrs Axelby's coming” Faith replied, “Plus the two girls from the theatre. Oh and Bernard of course”

“Hope he's leaving as sister at home then” said Aaron, resting against the sink, his hands in his pockets.

“Leaving her at home?” said Faith, “He'd be better off putting her in one if you ask me”

Friday – early evening

Robert reached over to the chessboard on top of the nightstand, which was now halfway along the bed, and moved one of his pieces.

“Where did you get to this afternoon?” he asked

Aaron was perched on the end of a small armchair and staring at the board.

“Went to the high street with Sarge. He wanted to get a present for Daniel” said Aaron, before moving his own piece.

“Is he here then?” asked Rob

“Nah. Tomorrow morning” said Aaron, “You gonna be alright to go to the pictures?”

“I'm fine!” said Robert, “What are we going to see”

“Fort Apache. Sarge picked it” his partner replied, “You know it's a Western. For Daniel”

“Who's in it?” said Rob, moving another piece

“Uh. John Wayne I think” said Aaron as he concentrated.
Robert frowned. “Do we have to go?” he asked

“Come on Rob” said Aaron, “How often do we get to go out with other people?”

“Fair point” said Robert, “Talking of feeling better. You moving in here tonight?” he asked with a grin

“Suppose so” his partner replied

“Well don't sound too enthusiastic or anything” said Rob

“I am enthusiastic” said Aaron, “This bed is much more comfy that the one in my old room” he added with a smile.

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Sunday afternoon

“Here we are” said Faith brightly as she put a plate of biscuits down onto the lounge table.

She turned to Mr Rudge as she sat down at the table, “Bernard. If you're going to light that thing again, take it out on the front porch”

Mr Rudge stood up, his pipe in his hand, frowning.

“And don't pull that face” Faith went on “You've know I've got a weak chest”

“Oh, I wouldn't say that” said Mr Rudge with a grin. Faith smiled back and passed the plate over to Mrs Axelby.

“I say your Cynthia in the week” the other woman said.

“Oh aye?” said Mr Rudge

“Coming out of Timothy Whites she was” Mrs Axelby went on, “I almost mistook her for your mother. God rest her soul”

“Yes. She definitely takes after our Mam” Mr Rudge agreed as he headed out of the room.

“And we all know what a right miserable cow she was” said Mrs Axelby, once he was out of earshot. Faith nodded in agreement.

“How about you young people over there? Alright for drinks?” Faith called over to the small group around the fireplace.

“Yes thanks Mrs D” said Daniel who was perched on the end of the sofa. Robert was sitting next to him, talking to the two young women sat opposite. They seemed to be hanging on his every word. Aaron was sitting next to his partner, his arms folded and a frown fixed on his face.

As the two women laughed at Rob's latest quip, Daniel got up and headed out of the room.
Daniel walked into the kitchen, his hands thrust inside his trouser pockets.

“Pat...” he started

“Hmm?” said Patrick, who was spooning some tea leaves from the caddie into the pot, “I'll be back in a minute. Just doing some more tea”

Daniel opened his mouth to speak, but his partner cut in

“Do you like the shirt? I wanted to get you something for passing your course, but I wasn't sure what to get” said Patrick

“What?” said Daniel, looking down at his neat white shirt, "It's really nice.."

“I mean, I know it won't be any good for work but you can keep it here for best and...” said Patrick as he took the kettle from the stove.

“Pat, can you just sit down for a minute” said Daniel sharply

Patrick stopped, “All right” he replied, a little uncertain, as he put the kettle back and sat down at the kitchen table.

Daniel grabbed a chair and moved it so it was right next to his partner. He sighed and then sat down, reaching over and taking Patrick's hand in his.

“Thing is” said Daniel, not looking him in the face, “I've.......I've let you down”

“What?” asked Patrick, “Oh. Don't say you didn't pass?"

Daniel said nothing, just rubbed Patrick's hand with his. Patrick decided to plough on. “Well, it's not the end of the World is it?” he said gently, “You can take it again I'm sure. But you should have said, I've have told Mrs Dingle to cancel the party. It was just we were both so sure that you would pass after all the hard work you did and.....”

“It's not that Pat” said Daniel cutting in

“What then?” Patrick asked

Daniel took a deep breath.

A little later.....

“But you promised me” said Patrick sadly “That was the whole point of this course, wasn't it?” he added, pulling his hand away from his partner's

“I know I did Pat” said Daniel, “And next time will be better”
“But this is the next time Danny!” Patrick replied

“I didn't lie to you Pat. I didn't!” Daniel insisted, “I was just unlucky this time, that's all”

“It looks like I'm the unlucky one from where I'm.....” Patrick started to reply, but stopped when Aaron walked into the kitchen.

Robert had been charming to those two show girls for far too long in Aaron's opinion. So he had welcomed an excuse to head for the kitchen.

“Nan sent me in after the tea” said Aaron, “Thought you two might have got a bit, you know, distracted”. He had meant to say it in a light-hearted fashion, but with the atmosphere in the room he tailed off.

“Sorry?” said Patrick, “Oh. I'll do it now” he added getting up and walking to the stove, “Uh, you'd better go back in Daniel. This party is for you after all”.

Daniel nodded silently as he got up and walked out of the room.

“Could you do the tea Aaron?” asked Patrick, “I just want to go upstairs, tidy myself up a bit”

Aaron looked at his friend and took in his neatly pressed shirt and trousers. His empty sleeve had been vigorously ironed and pinned to his shoulder by the cuff and his shoes were shining like he was on the way to a wedding. He put his hand gently on Patrick's upper arm.

“What's wrong Sarge?” he asked

“Daniel signed up for his next job, that's what he's been doing all week in Liverpool. He's sailing tomorrow night” said Patrick

“That's quick” said Aaron, “But he said he'd have more opportunities now didn't he?” he added, lowering his arm.

“You can say that again” said Patrick, “It's a good job this time. He'll be able to tell me all about when he gets back in six months” he added, hanging his head.

“What?” said Aaron, “I thought this was so he could do shorter trips?”

Patrick cursed himself as he felt a tear starting to trickle down his cheek. He'd hoped he'd been out of the room before that.

“Yeah” he said, his voice breaking, “It was so he could had more of a choice. And he has. He just hasn't chosen me”

“I'm sure it's not like that Sarge” said Aaron, keeping his tone sympathetic

Patrick looked up at Aaron, “I bet your Robert wouldn't leave you” he said sadly, starting to well up

Aaron thought for a moment.

“Look Sarge” said Aaron, “Why don't you skip the rest of the do? Go and have a lie down for a bit
Patrick nodded and wiped his eyes with his hand.

“Can you say I've got a headache?” he asked

“Sure” said Aaron. He gave Patrick another pat on the arm before he left the room, “I'll talk to you later, alright?” he added.

Aaron sighed as he put the kettle on. Somehow, Rob's flirting didn't seem so important now. And Patrick had been right. Robert wouldn't go off and leave him like that,

11:15pm

“Here you go” said Aaron, handing Patrick a cup of cocoa as he flopped onto the sofa next to his friend.

“Thanks” said Patrick, “Is this new?” he asked, looking at the red dressing gown Aaron was wearing

“What?” said Aaron, “Oh, no, this is Robert's” he explained

“I thought it was a bit 'Noel Coward' for you” said Patrick

“Did you have a proper chat with Daniel?” asked Aaron, his hands around his own mug.

“Not really. He's said he's sorry a few times, but he's still going” Patrick replied

“I thought of telling him not to bother to come back. But I'd never have got the words out, even if I did mean them. Which I don’t”

Aaron smiled ruefully, “Yeah” he said, “There's no going back is there? Not when you really care. And I know you really care about him”.

They sat there in the semi-darkness for a moment, with just the light from the standard lamp in the corner of the lounge.

“I'm jealous of you two sometimes. In that Gatehouse of yours” said Patrick, “At least you're together all the time”

Aaron nodded, “But together in the middle of nowhere” he said, “And, well, sometimes I wish we had somewhere to go. Not just to Adam and Victoria's. Or here to see you and Nan”

“I still think I'd like to swap sometimes” said Patrick

“You wouldn't get Daniel all the time though would ya?” said Aaron with a smile, “You'd have Robert. And remember he's my boss as well. He has to pay for my health stamp and everything”

“Or perhaps I should just start somewhere new” said Patrick

Aaron became serious, “You wouldn't move on would you? Nan would really miss ya”
“No I wouldn't” said Patrick with a sigh, “This is the first proper home I've had since I left the orphanage”

“What?” said Aaron surprised, “I didn't know you'd been....”

Patrick nodded, “It was the boy's home, then the Army, then the Training centre, then here” he said

“What was it like, the home I mean?” said Aaron

Patrick took a deep breath, “It was safe and they kept us fed. And they made sure we all behaved. Very sure in fact. But, well, there wasn't a lot of love about. I'll just say that”

“So perhaps it's not such a surprise that I can't let go of Daniel” said Patrick quietly as he put his empty cup on the table.

Aaron drained his own cup and put it down.

“I'm not surprised Sarge. I know what it's like. And I know what you're like too” said Aaron, “I just wish I could do something”

Patrick stood up and frowned. “There is one thing I suppose” he said

“What's that?” asked Aaron, standing up as well.

“Could you call me Patrick? It's just it's been years since the centre now. And this is still your home, even if it's mine too. It would seem more friendly, I suppose”

Aaron smiled, “Course I can” he replied.

Aaron was just rinsing the cups out in the sink when he paused for a moment. He stared through the kitchen window and out into the dark back yard. Patrick had been right when he said this was still home.

He'd sat sulking in the lean-to by the wall loads of times when he hadn't got his way. He'd stomped off to the shops on yet another errand for his Nan because she had to “look after the guests”. He'd smoked a cigarette with the lad from three doors down who'd filched them from his Dad's work coat. Then they had both argued over who had gone the most green afterwards.

And he could remember his Uncle Cain standing in that yard, bashing his boots together to get the sand off them while Nan complained about her nice clean kitchen floor. Or, to be more accurate, he remembered a dark haired man who he'd been told was his Uncle Cain. A man who'd sat with his Nan on the beach while he built a sandcastle. And he remembered her saying something then. Something he didn't understand at the time, “No grandson of mine is going into a home”.

“You're up late love” said Faith as she walked into the kitchen and snapped Aaron back to the present.

“It's alright Nan” said Aaron with a grin, “I haven't got school tomorrow”
“I was talking to Sar...to Patrick” he explained, “He's upset about Daniel”

“Oh, what's he done now?” said Faith with a smile

“Signed up to go away for six months” said Aaron.

“Oh, he hasn't” said Faith, her face falling, “He doesn't know when he's well off that young man!” she added

“I'm just going to make myself a drink. I just can't get off tonight” said Faith, “I must be sickening for something” she added with a smile.

“Night Nan” said Aaron as he headed to the kitchen door. When he got there, he paused and thought for a moment. He walked back in and gave his Nan a hug from behind as she stood at the stove.

“Hey, what's this in aid of? You after money or something?” Faith said with a laugh

“No!” said Aaron as he let go. And with a smile, he left the room.
Blackpool- The Golden Palm Tree Guesthouse - August 1948 – Monday morning

“Shall we get started then?” said Mrs Axelby, smoothing down the front of her apron.

“What time is it?” asked Faith, sitting at the kitchen table.

“Half nine” her friend replied, looking over at the clock on the mantelpiece.

Faith thought about the prospect of giving the hallways and the bathroom a thorough clean, as she'd planned to. Even with her friend's help, it still didn't seem much of a way to start the week.

“Let's have another cuppa first Beryl” said Faith, “No need for us to go raving mad” she added as she got up.

“After all, the dirt's not going anywhere is it?” she said.

Mrs Axelby nodded and sat down.

“He's still out there” said Faith, as she walked over to the stove and looked out of the window.

“Who's out where?” said Aaron as he walked into the kitchen with a tray of breakfast things.

“Patrick love” his grandmother replied, “He's throwing stones into the bottom of the drain pipe”

Aaron frowned and stared out of the window. He could see his friend, sitting in the lean-to against the far wall.

“What's he doing that for?” he asked

“I don't know love” said Faith, filling the kettle, “Why did you used to do it?”

Aaron thought for a moment. That could have been him sitting out there, a good few years ago.

“Any tea going?” said Robert, walking into the kitchen.

“Nan's just doing some Mr Sugden” said Aaron.

Rob looked a little puzzled, then noticed Mrs Axelby sitting at the table.

“Eh Faith” said Mrs Axelby, “Talking of drain pipes, do you remember your Aaron and that flannel?”

“What's this?” asked Robert, a cheeky grin on his face, as he thrust his hands into his trouser pockets.

“It was the first time Aaron got here and we were giving him a bath upstairs weren't we Faith?”

Aaron looked embarrassed as his Nan nodded

“And your Nan pulled the plug out and the flannel shot down the plughole. Didn't it Faith?”
“That's right!” said Faith with a smile, hooking her arm around Aaron's shoulders, “You wouldn't sit at that end of the bath next time”

“Kept saying he'd go down the plughole didn't he Beryl?” she added

“Course it came out the other end of the drainpipe, thank goodness” said Mrs Axelby, “You wouldn't want to waste a good flannel. I mean flannels were flannels in them days. Not like the rubbish you get now”

Aaron decided to head out into the yard. For one, he wanted to talk to Patrick, and also he wanted to get out before Mrs Axelby came up with any more tales of long ago.

“I'll just go out in the yard a minute” he mumbled. As he got to the kitchen door he beckoned his grandmother with a quick nod of the head.

“Is Daniel still here?” he asked quietly.

“No love” Faith replied, “He must have gone crack of dawn. He's not the first to sneak out of here. Fair do mind. He did leave me his last rent on the mantelpiece”

Aaron nodded and walked into the yard, closing the kitchen door behind him. There was a ping as a small pebble just missed the open end of the drainpipe and fell into the grille below. Aaron sighed and looked over towards his friend. Yes, that could just have easily have been him sitting there. A long time ago now....

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That First Crush

Blackpool- The Golden Palm Tree Guesthouse – a year or so before the War

He was called Harry and he lived a few doors down. He was a few years older than Aaron so they weren't exactly friends. In different years at school, hanging round with different sets of lads. But he was always friendly.

And he usually walked home down the alleyway that ran along the back of the houses. So if Aaron did happen to be working on his bike in the back yard, and the gate did happen to be open, he would probably see him go by. As long as he timed it right.

And one particular day. He had timed it just right.

“Alright Aaron” said Harry cheerfully, “Well, what do you think?” he said, stretching his arms out to the sides.

Aaron looked up from his bike, trying to act like he wasn't all that interested. That was the problem though. He was too interested. And he was scared that it would show.

“New shoes is it?” Aaron asked. He knew perfectly well it wasn't that. Harry was showing off his
new uniform. And he looked gorgeous in it. Not that Aaron could say that.

“No!” Harry laughed, flashing the young man a smile, “I'm at the post office now. I'll be doing the telegrams.”

“Packed in the chip shop have ya?” said Aaron, pretending to be concentrating on his back wheel for a moment.

“Oh yeah. I'll still be going in to see my Shirley” said Harry, “Get me extra 'two-penneth'. Know what I mean?” he added with a sly wink.

Aaron didn't know what he meant. Not exactly. But he could hazard a guess from the look on the other young man's face. But it didn't seem crude when Harry said things liked that, just a bit cheeky. He had that way about him.

“Course, I'll have me pick now. The girls love a bloke in uniform” said Harry, “They warned us mind. Never go in the house, even if you're asked. You've got to watch the women. And some of the blokes too, apparently!”

Aaron looked down, and idly played with the chain on his bike.

“So where you now? Still down at the engineering shop?” asked Harry

“Yeah” said Aaron, “Doing my apprenticeship at Fenwicks” he replied

“The money will be good” said Harry, “You'll need that. You'll be chasing the girls around yourself soon” he added.

'No I won't mate' Aaron thought to himself.

“Anyway. Better get on. Mam will have me tea ready” Harry said. He gave Aaron one last big smile and walked off.

Aaron got up and walked over to the lean-to, slumping down on the wooden seat along the back. He sighed and looked over to the open gate, even though Harry was well out of sight now. He bent down and picked up some small stones from the floor of the yard. He threw one lightly across the yard where it just missed the open end of the drainpipe and rolled harmlessly into the grille below.

Faith looked up from the kitchen window and out to her grandson.

“Right, we're off to the theatre now” said Bobby as he wafted into the kitchen behind her, “Can we look forward to anything substantial for our supper?”

“What's that love?” Faith replied, distracted, “Oh I'll leave something out in here for you” she went on as Bobby walked over to the sink and stood next to her.

“Your Aaron seems a bit down in the dumps” he said, looking out into the yard.

“Yes, he does a bit” said Faith, as her grandson idly tossed another small pebble towards the drainpipe.

“Well, must dash” said Bobby, “I want to get there before one of the girls nabs Malcolm”

“Malcolm?” asked Faith

“You know! Our dishy new pianist!” said Bobby
“See you later love” Faith replied, still looking into the yard.

“Now don't you worry. It'll be some affair of the heart of other. I was exactly the same at his age!” said Bobby.

Faith watched the young chorus boy as he headed out of the kitchen. She couldn't be sure. Not really. But perhaps he had been closer to the truth than he realised.

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That First Time

Bristol docks- near the start of the War

Daniel locked the small door that let you into the warehouse and pushed both bolts across. Now nobody could get in, even if they did have a key. Not that they would. That was one thing everybody agreed about on the ship. If you had to mind the cargo overnight, you had definitely drawn the short straw. Not when you could be out on the town, chasing after a woman. Or a feller, if that's what you wanted.

It was what he wanted. Or, to be more precise, he wanted the feller standing in front of him now. He had told Patrick as they walked here from that pub that everything would be alright. But he could see how nervous he was. And nothing he had said had seemed to make much of a difference.

Patrick was staring at the floor now. Daniel reached over and gently put his hand below his chin. He lifted his head up and leaned in for a soft kiss.

“It’s alright Pat” he said quietly as he moved back. Smiling, he stood over to one side and held out his left hand for the other young man to take.

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Patrick smiled as they walked into the back room. He'd seen the place a handful of times over the last six months. Daniel had explained that he had been lucky. He had been shifting supplies around the coast lately, not going overseas, so that meant more time in Bristol. More time to be together. But he said that was always going to change one day. And now it had. So the sailor had suggested that perhaps, this time, they could do something a bit special?

And Danny had made a bit of an effort, he could see that. He'd found another camp bed from somewhere and pushed it next to the one that was usually against the wall, so it looked more like a proper bed. And he must have put that old oil lamp on the desk, which was gently lighting up the room in place of the bare bulb in the ceiling. If even looked like he'd tidied up the floor!

Daniel had put his dark jacket onto the back of the chair, and was helping Patrick out of his.

“It looks nice in here” said Patrick, his nervousness forcing him to speak.
Daniel hooked his arms around the young man's waist. “I wanted it to look a bit, *special*” he said with a smile, looking into Patrick's eyes. He leaned and pressed his lips against his.

“Cause you're special” he added softly.

Patrick smiled back, finally looking as if he was starting to relax.

“No need to be nervous Pat”, Danny said softly, “It's just me and you. It'll all be alright” he went on as he leaned in for another kiss.

And it was all alright.

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*First (And Last) Time He Left Without Saying Goodbye*

Blackpool- The Golden Palm Tree Guesthouse - August 1948 – Yesterday evening (Sunday)

Patrick lay in bed, his back turned on Daniel.

“I know you're a bit upset Pat” said Daniel quietly in the darkness, “But I thought you'd want to. It's a long time, six months” he added gently putting his hand on his partner's hip, under the covers.

“It's a long time for *me* you mean” Patrick replied, his voice low

“I don't get you?” said Daniel, puzzled

“Well you're the one at sea aren't you?” said Patrick, “You'll have plenty to choose from”

“What?” said Daniel, “Pat! I don't do that” he said, the hurt clear in his voice.

“You know I don't” he said, this time angrily. He rolled over and turned his back on the other young man.

Patrick rolled onto his back. He waited for a moment before speaking.

“Danny....” he started

“Forget about it” Daniel replied brusquely

Patrick waited again.

“I'm sorry. I just don't want you to go away for so long” he said, “I'll miss you, that's all”

“I know” Daniel said quietly, “Let's just get some kip. Talk about it in the morning ok?”

“Ok” Patrick replied.

But in the morning, Daniel was gone.
Monday morning – the back yard

“He didn't even say goodbye. Or leave a note, or anything” said Patrick sadly, “He’s never done that before”

Aaron thought about mentioning that Daniel had settled his bill with his Nan. But then he thought better of it. It might just make things sound worse.

“Did he take all his stuff?” Aaron asked.

“He took his kit-bag” said Patrick, “But he left that new shirt I got him. But he was supposed to. That was for best”

“You don't think he's gone for good, do you?” Patrick asked nervously

Aaron hooked his arm around his friend's shoulders, “Course not” he replied. But he was not so sure. 'He'd better not have' he thought angrily to himself.

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The First Dance

Tuesday night 9:00pm

Robert was feeling very relaxed. He was stretched out on the living room sofa, a glass of whiskey in his hand and the radio humming away quite nicely in the corner of the lounge.

“Right, I've finished the washing-up” said Aaron clicking on the main light as he came into the room.

Rob frowned. “Turn that out and come over here” he said, swinging his legs off the sofa and sitting up.

Aaron clicked the light off. Well, the lamp was on in the corner anyway. He walked over to the sofa and plonked himself down next to Robert.

Aaron folded his arms, “Sure you're not overdoing it?” he asked with a grin

“Aaron” said Robert, looking at his partner, “I'm on holiday”

“So am I!” replied Aaron, “Not that you'd know it” he muttered

Rob sighed and put the glass on the table in front of him.
“Maybe I'm saving my energy?” he said with a cheeky grin, “You know, for something special” He leaned over and gave Aaron a quick kiss on the lips.

“We got the place to ourselves?” Robert asked

Aaron nodded. “Nan's taken Patrick out to the theatre”

“Do you think that will cheer him up? Where have they gone?” Rob asked

“The variety show. The ones those two girls are dancing in” Aaron replied

“Hmm. Well that's not going to help much then is it?” said Robert.

“Doubt it” said Aaron, “What he needs is probably half way to Canada or somewhere by now”

Robert thought for a moment. He leaned over and ran his hands through Aaron's hair a little.

“I know what we can do” Rob said suddenly, standing up, “Something I haven't done in years”

“Do we have to go upstairs?” said Aaron with a grin.

“You've got a one track mind Dingle” said Rob, “Luckily! But no, just let me move this table back”

Aaron got up and frowned as the moved the table away from the sofa.

“And this sofa” said Rob, “Just back a bit”

Aaron helped him move it back a little. Robert smiled and walked over to the radio. He turned the volume up a little and nodded in approval at the dance band that was playing.

“Now” said Rob, standing in front of his partner, “We can't leave all the dancing to those girls can we?”

“What?” said Aaron, “You want to dance?”

“Why not?” said Robert smiling as he hooked his arms around Aaron's waist, “Can I help it if I'm in a romantic mood? Anyway, I was pretty light on my feet before....... well, you know before what. I want to see if I've still got it” he added, pulling his partner close.

“Yeah. But I've never had it” said Aaron, “I can't dance!”

“Come on” said Aaron encouragingly, “You must have danced before” he added, swaying from side to side just a little.

Aaron frowned, “Wendy Fairfax dragged me down the Palais a few times. Before the War. I never liked it though”

“What can I say?” said Rob with a warm grin, “Wrong partner, obviously”

“Look, put your hands round my waist” he instructed. “Right now just lean on my shoulder” he added as his partner complied.

“And you leave it all to me” said Robert quietly, as they now both swayed to the soft music in the background.
“Don't I always?” said Aaron, nestling into Rob shoulder, a contended smile on his face. Yes, he thought, Robert wasn't going anywhere.

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*Putting Me First*

Thursday evening

Patrick was ironing what was Daniel's best, and in fact only, formal shirt. He was almost oblivious to the conversation that was going on in the kitchen around him.

“Well so I'd just sat down on the tram and opened my bag of humbugs and *she* leaned over the aisle” said Mrs Axelby

“Cynthia” said Faith, as she poured out the tea.

“That's right”, Beryl went on, “And she says to me, 'Well, no point dieting is there? Not at your time of life' ”

“She never” said Faith, handing her friend a cup

“She did” said Beryl, “The cheeky cow. At she must be five years older than me, if she's a day!”

“Mind you. My figure's not what it was. I'll admit that” said Beryl, wistfully.

“Least you had one to lose. More than can be said for her!” said Faith

“Well, exactly and...” Beryl began, “Who's that coming through your gate?” she added, peering over her friend's shoulder into the yard.

There was a tap on the kitchen door, followed by the entrance of a tall young man, with dark curly hair and a kit bag over his shoulder.

“Hello Mrs D” said Daniel, “Can you squeeze in a little 'un till Monday?” he asked with a smile.

“Well that was a quick six month's love” said Faith, smiling back.

Patrick had stopped ironing, but didn't say anything.

“Course you can stay love. Anytime, you know that” said Faith standing up, “Come on Beryl” she added, picking up her cup from the table, “Let's go in the lounge. I'll dig out that knitting pattern for you”

Faith waited until her friend had left the kitchen. She leaned close to Daniel, “Try not to mess things up love. Do your best eh?” she said quietly, giving his shoulder a gentle pat.

Daniel put his kit-bag down. He took his cap off and walked over to his partner.

“Not forgotten me then?” he said, a little sheepishly, pointing to the ironing board with his cap.
“I thought you'd gone” said Patrick, idly running his hand along the back of the shirt.

“I...I changed my plans” said Daniel, reaching over and taking Patrick's hand gently in his.

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“Well I thought he'd be well away by now Beryl” said Faith, as she noisily opened the living room door.

Robert and Aaron were sitting on the sofa. Right at opposite ends. In fact, they could hardly have been further apart and still been on the same sofa.

True, Robert's blonde hair did look a bit disheveled, but it had been a windy day. And Aaron was doing up his top shirt buttons but it was a hot August night after all.

“Daniel's just turned up” said Faith, as she walked over to the lads, “Now where did I put that pattern?” she said as she lifted the cushion up from the chair opposite the sofa.

Aaron looked at his partner with a frown.

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A little later......

Beryl closed the kitchen door behind her as she walked back into the hall, having collected her knitting.

“What's the matter love?” said Faith, as she stood in the doorway to the lounge.

“Well I just went in to get this” said Beryl, “and that sailor....” she started.

“Well, I'd swear he just kissed that lodger of yours” she added, looking puzzled.

“Oh, it's alright love” said Faith briskly, “Daniel's Spanish. They all do that over there. The men”

“Oh!” said Beryl with a smile.

“You know. Continentals” said Faith

“Right love. I'll be off then” said Beryl, perfectly satisfied with her friend's explanation.

In the lounge, Robert and Aaron smiled at each other.

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11:30pm
“Everything rosy in the garden again?” said Robert, as Aaron closed their bedroom door behind him.

Aaron padded over to the bed and climbed in next to his partner.

“You only want to know cause you’re so nosy!” said Aaron with a grin as he snuggled down into the mattress.

“That’s not true!” said Rob with a pout as he put his detective novel on the nightstand.

“I want to know cause Patrick’s a friend” said Robert as he rolled onto his side and looked down at Aaron, “And because I’m nosy” he added with a smile.

“Well” Aaron started, “Daniel’s not going away for six months now. He’s got a different job”

“Sailing to the Isle of Man and back?” said Rob, putting his hand onto Aaron's chest and gently running his fingers back and forth.

“No!” laughed Aaron, “He's been over to Hull. He's got a different signing now. Holland and...somewhere else. Much shorter trips. Patrick did say”

“He's going to try and get back here every fortnight if he can. Well, that's got to better than six months away hasn't it?”

“Uh huh” said Rob, a sly smile on his face.

“What are you grinning at?” asked Aaron.

“I was just wondering” said Robert, “Whether you fancied doing something a bit, Continental”

Aaron smiled as Rob leaned down and pressed his lips against his..............

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“Thank you” said Patrick quietly, cuddling up against Daniel in their bed.

“That good was I?” Danny said cheekily, as he curled his arms around the young man.

“For not going away!” said Patrick. Daniel had known perfectly well what he had meant.

“Well, this Dutch thing's not as good as the other job. But it's fine” said Daniel. “Other things are more important right now” he added, giving his partner a squeeze.

“Well, other people” he said, his voice soft.

He leaned in and kissed Patrick on the top of his head.

“That's what's important isn't it Pat?” Daniel whispered, “Me and you”

Patrick smiled, and snuggled against Danny.
Time For A Romantic Gesture (or two)

Blackpool- The Golden Palm Tree Guesthouse - August 1948 – Thursday evening

Daniel and Patrick were both sitting at the side of the kitchen table. Danny was leaning close, taking his partner's hand in his. He'd been wondering if he'd made the right decision about changing jobs all the way back from Hull. But the change in Patrick was so obvious, he just knew he had done the right thing. There was no trace of the distance between them that there had been the previous Sunday. It had been a distance that had taken Daniel aback and forced him to make a different decision. A better decision.

“Couldn't leave you on your own could I?” said Danny with a smile, reaching up to run his hand through Patrick's floppy fringe. “I mean” he added, “I don't want someone else snapping up my lovely lad”.

And then, it just seemed the most natural thing to do. To lean over and gently press his lips against Patrick's. He hardly noticed the kitchen door open and Mrs Axelby bustling in with a loud, “Just getting my knitting lads”. Daniel moved away from his partner quickly. But as Mrs Dingle's friend left the room, he only had to look in Patrick's eyes to see. It had not been quickly enough.

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Faith had just closed the front door to the guesthouse after Mrs Axelby had left. As she turned around, Daniel was standing in front of her, an anxious look on his face.

“Mrs D?” he asked hurriedly, “Your friend didn't see us did she? I mean....”

“Don't worry love, it's fine” said Faith. Daniel seemed unconvinced so she gave his upper arm a squeeze, “

“It's my fault, I wasn't thinking” said Danny

“It's fine love. Really” Faith insisted

Daniel let out a sigh of relief and ran his right hand through his curly hair.

“I'd better tell Pat. He was really worried, after the last time” he said

“What last time love?” asked Faith, concerned

“It was during the War. Someone saw us at that training camp once, threatened to report Pat”

“Oh love, I didn't know” said Faith

Daniel nodded, “It worked out in the end, but he was so scared” he said, his voice quiet. He turned quickly and headed to the kitchen.
As Daniel closed the kitchen door firmly behind him, he could see how nervous his partner was. Patrick was standing up and running his hand back and forth over the back of the chair.

“It's alright Pat” Danny said quickly, “Mrs D's sorted it”.

Daniel stepped towards the young man, but then decided to be sensible. He walked to the window and pulled the curtain across first and then wrapped his arms around Patrick from behind.

“Sorry Pat” he soothed, “My fault again” he said as he curled his arms around the young man's waist and tucked his head down into his shoulder.

Patrick rested his hand on Danny's arm, “No, it's not your fault. It's hard to remember to be, well, \textit{discrete} all the time. But I know we have to be ”

“We'd better be later” said Daniel with a smile, “I've got plans ” he whispered, hoping this would lighten the mood. It seemed to do the trick and he was relieved to feel Patrick relax in his arms.

At least now there was only Mrs D and the lads in the house. At least now they could relax.

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Blackpool- The South Pier Theatre – Saturday night

“Aaron, I said I'd go round, I'll only be five minutes!” said Robert as he stood outside the entrance to the theatre.

“Fine. I'll wait for you here then” said Aaron sulkily.

“And make sure it is five minutes” he added to his partner's departing back as he headed for the stage door. He couldn't be sure whether Rob had heard.

As he waited, Aaron walked over to the side of the pier and stared out to sea. He took a deep breath and filled his lungs. There was always something refreshing about coming home to visit his Nan, something liberating. Oh it was true that their Gatehouse home in Hadleigh had the wide spaces of the countryside, but there was something \textit{special} about staring out to sea. It was like looking up at the night sky with his telescope. It reminded you how big everything was. How small you and your concerns could be.

In fact, Aaron was so thoughtful, staring up at the night sky that he hadn't noticed that five minutes had dragged into ten and now fifteen. He looked as his watch with a frown. He decided he would concentrate on his concerns after all, however small they may be and stomped around to the stage door.

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“Hello young Aaron!” said the cheerful, white haired old man behind the desk at the stage door.

“Oh, hello Mr Dunn. I was looking.....” Aaron started

“How's your Nan. Looking after herself I hope?” the old man asked

“Yeah. She's fine. I was just...” said Aaron

“Do you know” Mr Dunn continued oblivious, “I remember her when she was a young woman and the girls in this show aren't a patch on her”

“Actually....” said Aaron

“Not a patch” said Mr Dunn, “Have you seen the show?”

Aaron gave up and just nodded.

“I watched the whole thing from the side of the stage on the first night. Filth that's what I'd call it. Wouldn't you agree?”

Aaron shrugged. He'd never had much of an interest in “artistic poses”. The acts they put on in between weren't too bad. Occasionally you got a comedian or a singer that was at least half-decent. But it hadn't been his idea to see the show, Robert had insisted. After all, they were on holiday and they could hardly not see the show that the two girls at the Palmtree were in, now could they? Aaron didn't see why not, but he had agreed to be dragged along all the same.

“It was no better the second night neither!” Mr Dunn added, “You come to see the girls have you?” he asked

Aaron nodded.

“Yeah. Thought you had. Your mate went through a while back. They're in room four, just down the stairs”

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Aaron frowned and knocked on the door. Lizzie, one of the girls staying at the Palmtree opened the door and smiled, “Hello Aaron, come on in!” she said brightly.

“Do you want a drink?” she asked, “We're not supposed to but Rosalyn has smuggled in a small bottle”

“Fraid it's only mugs” said Rosalyn in her clipped tones, “Still, hits the spot. Have to make the effort though don't you? Can't let the shower who run this place get one over on us” she added as she handed Aaron a tin mug

“Course you know Lucille don't you?” Rosalyn went on, “Stayed at your place before. So she says”

Aaron nodded. He recognised the third young dancer who was leaning back against the dressing table in a red, silk dressing gown. But he wasn't interested in renewing their acquaintance. It was the blonde haired young man that was relaxing in the chair in front of her he had come for.
Robert shifted a little uncomfortably, as if he could feel Aaron's gaze burning into the back of his neck. He turned around in his chair.

“Ah, Aaron!” he said, a little too enthusiastically, “I was just about to come and get you. I said we'd walk the girls home. Lucille is in Bay View so I......”

“Yeah, fine” said Aaron, taking a swig from his mug. But it wasn't.

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Aaron was quiet as he and Rob escorted the girls home. Not that it mattered particularly, as he had paired up with Rosalyn who was more than happy to keep a one-side conversation going.

“......so I said to Mother, you say what you like, I'm going on the stage. Mind you, if she saw this show she'd have an absolute fit! Then again, I could have joined the Royal Ballet and she'd have still have had a fit....”

They had paused at Bay View, just long enough for them to say goodnight to Lucille and for Robert to flash her one of his well-mannered smiles.

Rosalyn didn't notice how quiet Aaron was being. But Robert did.

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Blackpool- The Golden Palm Tree Guesthouse - August 1948 – Sunday evening 10:00pm

Of course, Daniel would have to go and do something to add to Aaron's increasingly sour mood. Not that he did anything to Aaron. Neither did he actually do anything bad. And, if Aaron was being fair, it was a nice romantic gesture. And it was nice to see. Especially when you didn't think you were seeing enough yourself.

“Oh, that's better” said Faith as she sat down at the lounge table and kicked off her shoes, “I feel like I've been at it all day” she added as she massaged her feet through her stockings.

“So. What was this present Daniel got you?” she asked, looking over towards Patrick, sitting on the sofa.

“How do you know he got me a present?” the young man asked, putting down the Radio Times he was reading.

“I just happened to be passing your room earlier. When I was changing the towels in the bathroom” Faith replied

Patrick sighed, “Alright. I'll go and get it” he said as he got up from the sofa and headed for the door.

“Where is Daniel anyway?” Faith asked
“He's gone to bed” said Patrick, “He's got to be up at the crack of dawn for his train” he added as he left.

“Why do you have to be so nosy Nan?” said Aaron, looking up from his electronics magazine on the table. He had been quite happy reading about television sets until his grandmother had walked in.

“It's nice to see Daniel making an effort love” Faith replied, “I want to see what he got him so I can say how nice it is”

“What if it's horrible?” said Aaron

Faith sighed, “I'm trying to be encouraging. I've already decided it's a lovely present. It could be a rusty old mangle for all I know!”

“Very romantic” Aaron muttered, looking down at his magazine.

Faith thought for a moment. “Where's your Robert hiding himself?” she asked

“Said he wanted to lie down and read his book” said Aaron, “So....” he added with a shrug.

Faith was about to reply when Patrick walked back into the room.

“Now it's not much” he said, putting a small black pouch onto the table, “It's not valuable or anything, it's just something he had made” he added as he awkwardly pulled back the drawstrings.

Faith picked up a small rectangular silver tag on a thin chain. “Oh, I know what this is. Ethan used to wear one!”

“Who's Ethan?” said Aaron, looking up from his reading

“He was that lovely young Canadian who stayed here during the War love” said Faith, “This is like an Army thing for identification”

“A dog-tag” said Patrick

“That's it!” said Faith, “He used to wear it under his vest” she added with a wistful smile. Aaron shifted a little uncomfortably in his chair.

“What's it say love?” she went on, “The prints a bit small in this light”

“Nan. You can get glasses for free now, I've told ya” said Aaron.

“It's Spanish” said Patrick, looking a bit embarrassed, “It says 'Te amo por siempre' “

“Aw!” said Faith with a smile, “What does it mean?” she added after a pause

“It's, um....” started Patrick, “Love you forever”

“Oh. Isn't that lovely” said Faith as she handed the tag back to Patrick and helped him put it into the bag.

“He's got one too. Identical” Patrick mumbled

“Did he get them in some far-off, romantic location on his travels then?” said Faith with a warm smile.
“Uh, no. He had them made in a jewelers in Leeds last week” Patrick replied

“Still” said Faith, “It's a lovely thought”.

Patrick smiled and headed out of the room.

Faith looked at Aaron, who was reading his magazine, a thoughtful expression on his face. She was about to speak to him when he got up.

“I think I'll head up. Might as well read upstairs” he said, “Night Nan” he added.

“Night love” Faith replied, watching her grandson as he left the room.

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11:00pm

When Aaron got upstairs Robert was still engrossed in his detective novel. Aaron had started to tell him about Patrick's present before he had been shushed. His partner had promised he would be finished in half an hour as he wanted to get to the end. But 10:30 had come and gone.

So Aaron was already curled up on his side of the bed and half dozing when Robert closed his book with an angry, “Well that was ridiculous!”

“What?” mumbled Aaron, keeping his eyes closed.

“My book!” said Rob, “It turns out, right, that the murderer was the half-brother who was killed in Chapter Four. Only he wasn't dead, he faked it and came back disguised as a woman. I mean, that would never happen in real life would it?”

“Yeah, well lots of things don't happen in real life do they?” muttered Aaron

“Well” said Robert, rolling over to his side “I'm all yours now”

“And I'm tired” Aaron replied quietly

Rob frowned and rolled onto his back.

“What was this present you were going to tell me about?” he asked, changing tack

Aaron rolled onto his own back,

“It was this silver dog-tag. You know, with some writing on it” he replied

“I didn't know Patrick even had a dog” said Robert, ”Must be very quiet”

“No, it's.....” Aaron started

“So what does it say?” asked Rob, “'Fido'? “

“It's not for a dog” said Aaron, “It's like an identity disc”

“Aaron. I was joking” said Robert with a smile, “We had them in the RAF”
“Were ya?” said Aaron wearily

“So, what does is say?” asked Rob

“Love you forever” Aaron replied, “Only in Spanish”

Robert thought for a moment. “Sounds like someone feels guilty to me” he said eventually, “I mean, it's not even Patrick's birthday or anything. Or is it? I mean your Nan would have said wouldn't she?”

“Doesn't have to be someone's birthday to be romantic” said Aaron, rolling onto his side and turning his back on Rob, “Least. Shouldn't have to be” he added

Rob was quiet. He rolled over onto his side and leaned in close.

“Night then” he whispered

“Night” Aaron said quietly back.

Rob gave Aaron a quick kiss on the back of his neck and then curled in behind him, wrapping his left arm around his partner's middle.

He was still awake by the time Aaron had dozed off. And he had been thinking. He knew why he thought Daniel had bought that dog-tag. This was about making a gesture. To show someone they were not being taken for granted.

And perhaps Rob had been doing that, just a little, with Aaron. After all, when they came back here Aaron slotted back into his old routine of helping out his Nan. So these trips were always more of a holiday for Robert than his partner. He was well aware of that.

And he knew that gave him more time to chat to the other guests. And it was good to do that. To talk to people who's lives were just that bit broader than back home in Hadleigh or Emmerdale. And Aaron was usually so keen for them to come here and do things in his home town, to show Rob some of his old haunts. True, he hadn't wanted to go to that show on the pier. And with them going home on Tuesday, there wasn't a lot they could do tomorrow. But Robert already had an idea.....

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Monday morning 6:00am

Daniel smiled as he sat down on Patrick side of the bed. His partner was curled up asleep, with his floppy fringe all messed up. It was a shame to wake him really, but he knew he had to say goodbye before he left, this time.

“Pat” Danny said quietly, giving the other young man a quick shake.

“Hmmm. You going now?” Patrick said tiredly as he sat up.

“Uh huh” said Daniel, “I'll be back Friday week. I promise” he replied. As he talked he idly ran his hand down the silver chain Pat was wearing and turned the dog-tag around in his fingers.
“Now come here a minute” Daniel added, leaning in close, “I wanna be discrete” he added as he pressed his lips against Patrick's for a lingering kiss.

Monday morning 10:30am

“Here you go love” said Faith as she handed Robert a metal lunch box. “That'll keep you going”

“Thank you” said Rob.

“Well I hope a day at the beach cheers our Aaron up. He's got a right mood on him” said Faith.

Robert frowned, “Actually, about that......” he started

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“And I'll pay for the food of course” said Rob, “I mean, I could do it when we're back home but Aaron does all the cooking and, well, it's not as if we could ask one of the villagers”

“No it's fine” said Faith, “I think it's a nice gesture before you go home. And Patrick will help, he likes to keep busy when Daniel's away”

“Thank you” said Robert with a smile

Faith walked over, a smile playing across her own lips, “I knew there was a big romantic heart in there” she said, gently putting her hand on Rob's shirt front, “First thing I thought when I met you”

“Well” she added, “Almost the first thing I thought”

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Monday night 7:00pm

“Ah ah, you won't need a jacket” said Robert as Aaron walked over to the stand in the hall.

“But it'll be cold by the time we finished eating” said Aaron

“We're not going that far” said Rob with a big grin. He leaned over to the door to the lounge and gave it a quick knock. Aaron frowned, puzzled.

“Come in!” said Faith brightly from inside the room.

Robert opened the door and walked in, Aaron in tow. The lighting was low, just the lamp on in the corner and the glow from the front of the radio set, playing quietly away in the background.

“Your table is ready, gentlemen” said Faith with a smile as she lit the two candlesticks on the
dining table.

“What, we're eating here?” said Aaron, his hands deep in his trousers pockets.

Robert sighed, “Aaron” he started, “We're not eating here! We're having a romantic meal here”

He curled his arm around the younger man's shoulders, “You know. Our last night here and everything. I thought it would be nice” he said with a warm smile.

Aaron looked down, a little bashful all of a sudden.

“Right, you boys sit down” said Faith.

Aaron grinned as he sat down at the table.

“Eh. This is the best tablecloth” he said as he ran his hands over the cotton cover, “I don't think it's been out since Mr Axelby died”

Robert just smiled as he sat down and looked across at his partner.

“Look” said Rob, “I know it's just a fish supper...”

“What?” said Aaron, “No desert?”

“Aaron. There's desert!” Robert replied

“Better be” Aaron mumbled, “It would be just having our tea in the dark otherwise and...”

“Aaron” Robert said softly, “This is supposed to be special. I mean, I couldn't do this if we went out now could I?” he asked as he reached over and gently took Aaron's hand in his.

“And we've got the place to ourselves” Rob went on, “With those....I mean, with the other guests out at their show”

“A special evening” said Robert, running his thumb over the back of Aaron's hand, “With my special lad” he added

Aaron beamed.

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Later

“So...” started Robert, as he lay on his side looking down at Aaron, lying in bed next to him.

“Am I back in your good books?” he asked with a smile

Aaron grinned back, “You're always in my good books” he replied.

Robert leaned in for a kiss.....

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Aaron hadn't caught what Robert had just said. Not that he needed to hear to know what it would be about. It was Rob's latest obsession, photography. Or, to be fair, one of his older obsessions that he had decided to dust off. And he had a good reason to, to start with. After all, he had been the one listing all the contents of the Manor House and helping Mr McCoy write the guide book. So why shouldn't he be the one to take the photos?

Not that he was working on the Manor House now. He had been snapping the extension he'd had built to their porch. Now the living room would not be as cold in Winter, as long as you kept its door closed. Which was what Aaron had done. And which was why he hadn't heard Robert talking in the extension.

“I didn't get a word of that” said Aaron as Rob walked into the room.

“I said “, Robert started, “I've taken a couple of snaps of the porch. You know, to send to people”

“What people?” said Aaron, as he picked up another potato from the bowl on the floor and started to peel it, “It's just a porch”

“Aaron.......” Rob started

“It's not even as if you built it” Aaron continued, “Those blokes from Hendersons did’

Robert sighed and sat down, fiddling idly with the settings on his camera.

“Why are you in here anyway?” said Rob, nodding toward the bowl of potatoes

“It's warmer in here” said Aaron sulkily, “Post for you by the way” he added.

Robert walked over to his desk and opened up the letter lying there, “It's from Lewis” he said, “Wants to know if I'll go to the RAF reunion in November” he added with a smile

“Will ya?” asked Aaron, as he continued peeling

“I ought to really” said Rob, “I mean, he did lend us his flat didn't he? And he has offered to put me up. It's in London this year. And I've not seen him in ages”

Aaron knew that Robert wasn't really asking him what he thought. He was just thinking out aloud. And he seemed quite enthusiastic, to Aaron's surprise. Rob barely mentioned his RAF days and Aaron didn't want to push him.

“Mind you. I don't know if my uniform will still fit” said Robert, “I'll have to try it on”

“Maybe we'll have to cut back on the potatoes Dingle” Rob added with a grin.

“Fine, boss” said Aaron sarcastically as he sat back on the sofa with his arms folded, as if he just gone on strike.

Robert ignored him and headed for the stairs, ruffling Aaron's hair as he passed him.
“Geroff!” said Aaron, a broad smile on his face. As Rob walked up the stairs, he went back to his peeling.

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That evening........

It was funny how Robert still managed to surprise him, even after three years of living together. Well, perhaps surprise was the wrong word. Impress might have been a better one.

There is only one photograph of Robert in uniform in the Gatehouse. It's from his wedding and it would have been disposed of long ago, if it wasn't for the fact that it was the only picture Rob had of his best man and friend Lewis. But as it is a wedding photograph, Robert has never shown it to his partner. Nor has Aaron ever seen Rob in uniform. Until now.

“So. How do I look?” said Robert loudly as he walked down the stairs into the living room and spread out his arms.

Aaron dumped the tea-towel he was using to dry the dishes and strolled out of the kitchen. He paused in the doorway, and drank in the view.

“Not a bad fit is it? There's my cap as well of course” said Robert, “But I know my head isn't any bigger, despite what you might say” he added with a grin.

Aaron walked over, a smile playing around his lips.

“Think its too tight?” asked Rob, “I've not put that much weight on since then”

Aaron ran his finger down the buttoned up front of Rob's dark blue jacket, resting his hand on the buckle that drew it in at the middle.

“No. Looks great to me” Aaron said softly, staring into his partner's eyes. He leaned up a little and pressed his lips gently against Robert's.

“Mmm” said Rob as Aaron broke away, “I'd have worn this sooner if I knew how you'd react” he added with a smile.

Aaron just smiled back.

Rob paused. He spoke again, this time his voice quiet, “Look more like a hero now, do I?” he asked. But there was no hint of bragging as he said it.

Aaron wasn't sure what to say at first. He wanted to ask Robert if he was sure this reunion was a good idea after all. Meeting up with an old friend was one thing, but what about the memories it would bring back? What about the crash? He didn't want Rob to go through the anxieties he used to have. Not because he would think less of him because of it. Not for a moment.

But that could wait for now. Robert had come down stairs with a real spring in his step. He had that same confident air that had bowled Aaron over the first time he had seen him in the Manor House. All those years ago.

“You always look like a hero to me Robert” said Aaron, leaning in for another kiss
Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse – mid September 1948 – one evening

“And Dr McGann has told her she's got to stay in bed” Patrick said down the telephone line.

“Well that's one good thing. She's been trying to get him into her bedroom for years” said Aaron, leaning back into Robert's desk chair, the phone in his hand.

“No, she really is bad Aaron. And I can't run this place single....” replied Patrick, “...on my own” he added quietly.

Aaron mouthed a silent 'thank you' as Robert handed him a mug of tea, before settling himself down on the sofa with his own mug and the paper.

“Who's staying there right now?” Aaron asked.

“Just the two showgirls. Your Nan told me not to let it any new people. Daniel's here, every other weekend, but he's no trouble” said Patrick

“Can you get Mrs Axelby to come round?” Aaron suggested

“She's not here. She's at her sister's in Whitby. Anyway, it's not just that. Your Nan's getting a bit maudlin. She's been sat in bed going through her own photo albums. I really think she'd like to see you”

“Oh. I'll speak to the Robert. Can you ring us tomorrow, about seven?” Aaron asked

“I'll try” said Patrick, “As long as there's no queue for this phone box. There's an old dear outside now who's being giving me the evil eye for the last five minutes”

“Thanks Patrick. Bye for now” said Aaron as he put the phone down.

“What's wrong?” said Rob, as Aaron flopped down on the sofa next to him.

“It's Nan” said Aaron, “She's been stuck in bed for the last two weeks. That's not like her at all”

'Well, not on her own', Robert thought to himself. But he decided against saying it. “Do you want to go up there?” he asked instead.

“Just for a long weekend. Haven't you got all your National Trust stuff to finish though?” Aaron asked.

“Well, you take the car and go up. I can fend for myself for a few days” said Rob

“If you're sure, Mr Sugden “ said Aaron with a grin.

“Well, as long as it is just a few days” Robert smiled back. He leaned over and kissed Aaron on the lips.
Faith hadn't heard the knock on her bedroom door as she dozed away.

“Oh, thank you love” she said as Patrick handed her a cup of cocoa. “Did I hear someone arguing earlier?” she added as she propped herself up in bed. “I hope those two madams aren't being a nuisance”

“No. Everything's fine” Patrick lied, “Your Aaron's coming up on Friday” he said quickly, to change the subject.

“That'll be nice” said Faith sipping her drink. “Sit down a minute love” she added, “You look worn out” she said, patting the space on the bed next to her.

“I'm alright”, Patrick replied as he sat down. But it wasn't true.

Faith was quiet for a moment. “You know, sometimes I wonder if it was a good idea turning this place into a guest house” she said.

“Still, I'm sure Charles wouldn't have minded” she added.

“Who's Charles?” asked Patrick.

Faith smiled and reached over to the photo album lying next to her.

“That's Charles” she said, pointing to a photograph of a striking, grey-haired man standing on the steps of the house. You could tell from his suit that it was an old photo. Either that or he was just no slave to fashion. But, in any case, the painted sign outside the front door wasn't there.

“Course, we're going back a few years now love” said Faith.

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An employment agency in Leeds – The Early 1920's

No one would have accused Miss Evelyn Blake of rushing things. Faith had felt as if she had been sat in front of her desk for an hour, even though it had been a matter of minutes. And her office was as neat as her own appearance. It made Faith wish she'd gone more to town on her own get-up. But what was the point. If you were applying to be a housekeeper, you may as well look like one, surely?

“So”, Evelyn continued, “Any family attachments?”

“I've a grown-up son, he's in the merchant navy” replied Faith, “And a daughter, but she's married
“And what about Mister Dingle?” Evelyn went on, “I take it there is a Mister Dingle” she added, peering over the top of her glasses.

Faith nodded.

“And what about Mister Dingle?” Evelyn went on, “I take it there is a Mister Dingle” she added, peering over the top of her glasses.

“Some of our clients are looking for married couples. Cook and handyman, that sort of thing. Does your husband have any special skills?” the other lady asked.

“Not unless you count chasing after barmaids” Faith replied, “Look love, cards on the table. We're separated, that's not going to be a problem is it?”

Evelyn winced slightly at being called 'love', but carried on, “Well, no. In fact that can be a boon with some of our unattached clients. It reassures them that we’re not sending them a gold-digger”

“Though, in my experience, it's the families that need the reassurance” she added.

“Oh, I know what you mean love” said Faith, “It was like that with my last gentleman, Doctor Richardson. Bachelor he was. I looked after him until he died and his relatives kicked up a right fuss, just because he left me a little something in his will. I mean, if they cared that much why didn't they get up off their lazy ass.....uh, rear ends and look after him themselves”

“So you won't have a reference? With your last employer having died” Evelyn asked.

“Oh no, the Doctor wrote one for me when I'd been there a year” said Faith as she picked up a large black handbag from the floor and started to rummage in it, “He was very particular” she added as she handed over a neatly written note.

“You know how men can get, when they're on their own” said Faith.

“So you didn't live in?” Evelyn asked as she read the reference.

“Only for the last six months, when he was very ill” said Faith, “I had my own room of course” she added.

“Yes, quite” said Evelyn, “Well your reference is positively glowing” she went on. She paused, thinking for a moment.

“I do have one vacancy that could suit. For a retired solicitor. He lives alone, but it is rather a large house” she explained.

“I'm not afraid of hard work” said Faith.

“It's in Blackpool mind you” said Evelyn.

“Oh, I think I could adapt” Faith replied with a smile.

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Blackpool – No. 16 Albert Avenue – a week later
It was a nice looking house, Faith had to admit. Several floors high and only a short walk from the Royal Oak public house, which would be an advantage. Her arrival into the street had not gone unnoticed. As she waited on the doorstep she saw that the severe looking woman over the road outside The Sea View guesthouse was taking a very long time to wash her front windows.

“Now you can’t be Mr Lesley” said Faith with a smile as the neatly dressed, grey haired gentleman helped her off with her coat and hat.

“The agency told me to expect a mature gentlemen” she added. To be fair, she was only laying on the flattery a little. Mr Lesley must have had a good fifteen years on her, but he still had his good looks. And the charm to go with it.

“This way, please” he smiled as he steered Faith into the lounge.

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“And this would be your room” said Mr Lesley as he escorted Faith into the small attic bedroom. “It's been empty for some time. Our Miss Rudge wouldn't live in”

“Miss Rudge?” asked Faith as she walked over to the window and stared out at the view of the back of the tall houses nearby.

“Our last house keeper. A local lady. Well, to be frank, she was mother's choice, not mine. And with mother no longer with us, I decided for a bit of a fresh start”

“So, do you think you'd be comfortable here Mrs Dingle?” Mr Lesley asked

“Oh yes love” the lady replied, “And please, call me Faith”

“What a charming name” said Mr Lesley, with a warm smile.

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“And this, as you can see of course, is the kitchen” said Mr Lesley

Faith looked out through the window into the yard outside and the small lean-to against the far wall.

“.....so it would just be a light breakfast, lunch and dinner. Though I do dine out sometimes at the Constitutional Club. But of course I would let you know in advance”

“That all sounds fine” said Faith

“Oh, and I'm not one for supper but I do like one thing before retiring” said Mr Lesley

“Yes Mr Lesley?” said Faith with a smile.

“A hot cocoa” the man replied

“Oh, I'm quite partial to something warm in bed myself” replied Faith.
Three months later, late one evening

Faith sat up in bed and took a sip from her china mug, before putting it on the nightstand next to the left side of the bed.

“Cocoa alright Charles?” she asked, turning to the man sitting up in bed next to her.

“Yes thank you” Mr Lesley replied, as he put his cup down on his own nightstand.

He rolled over onto his side and looked at Faith with a smile.

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No.16 Albert Avenue, Blackpool – a couple of years later

“It was packed in the Royal last night” said Beryl, as she relaxed in one of the lounge chairs and sipped at her tea.

“That Mrs Rudge was singing. You know, that French piece who's married to our postman. She always puts on airs that one, just because she used to work in a nightclub in Paris. Or so she says” she went on

“Nightclub?” said Faith, disbelieving, “Well we know what that means. A brothel with a piano player more like”

“Exactly” said Beryl, “Mind you, she is a friendly sort, I'll give her that. That sister in law of hers was in as well. Least said about her the better!”

“Cynthia you mean?” said Faith, “The one with the face like a wet fortnight in Morecambe?”

“That's her” said Beryl, “She used to work here. When it was the Lesleys I mean. Talking of which, has it all gone through? Is it all in your name now I mean?”

“Yes love” said Faith, as she drank her own cup of tea.

“And you're still going ahead with the guesthouse idea?” Beryl asked.

“Oh, yes” said Faith, “I don't want to move away now. And I can't rattle around in this place on my own. It was too big when it was just Charles and me. God rest his soul” she explained.

“Anyway” Faith went on, “It'll be company for me. I miss having a man about the place.”

“You don't think your husband will put in an appearance? If he gets to hear of your good fortune I
“I said a *man* Beryl“ said Faith, shaking her head.

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The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – a couple of years later

It was a shock. Especially after six years or more. But that was the thing with family rows, they could fester away for ages if you let them.

“Well, can we come in or not Mother?” the dark haired young lady on the doorstep asked sharply.

“If you must, you must” Faith replied, as she stood back to let her daughter into the hallway.

“And who's this little feller?” Faith asked with a smile, as she spotted the small, dark haired boy hiding behind his mother.

“Aaron, this is your Nan” her daughter explained.

Faith felt that one word, 'Nan' putting years on her in an instant. But she recovered herself with a sigh and leaned over to ruffle her grandson's hair.

“Well you can tell he's a Dingle” said Faith with a smile, “He's got my good looks”

“You needn't worry mother” the young lady went on, “We won't be staying for long”.

And as we know, that wasn't true. At least, it wasn't true for Aaron. Although he didn't know it at the time, Aaron had just arrived *home*. 
Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse – September 1948 – very early morning

Aaron quietly opened the door from the landing to their bedroom. It was pitch black outside, so there was only the hall light to see by. It seemed a shame to wake Robert up. He looked so cute curled up there on his side of the bed with his blonde hair all messed up. Even if he did have those daft striped pyjamas on. But Aaron knew Rob would be unhappy if he set off for Blackpool without a word.

“Robert” Aaron said, a little too quietly as he sat down on the tiny space at the edge of the bed. “Rob” he said again, as he gave his partner a gentle shake.

“Hmm? What time is it?” said Robert as he eased himself up a little and squinted at the alarm clock.

“I'm off now” Aaron replied

Rob reached over and ran his hand down the inside of the lapel on Aaron's jacket.

“This is like the old days” he said with a grin.

“What do you mean?” asked Aaron

“Up at the Manor House during the War. You having to sneak off back to your own room” said Robert, smiling broadly

“Well, I'm not sneaking off” said Aaron, smiling back, “I'm driving up to my Nan's”

“Call me tonight?” asked Rob, his hand still on his partner's jacket.

“Course I will” said Aaron, “I'll let you know how Nan is. Just in case I have to stay on a bit longer. You going to be able to do your own breakfast?”

“Aaron” said Robert with a sigh, “I can cope”

“Don't do too much” Aaron replied, “Don't want you putting me out of a job do we?” he said, leaning in and pressing his lips against Rob's. As he broke away, he realised the other younger man was still holding onto his jacket. So Aaron leaned in again. Well, he didn't have to set off exactly this minute now, did he?

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The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse - September 1948 – Friday lunchtime
Aaron could hear the chatter in the lounge as he put his suitcase down in the hallway.

“Hello girls. You alright?” said Aaron, poking his head around the lounge door

“Fine. Except my belly thinks my throat has been cut” said Lizzie sarcastically as she sat at the lounge table, staring at an empty bowl in front of her.

To tell the truth, it wasn't just the lack of food that was putting her in a bad mood. The latest young lad she'd hooked up with had turned out to be only interested in something casual. Very casual in fact. She'd sneaked him out of her room one morning, just before Mrs Dingle was ill and that was the last she'd seen of him.

Rosalyn just gave Aaron a quick smile and went back to reading her copy of The Lady.

“You should be more patient” she said to her friend as Aaron left the room, “I mean it's hardly the Ritz here is it?” she added.

Aaron could still hear them talking as he headed to the kitchen, “Well, she never should have taken him on!” said Lizzie, “She must be daft. I mean, he's obviously not up to the job is he? Only having one arm”

Aaron fumed. He thought of marching back into the living room right then. But instead, he carried on into the back of the house.

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“Alright Patrick” said Aaron as he walked into the kitchen. But the other young man was leaning over the stove and didn't appear to have heard him.

Aaron looked around the room. It wasn't as tidy as usual. Not that his Nan was very tidy by nature. But it was usually spotless, thanks to Patrick helping out. But now the sink was full of laundry and the table was covered with breakfast things. That and a couple of soup tins with the tops taken off. In fact, the jagged lids looked a bit lethal to Aaron.

“Patrick?” Aaron said again, taking a step nearer to his friend.

“Oh. Hello Aaron” Patrick replied turning around, “I wasn't expecting you till later” he added as he moved the saucepan to one side of the cooker.

Aaron looked down at Patrick's hand. There were deep red marks across his palm and over the inside his fingers.

“What have you done to you hand?” Aaron asked, concerned

“Oh. Had some trouble with the tin opener. That's all” said Patrick.

“Come here” said Aaron, taking hold of his friends arm and walking him across to the kitchen sink.

“It's getting a bit too much, isn't it?” Aaron asked, as he turned on the tap and held Patrick's hand under it for a moment.
“No. It's fine. And Daniel will be here today, sometime, he'll help out. Well, for the weekend anyway” said Patrick.

Aaron said nothing. He wrapped a tea-towel around his friend's hand and started to dry it off.

“I mean. Can't let your Nan down can I?” said Patrick, “Those girls have already threatened to walk out twice. We can't have that” he said quietly

“Hah!” said Aaron as he dried Patrick's hand, “They don't know they're born. I'll chuck 'em out myself if they're not careful”

“Right you” said Aaron, “Sit down a minute”

“Shouldn't you check on your Nan?” Patrick asked as he reluctantly lowered himself down onto one of the kitchen chairs.

“In a minute” said Aaron,”You catch your breath right?” he insisted as he put his hands gently onto Patrick's shoulders.

“I'll sort out Gert and Daisy” he added, “Then I'll see how Nan is. Then I'm checking on you. So you stay sat here, there's a good lad” he added with a smile.

Aaron picked the saucepan up from the hob and headed out of the kitchen. He didn't like the look of Patrick. He'd looked as if he'd been boiling, the sweat clear under his floppy fringe. And the kitchen wasn't that hot, even if it was September.

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“Mind your backs!” said Aaron as he walked into the lounge, hot saucepan in hand.

“Bit rough and ready today I'm afraid” Aaron went on. He was talking at a brisk pace, not giving the two girls a chance to say anything, even if they wanted. He poured some soup into Rosalyn's bowl.

“Still. Can't get the staff can you?” he said sarcastically as he topped up Lizzie's bowl.

“Tuck in girls” said Aaron, “I'll bring you your desert later. And help yourself to the bread, don't be shy”

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Faith had just had the tiniest of swigs from the small silver bottle in her hand. Well, it was supposed to be medicinal wasn't it? And she was still ill. All the same, when she heard the knock on her bedroom door she quickly tucked the small flask under her pillow.

“Come in” she said, as she sat up and tided up her nightdress.

“Can't leave you for five minutes can I?” said Aaron with a big smile as he came in and sat down on the bed
“Aw. Hello love” said Faith, beaming. She opened her arms up to give her grandson a hug.

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“Anyway, so I was queuing in the butchers and Mr Mason was serving me. Young Mr Mason I mean, not old Mr Mason. So of course, he was flirting with me” said Faith

Aaron smiled. His Nan was sounding like her usual self at least.

“So I said 'what can you give me?' and he said 'I've got a small turkey, but you won't be able to do much with it' and I said, 'Oh, you'd be surprised' and then it happened” said Faith

“What happened?” asked Aaron

“I passed out” his grandmother replied, “Right there in the shop. And I'd been fine until then. I had a bit of a temperature mind, but no dizzy spells or anything” she added

“Next thing I knew, I was lying on my back and this man's voice was saying 'I'll just loosen your clothing’ ” Faith went on

'Not for the first time' Aaron thought to himself with a smile. “And you're feeling better now?” he asked

“Oh, yes love” said Faith, “I should be out of bed after the weekend”

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Aaron cut into the dining room, where the two guests were still sat at the lounge table.

“Right ladies” said Aaron as he scooped up the now empty soup bowls, “Plenty of room for desert I'm sure” he said briskly as he left the room.

He heard the crash from the kitchen before he'd even got into the room.

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“Right. Let's have a look at you young man” said Dr McGann as he perched on the end of Patrick's bed. But Patrick seemed dead to the World.

“Shouldn't you be in bed?” The Doctor said, turning to Faith as he opened his black bag and took out his stethoscope.

“Now now Edward” said Faith with a smile, as she demurely put her hand on her chest and pulled her robe a little tighter, “One thing at a time “

“Um. Yes, well” the young doctor stammered as he started to examine his new patient.
“It's definitely the same as your grandmother, so he'll have to be in bed for a week” said Dr McGann as he stood on the doorstep. “Fortunately, she seems well on the mend” he added.

“Very uh, vital woman, Mrs Dingle” the Doctor went on.

Aaron didn't know what to say, so just nodded and thanked the young man before closing the front door.

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It was that final remark. That was the straw that broke the camel's back as far as Aaron was concerned. The door to the lounge was open and Lizzie was in full flow as she and Rosalyn walked out into the hall.

“......so I suppose that's supper out of the window as well!” Rosalyn complained.

“I mean it's ridiculous! I know he can't help being ill, I suppose. But if you ask me he belongs in a home” said Lizzie.

Aaron's fixed glare should have been enough for her to know she'd said the wrong thing.

“No, it's alright” Aaron started angrily, “I'll fix your supper. I mean it's hard work sitting around in half a swimming costume all night isn't it?”

“Now look” Rosalyn started frostily, “We are paying guests after all and....”

“No, you look” said Aaron, “This isn't a hotel. It's a guesthouse. A family guesthouse. And Patrick doesn't work here, he lives here. You're lucky he tried to look after you at all”

“And if you don't like it, you can try somewhere else. See how you get on when the landlady doesn't like how much gin you knock back” said Aaron, looking at Rosalyn.

“Or when she doesn't like the fellers you bring home” he added pointedly as he looked at Lizzie.

A silence fell over the hall. It was broken by Faith who had just appeared in the doorway of the kitchen.

“It's alright Aaron. I think you've said you piece love” she said. Aaron just shook his head and marched up the stairs.

“No need to pack your bags girls” said Faith, “We'll be back to normal by Monday, don't you worry” she said as she turned to go back into the kitchen.

“Oh” said Faith, turning around again and resting her hand on the door frame, “And Patrick is in a home. This is his home” she added.
Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse - that evening 9:00pm

“Hello Dingle” said Robert with a smile as he relaxed in his desk chair, “I'd almost given up on you”

“Yeah. Sorry” said Aaron, “I had to wait for Daniel to show up before I came out. Nan's much better but Patrick's gone down with it now”

“Oh no” said Rob, “When do you think you'll be home?” he asked

“Monday I hope” said Aaron, “If Nan's back on her feet. Daniel's here till then and he's going to help me get everything back to normal. Patrick's been trying to do too much and he didn't tell Nan he was ill of course. Didn't want to worry her”

“Oh, and I had to have words with those showgirls. They didn't do a thing to help and I know for a fact Nan's place is the cheapest for miles. They just complained and made remarks about Patrick”

“Well I'm glad you're there then” said Robert, “Even if I wish you were still here, if you see what I mean” he added.

Aaron smiled. He leaned over to the metal rest in the phonebox and idly moved some of the dust around with his hand as he spoke.

“You been busy today?” he asked

“Yeah. Had the committee round about the Manor House. It's not open to the public till Spring and they're already planning the opening ceremony”

“Who was round?” asked Aaron.

“Oh. McCoy, of course. Mrs King. Sorry, I should say Councilor Mrs King and Miss Phipps. She asked after you by the way” said Rob

“Did she?” Aaron asked

“Yeah. 'No young Mr Dingle?’ she said. I told her you had family business and left me to fend for myself. I think she fancies you!” Robert explained

“Shurrup! No she doesn't” Aaron replied

“Must be her eyes going. All that reading in the Library” Rob teased

“Yeah. Maybe I ought to stay here a week” his partner said, “You know, make sure Nan's really alright”

“Typical!” said Rob, “Lauren was right. She said you can't get reliable servants like you did before the War”
Aaron was quiet for a moment, “You didn't say Lauren had come round” he said

“Didn't I?” said Robert, “Oh. Well, she's on the committee too. Anyway they weren't here long. They decided Nicola will do the honours. Well, Nicola decided she'd do the honours if I'm honest”

“That right” said Aaron levelly.

Rob was annoyed with himself. He'd inadvertently killed the light mood of their chat and he hadn't meant to for a minute.

“So. You going to ring me tomorrow evening? Let me know how things are progressing?” said Robert

“Might not be any change” said Aaron, shrugging as he did so.

“Well, ring me anyway” said Robert, “I....I just want to hear from you that's all. I mean, that's the point of this thing isn't it? So we can talk when we're apart”

Aaron sighed. He was annoyed that the light mood had gone from their chat too. Maybe if those girls at the guesthouse hadn't made him see red, he would have been in a better mood. Or maybe if Rob had mentioned that Lauren had been on the committee straight out. But then again, it wasn't Robert's fault that the Doctor's daughter obviously had a big crush on him. He was interrupted from his thoughts by the sound of someone banging on the glass of the phonebox. He could see an older woman in the dark, who's patience was obviously wearing a little thin.

“Course I'll ring” said Aaron. “Sometime after seven, see how things are going. I've got to go now anyway. Some old dear wants her turn”

“I can't really talk” said Aaron, “But, well, you know” he added, his voice soft this time.

Robert smiled as he sat in their home, “Love you” he breathed down the line.

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“About time too!” Miss Rudge said indignantly as Aaron stood out of the phonebox. It would be her, he thought, as held the door open. Miss Rudge just kept glaring.

“You want to be careful” said Aaron, “Wind could change and you'll stay like that” he added as he marched off into the night and headed for the Guesthouse.

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The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Friday evening

The house was very quiet. When Aaron opened the lounge door only Daniel was there. He had laid out the contents of his kit-bag on the carpet in front of the fire and was sorting through them.

“How are the invalids?” Aaron asked
“Pat's fast asleep” said Daniel, “And your Nan's up in her room reading” he added.

“Fancy a cuppa?” Aaron asked.

“Hmm?” Daniel replied. He was staring at a small tube of metal. For the life of him, he couldn't remember what it was for. “Oh, yeah. Thanks” he said.

The kitchen was now remarkably tidy. If he had to pick a word to describe it, Aaron would have said “shipshape”. Which was very appropriate, considering Daniel had been the one tidying up.

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“Thanks” said Daniel as Aaron handed him a mug of tea.

Aaron never really got the chance to speak to Daniel that much. And with his Nan and Patrick laid up, now seemed as good a time as any.

“You having a Spring clean?” said Aaron, “Well a late-Summer clean I mean. I suppose” he added as he sat down crossed-legged on the floor next to the young sailor.

Daniel sighed. “I can't do this in my place in Hull” he said, “There's three of us packed into one room and the landlady doesn't give you the run of the house”

“Not everyone's like your Nan” he added.

“Hah. Well that's true” Aaron agreed with a smile, “Why don't you come every weekend then?” he asked

“Can't afford to mate” said Daniel, “I've got to save something from this Holland lark and they don't pay as well, these short hauls. I mean, I've got to pay Pat back for my course haven't I?”

“Don't say anything to Pat. About that I mean” Danny added quickly, “He doesn't know. He'd forget about it if I let him”

Daniel looked gloomy all of a sudden, so Aaron decided to change the subject

“Hey, that's the photo in the kitchen isn't it? The one up on the mantelpiece” said Aaron, pointed to a slightly crumpled snap on the floor.

“Yeah” said Danny with a smile picking it up, “That's my 'safe' picture”

Aaron looked puzzled.................

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Port of Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada – July 1947

He'd hated sending that letter. More than he could have told anyone. Not that there was anyone he could have told. Not on the ship. At least Patrick wouldn't be on his own while he was away. At least he had Mrs D. Sure, she was his landlady but she was his friend too. And he had tried to tell him how much he would miss him. How special he was to him. But it was hard to find the words sometimes. Pat was the one good at that.
He wished he had a friend right now. Someone he could tell how hurt he was that he wouldn't be going home to Blackpool as he planned. That he'd miss Christmas and New Year with Pat, all because their flaming ship had broken down and everyone was scrabbling around for a new posting.

The room in the boarding house was tiny. But at least it was clean. And at least he knew the other lads in the room. Plus you got to eat your meals around the table in the dining room. He'd been in plenty of places when you had to go out. Or else sneak some fish and chips in your room and hope the smell wouldn't be too bad.

Of course, nothing could be as bad as Patrick had told him about the home. Where all the boys had to sit at a big table in the hall and weren't allowed to speak. He frowned. He'd have to try and not to think about Pat. How else would he get through the next few months? The last ones had been bad enough.

With a sigh, he laid back on his bunk and picked his crumpled copy of “Hell At Eagle Gulch” up from the floor. Maybe that would take his mind off things. But it didn't work. It was only a matter of minutes before he dug out his photo from his kit-bag and looked at it. It was him and Pat on the steps of the Golden Palmtree, with Mrs D standing between them. One of her 'gentleman friends' had taken it. He used to do his own developing in that small backroom near the kitchen that wasn't used. So he'd made a copy for Daniel to take with him. It must have been a long process to develop snaps as Mrs D was always going into that back room to help him. And she'd be in there for ages.

“You mooning over a snap of your girl?” the other young man said loudly as he walked into the room. It was Jimmy. He'd been on the ship that had broken down and was hawking around for some new work too In between chasing after any Canadian women he could get his hands on that is.

“You know, that nurse you always go and see back home” Jimmy continued as he flopped down on his own bunk.

“No. It's my Nan. I always stay at hers in Blackpool. Well since the folks died anyway” said Daniel. Well, it wasn't a complete lie. Danny's parents were both dead and he did always stay in Blackpool. It was just with someone else's Nan. That was all.

“Give us a look” said Jimmy, taking the photo, “Oh. I was expecting a white haired old lady in a pinny” he said as he took in the picture of Faith.

“Nah. She married very young” said Daniel.

“Who's the pretty boy?” Jimmy went on.

“That's my cousin Patrick” said Daniel, “He lives with her”. Again, not a complete lie.

“And his...?” Jimmy started. Danny knew damn well he the other man wanted to ask about his arm. Just because of idle curiosity.

“Dunkirk” said Daniel angrily and snatched the photo back. As far as he was concerned, discussion about his partner was at an end. Even if he was pretending the young man in the picture was only his cousin.

“Well, I'm going talent spotting. Sure you won't come along?” Jimmy asked as he stood up.

“I'm fine here thanks” said Daniel, as he lay back on his bed and picked his book up again. The other young sailor nodded and headed out of the room.
But he wasn't fine. As soon as the coast was clear he stared at his picture again and at the dark haired young man with the floppy fringe standing in it. He was very far from being fine...............

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The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Friday evening

“Is that bed still in the room by the kitchen. The one your Robert used after that operation he had?” Daniel asked.

Aaron smiled. It was nice to hear that. 'Your Robert'.

“Uh. Yeah. Why'd you ask?” asked Aaron

Daniel had started to pack his things neatly back into his kit-bag.

“I better kip down here. With Pat being sick” Danny explained, “I'll stow this next door and then go and read my book upstairs for a bit. I mean, I ought to keep him company, even if he doesn't know I'm there”

“Your Nan told me about earlier” Daniel started, “Thanks for, you know, sticking up for Pat” he added as he put more of his things away.

“That's alright “ said Aaron with a smile.

Danny stopped and sat back on his heels for a moment. “Do you know, right? Pat looked after all those lads in that rotten training centre for years. He even went to some of their funerals, when no-one else would”.

“And he's written all those letters to the Government, trying to get you lot something for your War work. And he never hears anything from the other lads”

“I know about the letters” Aaron said, unsure of what to add. Fortunately, Daniel closed the topic down for him.

Danny stood up. “You're a good mate Aaron” he said leaning down and giving the other young man a quick squeeze on the shoulder before he left the room.

And talking of those lads from the training centre, earlier that day one of them just got some news he didn't want to hear............

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The Sugden Farm Emmerdale – September 1948 – Friday night

Adam was sitting on his bed, looking at one his favourite photos. It was from well before the War,
when his Dad was still alive and when he and his sisters had just been children. They'd been
dragged off to some studio in town, all in their Sunday best, just to have it done.

Now Dad was gone, Holly was gone. And Hannah was in London. Married to a medical student
she'd met when she was an ambulance driver in Manchester during the War. Not that he could
begrudge her being happy and having a new family. After all, he was happy with his.

Victoria walked into the bedroom, a mug of tea in each hand and passed one over to her husband.
Adam put the photo down and took his mug, forcing a smile.

“So” Victoria started carefully, “Are you going to tell me?” she asked as she sat down next to him.

“Tell you what?” Adam replied glumly.

“Why you hit your new....your Mum's husband to be” Victoria asked. She had just stopped herself
from saying 'step-father', which she knew would have been like a red rag to a bull.

Adam sighed and started to tell her....................

TO BE CONTINUED

Chapter End Notes

Gert and Daisy were a British female comedy double act, popular in the 1940s and
1950s.
Snapshots (Part Three)

The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse - September 1948 – Monday morning

Aaron gave a quick knock on Patrick and Daniel's bedroom door and heard Danny telling him to come in.

“Are you ready?” Aaron asked as he leaned into the room, “I'll drop you off at the station if you want” he added

Daniel was sitting on the edge of the mattress. Patrick was curled up on his side of the bed and still looked very dozy.

“Thanks Aaron” said Danny.

“Right, listen you” said Daniel, leaning over and lifting the dog-tag that was lying on the top of Patrick's t-shirt. “You take it easy. I'll be back in a fortnight, we'll have a proper weekend then, ok?” he said, as he turned the metal disc over with his fingers.

Danny let go of the tag and pushed Patrick's floppy dark fringe back with his hand. He leaned in and gave the young man a quick kiss on the forehead.

It was just a whisper, but Aaron definitely heard him say “Love you” as he leaned in.

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“So, you going home tomorrow then?” Daniel asked as he sat in the passenger seat of Robert's car.

“Yeah” said Aaron, slowing down as the milkman's horse and cart went across the end of the street.

“Nan's up and about now” he went on “And Mrs Axelby's back from her sisters on Wednesday. She'll be straight round to ours with all the gossip”

“Aw!” said Danny with a cheeky grin, “I'll miss that” he said.

“Oh yeah” said Aaron smiling back, “You wouldn't believe what goes on at the Women's Institute in Scarborough”

“It'd make your hair curl” said Aaron, “If it wasn't curly already” he added, glancing across at the young sailor.

“I'm not going straight back though” said Aaron, as the car pulled away from the junction, “I'm seeing my mate Adam on the way back. Thought I'd surprise him”

“Adam?” asked Daniel as he reached inside his jacket pocket

“Yeah. He was a Bevin boy with me” Aaron replied, “He’s married to Robert's sister. They've got a
Aaron parked at the end of Station Road. As he set the handbrake he looked across at Daniel again.

“Actually. Adam looks a lot like.....” he started

“Damn!” Danny interrupted as he checked his other jacket pocket.

“What's wrong?” asked Aaron

“I've gone and left some cash at your Nan's. I was going to go round the Post Office with it but there wasn't the time with Pat being ill. Must have left it in on the kitchen table cause I counted it out in there this morning”

“Are you short of money then?” said Aaron, “Cause I can...”

“No. Thanks mate” said Daniel, “Can you do us a favour though? Can you give it to your Nan to look after? It took me ages to save that”

“Yeah sure” said Aaron, “It wont go anywhere I'm sure. There's only those two showgirls staying in the house anyway”

“What you mean old snooty-drawers and that slapper do ya?” said Daniel, “That pair would nick the table if they could lift it!”. Rosalyn and Lizzie had been at the party Mrs D threw for Danny when he had passed his electronics course. Daniel had not been impressed. He was even less impressed when he'd heard about them running Patrick ragged when he was ill.

“Hah. They won't even be up yet” said Aaron

“Ok” said Danny, “Thanks for the lift. See you next time you're up” he added as he headed out into the road.

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Emmerdale – The Sugden Farm – Tuesday teatime

“Who can that be?” Victoria asked as he heard the sound of a car pulling up in the yard outside.

Adam had just started to undo his tie. “I dunno” he replied as he marched over to the kitchen door and opened it.

“Aaron! What are you doing here?” Adam asked, beaming at the sight of the young man on their doorstep.

“Never mind what I'm doing here. What are you doing in your best suit?” Aaron asked as he walked into the room.

“This is my only suit mate” said Adam with a laugh as he clapped Aaron on the back. “Aw. It's great you turning up. You wait here while I get changed” he added as he headed out of the room.

“No Robert with ya?” asked Victoria.
Aaron pulled up one of the chairs around the table and sat down.

“Nah. I've been up to Blackpool to see Nan” explained Aaron, “She wasn't feeling so good. Thought I'd come here on the way home”

“So what's my brother doing while you're gadding about?” Victoria asked. She got up from the table as the kettle on the stove started to whistle.

“Oh you know. National Trust stuff. Committees. Running half the village” said Aaron as he sat back and folded his arms.

Aaron noticed that Victoria had what must have been one of her best dresses on.

“Why are you two all dressed up?” he asked, “You've not been to a wedding have ya?”

Victoria groaned, “Aaron, please.” she said, “Don't say that word!”

“We've just been to the photographers in Hotton. Adam thought it would be nice to have a proper family photo done of the three of us. Good thing too. He finally let me trim his hair” the young woman said as she filled up the teapot

Aaron smiled.

“Oh, I like your new porch” said Victoria as she poured out a cup of tea and handed it to the young man.

“Oh. Uh, thanks” said Aaron. Well at least that answered where Robert had sent one of his photographs.

Victoria frowned as she thought for a moment. “Do you have to rush back home? I mean, do you think you could stay the night?”

“Yeah. Could do” said Aaron, “I'd have to ring your brother and tell him. Why, is there something up?”

Victoria looked over to the door into the rest of the farmhouse. There was no sign of her husband, fortunately.

“Ok. Adam will tell you himself later. So don't say anything alright?” the young women asked

“Course not” said Aaron

“You know that farm hand that caused all the trouble? The one his Mum hooked up with? Well, they're getting married”

Aaron wasn't at all surprised that this would upset his friend. He knew Adam worshiped his late father. Aaron, on the other hand, never thought of his. Not really.

Victoria was about to continue but she could hear her husband bounding down the stairs.

“So. You're staying for your tea I hope” said Adam, as he continued hooking his braces over his flannel shirt.

“Well, actually” said Aaron, “I thought I'd stay the night, if that's alright?”

“Course it is!” Adam replied happily
“Right then” said Aaron, “I'll have to ring Robert. Is the nearest phone still the one in the Wheat Sheaf?”

Victoria nodded in reply.

“Ok. We'll head over half-six” said Aaron.

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The Wheat Sheaf – that evening

Aaron hadn't been able to get anything out of Adam on the drive over. His friend had insisted on taking his truck instead of Robert's car. And he was his usual chatty self as he drove. He'd asked about Aaron's Nan, and how Sarge was getting on in Blackpool. And he'd asked after Robert, and said how nice he thought their new porch looked. Anything rather than talk about what was on his mind.

But as soon as they walked into the pub, Adam's smile faded in an instant. One minute he'd been laughing about how they really, really, ought to stay for one drink. Otherwise it was a waste of petrol, just to make a phone call. The next, he'd turned on his heels.

“Uh. Forget that” Adam said, “I'll wait in the truck and we'll head straight back”

“Alright” said Aaron, confused.

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“Right all sorted” said Aaron as he climbed into the passenger seat in the truck.

“Good” Adam replied quietly.

“Robert's doing the accounts for the local garage. He said he'll get them done in half the time, without me there to annoy him” Aaron said with a grin.

But Adam just nodded.

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Adam finally opened up as the parked the truck in the yard outside the farmhouse.

“Listen. I....I couldn't stay in that pub” he said

“Why not?” asked Aaron

“That Katy was behind the bar. The one who used to work in the Woolpack”
“What that blonde tarty piece? That was Katy? I thought Robert got her to sling her hook” said Aaron, surprised

“She did” said Adam, “Just hasn't slung it very far has she! I didn't even know she was working in there. Don't tell Victoria. We've got enough to deal with right now without her being reminded of that cow”

Aaron thought for a moment.

“I'll do a deal with ya. I won't mention her if you tell what you are dealing with” said Aaron, “That alright?” he prodded gently.

Adam nodded and gave a small smile.

“Right. Let's get a hot drink and you can show me what you've down with the barn” said Aaron

“I haven't done anything with the barn” said Adam, confused.

Aaron just smiled.

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Aaron was sat on a hay bale in the barn, next to his friend. Both had their hands around a metal mug of cocoa.

“.....so she wrote to me asking me to go over. Said there was something important to discuss about the farm. I thought she'd tell us she was marrying that farmhand. I mean, I knew he was still there and it had to be on the cards one day” said Adam

“And I know I was being daft. But I was still hoping that she wanted to bury the hatchet. I mean, I know it's a been a long time but.......” Adam tailed off.

“And is your Mum getting hitched?” asked Aaron.

“Yeah, but she didn't want to talk about that. She wanted to talk about the farm. She's changing her will. It was going to go to me and Hannah. She's leaving it to her husband now”

“You didn't want to go back there though did ya? “ said Aaron, trying to think of something positive to say, “I mean. You and Victoria will get this place one day won't ya? And the pair of you are much happier here”

“It's....it's not just the farm” said Adam. Aaron could already spot the telltale crack in his friend's voice. “I mean, my Dad built that place up for us. For our family. And, so what if our Hannah's married to a Doctor? Well, as good as. And what does it matter if I'm going to be here?”

“My mum's got no right to give it away to a stranger! No right” said Adam, “Even if she is expecting his flaming kid !”

Adam had being trying to hold his tears back as he unburdened himself, but it was too late now.

“Come here mate” said Aaron as he put his mug down and wrapped his arms around his friend in a hug.
“And do you know what he said to me. That bastard? “ Adam asked. He was calmer now, but Aaron still had his arm around his shoulders.

“No, what?” asked Aaron

“Well, I was really angry. I said he'd had this planned all along. Get my mum in the family way then she'd have to marry him and he'd get the farm and he......” said Adam

“Go on” Aaron encouraged

“He said, 'at least I can get a woman pregnant!' ” said Adam, “And I'd just had enough, and I punched him. Then Vicky got really angry and said 'Right. We're leaving'. Dragged me out of there, pretty much”

“She hates fighting” said Adam quietly, “She's said to me before, she put up with one husband with a violent temper”

“You're nothing like him!” said Aaron, giving his friend's shoulder a squeeze, “Nothing” he repeated

“You're right. I didn't want the old farm” said Adam, “But I always thought, when the time came, me and Hannah would sell it. Then I'd put my half into this place”

“I mean. I have to give Vicky something don't I? Seeing as I can't give her another kid”

“You have given her something mate” said Aaron, “You've given her a proper husband. And you've given Sarah a real Dad, haven't ya?”

“Suppose” said Adam, but his heart wasn't really in it.

“No suppose about it mate” said Aaron, “Now come on. Let's go in an join your family, right?”

“I'm always doing this to you aren't I? Crying on your flaming shoulder” said Adam

“Come off it. I've done the same” said Aaron, “What are mates for?”

Adam nodded and managed a smile.

The next morning......

“Here we go” said Victoria, handing over a large box of eggs to Aaron, “I hope Robert like's an
omlette. He was always really fussy about food when he was a kid”

“Hah!” laughed Aaron, “He'll eat what he's given. I've told him, he can learn to cook if he wants something else”

“What does he say to that?” Victoria asked with a smile.

“He threatened to sack me. But he does that once a month so...” Aaron replied with a shrug.

Adam walked from the house and gave his friend a pat on the arm, “So. When will you up here next?” he asked.

“Well, Rob's got this RAF reunion next month. We'll be here for Christmas though. A proper stay this time”

“Sounds good” Adam said with a smile.

“Oh, you know this photograph you've had done in Hotton?” said Aaron

“Yeah. Don't worry mate. We'll send you and Robert a copy!” Adam replied

“Can you send one to Patrick up at Nan's?” said Aaron, “It's just his feller was telling me he never hears from any of the lads these days”

“Yeah. Course I will” said Adam.

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Chelsea, Lewis Holbrooke's Flat – November 1948 – late evening

“You will be alright on your own?” said Lewis as he slipped off his RAF uniform jacket and dumped it on the back of one of his living room chairs.

“It's just I've got lunch with my awful mother-in-law to be tomorrow” he added.

Robert put his walking stick in the hall stand and followed his friend in. There had been an argument about that before he'd left home. Not a serious one. Aaron had insisted he take it. Rob had insisted he didn't need it and, anyway, they'd be going everywhere by tube or by taxi. But Aaron had had the last word. 'Fine, come home in agony. I'll just work around you as you lie on the floor!'.

“No. I'll be fine. I want to head into Jermyn Street while I'm here anyway” Rob said to his friend as he slipped his own jacket off and sat down on the sofa.

“Course. Hard to get the finer things in life down in the sticks I imagine” said Lewis

“Oh. I don't do too badly” said Robert, a sly smile on his face.

Lewis opened up one of the cupboards and took out a bottle of whisky.
“One more for the road?” he asked

“We had 'one more for the road' at the reunion” Rob replied

“Well, one for the gutter then” Lewis said with a smile, handing his friend a drink and then pouring his own.

“What shall we toast to? Comrades in arms?” Robert asked

“Ugh. I've gone off that word since the socialists got in. You should hear my old man go on about them! How about 'the boys in blue'?”

“That's the Police isn't it?” said Rob. He thought for a while. “How about, to 'the few'?” he suggested.

“To 'the few'” Lewis replied with a smile as they clinked glasses.

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“That's the car and the garage space” said Robert, showing his friend the photograph he'd taken out of his wallet.

“Of course, I've had an extension put on the porch. It's much more of a house now than a cottage” he added

“Nice motor” said Lewis, “Is that your man cleaning it?”

Robert nodded, “Yes. I'd drive myself, but what with the old leg” he explained.

Lewis nodded, “Does he repair it too? My old man's obsessed about that. You know, getting servants that are all rounders. It's the only way you can afford to pay them. They want the Earth these days. The bolshie lot!”

“Well, Aaron is very good with his hands” said Rob with a smile.

“Well I'm bushed” said Lewis, rubbing his face as he spoke, “Help yourself to another nightcap or anything” he added as he got up from the sofa.

“Don't let me sleep in, there's a good chap” he went on, patting Robert on the shoulder, “I don't want to be too late for the old dragon!”

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Robert smiled at the photo in his hand once his friend was out of the room. Although Rob didn't know it, this was his 'safe' photo. If anyone asked, he could tell people that it was of his pride and joy. His beloved motorcar. After all, how many people could afford a car? Of course he'd want to show it off.
And anyway that was true. That picture was of his pride and joy. It was of a handsome, dark haired young man. Just a little on the short side. And, now and again, still just a little on the shy side. Yes he could be grumpy. And he definitely could be stubborn and argue for arguments sake. But he was loyal and stuck by his friends. And he'd given Robert so much love and affection in just a few short years.

And one of the joys of a short trip to London like this was the chance to come home again. To come home to Aaron.

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The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse - November 1948 – Monday mid-morning

“That's a large one” said Faith, raising an eyebrow as the postman handed over a big brown parcel.

“Now. Do you need anything from me?” she added

“Uh. What's that Mrs?” the young man replied

“A signature or anything?” said Faith

“No. You're all right” said the postman, “This is for you too” he added, putting a stiff envelope onto the top of the box before making a hasty retreat.

Faith squinted as she carried the post into the hall. She could just make out that the items were both addressed to Patrick. As she passed the lounge she heard the sound of the showgirls bright chatter.

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“Well that Lizzie is in a good mood” said Faith as she walked into the kitchen and put the post down on the table.

“So no doubt she's getting some” she added as she patted her hair in at the sides.

Patrick smiled indulgently and sipped his tea.

“These are for you. You finish your breakfast, I'll open them” said Faith in a matter of fact tone. There was no way Patrick would have managed the parcel. It had been wrapped tight by someone who looked as if they must have a School Certificate in Neatness. So the landlady was not surprised when she saw Robert's name and address written very tidily on the side as 'sender'.

“Photo and a letter” said Faith as she handed the now open stiff envelope to the young man next to her. Patrick smiled again. That was Mrs D all over. She always tried to help without making a big fuss about it.

“It's from Adam and Victoria. You remember, Robert's sister and her husband” said Patrick taking out the photograph. The couple were both dressed to the nines and had their little daughter sitting on a chair between them. He'd read the letter later.

“Scrubs up well doesn't he?” said Faith as she looked across. She soon unpicked Robert's
meticulous wrapping.

“Oh, this is the Christmas present I asked Robert to get me next time he was in London. For Daniel I mean” said Patrick as he stood up and rummaged in the box.

“What have you got him?” said Faith nosily.

“It's a surprise. A shirt and, things....” said Patrick, a little embarrassed. He hastily closed the top of the box. It was a nice formal shirt from Jermyn Street, plus three pairs of those stripey boxer shorts than Robert had got for Aaron.

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse - Monday evening

“Right” said Aaron, turning to his partner sat on the sofa next to him. “Where shall we put them?” he asked, indicating the two photographs on his lap that he just snapped into Woolworth's frames.

“Hmmm” said Robert, picking up the top photo of his sister and her family, “Do you know, I still don't think this photo does them justice”

“Yeah. They should have had it done in front of our new porch” Aaron replied sarcastically

“What was that Dingle?” Rob asked

“Nothing” said Aaron

“I like this other one. There's something about a man in uniform” said Aaron with a smile. He was holding up a picture of Robert and Lewis that had been taken at the reunion.

“You think so?” said Rob with a smile.

“Yeah. You don't look bad either” said Aaron, just managing to miss Robert's sharp elbow poking him in retaliation.

Robert took both pictures from his partner and arranged them, very carefully, on the mantelpiece.

“That alright?” he said, flopping back on the sofa.

Aaron frowned and folded his arms, “No pictures of me up there I see” he said sulkily.

“Ah well, you see” said Robert, wrapping his arms around the young man's shoulders. “I've got the real thing, haven't I?” he said with a smile.

Aaron smiled back as Robert leaned over for a kiss.............
Sneaking off without saying Goodbye?

Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Friday night, end of January 1949

Faith couldn't resist peaking around the door of the living room, just for a moment. She wasn't being nosy, she just wanted to make sure her advice had been heeded. Fortunately, it looked as if it had been. Daniel was sitting on the sofa, his arms wrapped around Patrick, the poor lad. It would have looked sweet, if the reason hadn't been so sad. Danny gently rubbed his head against the side of his partner's, his eyes tight shut as he did so. Faith allowed herself a small smile as she left the room and headed for the kitchen. She stopped for a moment to steady herself against the desk in the hall. That was strange, she thought to herself, she'd felt fine a moment ago. She took a couple of deep breaths and carried on.

But let's roll this chapter back a little........

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The Guesthouse – two week's ago

Faith had heard the raised voices as she passed the lads room on the way to bed. That was a surprise in itself. But she decided she wouldn't interfere unless it sounded like it was getting fraught. After all, the lads room was their room and she wasn't either of their mothers, even if she did feel like she was on occasion.

“Just listen. It's everyone. They've cut the wages by a fifth for everyone” said Daniel.

“Why didn't you just tell me instead of bottling it up?” Patrick asked

“I didn't want to tell ya. I'll never pay you back at this rate!” Danny said

“What do you mean? I haven't asked you to pay me back” Pat replied

“And I didn't ask you to carry me!” Daniel shot back.

It was at that point that Faith heard someone stomping to the bedroom door so made a hasty retreat to her own room. She could see Danny heading to the bathroom. She left her own door open, just a little, as she climbed into bed.

Ten minutes or so later she heard the lad's door open and close. No more voices were raised, she noted with relief. In the morning, she discovered that Daniel had left before she had even got up. But he often did that.

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A merchant ship returning from The Netherlands – a couple of days ago

Daniel lay on his bunk and winced as he rubbed the side of his rib-cage. It had been a lucky punch. It was also the last piece of luck that the other man had had. He had picked on the wrong person to take his prejudices out on and he wouldn't try it again. But it had still shaken Daniel up a little. He always made a point of being discrete about himself when he was on board ship. But sometimes, it could be a small World. You could find yourself working with someone who had spotted you in a particular pub sometime. Someone who then talked about it a bit too loudly in the galley. Loud enough for someone else to suddenly take exception to you.

And even though Danny had only been defending himself, and his mates backed him up on that, it was still both him and his attacker that got hauled over the coals by the skipper.

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The Guesthouse – Friday night - end of January 1949

Patrick had been all smiles when he came home in the early evening. Collecting the accounts of the small Penny Arcade on the South pier to do over the weekend was hardly a treat, but it being this Friday meant Daniel was coming home and Faith knew that always put an extra spring into the young man's step.

And he had been fine when she left him.

“Right, I'll do our tea when I get back love” said Faith as she picked her handbag up from the sofa in the lounge, “I promised I'd visit Beryl. Problem again with her you know” she explained.

“Oh. There's a letter for you on the mantelpiece. From Australia by the look of it. Can you keep the stamp for Bernard?” said Faith as she put her coat on in the hallway “Not that he deserves any consideration” she muttered under her breath as she headed out of the house.

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Later........

The journey had been a bit more painful than Daniel had expected. He had been fine until he'd put his kit-bag up on the rack above the seats in the third-class carriage on the train. Just one stretch too many it had turned out. So that did not help his mood. Neither did the fact that he knew he shouldn't have snuck off early after his last visit the way he did. None of that excused his subsequent behavior. But it did at least explain it.
And it had only taken one word to set Mrs D off. Though, it was more the way he had said it. He had just let himself into the guesthouse and hung up his cap and jacket on the stand in the hall. He knew something was up when he walked into the lounge and saw Patrick on the sofa. He looked miserable. Mrs D was perched on the arm rest, her hand resting on his shoulders.

“Oh God!” said Danny irritably, “What's flaming wrong now?” he added, dumping his kit-bag on the floor.

It was that 'now' that did it. Faith walked over and bundled the young sailor into the hall, much to his surprise. She pulled the door closed after her.

“Patrick's just had some very bad news” the landlady said

“I've not had a barrel of laughs myself this month” Daniel started defensively, rubbing the side of his rib as he spoke, “I had this run-in on the ship and....”

“Daniel” said Faith, “He's just found out his sister's dead”

“What?” Daniel replied in surprise, “But I thought he hadn't even seen her since, well since...”

“Since he went in the home” Faith finished the young man's sentence for him, “Yes, well he's been trying to track her down, on and off, since he joined the Army. Been getting knocked back all the time but, you know Patrick. He doesn't give up on people”

“No, he doesn't” said Danny quietly, “When did it happen? I mean, when did she?....” he asked

“Just after the War love” said Faith, “And she was his only living relation, so he's feeling a bit, well, on his own love” she added.

Danny frowned. Suddenly, some aches and pains didn't seem that important right now.

“He's not though, is he Mrs D?” asked Daniel, “He's got us”

Faith smiled and put her arm around the young sailor's shoulders. “Course he has” she says, “So why don't you go in there and have a second go at coming home, eh?”

Daniel nodded.

“And you can tell me about that sore rib later. I bet the other feller came off worse” Faith replied as she opened the door and steered him back into the room.

Danny sat down on the sofa next to his partner and hooked his left arm around him. “Come here” he said, this time his voice soft and gentle.

“I'm sorry Pat” Daniel whispered, as Patrick buried himself in his shoulder.

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse – March 1949
Aaron towelled his face dry and reached for Robert's dressing gown which was hanging on the back of the bathroom door. Although he resolutely refused to have one of his own, it was cold in the gatehouse tonight and there was no point being stupid about things. Anyway, despite what Robert had said, at length, about the new porch providing a source of insulation, it didn't make their bedroom any warmer now did it?

Robert was sitting up in a bed, a set of papers spread out in front of him. It was obvious that he was not planning a romantic evening. Aaron decided to change those plans and leaned on the side of the doorway, in what he hoped was an enticing pose.

"Fifteen!" Robert said in exasperation, not looking up at his partner.

"You what?" Aaron asked, bemused

"I've found fifteen errors in the proofs for the Manor House guide. And I'm only on chapter two!" Rob complained, "Close that door will ya?" he added

Aaron let out a small sigh and did as he was asked. He padded over to his telescope and sat down on his stool. He'd decided he may as well entertain himself

"Why the rush anyway?" he asked, flicking through his astronomy book for a moment, "You don't open till May"

"Aaron" said Robert patiently, "The printers will need to be up and running well before then"

"Expecting a lot of demand for your writing are ya?" said Aaron as he adjusted his telescope

"Well, not everybody's as lucky as you" said Rob, looking up from his paperwork , "You get to hang on my every word every day"

"Oh yeah" said Aaron, "I'm so lucky" he added, but his grin was warm as he said it.

Robert smiled back and went back to his reading.

A Hospital in Blackpool - beginning of April 1949 - Sunday afternoon

"So, you married then?" said the middle aged woman in the next bed to Faith as she sat up.

"Widowed love" Faith replied as she looked up at the clock. It was one minutes to the hour and she knew that officious nurse would not let any visitors in a second early.

"Well it can be a blessing" Ruby continued, "You know what they can be like. Men. With their demands" she added

"Oh, I know love" said Faith

"Take my Arnold. Like a wild animal he is sometimes" said Ruby.
At that moment the doors opened and the visitors entered. A small, inoffensive looking man in his Sunday best walked over to Ruby's bed. He did not live up to his billing, Faith thought.

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Despite his years as a nurse, Patrick was never happy in a hospital. It was too much like being back in the army for his liking. Different uniforms of course but it was still rules and regulations and people giving orders. And the longer he had been out of the services, the less he missed it. The sign in front of him now was an irritating case in point, 'Only one visitor per bed at a time'

"You go in first and then we'll swap" said Patrick

"Aw. Can't you go in" Daniel replied, "I won't know what to say"

Patrick sighed, "We only get half an hour. Look you go in for ten minutes or so, then come and get me" he said. His partner frowned.

"She'll want to see you Danny" said Patrick, "Specially with you looking so smart" he added. It was true, Daniel was looking well turned out in his formal shirt and a pair of slacks that usually never left the wardrobe in their room at the guesthouse.

Daniel handed Patrick the leather satchel on his shoulder. Moments later a severe looking nurse opened the door to the ward and a small stream of visitors trooped in.

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"That was a quick ten minutes" said Patrick as his partner leaned over him.

"She wants the paperwork" said Daniel as he sat down in the empty chair next to the other young man.

Patrick opened the satchel. He first handed Danny his cowboy novel and then took out a metal biscuit tin with 'Coronation 1911' on the front.

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"Right, I need the lavvie" said Ruby as she pulled back the covers from her bed, "It's all this tea. Goes right through me"

"I don't drink tea, I just rent it. You always say that, don't you Arnold?" said Ruby as she pulled on her robe.

"Aye" her husband replied. It was to be his sole contribution to conversation in the half hour he was there.
Faith leaned over to Patrick, now sat at the side of her bed, "I don't know how they can put me next to her. She's dead common" she said quietly

"This one your grandson?" Ruby asked loudly, indicating Patrick.

"No, this is Mr Seaton. One of my residents. " Faith replied.

"The one in shipping?" Ruby asked

"No. That's Mr Perez who's just been. Mr Seaton's an accountant" Faith replied. Patrick raised an eyebrow at this.

"Shipping?" he asked, once the other lady was out of earshot

"Well, he works on a ship doesn't he?" Faith said defensively

"Well I'm not an accountant" said Patrick, "I'm a book-keeper". It was obvious that Mrs Dingle had been building up the Guesthouse. It had probably become a five star hotel in the telling.

"Listen love. I'm had it up to here with her. Her husband's got a corner shop but the way she goes on you'd think it was Harrods" said Faith. She turned around to smile at Ruby's husband, but he was oblivious to what was going on in the ward.

"Anyway, now she's gone, let me go through that tin"

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"Now would you believe it, but that sweet young girl there is me" said Faith, showing Patrick an old black and white photograph.

"Is that on your wedding day?" the young man asked. Faith nodded in reply.

"You didn't get married in white then?" said Patrick with a smile.

"Bit late for that love" said Faith, "I was three months gone with our Cain at the time"

"Besides" she added wistfully, "The vicar'd never have kept a straight face anyway. What with my reputation"

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"Now, I've got a confession to make" said Faith. Patrick looked puzzled at this.

"This operation is a bit more serious that I let on" she added

"How serious?" said Patrick, leaning in, concerned

"Put it this way. This is my will" said Faith
"Your will?" said Patrick, "But you said..."

"I know love" said Faith, giving his hand a pat, "I didn't want to worry anyone. But now it's come down to it, I want to make sure everything is sorted. Just in case"

"There's an address in there to let our Cain know. It's his usual landlady when he stops off in Liverpool. And there's an address for my daughter. She's in Bristol"

"Aaron's mother?" asked Patrick, "I didn't think anyone knew where she was"

Faith sighed for a moment.

"She wrote to me a couple of years back asking for money. I didn't send it mind. It would have been for some mess she'd gotten herself in. Or for a feller in a bind more like. But I couldn't do it love"

"I mean, I know she's my daughter but she's never bothered with our Aaron once since she left him with me. Not so much as a birthday card and that's just not right, is it?"

"Look, Faith, about Aaron" said Patrick, using her first name just this once, "I mean, he doesn't even know you're here and..."

"There's no need to worry him. I'll be fine. This is just in case" said Faith.

"But shouldn't I at least..." Patrick argued

"No love. Please" said Faith.

The clock was ticking around to half past the hour. Patrick frowned.

"I'm still going to worry" he said, leaning over and giving Faith a kiss on the cheek.

Faith kept smiling as Patrick walked to the door. But once he had gone, she just looked anxious.

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Patrick had been quiet as he and Daniel headed out of the hospital. He stopped at the entrance as they walked into the street.

"Come on Pat. What's wrong?" said Danny as he put his cap back on.

Patrick looked both ways down the street until he spotted a red phone box in the distance. "I need to make a phone call. There's something I have to do" he explained

"What?" Daniel asked

"Betray a confidence" Patrick replied

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"Couldn't you see how bad she was" said Aaron angrily as he hung his coat up in the hall

"Aaron...." Robert started to say

"I mean, you were a flaming nurse Patrick!" Aaron carried on.

"I don't have x-ray eyes" Patrick replied, stung,

"You should have let me know!" Aaron said loudly

"Look, first she didn't want to go to the doctor. Then she insisted it was nothing. She didn't even want to tell you she was having the operation!"

"Hey! What's all this shouting?" said Daniel. He was standing on the staircase in his vest and boxer shorts, Patrick's dressing gown had been pulled hastily around his shoulders

"Whatever it is, can't it wait till morning?" he asked, after no-one replied.

"Good idea. We can all talk about it then" said Robert smoothly.

"Come on Pat" said Daniel. The other young man started to walk up the stairs. Daniel rested his hand on the back of his shoulders as he reached him and then followed him up the stairs.

"This isn't Patrick's fault" Robert said, once the other young couple were out of earshot

"I know" said Aaron, "It's just, what if it is serious? What if I can't see her? Her operation's tomorrow afternoon and...."

"Aaron" said Robert, putting his hand on his partner's shoulder, "We're going to that hospital first thing. You will see your Nan I promise you. Ok?"

Aaron gave a nod but he call feel himself tearing up. He had been bottling up his anxiety all the way in the long car journey. It had been an even chance between him shouting or crying as soon as he'd got to the guesthouse.

"Come here" said Robert gently, embracing his partner and pulling him close.

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A little later.....

Aaron didn't want to go to bed with any argument hanging over him, so he tapped on Patrick and Daniel's bedroom door. He heard muttering and the sound of someone padding over towards him. Daniel opened the door, very slightly and frowned.

"Look Aaron" he said defensively, "In the morning ok?". It was obvious that the young sailor was
in full guard dog mode.

"I know, I just wanted to say goodnight" said Aaron, "I know it's not down to Patrick, I'm just worried about Nan that's all". By the time he had finished, Patrick had walked over to the door.

"I promise you Aaron" he said, "I told you as soon as I knew. If your Nan had her way, you wouldn't have known at all"

Aaron could tell his friend was being truthful and nodded quietly.

They said their good nights, but nobody in the house slept well.

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A Hospital in Blackpool - Monday mid-morning

"What are you trying to do Nan? Sneak off without saying goodbye?" said Aaron, forcing a smile as he sat down next to Faith's bed.

"What are you doing here?" his grandmother replied, the surprise clear on her face

"A little bird told me you weren't well" Aaron replied

"Really?" asked Faith, "This little bird. Did he only have the one wing?"

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"How did you get in? They don't allow visitors out of hours. They're very strict" said Faith

"It's fine Nan" said Aaron, "Robert's talking to the Matron now. You know, kicking up a massive fuss or being all charming. He's good at both"

Faith smiled. Well, at least if the worst did happen, Aaron was in good hands.

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The Royal Oak public house - 8pm

"Everything all right boys?" said Arthur, wiping his hands on a beer towel. But the landlord could tell from the look on Aaron's face that everything had gone well.
"I knew it would be fine" Arthur went on, "She's a tough old lady your Nan"

"Hah!" said Aaron, "Don't let her hear you say that" he said, a relieved smile across his face.

"You'll have a pint before you go then" the landlord asked, "On the house". His own relief had prompted this very uncharacteristic generous gesture.

"We ought to get back" Aaron replied, thinking of Robert who was stayed at the Guesthouse

"Just a half, thank you" Patrick said.

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If Aaron had gone straight back, then maybe Robert's inquisitiveness wouldn't have got the better of him. Patrick had told Aaron about Faith's will being in the Coronation tin, though he hadn't read it and said there was a small list of people who'd need to be told 'just in case'. In was that list that Robert had in his hands as his partner walked into the kitchen.

"Everything's fine, Nan's alright and....what are you doing?" asked Aaron

"Hoping for something in the will were ya?" he added angrily, walking over and snatching the tin from the table.

"No! Course not" said Robert as he stood up, "I was looking through the paperwork that's all. You have to hope for the best and prepare for the worst sometimes". He remembered what it had been like when his Mum died, then later when his Nan passed away. You'd think it would be easy, the arrangements, but it wasn't. He remembered his Dad and his Uncle Joe arguing like hammer and tongs. Before it had been about girls, then about the farm. Then they had been arguing about a coffin.

"Well, Nan's fine" said Aaron, "We don't have to prepare for anything" he snapped, putting the tin back on the mantelpiece.

Robert thought for a moment. He wasn't sure whether or not to say something,

"Aaron. There's an address in there for your mother. A recent one" Rob said, keeping his voice level

"My mother?" Aaron replied. His voice had gone quiet now and his face showed the conflict of emotions going on.

Robert didn't say anything. He hooked his arm around his now quiet partner's shoulder.

Aaron didn't react. His anger had vanished and, suddenly, he seemed as if he was a million miles away.

TO BE CONTINUED
Sneaking off without saying Hello

A hotel room in Bristol - the end of April 1949

"Here you go. You get that down you" said Robert, as he handed his partner a hot cup of tea. Aaron wiped the tears from his eyes and took the cup.

"Thought guests weren't allowed drinks in their rooms" said Aaron, with just a small crack in his voice.

Robert picked up the Manor House paperwork from the single bed on which Aaron was sitting and moved it to the other bed in the room.

"Ah. Well I had a word with reception" said Rob as he sat down next to the young man.

"Charmed that blonde girl did ya?" said Aaron as he stared down into his cup.

"It was that young lad actually" said Robert, "You know. The one I said was giving me the eye when we booked in" he grinned, trying to lighten the mood just a little,

Aaron smiled despite himself, "Can't take you anywhere can I?" he said with a sniff

Robert curled his arm round his partner and held him close. Aaron pressed his head into Rob's shoulder and sat there, silent.

"I know it didn't go as you planned. I could see that as soon as you walked in" Robert said softly, "And if you want to talk about it, we can do that. Now, or whenever"

"In a bit" said Aaron quietly.

"Sure" said Rob as he wrapped his other arm around him in a hug.

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And those tears had to come from somewhere didn't they? Let's go back just a bit....

The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse - beginning of April 1949 - Tuesday night

Aaron had decided that he would stay on until his Nan was out of hospital and settled. Besides, it wasn't fair to leave it all to Patrick. And Patrick had decided that as Aaron was there, they could do a bit of spring cleaning. Take advantage of there being no guests. And it would be a nice surprise for Mrs Dingle when she got home.

But Aaron didn't mind the chores so much. As the two lads turned the kitchen into a laundry, it
gave him the chance to ask some questions without being too obvious about it.

"You're from Bristol aren't ya?" Aaron asked as he started to peg out a bed sheet on the line now strung across the back yard.

"Yes. But I've not been back there for years " Patrick replied as he pegged up a striped pillowcase.

"Do you know a pub called the Pilgrim's Rest? Down in the docks somewhere" said Aaron

"Well I know of a pub called that round there" said Patrick as he paused, "I walked past it several times. That's what you do if you're sensible. Walk past it"

"Bit rough is it?" asked Aaron

"I only know what I was told. I mean, I never set foot in any pub until I was in the Army. But I heard it was a real 'sawdust on the floor' place. And if you saw a woman in there she would be on the game. Course, that could have wishful thinking by some of the lads"

Aaron just nodded.

"Is this something to do with your mother?" Patrick asked quietly

Aaron nodded again

"Are you thinking of getting in touch?" his friend asked

"I....I don't know. I'm going to talk it through with Robert when I get home" said Aaron. "Listen. Don't tell my Nan about this will ya?" he added with a frown.

Patrick sighed, "You mean like she told me not to tell you about going into hospital?" he asked

Aaron looked just a little guilty, "I've got a good reason. It's just that I don't want Nan thinking she means any less to me. You know, that I wish someone else had brought me up or anything. Cause it's not like that. It's not like that at all".

Patrick thought for a moment. "Look. That address was kept just in case. In case anything had happened. A far as your Nan's concerned, you don't know about it. So I suppose we can leave it like that"

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse - later that evening

Robert picked up the phone on his desk and smiled at the familiar voice he heard.

"Your train journey ok?" Aaron asked

"Yeah. It was fine" replied Robert. He could tell that his partner was a little distracted.

"And you alright for your committee stuff this week?" Aaron went on
"All in hand. Lauren's going to give me a lift while you're away" said Rob, "When are you coming home by the way?" he added quickly

"Nan's supposed to be out tomorrow, so I'll stay Thursday to settle her in. Then drive up first thing on Friday"

"Good thing too" said Robert, "I want you back home, slaving over a hot stove. I'm a growing lad remember"

Aaron smiled. "I've had a think" he started

"Makes a nice change" said Rob

"Shurrup!" said Aaron, "No I mean it. I know you're busy with the Manor House stuff but I was thinking about making a trip to Bristol. You wouldn't have to come. I can go on my own........."

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The Sugden Farm - Friday afternoon

Adam put his hammer on the ground and took a step back. The yard fence looked fine to him now, even though he knew his father in law would tell him he should have done something differently.

"So. You going to go to Bristol then?" he said as he turned to Aaron. His friend was leaning against the bonnet of Robert's car, a mug of tea in his hands.

"Now I know she's there. Or at least was there" said Aaron, "I've got to go and look. I'll always be wondering otherwise. Robert's coming with me so......"

Adam could see how conflicted his friend was about this. "Well, I hope it works out mate" he said, giving Aaron a quick pat on the upper arm.

"You heard from your Mum?" Aaron asked.

Adam immediately frowned.

"Nah" he replied, "I know she's alright. And I know my....I know the baby's fine too. Our Hannah wrote to us. But nothing from Mum" he said sadly.

Aaron didn't know what to say. Fortunately the silence was broken by the sound of Victoria coming through the gate with a cheerful, "Hello. We weren't expecting you"

Aaron was pleased to see his friend's mood change completely. Little Sarah rushed over towards her Dad and he beamed as he picked her up.

"You'll stay for your tea" said Victoria. Aaron could tell that wasn't really a question.

"Course I will" he replied with a smile.

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"I'll have it in a minute. After I've had my tea" said Faith as she sat up in bed. Patrick just stood and looked at her.

"Oh alright!" said Faith as she reached for the tablet and glass of water on her nightstand, "He's as a bad as a prison warden sometimes" she added, turning to Beryl who was sitting on a chair next to the bed.

"Good girl" said Patrick as his landlady swallowed her medication. He walked into the hallway and paused as the ladies re-started their conversation

"Where was it you saw Cynthia Rudge again?" Faith asked, as she picked her teacup up from the nightstand.

"Wednesday it was" said Beryl, "No. I tell a lie it was Tuesday because you were still in hospital. She was at the dog track"

"What was she doing? Putting a bet on or competing?" asked Faith,

Beryl smiled to herself. She had been saving up her next gem, "She was there with a man " she said as she sat back in her chair, a smug smile on her face.

"Never!" said Faith, "Who?"

"Mr Petty. That widower with that hardware shop in the High Street. It was him" said Beryl

"Andrew?" said Faith with surprise, "But he's a good looking feller, for his age I mean..." she added

"Oh yes. For his age" Beryl agreed

"How did she nab him? She must be blackmailing him or something" said Faith

"Oh they looked very affectionate. She had her arm in his" said Beryl

"Only to make sure he couldn't make a run for it" said Faith.

In the hallway, Patrick smiled. It sounded like Mrs Dingle was feeling more like her old self.

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Later that evening........

"Right. I've locked up, I'll just put the kettle on" said Patrick as he leaned in through the lounge door.
Daniel looked up from the sofa where he was stretched out comfortably. He'd decided to make an extra weekend trip to see that Mrs D was alright after her operation. Not that he had been worried of course. And with no guests staying at the moment, the lads had the run of the house for once.

Danny put his cowboy book down on the table and swivelled around on the sofa.

"Come here a minute then" he said, patting the empty space next to him

"I'll just....." Patrick started

"Come on" said Daniel.

Patrick walked over and curled up on the sofa, leaning his head down onto his partner's chest. Danny hooked his arm around the young man, slipping his hand under his folded, empty sleeve and pulling him in.

"This place looks clean. Hope you've not being doing too much" he said

"Aaron did a lot" said Patrick, "He didn't head home until this morning. Wanted to make sure his Nan was fine"

"This business shook him up a bit. Got him thinking about when she won't be around" he went on, "It got me thinking a bit too"

"What about?" Danny asked

"You know. About what would happen if we couldn't stay here anymore. About what would happen to us" Patrick said quietly.

Daniel thought for a moment, not sure how exactly to reply.

"Mrs D won't be off in a hurry" he started, "And whatever happens....."

"Yes?" asked Patrick

"I'll look after ya. I promise" said Danny softly as he held him close

Patrick smiled and closed his eyes.

"My lovely lad" said Daniel, in just a whisper

"You're my lovely lad too" Patrick whispered back

Danny smiled.

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A hotel in Bristol - end of April 1949

Robert knew exactly how he was going to get his own way in the hotel before he'd even stepped into the lobby. The knack was to insist that all of your demands were perfectly reasonable and make it clear that the hotel staff must agree with them because, after all, they were intelligent
people weren't they.

He only really had one requirement. They were going to book him and Aaron into the same room and, what's more, not think anything remotely strange about it.

"My man has parked my car across the street. That's not a problem is it" said Robert to the young man behind the desk as he signed the register. Rob knew just how to ask a question and make it sound like a statement when he needed to. It was one of the things he'd observed from his ex-wife and her family, how at least to act high and mighty.

"And you have booked us in one room I take it" Robert continued, gripping the end of his walking stick for effect. Truth be told, he didn't need it, not on a trip like this. Today, it was a prop.

"I don't want to be traipsing up and down stairs to some attic, just because I need help with something or other now do I" said Rob.

"All arranged sir. You're in Room 12 on the first floor" the young man replied.

Robert nodded in acknowledgement and put the pen back on the desk. He'd accidentally just written 'Hadleigh Manor' as his address and missed out the word 'Gatehouse'.

"Finished throwing your weight around have ya Colonel ?" said Aaron sarcastically as he followed his partner up the flight of stairs, carrying both of their cases of course.

Rob just smiled. It was all in a good cause.

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There was a wooden chest of drawers jammed between the two single beds in the room. In was old, large and, as Robert soon found out, too heavy to move out of the way. His plan to push the single beds together had gone out of the window. Which is where he'd had thrown the chest of drawers if he could have lifted it.

"I bet some right puritan put this in here" said Robert, annoyed.

But Aaron didn't say anything as he unpacked the cases and hung a few things up in the wardrobe.

Robert watched his partner quietly for a moment.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Rob asked as he walked over and stood behind him , "Because just say and...."

"No. You stay and do your paperwork" said Aaron, not turning around, "I need to do....whatever it is that I do, on my own. I haven't decided yet. I might not even go in the flaming pub!" he added in frustration.

Robert put his hand gently onto Aaron's shoulder, "You do whatever you decide" he said softly, "We can go straight home first thing and forget about this, if that's what you want, ok?"

Aaron reached up to where Rob's hand was resting and gave it a squeeze.
The Pilgrim's Rest Public House- The Dock area, Bristol- that evening

It wasn't easy to just walk in. Aaron had already stood staring at the outside of the pub for a good few minutes. A wave of doubt had suddenly struck him. What if his mother didn't work here anymore? What if she did and it was her night off? Would he even recognise her? Would she recognise him? It had been a long time after all.

But the huge question was, "What was she like? ". Not for the last time on this trip, he was thankful that Robert was waiting for him back at the hotel. To share whatever it was that he would have to share.

Then Aaron decided. He would wait until someone else went in and follow in their wake. Then he wouldn't stand out so much. He'd be just another customer.

He thought his opportunity had come when two young sailors walked past him. But they carried on down the street. Well, this probably wasn't the only pub in the dock area. He could have sworn that the lads had given him an appreciative look as they went by. But he barely thought about that at all.

The next person coming down the street was definitely going in. You could tell that from her walk. This was someone on a mission. An angry person.

And although Aaron didn't know it, she was looking for his mother too. It might have been better if she hadn't...........

Aaron didn't think he'd set his expectations that high. Not really. But it was true his family experience was limited. He'd always looked up to his Uncle Cain and he'd never said anything bad about his Mother. Although, it was true to say that he had never said anything much at all when you thought about it. And as for his Nan, yes she was probably the worst flirt in Blackpool and yes she probably would never act her age but he still loved her to bits. So surely a younger version of his Nan wasn't too much to expect. But then this was a rough looking pub, so perhaps his mother would be a little rough around the edges too.

Perhaps if that other women hadn't come in, it wouldn't have been so bad. He tried to tell himself that as he trudged back to the hotel. But he knew he was kidding himself.

He knew it was his mother because the landlord had used her name. Or, to be accurate, he had used it to tell her to 'shift her lazy ass and stop flirting'. And she had been flirting. Not just with the man sat at the bar talking to her, but to any man that came in. And not in the way his Nan liked to. This wasn't teasing, although then again his Nan wasn't always teasing.

So Aaron had taken his pint that the landlord had poured and sat quietly to one side of the room and just watched. He'd accidentally picked the best seat to observe the fight. His mother had just
been grabbed by some huge bloke and plonked herself down on his lap when the woman Aaron had seen marching in turned on her. She told her to keep away from her husband and called her every name under the sun for good measure. His mother had replied with a few choice words that Aaron hadn't even heard down the mine. She then followed them up with threats and some very fake commiseration that the other lady couldn't 'hang on to her feller'. It was then that the fight started. A couple of the men tried to prise the woman apart. But for most of the regulars, this was obviously a welcome and familiar sight. The tarty barmaid at her entertaining best.

Aaron put his glass down on the table and walked out. No one noticed.

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A hotel room in Bristol

Robert had arranged the pillows on his bed as well as he could. Just so he could make a comfortable space for the two young men to sit up against. And with just the lamp switched on, the one that was sitting on that annoying chest of drawers, it made the room seem more intimate. More like being curled up back home. Aaron's eyes were still just a little red. But he was quiet now as he lay down, his head pressed against the top of his partner's shirtfront.

Rob knew what to do. He kept his voice soft and talked around what Aaron must be feeling. He didn't push him on what had happened. He knew Aaron would tell him in his own good time.

"....so Patrick was telling me that it had been so long since he'd seen his sister, he couldn't even remember what she was like. And that was what was hard to deal with. Not being able to know now" said Robert, "And he hasn't got any other family. And with Daniel being away working like he is, I think it's good that he gets on with your Nan so well. I mean, you did him a real favour when you said he should go there after the War".

Then Aaron started to talk.....

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"When I went to Blackpool the first time, when I was just a kid... " said Aaron

"Go on..." Rob encouraged

"For ages, I kept wondering when she was coming back. When my Mum was going to take me home. I didn't think it would be back to our old home. Cause I all I remember about that was the rowing all the time" said Aaron

"And then....after a while...I had this idea in my head. About how great my Mum must be. Any time I was angry at Nan for telling me off or something I'd think that one day she'd turn up and I could go with her. I just wanted her to be this great person"

"When I never heard anything, I started to hate her. Cause I thought she must have hated me. To leave me there and never even get in touch"
"Maybe she just couldn't cope Aaron. And she thought your Nan was in a better position to. Having the guesthouse and everything" said Robert. He wasn't trying to defend Aaron's mum. Not after the blow by blow account Aaron had given him of his pub visit. He just didn't want his partner to blame himself for being dumped on his Nan and forgotten.

"She didn't have to run off. She could have got a job in the Royal Oak and thrown herself at all the men there if she'd wanted" said Aaron

"Then I just forgot her. Uncle Cain never said a word. No reason for them to be close, he isn't even that close to Nan. Not really. She says he went off to sea soon as he was old enough"

"But, the thing is. I know how much you miss your Mum. And look at Patrick, both his parents are long since dead. And Danny's are too. And Adam's only got his Mum and they don't even speak to each other. So I just thought. I thought, if my mum is out there. I ought to at least try cause, what other family have I got?"

Robert thought for a moment. He gave Aaron a gentle hug before replying.

"Well. You've got a Nan who thinks the World of you for a start. And she's warned me on many occasions what'll happen if I don't look after ya. And you've got an Uncle who spoiled you rotten when you were little. I don't even hear from mine"

"I didn't know you had one" said Aaron

"Ah. Just someone else my Dad fell out with" said Rob, "He's got his own farm somewhere. Anyway, I was talking about you. You've got your friends too. There's the lads in Blackpool and my dopey brother in law"

"Adam's not dopey" said Aaron. Robert smiled, he'd only really said it to keep the mood a little light.

"Oh come on Aaron, he is a little bit dopey" said Rob, "But the important thing I'm trying to say is, well, I know it didn't go well with your Mum today. But you could try again if you wanted. You could just have caught her at a bad time?" he added, not believing it for a moment.

"It's......it's not today. Not really" said Aaron quietly , "It's the twenty years without a word"

"Ok" said Robert, "How about this then? Let's draw a line under today. And if you decide sometime that you want to come back, I'm sure your mother isn't going anywhere. We'll go home tomorrow, get back to what matters right now. Sound alright?" Robert asked

"Yeah. Sounds good" said Aaron

"Cause your mother's not going anywhere. And neither am I" said Rob

Aaron lifted his head up and pulled away from his partner so he could look him in the face.

"You promise?" said Aaron.

Robert stared into his eyes.

"I promise" he said in a whisper. He leaned forward and pressed his lips tenderly against Aaron's.
"Come on Robert" said Aaron as he walked into the living room with a cup of cocoa in each hand, "You've done enough for one night"

Rob looked up from his paperwork, which was spread over the table in the corner of the room.

"Aaron. It's only two weeks till opening day" he replied. Without knowing it, he had adopted the same half-pleading voice that he used to use when his Mum made him come in for his tea when he was a lad.

"And it's late" said Aaron, as put the mugs down on the small table in front of the sofa and sat down.

"Fine" Rob replied as he walked over.

"It's true what they say" he added as he plonked himself down next to his partner and picked up his cup.

"What?" asked Aaron

"If you want to keep staff nowadays you have to act like they're in charge" said Robert with a grin as he curled his left arm around the back of the young man shoulders.

Aaron picked up his mug with a smile.

"Drink your cocoa" he said as he cuddled up against Rob.

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Happy times, dark times

The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – late one evening in August 1949

“Well, what was this place like then?” asked Beryl

Faith sighed as she filled the kettle, “Quite a nice house, I suppose. Lots of grounds to walk around in too, if you can manage it mind. But however much you dress it up Beryl, it's still a sanatorium. You stopping for a cuppa?”

“No, I best get back” said Beryl

“Well thanks for doing the meals love” said Faith

“You're welcome” Beryl replied as she buttoned up her coat, “It was hardly that much cooking. Only your commercial traveler wanted a big meal. Those theatre people seem to eat like pigeons to me” she added as she headed to the back door.

Mrs Axelby paused before leaving, “How's he taking it? Your other lodger I mean?” she asked

“Well, he's upset Beryl” said Faith, “I mean, they're close friends” she added carefully

Beryl nodded. “I know what you mean. My eldest Frank was the same. Hit him very hard when his best pal never made it back from Anzio. Well, I'll say goodnight love”

“Night love” Faith replied.

Faith knocked on the door to Patrick and Daniel's room. There was no answer. She decided to go in all the same. Just this once.

“I've brought you a tea love” she said softly as she walked into the room, cup in hand.

The room was in darkness. But with the light from the landing coming in she could make out Danny lying on the bed. He was still in his smart shirt and slacks but was curled up, his arms clinging tightly to the pillow he'd taken from Pat's side of the bed.

“Aw love” said Faith kindly as she closed the door and walked over to the bed, “I know it's bad, but we're past the worst aren't we?” she added as she put the tea on the nightstand next to the bed and clicked on the small lamp.

“Are we? How do you know?” asked Danny as he swung his legs around and forced himself to sit up, still clinging to that pillow.

Faith sat down on the bed next to him. She could see how red Daniel’s eyes were. And he'd been so quiet on the trip home. Obviously, he'd been managing to keep a lid on things, until now.
“But that Doctor said didn't he? It's just a matter of time now. He'll be home once he's recovered, even if it could be a bit of a wait” she said

“Yeah?” said Daniel, “That's what they told Pat's Mum when it happened to his Dad. And he never got to leave that TB clinic!” His voice was angry, but no sooner had he spoken he seemed to collapse. His shoulders started to tremble as he hunched forward, squeezing that pillow all the harder.

“Oh Danny love, come here” said Faith gently, hooking her arm around the young man. Danny buried his head in her shoulder as the tears started to flow.

“I can't lose him Mrs D. I can't!” the young man said, his voice breaking.

“You won't lose him love. You won't” Faith said soothingly, holding tight onto Daniel as she spoke.

And things seemed so different, not so long ago.........

A train traveling to Hadleigh, Derbyshire – A Friday afternoon in late May 1949

Patrick blamed his cough. If he hadn't started coughing then maybe the other man in the third-class carriage wouldn't have started a conversation with him and he could have stuck to reading his Agatha Christie novel.

“Pipe not bothering you is it?” the red-faced older man asked in a clipped tone.

“No. Not at all” Patrick replied. Well, he couldn't blame his cough on the man's smoking. That had started a couple of weeks ago but, still, it was no reason to cancel his trip to Hadleigh. Not when the lads had invited him. And not when Robert was looking forward to the opening of the Manor House on Saturday so much.

“Been in the forces, haven't you?” the man went on, “Can always tell”

“Yes. I have” said Patrick, closing his book.

“Bet you weren't a conscript either” the man said, “Way you're turned out”

“I joined the Medical Corp. Before the War I mean.” Patrick replied.

The other man leaned forward. Patrick didn't need to ask whether he had been in the Army. He had 'ex-officer' written all over him.

“Now. Most of the lads you see now. Never think they'd even been in the Army. Back in civvie street for a few months, all goes to pot”.

The man sat back on his side of the carriage again. He looked as if he was about to start on a favourite topic of his. Patrick decided to just listen. Hopefully, Hadleigh Halt wasn't that far away now.

“Course. Major myself” said the man, “Army man all my life and I can tell you.....”

And he did.
“It's quite alright Major. I can manage” said Patrick. But it was to no avail. The older man insisted on taking Patrick's bag down from the rack and carrying it out onto the platform for him.

“Nonsense! I can see how you're situated” Major Witherby replied, indicating the empty sleeve of Patrick's jacket, “God knows these porters won't help. And they still want a tip if they do! They haven't nationalised that yet!” he added with a snort.

“Well I must say Sergeant I did enjoy our talk” he went on as they headed to the small gate leading out from Hadleigh Halt.

Patrick smiled. It hadn't been a talk really, more of a lecture.

“Sure I'll see you at this shindig tomorrow” said the Major, “Not my thing at all but the good lady's keen so...ah, there's Sugden's man now” he added as he spotted Aaron pulling up in the car.

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“Funny really, you don't expect a Major in third-class. Even a retired one” said Patrick as they drove to the Gatehouse

“Was he a real pain then?” Aaron asked

“Oh he was alright” his friend replied, “He hasn't got over us pulling out of India. Well, to be fair, I don't think he's got over Queen Victoria dying yet” he added as the car pulled up at Robert and Aaron's home.

“I'm glad you could make it” said Aaron as he took Patrick's case from the back seat of the car, “You're our first ever guest” he beamed.

Patrick stood and looked at the Gatehouse from the main road. It was bigger than he'd imagined, you couldn't really call it a cottage.

“One thing” said Aaron as they walked through the front door into the long, stone porch that ran alongside the front of the house, “The Manor House, that opens to the public on Monday. So this party tomorrow, that's just for the local bigwigs. So Robert's done everything he's supposed to do. And I mean everything”

“Uh huh” replied Patrick

Aaron paused with his hand on the door from the porch into the front room, “So do us a favour will ya? Help me convince him” he added.

Aaron opened the door and the two young men walked in. Robert was sitting on the sofa, a stack of papers spread out around him. He didn't seem to notice their arrival.

“Robert” Aaron prompted

“Hmm? Oh hello Patrick” said Rob, looking up and flashing their friend a smile, “I thought I had ages before you were here........”
Later that evening..............

“It's just at the top of the stairs” said Robert as Patrick headed up towards the bathroom.

Aaron picked up the dinner plates from the table in the corner and headed towards the kitchen, “Do you have to keep going on about the flaming Manor House?” he asked as he passed his partner, looking up the stairs first to check their friend was out of earshot.

“What do you mean?” asked Rob, following Aaron into the kitchen, his whisky glass in his hand.

“He'll see it all tomorrow. Give it a rest for five minutes can't ya” said Aaron as he started to wash the dishes.

“Oh excuse me” said Robert sarcastically, “Perhaps I should leave it to you and we can talk about valves all evening”

“Fine, I will!” Aaron replied as he stopped washing up abruptly, “You clean up and I'll talk to our guest. That's all I'll be doing tomorrow anyway, cleaning up after you and your mates” he added as he wiped his hands on a towel and glared.

Robert was quiet for a moment and stared down into his glass.

“Is that what all this is about?” he asked quietly

Aaron just turned his back and gripped the edge of the sink. Robert walked over and stood behind him.

“Look, if I had my way you'd be coming with me tomorrow” Robert started, keeping his voice soft, “But you know how it is. If we could tell people, about us, I would. You know that”

Aaron turned around and thrust his hands into his trousers pockets.

“Do I?” he mumbled, not looking Rob in the face.

“Aaron. You know I would” he replied. Robert leaned forward and pressed his lips gently against his partner's.

Aaron smiled as Rob broke away.

“You'll be the most important person to me there” Robert added.

Aaron leaned in for a longer, more passionate kiss. He hooked his hand around the back of Rob's neck and pulled him in, running his fingers through his partner's blonde locks as he did so. Even after all this time the taste of him was so good. The taste of his Robert. Who cared if no-one else knew? Well, almost no-one else he reminded himself as they heard their guest coming back down the stairs.
“I hope you don’t mind” said Patrick as he sat down in the living room chair, “I had a quick look at your telescope as your bedroom door was open. I haven’t changed the settings or anything.”

“No, that's ok” said Aaron as he handed the young man a glass of whisky.

“You've got a real nice place here” said Patrick as he looked around the living room, “A real home” he added as Aaron settled into the sofa and hunched up against Robert.

Rob smiled and curled his arm around Aaron's shoulders. Aaron smiled back.

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“There you go” said Aaron, as he padded into the spare room, a glass of water in his hand.

“Thanks” said Patrick as he sat up in bed, “I can't seem to shake this cough” he added as he took a gulp from the glass.

“Probably being in the countryside. You're used to the sea air now I suppose” said Aaron

“I suppose” said Patrick

“You should be comfy in here” said Aaron, glancing around, “I've slept in here a couple of times. When Robert's been ill. Course it is supposed to be my room” he added with a wink as he left.

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse – Saturday morning

“Patrick, I've brought you a cuppa” said Aaron as he put a mug down on the nightstand in the spare room. But his friend seemed dead to the World. Aaron walked over to the window and opened the curtains a little.

“It's ages till this do” he added as he stared out into the road, “Course, Robert's in a flap, again” he added.

“What time is it?” Patrick mumbled sleepily, “I've not overslept have I?”

“Nah it's just gone half eight” said Aaron as he sat down on the edge of the bed, “You alright?” he asked, concerned.

Patrick pushed himself awkwardly into a seating position. He was about to speak when Robert burst in, wearing just his white shirt and trunks. He had a coat hanger in each hand, one with a light brown pair of trousers on, the other holding a light blue pair.

“Aaron. What do you think?” he asked, holding out both coat hangers.

“Uh, yeah” said Aaron with a smile, “I think you should definitely wear trousers”
“Blimey, hasn't she finished yet?” said Aaron as he put down two trays of sandwiches onto a table in the hallway.

“She could talk the back legs off a donkey that Nicola” said Florrie, as she finished filling up the sherry glasses, “She was the same when she was a girl. Motor mouth they used to call her”

“Are you taking these round on a tray?” Florrie asked. Aaron sudden scowl gave her her answer.

“I'll take Miss Phipps one, or she won't get any” said Aaron as he picked up a glass, “That lot can help themselves” he added as he stomped over to the far end of the room.

“Sherry Miss Phipps?” asked Aaron, “There's time, she hasn't even cut the ribbon yet” he added

“Oh thank you Mr Dingle” said Miss Phipps, turning around on the piano stool, “I shouldn't really” she went on, eagerly grabbing the glass from his hand.

“How come you don't play in church?” Aaron asked, wiping his hands on his green apron.

“Oh, I'm a Methodist. I go to the meeting hall in town” said Miss Phipps, “It's such a shame because Reverend Thomas does have a magnificent organ”

“That right?” said Aaron with a grin, leaning on the side of the piano

“Oh yes” said Miss Phipps, “The best for miles around I've heard...”

“.....so I now declare Hadleigh Manor House open” said Councilor Mrs King as she cut the ribbon. There was a round of polite applause as Nicola finally finished her speech.

“Eh, you're on” said Aaron. Miss Phipps knocked back her sherry in one gulp and started to play the piano.

“Of course” said Mr McCoy. “We'd have never managed it all without Mr Sugden” he added, pointing to the young man with his glass.

Robert beamed.

“And the guidebook, that's all his work” the older man added, “Well, as good as”
Nicola frowned as she looked through the small printed guide. She was unhappy that the attention in the room had swung away from her.

“You don't mention your old in-laws much do you?” she said, “’After the death of Edward Peterson in 1929 the Manor House was briefly owned by the White family and then the Rutherfords before being gifted to the Trust’” she read out.

“Hardly here were they?” Robert replied with a scowl, “Besides, people want to read about the old days don't they? You know, back when you were a girl”

“Well I think Robert's guide is just marvelous!” gushed Lauren Gillespie.

Nicola looked furious.

“Now, you must show me this cafe” said Mrs Witherby, slipping her gloved hand around the arm of Robert's light brown jacket.

“Of course” said Rob, flashing his winning smile.

“Henderson's did the work. I got them in to do our....to do my porch at the Gatehouse” he added as he walked Mrs Witherby to the front door. Lauren followed them out.

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“Robert's seems very popular” said Patrick. He was standing near the large fireplace in the middle of the hall, “Except with that hard-faced cow of course” he added, nodding towards Nicola.

“Ah well. That's Robert” said Aaron with a shrug, “Mr Charming”

“Who's the young lady? The one hanging on his every word I mean” asked Patrick

“That's Lauren. Her Dad's the local Doctor” said Aaron, frowning, “She thinks the sun shines out of Rob's........”

“Ah Sergeant, there you are!” said Major Witherby loudly as he marched over, a little unsteadily, “I was just telling the vicar about our chat on the train and.......”

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Later on........

“Right girls, where do you want these?” said Aaron as he walked into what was now the cafe kitchen, a pile of metal trays in his hand.

“Just on the table thank you Mr Dingle” said Mrs Smedley as she continued with the washing up.

“Ted's finished tidying up the hall so I'll lock up the main bit” added Aaron
“Did you manage..” Florrie started

“Course I did, got it earlier” said Aaron with a smile as he darted into the cafe. He came back into the kitchen a moment later with a half-full bottle of sherry.

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With Robert agreeing to have a drink over at the Gillespies, Aaron had taken advantage of a chance to show the now empty Manor House off to Patrick. Of course, it wasn't exactly the same as when he'd lived there. Some of the rooms had been rearranged to look like they were in “days gone by”.

“And this was where me and Adam slept” said Aaron as he stood in the doorway of the blue room. Three small poles, with red rope strung between them, had been laid out to form a viewing square just inside the entrance.

“Lucky old you” said Patrick, looking at the four-poster bed that was now in the centre of the room.

“Shurrup!” said Aaron with a laugh, “No. We had a bunk each then. And that painting wasn't here” he added pointing to the near wall, “Or all this china”

“They didn't want to waste that did they? Not on a bunch of scruffy miners” he added.

“Where were the other boys? Dafydd and Samuel I mean” Patrick asked quietly.

“Oh” said Aaron, “They were together. It's just along here”

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The yellow room had been turned back into a sort of sitting room. The only thing familiar about it all to Aaron now was the colour of the walls..................

The Yellow Room – towards the end of the War

“I don't know why you're chasing after that Sugden girl. This house belongs to the wife's family, not her brother. She's got no money you know” said Don as he sat on Dafydd's bed.

“Oh yeah?” said Adam angrily, “You'll have no teeth if you don't shut up” he snapped.

“Boys, boys. It's my birthday, so leave it out alright!” said Sammy good naturedly as he topped up Aaron's mug.

“Not too late am I boys?” said Leo as he sauntered into the room.

“No. Besides, there's plenty of my Nan's cordial left” boomed Dafydd.
“Oh, that's...good” said Leo as he squeezed onto the edge of Sammy's bed next to Adam and Aaron.

“Right, everyone got a drink now?” asked Aaron giving a quick look around the room, “Good. Happy birthday Sammy” he added. The other lads joined in the toast.

Leo could see that Adam and Don were still glaring at each other, so tried to lighten the mood.

“So, did Florrie give you anything for your birthday?” he asked, “A present I mean” he added quickly.

Sammy grinned broadly and walked over to the dressing table. He took out a small round tin and turned around in triumph as he opened the lid.

“Only........... half a dozen rock cakes” said Sammy, using the same voice he would have had if the tin was full of gold sovereigns “Well, five and a small one. Call it five and a half. Best I can do ya”

“Good grief. She must have blown her sugar ration on that” said Leo as Sammy offered him a cake, “What's in it for her?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Sammy just laughed and held the tin out to Aaron and Adam.

“Why did you hide that tin?” asked Dafydd, as Sammy took out a cake for himself.

“Cause I wanted to eat one” Sammy replied.

“Oh, I wouldn't have helped myself” said Dafydd, “That would have been greed. That's a sin” he went on. But all the same, he made sure he took the last full cake, leaving Don with the half. The young Scot scowled.

“Be fair mate. There is a War on!” said Sammy cheerily.

Aaron smiled....................

Hadleigh Manor House- The Yellow Room – May 1949

“....and it wasn't just their house. The whole street had been flattened” said Patrick

“What? Sorry Patrick” said Aaron, “I was miles away then”

“The street where the Feldman's lived in the East End. I was just saying, it had all gone. When I went to Sammy's funeral”.

Aaron sighed. His friend's comments had snapped him back to the present day. “Come on” he said, giving Patrick a friendly pat on his arm, “Let's get home”

Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse – Sunday afternoon
Aaron was annoyed. He was more than happy to drive Patrick to the station so he could head home but why did Robert have to insist he took a book back to Dr Gillespietoday.

“Right, I'm back” said Aaron as he opened the door to the living room. “Patrick got his train alright” he added as he hung up his jacket, “Do you think he looked a bit thinner to you cause I....” he said as he walked into the kitchen.

“Hey. What's all this?” Aaron asked with a smile. A red and white tablecloth had been spread out over the kitchen table. There with a small picnic basket lying at the top with 'F&M' written on its lid and its contents has been spread out on a few small plates.

“Well” said Robert, as he took the stopper out of a large beer jug, “I know you couldn't be my guest yesterday, but you're mine today”. He smiled as he poured them a glass of beer each and put the jug down on the table.

Aaron walked over and hooked his arms around his partner's waist.

“Course, that hamper is tiny” Rob complained, as he curled his arms around Aaron, “Nothing like what you used to get before the War. Well, nothings as good as it was, is it?” he asked

“Oh I don't know” said Aaron. He arched his head up a little and pressed his lips softly against Robert's......

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The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – late one evening in early July 1949

“....and do you know what Cynthia had the brass neck to say then?” asked Beryl

“What love?” asked Faith as she rummaged in her handbag for the back door key.

“She said she always knew she'd find true love when she was fifty, because Madame Rosa had told her that in a reading once. You remember her, used to have that little tent on the pier”

“ Fifty ! Who's she trying to kid?” said Faith as she unlocked the door, “That boat Beryl has well and truly sailed”

“Right I'll put the kettle on” she said as she walked into the kitchen. There was a bag of shopping lying on the table. She remembered Patrick was heading out earlier, but it wasn't like him not to pack everything away as soon as he got in.

“I'll just hang my coat up” said Beryl as she headed to the hall.

Faith took the kettle off the stove and stepped over to the sink. It was then that she noticed the blood.

Beryl rushed back into the kitchen. “Faith, it's your lodger. He's out cold on your sofa” she said

“Oh he's....probably tired” said Faith, “He's been very tired lately” she added quietly, still staring into the sink.
“You'd better call for the Doctor” said Beryl “I can't wake him up”

TO BE CONTINUED
Let's go back a little, before we move on again....... 

The Sugden Farm, Emmerdale – mid-June 1949 – one morning

“Feet!” said Victoria irritably as she looked up from the kitchen table.

“What?” asked Adam as he leaned in through the door to the farmyard

“I've just done the floor. Leave your boots outside thank you” said Victoria as she continued to read her letter.

Adam grumbled under his breath but kicked his footwear off in the yard all the same.

“You make work sometimes” said Victoria as she poured her husband a cup of tea from the pot. Adam took two very large steps from the door to the nearest chair and sat down, a large pout on his face as if he was hard done by. His wife took no notice.

“Who's been sending you bits of newspaper?” he asked as he took a gulp from his cup, looking down at the cuttings on the table.

“They're from Robert. Look he was in the West Derbyshire Chronicle” Victoria said proudly

Adam looked down at a picture of Rob standing next to Nicola King, with the crowd in the hallway of the Manor House behind them.

‘Councilor Mrs King’ he read out, “Hey, that's her that was in charge of the Land Girls isn't it? ’ pictured with prominent local resident Mr Robert Sugden” he went on.

“He'll like that, 'prominent' “ Adam said with a smile.

The Woolpack Pub – the backroom, the same morning

‘Prominent local resident' “ Diane read proudly, “Well I'll definitely be showing that to our Val next time she turns up”

Jack was sitting at the other side of the table cleaning his boots. He said nothing.

“Don't think much of that Mrs King though, do you pet? “Diane went on, “Looks a right hard-faced cow to me”
Robert closed the ledger on his desk with a sigh. Aaron was sitting on the sofa with a canteen of cutlery and a tin of metal polish in front of him on the table. He ignored the sigh and picked up another knife to polish.

Rob got up and walked over to the window. He thrust his hands into the pockets of his slacks and stared out towards the Manor House. He sighed again, this time more loudly.

Aaron had known that this was going to come. After all the excitement with the build up to the opening of the Manor House, his partner was bound to feel a little deflated once his work was over. Aaron stopped for a moment and tried to think of something he could suggest Robert could do. He'd already sent copies of his appearance in the Chronicle to everyone he thought would be even remotely interested.

“Haven't you got any accounts to do?” Aaron asked, as he put the knife back in the box on the table.

“All done” said Robert turning around, “And I've read all my committee papers” he added, cutting off Aaron's next suggestion.

Fortunately there was the sound of the post coming through the letter box and landing on the mat in the porch.

“Right, I'll put the kettle on” said Aaron as Rob darted out to collect the mail.

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It wasn't long before Robert was beaming.

“Mr McCoy's retiring as area supervisor soon. For the National Trust I mean” said Rob as he read one of his letters, “He wants to know if I'd be interested in replacing him”

Aaron could tell from the look on his partner's face. Of course Robert was interested. So, all in all, it was a good start to the week. Or at least, it was right then.

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Monday evening

Aaron put the phone on Robert's desk down and sat back in the chair. He put his hands up to his face and rubbed at his eyes. Why now? Surely there'd been enough to deal with this year? After his Nan was ill. And the disappointment of seeing his mother in Bristol.

Robert walked into the room from the kitchen, a mug of tea in one hand and his letter from Mr McCoy in the other. All day his conversation had been peppered with references to the area supervisor post.

“I think I'll arrange to go and see him. McCoy I mean” said Rob, “You know, get some more details before....” he stopped when he saw the look on his partner's face.
“Hey, what's happened?” said Robert, putting the letter and his mug down and walking over to the desk, “It's not your Nan is it?” he added gently, putting his arm around the younger man.

“It's Patrick....” Aaron started, “He could....I mean he” he said unsteadily, “Hasn't this year been rotten enough!” he added, starting to tear up a little.

Robert crouched down, and pulled Aaron in towards him.

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A hospital in Lancashire – Tuesday night

Patrick couldn't see, at least not yet. And it was hard to move. But he knew from experience where he must be. Civilian or military, when you've worked in enough hospitals you get to know the signs. For one, there was the strong smell of cleaning fluid. Not that that indicated much more than a zealous Matron on the warpath somewhere. But it he had any lingering doubts about where he was the conversation at the end of his bed put paid to them.

“......so if he makes it through the week they'll move him over to the sanatorium” said one young female voice

“Have they told his family?” a second female voice asked

“No. No family. All on his own. His landlady found him”

“Aw. Pour soul. You get a lot of that with the War. Shame. He's a nice looking lad really”

“What about that arm?”

“What about it? Least it's one less to keep an eye on in the back row!” the voice said with a laugh

“That will do Nurse!” said a third, deeper female voice

“Sorry Matron”

Patrick tried to focus his eyes, but couldn't so gave up. So he tried to remember instead. He remembered coming back from the shop in the next street. He remembered having a coughing fit in the kitchen. Then he went for a sit down in the lounge, just for a minute. Then, nothing. The nurses voices were getting more and more quiet now. What was it that happened? Whatever it was, it can't be as bad as last time.............

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A hospital on the South coast of England - June 1940

He remembered the explosion. He remembered the sudden, wrenching pain all down the left side of his body. He remembered the boat. Or at least, that he was on a boat.

But now, it was dark and he couldn't move. But it was getting lighter and he could hear male voices in the distance.
“.........what did you put him in here for Corporal? He should be in the recovery room, not in a ward” one said

“We haven't got a recovery room sir” another replied, “That's being used as a ward”

“Pah!” came a dismissive reply, “We'll be putting tents up in the yard next!”

And then the voices stopped

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“Back with us are you son?” said the new voice. It was an unfamiliar voice and, then again, it wasn't. That was it, it was a familiar accent. It was someone from Bristol. A man from home. Or at least from somewhere near home.

Well he sounded like a man anyway. He just looked like a dark blur. One that had just got up from the bed next to his and walked over a little awkwardly.

Patrick tried to sit up, but couldn't.

“I can't move” he said, his voice unsteady

“Hang on son” the other man said kindly, “I'll get one of the nurses to come in” he added. The dark blur was beginning to look more like a person now.

“Can you just...” Patrick started

“Do you want some water?” the other man asked.

“No. It's just my left arm” said Patrick, “It's itching like mad. You couldn't scratch it for me could you?”

The other man was silent for a moment.

“You just lie still a minute” he replied, his voice calm, “I'll just fetch someone, alright?”

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Several weeks later.......

“What are you doing here?” said Patrick, as he sat up in bed.

“I said I'd come back in and see ya before I went back didn't I?” the young man in uniform replied in his West Country accent, “Do you know what's happening to ya now?” he asked as he eased himself casually into the chair next to the bed.

“Well there's this post in medical records in Bristol. I thought I could do that. It would be better than relying on my Army Pension”

The other young man's attention was wandering a little. He was eyeing up the attractive looking male nurse on the other side of the ward. He waited until the nurse turned around and then gave him a big wink.

“Hey. Behave yourself” said Patrick nervously. This wasn't the first time he'd caught his former
roommate in this sort of situation.

“So...if you do get back to Bristol” the young man said as he scribbled an address down on a piece of paper, “Try this place”

“I...I don't know if I could, not now” said Patrick sadly.

The other young man just smiled. He leaned over and tucked the paper into the pocket of Patrick's dressing gown.

“Listen. It's like I told ya” the young man said, “There's a War on. Anything could happen. What's wrong with having a little fun before? Anyway, you can't miss this place, it's the last pub before the docks. It's just past the Pilgrim's, but don't go in there, whatever you do. That's a real dive”

“So look after yourself Patrick” he finished. Then with a squeeze of Patrick's hand and one more flash of his warm smile, he was gone.

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse – second week in July 1949 – Saturday morning

Aaron put his suitcase down by the door to the porch and started to lift his jacket from its hook. He put it down onto the top of the case. Well, it was probably going to be a hot drive.

Robert looked up from his paperwork which covered the table in the corner of the living room. Half a dozen guides to National Trust properties in the area, including the Manor House, were spread over the table.

“All ready to go?” asked Rob, trying to keep his voice upbeat.

“I'm ready to go” Aaron replied, pointedly

“Aaron” said Robert with a sigh as he got up from the table, “You know I'd come with you if I could. But there's this interview on Monday and then there's the committees and....”

“You've said” said Aaron with shrug as his partner walked over to him.

“I'll come with you next time. I promise” said Rob

“Yeah, cause there's bound to be a next time isn't there?” his partner replied

“Aaron. He is out of hospital now. He must be past the worst of it”

“Think you're a Doctor now ya? You've been spending too much time at the Gillepsies” said Aaron.

As soon as he saw the hurt look on Robert's face, Aaron wished he hadn't said it. There was an uncomfortable silence.
“Ring us tonight? “ said Rob as he stood in front of the other young man, his hands now thrust in his pockets.

“Yeah. Course I will” said Aaron quietly. He bent down to pick up the case and turned for the door. Then, as if it was an afterthought, he turned around and gave Robert a quick kiss. But there was something perfunctory about it. It seemed more dutiful than affectionate to Rob.

Robert walked back to the table and his paperwork. He heard the front door of the porch close and, shortly after, the sound of the car driving away. He frowned and picked up the nearest guide.

The Golden Palm Guesthouse - Saturday afternoon

“So when you visiting this Sanatorium then?” asked Beryl, as she sat at the kitchen table, turning over the pages of the local paper as she spoke.

“Tomorrow love” said Faith, as she continued with the washing up, “Our Aaron is coming up for a bit, he'll drive me over. Now that Patrick's allowed visitors”

“You'll be able to manage the meals for the guests won't you?” she asked

“Course I will love” said Beryl, “Hey listen to this” she went on, trying to cheer the mood a little, “'Cynthia Alexandria Rudge is....' “

“Alexandria? She's kept that quiet” said Faith.

“No, listen” said Beryl as she continued to read from the paper, “'is pleased to announce her engagement to Mr Andrew Thomas Petty, of Petty Hardware stores, Victoria street' ”

“I should say she's pleased!” said Faith turning around, “I bet she thought she'd go to her grave not knowing at this rate”

“Not knowing what?” asked Beryl

“Oh, Beryl!” said Faith with a smile as she wiped her hands on a towel.

“That's typical of her, putting a mention in for the business” said Beryl, “I suppose she'll be working there, after they're married”

“She'd suit a hardware shop” said Faith, “She's got a face like a bag of old spanners as it is”

“Seeing as we're talking of neighbours, well sort of “said Beryl, “How's old Mrs Hanley at No.18?”

“Oh, not so good love” said Faith, “She's still in hospital. Actually, you've reminded me I've got to go round and feed that dog of hers”

“Have you heard from Bernard at all?” asked Beryl

“No love I haven't” Faith replied quickly, “Now. Where did I put those keys to No.18? ” she went
Faith sat in the passenger seat of Robert's car in the driveway of the sanatorium. She looked across at her grandson next to her. He was just sitting there silently. He hadn't uttered a word since they walked out of the building.

“Listen love” Faith started quietly, “I know it's hard to credit, but he actually looks better. I mean, if you'd seen him when he went into the ambulance”

“Nan” Aaron replied, “He looked terrible. He didn't hardly speak to us. That wasn't Patrick, that was, that was like his ghost“

“I know love” said Faith, “But he's over the worst. He got out of that hospital and at least he's here now”

“Oh yeah, that's great isn't it?” said Aaron, “Cause this is like a holiday camp really. Nobody dies here or anything!” he snapped.

Faith said nothing and just let Aaron get his pent up frustration out of his system. Aaron took a couple of deep breaths to calm himself before talking.

“Sorry Nan” he started, “It's just lately things have been....well, just a bit too much” he added.

“You're not arguing with your Robert are you?” asked Faith, concerned.

“No. It's not that” said Aaron, “It's just...things”. He'd decided not to mention his visit to his mother in Bristol. It felt a little disloyal somehow, after all his Nan had done for him.

“Anyway” said Aaron, starting up the car, “How can I argue with him? Not here is he?”

Aaron took a small gulp from his tea and looked around the empty lounge.

“Bit quiet isn't it Nan?” he said, just to break the silence. His voice was a little distant.

“What love?” said Faith. She was struggling to thread a needle and, given her reluctance to wear glasses, the needle had the upper hand.
“The theatre girls will still be asleep. And Mr Anstruther had to go out early. Something about a sales visit in Southport or something” said Faith.

There was the sound of someone knocking on the front door.

“Who’s that when they’re at home?” said Faith, getting up and heading into the hall.

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Aaron picked up the needle and threaded it. He put it back on the table and started to read the local paper but stopped when a familiar voice echoed in from the hall.

“I thought you had an interview?” Faith asked

“I did” Robert replied, “Yesterday. And I did have some committees this week but I've asked Lau....I've asked someone to cover for me” he added as he hung his hat and jacket on the hall stand.

“So I thought I'd come up on the early train and see how Patrick was doing. Instead of waiting till next time” he added.

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“Hello” said Rob as he walked into the lounge. He was expecting a sarcastic comment. Something about deciding to show his face after all. Or perhaps Aaron wondering aloud how the rest of Hadleigh could manage for five whole minutes without Robert being there.

But Aaron didn't say anything like that. He just got up and walked over and wrapped his arms around Rob, burying his head in his chest. He mumbled a quiet 'hi' as he did so.

“Is it as bad as that?” Rob asked softly, bringing his arms around the young man.

“Yeah, it's bad” Aaron replied, “But it's a bit better now”

Robert smiled and hugged him tightly.

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TO BE CONTINUED
One thing Robert certainly wasn't was a “throw a few things in a case” person. And even though he had not decided on his trip to Blackpool until very late last night, his suitcase looked as if it had been carefully packed in preparation ages ago. And he had still managed to bring more with him in that one case that he'd carried on the train than Aaron had brought up in the car.

He'd already put the Agatha Christine novel he was reading on the nightstand next to Patrick's bed. Plus his Sherlock Holmes he’d brought as a fallback, just in case they got stuck here longer than a few days. The thing was, he thought as he laid out his gentleman's grooming kit on the dresser, Patrick's room was so obsessively neat, you didn't feel you were intruding on someone else's space.

Or at least he didn't until he opened the wardrobe to hang up the shirts he'd brought with him. He'd just slid the shirts already hanging there to one side when he stopped. You could tell they were Patrick's. The left sleeves had been neatly ironed and folded in two, with the cuffs clipped to the shoulder with a safety pin. Then there was the solitary tie. It wasn't hanging neatly, it was already done up but with a large space for the head to go through. So someone could just slip it round their neck with one hand and do it up. Just so they could look a bit smart, without having to ask someone else for help.

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Robert had just pulled his striped pyjama bottoms on and was sitting on the side of the bed. He was about to pull his pyjama jacket on when he frowned. It was silly to think about a tie hanging in a wardrobe but he couldn't help it. It was a well made tie, Rob knew quality when he saw it. And it was a good colour, plain black. The sort of thing you wore to be formal. When you were dropping off someone's accounts say. Or going to a smart restaurant. Or to a funeral.

Fortunately, Robert was jolted out of his thoughts by the sound of Faith bustiling in, clasping two large towels to the front of her blouse. She closed the door behind her discretely.

"Sorry Robert love” she said, a smile playing across her lips as Rob stood up quickly, “Forgot to knock” she added.

Robert realised he was holding his pyjama top in his front of his bare chest in rather a chaste fashion,

“Brought you some clean towels” said Faith, placing them on the end of Patrick's bed, still smiling.

Aaron chose that exact moment to walk in, carefully closing the door behind him. Robert hurriedly pulled on his pyjama jacket.

“Actually Faith, I meant to ask. Why are we in here?” he asked, “Me and Aaron I mean” he added quickly as he did up his jacket buttons.

Aaron looked a little puzzled as he sat on the bed and started to undo his shirt.

“It's alright love” the older lady replied, “Patrick won't mind. And Daniel's away this month”
“I thought we'd be in our usual room, that's all” said Robert

“Mr Anstruther's in there. You know, my commercial traveler” said Faith as she headed for the door, “I could ask him if he wouldn't mind sharing if you like” she added

“But I warn you” she said, “He hogs the sheets." And with a final broad smile, she left the room.

Rob looked at his partner. Aaron shifted on the bed a little uncomfortably and continued to undress.

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Aaron stripped down to his vest and boxer shorts and climbed into bed next to Robert. His partner was sat up reading his detective novel and paying him no attention. Aaron rolled onto one side and slid his arm beneath the covers and across Rob's mid-rift.

“Did you want something?” said Robert, still reading his book. He smiled as he said it.

“I just...” Aaron started to say, “I'm just glad you came up” he finished.

Rob put his book down on the nightstand. He hunched down into the bed and curled his left arm around the younger man to pull him into a cosy embrace.

“Well, you were right, about visiting” said Rob, “Not because I'm worried. I'm sure Patrick will be fine. I am” he added soothingly, “But if it had been the other way round. If I was one of us, I know he'd have come round soon as he could”

Aaron lay his head down onto Robert's chest and hooked his arm around his middle.

“What was that about earlier?” he asked, “About being in here. We've had this room before”

“I don't know” said Rob, “It just feels a bit different this time. That was when Daniel had gone off to Canada for all that time wasn't it? Before I mean”

“Yeah. Think so” Aaron mumbled.

“Where is he anyway? I thought he'd have come home like a shot” Robert asked.

“It's just really bad timing” said Aaron, “Nan told me he's gone on this trip to the Baltic. Stockholm and that. So he's not back until the start of August”

“I wouldn't mind going to Stockholm” said Rob, “It'd be nice to see a city without a load of bombsites for a change”

“Thing is “said Aaron, “He didn't want to go. Daniel. But Patrick told him that was daft, cause he'd get this big bonus if he did. So he goes off Monday morning and that night, Patrick collapsed downstairs”

Rob was thoughtful for a moment. He cuddled Aaron a little more.

“You should have said you were thinking of coming up when I rang ya yesterday” said Aaron, “Cause we can't visit until Sunday”

Robert frowned, “Has your Nan got the number for this sanatorium?” he asked.
“Yeah. Somewhere” said Aaron, yawning a little.

“Can't visit till Sunday?” said Robert, “Well, we'll soon see about that!”

Aaron smiled as he drifted off to sleep, Rob's arms still wrapped around him.

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Wednesday morning

Robert opened his small black address book and flicked through to the letter N and started to jot down a number. “Right” he said to Aaron, who was sitting at the opposite side of the kitchen table drinking his tea, “I'm going over to the Royal to use their phone” he added as he got up and marched out of the room.

“Where's your Robert off to?” said Faith, as she walked into the kitchen with a tray of the breakfast things from the lounge, “He had a very determined look about him”

“He's off on an errand Nan” said Aaron, “He's going to be all charming”. And if that doesn't work, Aaron thought to himself, he'll just be downright awkward till he gets his own way.

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Aaron didn't need to ask if Robert had got his own way. He strode into the kitchen with that confident walk he liked to occasionally do. Not that he didn't always have a confident air. To Aaron, he had right from the start. Even when he had needed his stick. But this confident walk just said, 'make way, a clever person is coming through'.

“I thought they only allowed visitors on a Sunday” said Faith, “Well, you know not unless it's...” she added. She decided not to finish her sentence.

“Well, I've spoken to the Matron” said Robert with a grin.

Aaron turned from the sink with a smile. He was washing up so his Nan could put her feet up for five minutes.

“And they're making an exception this afternoon” said Robert, “After all, I am Patrick’s cousin aren't I? And I've got to see him because I'm going back to Canada on Friday”

“Why are you going to Canada?” asked Aaron, “I mean, why have you said that to them?”

“I'm a trade official. I work in the embassy” said Rob

“And what if they find out you're not?” asked Aaron.

“Well, if they do ring the Whitehall number I gave them, then Lewis Holbrooke will tell them all that too” said Robert, “I've got an old RAF friend in the Foreign Office” he added, turning to Faith, “Anyway, they won't check up. I'm sure I convinced them”
“I see I'm going to have to keep an eye on you, Robert Sugden. With this silver tongue of yours” said Faith, looking at Rob appreciatively.

“Oh, well, it's all in a good cause isn't it?” said Robert, feeling just a little uncomfortable under her gaze.

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The Nightingale Sanatorium – Lancashire – Wednesday afternoon

Aaron wasn't expecting a familiar face to greet them on their arrival. But sometimes, it was a small World.

“So how long have you been here Sam?” Aaron asked, as he walked up the steep staircase to Patrick's distant room.

“Just this week” said Sam Dingle, “They moved the lot of us from our place in Bradford. You know, re-organising “

“What, already?” said Robert, “The Health Service has only been going for five minutes. If you ask me....”

He stopped as Aaron had turned and looked at him. He didn't say a word but the look on his face said “Not now”.

“Sorry” Rob mumbled.

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“...and I saw it was the boss down on the lists. Well, same name like” said Sam as the three men walked down a long, dark corridor, “So I asked to be orderly for this bit. Seems only fair. He always looked out for me back at the centre. And we get a nice card every Christmas. Me and the Mrs”

Sam paused at they reached the door to the room.

“Don't say anything right” he started, “But the feller in the other bed went last night. It can happen like that sometimes. I've not cleared his stuff out yet though and......”

Aaron had stopped listening. But this was where Patrick was supposed to get better! He knew people could die here. He knew he'd brought the possibility up himself when he came here with his Nan and was upset by the change in Patrick. But this death was a little too close to home. Too close to his friend.

“Couple of visitors for you boss” said Sam as he marched into the room.

Aaron was still standing outside. Then he felt a hand resting on the back of his shoulders, gentle but supportive. “It won't happen Aaron. I promise” Robert said softly. And even though Aaron knew that Rob was just saying that. Even though he absolutely knew his partner couldn't make that guarantee, just hearing him say it made him feel that little bit better.
Miners Training Centre- The Midlands- a year or so before the end of the War

Sam Dingle had never really seen Patrick angry before. He'd seen him argue with Mr Pollard, the training centre manager, a couple of times but he'd never lost his temper.

“We were only larking about” the young mining trainee had said angrily. None of his mates standing around the yard behind the mess hut had much else to say.

“I don't care” Patrick had snapped back, “I'm confining the lot of you to your hut for the weekend”

“We're not in the flaming army mate!” the trainee replied, refusing to back down.

“No. You're not” Patrick had said, taking a step forward, “But I am. Now move, before I cancel leave for the the whole month”

The trainee scowled. He decided not to push his luck and sullenly he walked out of the yard, his friends in tow.

Once they were out of sight Patrick nervously rubbed his forehead with his hand. He never enjoyed being confrontational. He stood there thinking for a moment when the sound of Sam lifting an upturned metal bin off the ground snapped him out of his thoughts.

“No, leave it Sam” said Patrick

“It'll 'ave to be cleared up boss” Sam replied, looking around gloomily at the mess all over the yard.

“ They can do it in the morning. I'll make sure of that” said Patrick. He put his hand on the back of Sam's shoulders, “Come on. Let's go in the kitchens. Doris will give us a cocoa”

“Thanks boss” said Sam.

Leo watched the two men heading into the kitchens from his vantage point at the far edge of the yard. He walked around the corner and back to the low wall where Adam and Aaron were sitting, mugs in hand.

“What was all that racket?” asked Aaron

“It's alright now” said Leo, sitting back down on the wall, “Some of those Hut C oiks were having a go at Sam. Seato gave them a right tongue lashing though” he added, pausing to drain the last of his own mug.

“Seato?” asked Adam, looking confused

“You know. Sergeant Seaton” Leo replied, as if it were painfully obvious who he was talking about

“Why do you call him Seato?” asked Aaron

“It's an abbreviation” said Leo, “You know, for short. We used to do it all the time at school”

“What, dropping one letter? Not much shorter is it?” said Aaron, “What did they call you?” he
“Rashers” of course Leo replied. Aaron frowned at this. He couldn't see what was wrong with just plain Leo. Then again, Leo's school sounded a lot posher than Aaron's in Blackpool and Leo's surname, 'Roberston-Ash' was a bit of a mouthful.

“Do you mean like bacon?” asked Aaron

“Aww!” said Adam, “I'd love a bit of bacon!”

“What would I get called then?” Aaron asked, ignoring his hungry friend.

“Hmmm. Don't think we ever had a Dingle at Eton. Well, not in my time. 'Dingers' I suppose” said Leo.

“Hah!” said Adam with a grin, “Makes you sound like a dog” he added, quickly moving out of the way to avoid the sharp dig Aaron had aimed at his ribs

“Can't say I'm surprised it was that Hut C lot” said Leo, “That's where they put all the awful lads. Absolute shower they are ”

“How come we ended up with Don in our Hut then?” asked Aaron

“Ah, well he's the exception that proves the rule I suppose” said Leo

“You what?” asked Aaron, slightly confused

“Come on. Keep up 'Dingers' !” said Adam. He added a quick 'Ow!'. That time Aaron had been too fast for him.

“Geroff!” Adam laughed. He tried to dig Aaron back but missed.

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“Thank you Doris” said Patrick as the middle-aged woman handed him and Sam a mug of cocoa each as they sat in the kitchen at the back of the mess hall. Doris wiped her hands on her apron and went back to the serving hatch where a grinning young Sammy Feldman was leaning on the counter and waiting to continue their conversation.

But Patrick and Sam didn't get much of a respite before Mr Pollard angrily marched in from the yard.

“What on earth is that mess outside there!” he demanded, glaring at Sam.

“It's all in hand” Patrick sighed

“I pay you to keep that yard clean. Not sit around on your backside” Pollard continued. Sam didn't answer and stared down at the floor of the kitchen.

“I'm talking to you!” Mr Pollard bellowed into Sam's ear.

“I said it's all in hand” Patrick repeated through gritted teeth.

Mr Pollard turned around, as if he had just noticed that the young Sergeant was sitting there for the
first time.

“Well I want it dealt with now” the centre manager insisted.

“Well hard cheese” said Patrick, “Now go away you ridiculous, jumped-up, little man” he snapped.

Mr Pollard could not for a moment believe that Patrick had been so blatantly rude to him. So, with a huff, he simply pretended it hadn’t happened and marched back out of the kitchen. Sam looked up, looking a little nervous.

“Don't worry about him Sam” said Patrick, “I'll look out for you” he added.

Sam managed a grateful smile.

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The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – end of September 1949

“Well she had a good run” said Beryl, “Eighty two's not bad”

“No love” said Faith, pouring her friend a cup of tea. They were both clad in black.

“Have you heard from your Aaron?” asked Beryl.

“He's very busy” said Faith proudly, “Has to do more driving now. What with his boss's new job”

“Who's it with again?” asked Beryl

“National Trust love” said Faith, just managing to make it sound like 'Buckingham Palace'

“Oh. Very nice” said Beryl, “Did you tell him about the funeral?” she added

“Well it's not as if he knew old Mrs Hanley that well Beryl. Apart from kicking his football into her backyard a few times. Mind you, Patrick would have gone, if he could I mean”

“How's he getting on?” her friend asked

“Oh you know. Slow but sure, that's what his Doctors say” said Faith, “It just looks a bit more slow than sure to me at the moment”

“Did you hear Lettie Chorley when we got back from the crematorium?” said Beryl, changing the subject, “She was going round asking if there was a will”

“She wasn't!” said Faith

“She was” said Beryl, “And I saw her eyeing those silver candlesticks in the front room. You know, the ones that belonged to Mr Hanley's mother's. She'd have had 'em in her flaming handbag if she thought no-one was watching”

“Cynthia was the worst though” said Faith, “Acting all grief stricken, like she was her best friend. She's not put a foot across that doorstep in fifteen years!”
“Oh I know” agreed Beryl, “You could tell that from the way that dog kept growling at her”

“She was only putting it on for her intended. So she can convince him she's all caring” said Faith

“Well she'll have her work cut out there” said Beryl, “So. Who will be getting it all?” she went on

“That nephew of her's from Ripon. You know, than lanky feller with the glasses who turned up” said Faith, “But he doesn't want the dog”

As if on cue, Daniel walked into the kitchen from the back yard. He was carrying a small white dog with a large black patch around one eye.

“Hello Mrs A” he said with a smile, “You were right about the beach Mrs D, he loved it” he added, “Didn't you boy?” he went on, talking to the dog.

“Come on, let's get you cleaned up” said Danny, as he carried the dog out into the hall.

Faith watched as he left. Daniel hadn't been smiling a lot lately. It was nice to see.

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No.18 Albert Avenue– (two doors down from the Golden Palmtree) - June 1948

“You could always go to the Doctor you know Mrs Hanley. It is all free now” said Patrick as he washed his hand under the kitchen tap.

“Oh, I couldn't do that Nurse Seaton” the old lady replied as she put her cardigan back on. Patrick had explained to her that he wasn't a Nurse anymore, but she had got that idea into her head and wasn't letting go.

“Dr McGann's very nice” Patrick added as he patted his hand dry on a small towel.

“I've always preferred to make my own arrangements” said Mrs Hanley

“Right. Well, I'll just collect Mr Perez and be off. He's put your radio back in the front room for you”

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Patrick opened the door to the lounge. He couldn't help but smile. Daniel was lying on his back on the rug in the middle of the room. He was lifting up a small white dog with a black patch over his eye, as if he was pretending it could fly.

“Who's a lovely boy then?” said Danny, beaming. To be fair, the dog seemed to be enjoying the attention.

“All done. We can go now” said Patrick.

“The old dear alright then?” Danny asked as he sat up, smoothing the dog which had flopped into his lap.
“She's fine. I wish I could get her to go to the GP though. But she says she's got to eighty without any help from Doctors and she doesn't plan to start now”

“Right. We’ll be off then, won't we Patch?” said Danny, giving the small dog a tickle behind the ear before he stood up.

He'd always liked animals.........................

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A house in the backstreets of Manchester- early 1930s

A nine-year old boy with dark curly hair and lightly tanned skin was standing in the kitchen, a small scruffy dog in his hands.

“But Mum” said Danny, “He followed me home”

Mrs Perez sighed and stopped stirring the stew on the stove for a moment

“But Danny” she said, “You've already got a cat. And a rabbit”

“That's alright. They won't mind” said Danny

“I didn't mean that” said Mrs Perez “He'll want walking and feeding”

Danny frowned and stared into the pot on the stove.

“He can have some of that stew” he said “Dogs aren't fussy”

“But.....” Mrs Perez started. She looked down at her son staring back at her with those eyes. They were definitely his father's eyes. If it hadn't been for those eyes she probably wouldn't be Mrs Perez and standing here now arguing with their son.

“Alright, you can keep him” she said, conceding defeat.

Danny beamed and headed out into the yard. “Hola Papa” he said as squeezed past a tall, dark-haired man with olive skin who had just walked in from the alleyway.

“Un perro!” said Mr Perez as he came into the kitchen. His wife just looked at him and raised an eyebrow. He let out a sigh.

“A dog?” Mr Perez said again, a little sulkily as he put his work bag down on the kitchen table.

“I've said he can keep it now Carlos” said Mrs Perez, turning back to the stove.

Mr Perez stared into the pot, he didn't look very impressed.

“Let it have stew” he said after a moment, “Dogs. They will eat anything”

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Faith had made herself scarce for the end of the visit, heading off to 'powder her nose'. And the lad in the other bed was in the day room. So Danny was trying his best to finish his stay on a positive note, if only for Patrick's sake.

“You never know. You could be home for Christmas” said Daniel, sitting on a chair next to Patrick's bed.

“They said that during the War. And in the last war” Patrick replied.

“Well, I hope you will be” said Danny, looking downcast. He reached over and took Patrick's hand in his.

“I'd take you back now, if they'd let me” he said.

Patrick tried to think what to say, but was at a loss. He didn't want to get Danny's hopes up.

“What was this picture Mrs Dingle mentioned?” he asked

“Oh, right” said Danny, brightening a little as he reached for his bag under the chair, “It's a recent one, you know, with Patch in it”

He handed Patrick a framed black and white photo. Faith was sitting on a deck chair on Blackpool beach, with Daniel kneeling next to her on a rug, holding a small white dog and smiling for the camera.

“That's great” said Patrick with a smile.

Daniel took the picture off his partner and put it on the nightstand next to his bed. He reached down to pick up the card he'd knocked accidentally to the floor. Inevitably, it had flowers on the front. Daniel glanced briefly at the inside before putting it back and read the signature, 'From Adam, Victoria and Sarah Barton'.

“Don't say anything” said Danny as he sat down again “But Mrs D doesn't see a lot of Mr Rudge these days. And she thought she would, what with that sister of his getting married. And the thing is, she really misses him. Well, misses having a feller about anyway. So I think she took in Patch to take her mind off him a bit”

“But don't say anything “ said Daniel, gently taking Patrick's hand again, “Cause its rotten. You know. When you really miss someone”

Patrick looked at Danny. Looked into his deep, dark eyes.

“It's alright” he said softly, “It'll be our secret” he added with a smile, giving Danny's hand a squeeze.

Daniel smiled back.
Blackpool, The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – November 1949 – late one Friday night

Daniel's digs in Hull weren't all that different from the Guesthouse. Not when you first looked at them. But the digs, that was just somewhere to stay. “Cheap and cheerful” is what one of the lads on ship who stayed there had said. And what they lacked in cheer, they made up for in cheapness.

When he got back from a stint at sea, he'd come into the house and head straight up the stairs. The landlady would usually be arguing with her husband in their rooms on the ground floor. Not that the guests were allowed in there. Then he would trudge up to the room he shared with some other lads, past the small alcove where there was a tiny cooker with a couple of rings for them to use. And usually he'd then collapse onto his single bed in the corner and lie down. And every other fortnight he'd tell himself with a smile, “I'll be home tonight”. And of course a big part of that was, “I'll be with Pat”.

Whenever Daniel got off at the tram stop and started to walk up to the Guesthouse, he'd feel that little bit better. Just reaching Albert Avenue and the sight of the sign outside Mrs D's front door was usually enough to put a smile on his face. And there was still a warm welcome for him now, which he appreciated all the more on such a cold night. But it wasn't the same. Mrs D did her best, but she couldn't fill the gap in his life that taunted him day by day.

Danny had stripped down to his vest and boxer shorts and slipped quickly into the double bed in his and Patrick's room. It was cold tonight. Too cold. He thought about knocking on Mrs D's door and asking to borrow those men's pyjamas she had. But he decided it was too late at night and, besides, it could just give her the wrong impression. So instead he pulled the blankets around himself a bit tighter and tried to think about Sunday. Things would be better then. When they'd get the train over to the Sanatorium. He drifted asleep........

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A cold night some time ago......

It was freezing in Patrick's room. Too cold for Daniel to be sitting around, even in these pyjamas Pat had borrowed for him. So he climbed quickly into his side of the double bed and waited for his partner to return. Luckily, Patrick always planned ahead so he'd put a hot water bottle underneath the blankets not so long ago.

It wasn't long before Pat slid into his side of the bed. “That bathroom's freezing!” he said as he snuggled down under the sheets. “Come here” Daniel replied with a grin, curling his strong arms around him, “I'll warm you up” he added. Patrick turned onto his side and lay with his back to Danny, so the other young man could wrap himself around him. “Night Pat” Daniel whispered, planting a quick kiss on the back of his partner's neck. Then he closed his eyes and drifted asleep....

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Daniel woke with a start. He wasn't sure why. He looked over to Patrick's empty side of the bed
and immediately frowned. With a sigh he lay on his back and stared into the darkness. He brought his hand up to the silver dog-tag around his neck and thought for a moment. His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a tapping on his bedroom door. He dismissed it at first. Must be the wind coming up the staircase. But no, there it was again. Oh God, he thought. It better not be one of those theatre girls. Or even Mrs D.

After the third tap he pulled back the sheets and walked over to the door. He opened it just a little, but that was enough for Patch to squeeze through and run into the room. Daniel closed the door with an indulgent smile as the small dog leaped up onto the mattress, going straight for the warm side of the bed where the young man had been lying.

Danny climbed in on Pat's side of the bed. It didn't seem right somehow. But he reached over and gave Patch a few gentle smooths before getting his arms back under the covers.

It just didn't seem right. None of this did. He closed his eyes and tried to go back to sleep. Sunday soon.

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Northamptonshire – the road to Garston Manor House – November 1949 – Monday morning

“...and the thing is “ Robert went on, “This place is really in a state. It's been empty for the best part of ten years”

“Uh huh” said Aaron as he concentrated on driving. The novelty of ferrying Rob around to visit the properties he was now in charge of had soon worn off.

“There's a lot of work for me here” said Robert, “If I can this place open next year it'll be good for me. With the Trust I mean”

Aaron said nothing. He maneuvered the car through the gate at the end of the drive and pulled up alongside the small cottage that was hugging the outer wall of the estate. Somehow, he didn't share Rob's enthusiasm for Garston Manor. It just meant more driving back and forth as far as he was concerned. And Robert didn't help sometimes. Such as now.

“Now. I'm going to heading to the Manor with.....Mr Foster” said Rob as he checked the black notebook in his hand, “....so I don't want you under my feet”

“Don't worry. I'll keep out of your way sir “ Aaron replied sarcastically

Robert turned and was about to say something when the front door of the cottage opened and a cheery, grey haired man stepped out and thrust his hand toward the young man.

“Morning. You'll be Mr Sugden then? Though it'd be you, soon as we saw the car” he rattled away as he shook Rob by the hand, “Now I've heard you're a busy man, so we'll head up the house right away and I'll give you the tour”

“That's what I like to hear” said Robert with a smile. Obviously his reputation for getting things done in the Trust was spreading. He glanced briefly across at his partner. Aaron was scowling.

“Right then Mr Sugden” Mr Foster replied as he reached inside the cottage and grabbed his jacket
and a canvas bag, “Let's get to it”

“Right” said Rob, “Oh. This is Dingle my driver” he went on, “Mr Dingle” I mean he added quickly. Robert winced as he said it. He felt as if he could actually feel Aaron's scowl hardening without even looking around. He just knew he'd hear about this later on.

“How do son” said Mr Foster with a quick nod. Aaron nodded back. There was no handshake though but he was used to that. It didn't mean he liked it though.

“You go through to the back lad” Mr Foster said as he stepped out of the cottage, “The Mrs is down in the village but our Warren will make you a tea”.

Robert started to walk up the drive with Mr Foster who was now in full flow.

“...and I don't know what the Henleys spent their money on. That's them that had the Manor, but I can tell you this for nothing it weren't on damp proofing!”

Rob glanced back over his shoulder as they walked up the drive. But Aaron had gone.

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Aaron took his cap off and smoothed his hair down a little as he walked into the lodge house. The Fosters had a nice cottage. Not as big as the Gatehouse back home but very homely. Someone was obviously very houseproud, he thought. He wished he'd brought a book along now. He should have done really, just to stave off the boredom. This wasn't the first time he'd been dumped in the “servants quarters” while Robert went off being Robert.

As he walked into the kitchen a young man in his early twenties looked up from the kitchen table, which was covered in paperwork.

“You the feller from the Trust?” said Warren.

“Oh, uh, no” said Aaron, “I'm Rob...Mr Sugden's driver. Your Dad said to come through for a cuppa”

“A driver?” said Warren, a smile breaking out over his handsome features, “I saw the car coming up the road” he added as he got up and headed for the stove.

“Hey” he went on on as he walked over to the sink with the kettle, “You couldn't let us have a look could ya? I'd mad about cars”

“Uh, yeah. If you like” said Aaron, pulling up one of the kitchen chairs and sitting down.

He glanced at the paperwork. He recognised a couple of copies of Radio Retailer magazine.

“These your Dad's?” Aaron asked, his interest piqued

“No. They're mine” said Warren, “I work in the shop in town. I love all this stuff, ever since I was in the Army”

Aaron smiled. Maybe this visit wouldn't be so boring after all.

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“Thanks Mrs Dingle” said the young man at the kitchen door as Faith handed him over a bucket of water.

“Call me Faith love” she replied, “Now I'll just be in the kitchen. So you just come in if you want more water. Or to dip your shammy or anything” she added with a smile.

“Uh thanks” the young man said, flushing a little. He quickly started to climb back up the ladder.

Faith folded her arms and watched him climb up, still smiling. They were very tight fitting around the rear, those overalls, she thought.

As she walked back into the kitchen Beryl was looking at her with a tea cup in one and hand and her lips tightly pursed.

“What?” said Faith innocently as she sat down at the table opposite her friend.

“That's Dennis isn't it? Renee Culshaw's youngest” said Beryl, nodding towards the kitchen window, “How old is he now?”

“Oh I don't know. Twenty one I think” said Faith.

“Your blouse is older than that” said Beryl, tutting.

“What? It never is” said Faith looking down at her dark, floral top, “My God, you're right and all. Charles bought me this, first Christmas I came here” she added. Faith fell silent, lost in the past for a moment.

“He was a lovely man, Mr Lesley” said Beryl. Faith nodded and smiled.

“You heard from Bernard?” Beryl asked.

“He knows where I am. I'm not going chasing after him again” Faith replied, her tone showing that was all she wanted to say.

“Least that blouse still fits” her friend said, “I couldn't get into the dresses that my husband bought me”

“Either of them” she added sourly, “The old skinflint”

“Well, I'm sure Lester had other qualities” Faith offered.

“Yes” said Beryl as she put her cup down, “I'm sure I'll think of one if I try hard enough”

“Let's have another cuppa” said Faith brightly as she stood up, “See if we can tempt young Dennis down off his ladder” she added as she headed to the cooker.

“Oh well. Least your Bernard is still alive” said Beryl, wistfully.

“That's a matter of opinion” Faith replied, leaning across the sink and looking up at the ladder outside.
Northamptonshire – Garston Manor House – November 1949 – Monday morning

Robert looked around the morning room while Mr Foster poured him out a mug of tea from his thermos flask. The older man had pulled back the dust sheets on a couple of the long sofas so they could sit down.

“There you go” said Mr Foster, handing Rob his tea, “Thought you'd want a break and it saves the walk back to the lodge” he added.

“You're very organised Mr Foster” said Robert

“Ah, that's the Army for you” the other man replied, “Never leaves you”

“Aye. This place must have been grand. Back in it's day” he said, looking around the room.

“Course, I suppose you're been in places like this all your life”.

Rob was puzzled.

“It's like Ted Lofthouse were saying. Course, you've met Ted haven't you. Caretaker down at Loggerheads. Some folk were saying as you were a bit young to be area supervisor. But it's like Ted said. It's breeding. You can just tell”

Robert smiled. He'd have to tell Lewis Holbrooke that at the next RAF reunion. Especially as his friend was always ribbing him about being an “oik”.

“...and we've got a television in the shop” said Warren, “Just to show people you can get a signal now. But I mean, who can afford one round here?”

“I know” said Aaron enthusiastically, “I said the same to Harry. He got one in and he'll never shift it!”

“My Dad says they'll never replace radio” said Warren, “Course Grandad used to say the pictures would never replace the music hall!”

Aaron smiled. But his mood changed once the back door opened and Mr Foster walked in with Robert.

“Right” said Mr Foster briskly, “I'll get on to the builder about those estimates and we'll see you again on the 12th”

“Excellent” replied Robert.

“I'll get the car warmed up Mr Sugden” said Aaron as he stood up, his voice now sounding as cold as the weather outside.
Rob frowned. It looked like it was going to be a long journey home.

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse, Derbyshire – later that afternoon

It had been a long journey. At one point Robert had thought of asking Aaron if he'd gone on a sulking course when he was at the training centre during the War. But he decided it'd probably just make things worse. He'd tentatively tried a couple of light comments on the journey, but they'd been rebuffed. Even his comment about Aaron seeming to get on well with the Foster's son only solicited a gruff, “Yeah. Nice bloke. Into radios”.

Rob's final attempt was a cheery, “Hello. See the Postman's been” as Aaron drove up to the Gatehouse. He had spotted that a large parcel was sitting on the doorstep to their porch. But Aaron had just muttered back, “Fine. I'll bring it in now”. Robert shook his head and began to resign himself to an uncomfortable evening.

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Robert had opened the parcel on the table in the corner of the living room and was checking the contents against the packing note that Hatchards had put inside. There were three detective novels, two science-fiction books and a couple of Western.

“Been treating yourself. Again” said Aaron as he walked up behind him.

Rob sighed and grabbed the back the chair in front of him with his right hand.

“They're not for me actually” he replied, “They're for Patrick” he added, staring down at the table and away from his partner.

“Oh. Right” said Aaron, his angry mood starting to deflate.

“I mean he's been in that place for ages now hasn't he? It must be rotten. We can take them up next time we go. I thought it would be a nice gesture, that's all” said Robert

“Yeah. It is. Nice I mean” said Aaron, putting his own hand on the back of the chair.

“There's a couple for Daniel too. Can't be nice for him either. You can tell he misses him” said Rob

“Yeah. Course he does” said Aaron. Without thinking about it, his hand had edged across the back of the chair and was brushing lightly against Robert's.

“Right. Better get tea started hadn't I?” said Aaron, his face finally breaking into a smile.

Robert picked up one of the Western novels as Aaron started to walk away. He read the title, ‘The return of Cactus Pete”. Danny would probably enjoy it he thought.

He was snapped out of his thoughts as Aaron had walked back, just to plant a quick kiss on his right cheek before heading back to the kitchen. Robert smiled as he watched him walk away. The evening was starting to look up.
The Nightingale Sanatorium, Lancashire – first week in December 1949 – Sunday afternoon.

It had only been a quick glimpse as he'd walked past the door of Patrick's room, but it had been enough for Faith.

“I'll leave you now love” she said, giving Pat's hand a quick squeeze, “I just want a quick word with that nice Doctor Halliday” she added as she headed quickly to the door.

“I think she's getting worse” said Patrick, as soon as she was out of earshot, “She was going on about her gorgeous new window cleaner the other week”

“Have I got competition?” he asked

“What? No, course not” Daniel replied, frowning.

“Before you go, there's a list for you to take home. It's in the nightstand. The one in the envelope” said Patrick

“What is it?” said Daniel as he opened up the small cupboard

“It's some things for you to remember, while I'm stuck here” said Patrick

“I can cope Pat” said Daniel with a sigh, “I mean....” he tailed off. He meant he could cope with practical things. But this. This he couldn't cope with.

“I know you can” said Patrick gently, “It's just some reminders, that's all. After all, Mrs Dingle. She'll be thinking about other things won't she?”

“Yeah” Danny agreed, forcing a smile.

“Read it when you get home” said Patrick. Daniel nodded in reply.

Blackpool, The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – first week in December 1949 – late Sunday night

Daniel sat on the side of the bed and kicked his boots off. It was then that he remember that list that Patrick had given him earlier. He picked it up from the nightstand where he'd left it and opened the envelope.

There were just the two pieces of paper in it. Patrick had written “Remember” neatly across the top of the first page before adding a few points. Danny shook his head in irritation. It felt a little like he was being talked to as if he was still a kid. And Pat wasn't like that. Not usually.

He read through the list of things and they were all good practical points. And, to be fair, he had forgotten a couple. There was a reminder to get his Health Stamp paid once a month while he was
in Hull. And a reminder of where his Post Office savings book was (in the Huntely & Palmer biscuit tin at the bottom of the wardrobe).

Daniel had read to the bottom of the list. The final point had been a reminder about taking Patch to the vet every three months. Something about a recurring stomach bug he'd had that old Mrs Hanley had mentioned to Patrick.

Daniel stopped before moving to the second page. It had just crossed his mind that Patrick had written all this in case of the worst happening. But he kept saying he was fine. Well, obviously not fine but on the mend at least. He'd be home once his strength was back.

Danny pushed that thought out of his mind and started on the second page. There couldn't be that many things he need to do could there? There was the same “Remember” written neatly across the top of the page but this list was different. This list started, “Remember I love you”.

Daniel read down the rest of the page. It read simply, one line at a time, “I miss you, I count the days till you visit, When you're here I don't want you to go, I want to come home to you, You're the best thing that ever happened to me, or ever will”

And then, finally, it just said, “Te amo por siempre – Patricio”.

Danny sat on the side of the bed quietly, a tear trickling down the side of his face. It was years ago that Patrick had asked him what his name would be in Spanish. They were both still in Bristol then! Cuddled up one night in the back room of that warehouse. Pat had been a little disappointed when Daniel told him his own name was the same. Just said differently.

The silence was broken by the sound of Patch, pushing open the nearly-shut bedroom door with his nose and scampering over to the bed. He leaped up onto the mattress and flopped down next to the young man.

Daniel put the note to one side and scooped up the small dog. “Come to see your Dad have ya?” he asked with a sniff, giving Patch a cuddle.

“I've been to seen your other Dad today. You remember Patrick, don't ya? He's not home right now, but he will be one day."

"One day real soon”
“ONE.......My Nan and my Uncle.........................”

The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Christmas Eve – long before the War

“Right then young man, it's your bedtime” said Faith

“I don't want to go to bed Nan!” complained young Aaron. He was very happy sitting in front of the fire pushing his toy train around. It was warm in the front room and, even though it was full of people, no-one was arguing. Not like it used to be with his parents.

“And it's *dark* on the stairs!” Aaron explained.

“I'll take you, you come up with your Aunty Beryl” said Mrs Axelby, getting up from the table.

A little reluctantly, Aaron took the older woman's hand and padded out of the room. Faith reached down to ruffle his hair as he went by, a broad smile on her face.

“Hadn't you better be heading to the theatre love?” she added. Her comment had been directed towards the attractive young lady in the corner that had been talking to her son all evening. Or, to be more accurate, hanging on his every word.

“.....and the shark was *that* far from my leg” said Cain, illustrating a small distance with his hands, “No word of a lie” he added as he sat back in the chair with a smile.

The young lady gaped before getting up and heading out to the hall.

“You can bring that tree in for me now” said Faith “Now our Aaron's in bed. It's at the back of the lean-to”

“Fine” Cain grumbled, getting up and heading out of the lounge.

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“Right, your Aaron's settled” said Beryl, coming back into the room. Faith had taken a large cardboard box out of the bottom of the sideboard.

“Do you fancy helping? Or you got to get off home?” she asked.

Beryl looked over at her husband, who was sitting in a chair by the fire, dead to the World.

“We'll hang on. Best not shift him” she said

“Poor thing. He must be worn out” said Faith, as Mr Axelby let out a loud snore.

“Well, it takes a lot out of you doesn't it?” Beryl replied sarcastically, “Sitting on your fat backside all day!”

“Right. Where do you want this Mother?” said Cain as he carried a medium sized Christmas tree
“Corner by the window love” Faith replied.

“Why did you wait until tonight to put your tree up?” Beryl asked as she rummaged around in the decorations in the box on the table.

“I thought it would be nice for our Aaron” said Faith, “You know. It's his first Christmas here after all. He'll come down in the morning and we'll have a nice tree all done. That's what Charles's parents used to do when he was a nipper”

“Don't remember us ever having a tree” said Cain, sulkily.

“We did!” Faith insisted as she started to unwrap some glass baubles in the box, “You father got us a tree the first three years we were married”

“He wouldn't try it on that estate again though. Not after the gamekeeper got him with that buckshot” she added turning to Beryl, "He couldn't sit down till New Year's Eve"

Faith took a step back from the completed tree. Mr Lesley's family decorations had set it off a treat.

“I'll put the presents under later” said Faith with a smile, “I'm sure our Aaron with love it”.

And he did.

“TWO..................My big brother, my sister-in-law and my husband.........................”

Tuesday 13th December 1949– The Wheat Sheaf, near Emmerdale

“...right, so well see you first thing” said Victoria, as she sat by the phone in the back hallway of the pub. She put the phone down and thought for a moment. With a small sigh, she picked it up again and spoke into the receiver.

“It's Hadleigh.....” she started to say to the operator.

“Hello Sis!” said Robert enthusiastically, “I was just about to write to you” he added.

“Were ya? What about?” Victoria asked

“I'm coming up for the RAF reunion on the 19th after all. You know, the one they're having at the air base. My friend Lewis wasn't going at first, so I wasn't keen, but he is now”

“Will Aaron be coming?” his sister said

“Yeah. Course he will” said Robert, “We're heading on to Blackpool for Christmas anyway”
“Good. Cause I'm hoping he can cheer Adam up.........”

Victoria had hoped to have gotten out of the pub without having to speak to her. But as soon as Katie had heard the other young woman coming out of the back of the pub she had darted out from behind the bar, suddenly interested in collecting empty glasses after all.

“Evening Victoria” said Katie, “Not seen your Adam in here for a while. He is alright I hope?” she added, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Never better thanks” Victoria replied with a fake smile.

“Well give him my love. And tell him. He knows where to find me” Katie went on

“Everybody knows where to find you Katy” Victoria snapped, “Flat on your back in the nearest gutter” she added before storming out of the pub.

“Is he coming then?” Adam asked as his wife climbed into the passenger seat of the truck

“Who?” Victoria replied

“The vet” Adam replied patiently, “I thought that's what you went in for love”

“Oh, yeah” said Victoria, “He'll be round first thing”

“Good” said Adam as he started up the engine, “Hopefully your Dad will give it a flaming rest now!” he added.

Victoria hoped he would too. But if that doesn't work, I'm sending in the big guns. Well, gun' she thought to herself

Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse - Wednesday 14th December 1949

“Well, it still fits” said Robert proudly as he walked to the bottom of the stairs and into the living room. He was kitted out in his blue RAF uniform, complete with cap.

Aaron finished wiping his hands on the towel in the kitchen and walked over to the doorway.

“Why wouldn't it fit?” he asked, “You're no bigger than the last time you wore it. Older yeah, but no bigger”

“Thanks a bunch ! I wish I hadn't bothered putting the flaming thing on now!” Rob pouted.

Aaron smiled and stood a little forward, so he was right in front of Robert.

“Don't say that” he said softly with a smile, taking hold of Rob's jacket and running his hand
slowly down the front.

Robert smiled and leaned forward eagerly, pressing his lips against the young man's.

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Emmerdale – The Sugden Farm – Sunday 18th December 1949 – afternoon

“...and I'm not kidding. I was *that* far from taking his offer, wasn't I love?” said Adam, gesturing a small space with his fingers.

Victoria was sitting next to him at the kitchen table and nodded. Robert frowned. He could see how frustrated his brother in law must be right now.

“Well, the thing is, Dad's getting on and he won't accept it. So of course he just pokes his oar in” said Robert

“I mean” said Adam, “If I knew for definite that one day we'd get this place and then we could pass it on to our Sarah, that'd be different. But he won't even do a new flaming will”

“Won't you and Victoria get it anyway?” said Aaron, turning to his partner sitting next to him.

Robert folded his arms and stretched back in the chair, “I've no idea. Dad probably wrote his will when Granddad Sugden died. That was *years* before I was born. For all I know, Uncle Joe will cop for the lot!”

“Anyway, I've got work to do” said Adam standing up, “You are staying with us as usual aren't ya?” he asked Aaron.

Aaron looked at his friend. There was just a small touch of uncertainty in his voice.

“Yeah. Course” said Aaron, “Well. Looks better then doesn't it? Me here, Rob at the Woolpack”

As soon as he spoke, Robert reached behind his partner and gently rubbed the back of his shoulders.

“Good. There's some stuff I want to show you later” said Adam as he headed to the door.

“Right” said Aaron standing up, “I'll warm the car up before I drop you at the pub” he added as he also left the room.

“You going to speak to him? Dad I mean?” Victoria asked her brother.

“Yeah I will” her brother replied, “It's just I'll need.....”

“To find the right time?” Victoria interjected

Robert scoffed, “Hah! You know Dad. There's no such thing as the right time for me. No, what I'll need is to find a good excuse!”
“And that's my Dad. Back in the first lot” said Adam with a proud smile as he took a black and white photograph out of the wooden box on his lap.

Aaron was sitting on the sofa next to his friend and looked at the picture. A handsome, dark-haired man was standing on a station platform with four other young men. All were in army uniform, with rifles over their shoulders.

“He always told me these were his best mates” said Adam, “Those two blokes on the left, they even came to the funeral. And he lived down in Devon one of them”

“The other two never came back from the Somme” Adam went on, his smile fading. Aaron was quiet. He could tell this was one of those times that his friend wanted to just talk.

“And the thing is. I'm glad my Mum sent me all this. I am “said Adam, as he looked inside the box.

“But...” Aaron prodded gently

“But it's like she's trying to get rid of him. Just because of this flaming new feller of hers. You know, like my Dad never existed”

“Ok” said Aaron, “So maybe that's what your Mum is doing. Maybe she doesn't want to think about him”.

Adam instantly looked pained. It was one thing to put the idea out there. Quite another to have it confirmed by your best mate.

“But even if she is. That doesn't mean you have to does it? You keep this with the other stuff you've got any one day, you'll be able to tell your Sarah about her other granddad won't you?”

“I mean, well, you're not going to forget him. Are you mate?” said Aaron as he hooked his arm around his friend's shoulders.

Adam smiled and started to rummage again in the box.

Emmerdale – The Woolpack- Monday 19th December 1949 – evening

“Look at this lot” said Jack Sugden dismissively as he leaned onto the bar, “It's as bad as the War”

“Three airman Jack!” Diane corrected him as she put the empties she'd collected onto the bar, “And one of them's your own son!” she added as she nodded towards the corner of the pub where Robert was sitting with two friends.

“Anyway. They'll not be here long” she added, “A car's coming over from the base to pick them up
“You never see me wasting my time on Home Guard reunions” said Jack, unmollified.

“Oh be fair” said Diane, “Most of them have passed on pet. Half of your lot were pushing 70 when the War started”

Jack just looked sour.

“Of course. You’ll have a job sorting that Garston place out” Lewis Holbrooke said to Robert as he relaxed in his seat. He knew if he waited long enough their companion would get up and get another round in. It wasn't as if he couldn't afford his shout, but old habits died hard.

“It was terrible when I used to go there” he added

“I might have known!” said Rob, “Is there anywhere you haven't been?”

“Well, it was their eldest daughter, Miranda” said Lewis leaning forward a little, “We used to play sardines when we there, of course”

“Of course” said Robert, dryly

“And if you got in the cupboard with her she'd......” said Lewis

“Another drink lads?” Diane interrupted as she leaned over.

“No. Thank you” Rob replied flashing a smile at his step-mother, “Will's getting them in”.

Diane smiled back and carried on collecting the empties.

“What happened to that barmaid they used to have here?” Lewis asked, “You know, your old girlfriend”

Robert just frowned at his friend.

“You know who I mean” Lewis persisted, “Blonde, gorgeous, outgoing. Do anything for a pair of nylons and a chocolate bar”

“Oh Katie” said Robert, “She moved on. Something disagreed with her”

“Oh really, what?” asked Lewis

“Me” said Rob, with a satisfied smile.

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Emmerdale – The Woolpack- Tuesday 20th December 1949 – 9:00am

“Diane. How recent is Dad's will?” Robert asked as he sat at the table in the back room.

“Well that's a cheery subject for the breakfast table” Diane replied, putting her tea cup down in the
saucer, “Are you worried about your inheritance?”

“I don't want the Farm. It's Victoria I'm concerned about” Rob replied, “These things need to be sorted”

“Well I did ask him after we got married pet” said Diane, “But you know your Dad. I think he's that superstitious, he thinks the moment he signs it, he'll drop down dead”

“Hmm” Robert thought for a moment, “Still think we ought to sort it. You know, take the risk”

He was broken from his thoughts by the sound of his father coming in.

“Surfaced have you?” Jack asked, “Can't say I'm surprised it took you so long. What time did that flaming car drop you off? One o'clock?”

Rob sighed, “It wasn't that late Dad. It was quarter past midnight”

“Well some of us have to get up in the morning” Jack replied, “Some of us have got proper work to do”

As far as Robert was concerned that was the final straw, as well as the opportunity he needed.

“But that's just it Dad” said Rob, “You'd don't have work to do. Not anymore. It's down to Victoria and Adam now”

“Adam can't cope!” said Jack dismissively

“Not with you breathing down his neck every five minutes he can't!” said Robert

“What's it to you anyway?” Jack demanded, “I'm still the head of this family!”

“Family?” said Rob standing up, “You keep this up Dad there won't be a family. Adam will go off if you're not careful. And he'll take Victoria and Sarah with him. There's plenty who'd jump at a hard working couple like them. He's already had one offer....”

Jack fumed. Robert could see that was news to him. But his Dad being his Dad, he wasn't going to climb down from his high horse.

“You leave the farm to me Robert” said Jack, “You stick to your Manor Houses alright?” he added before storming angrily out.

There was a time when Rob would have been furious. Where his father would have goaded him into lashing out verbally. But now, he just took a deep breath and sighed.

“I'll talk to him” said Diane, “I mean, at least it's out in the open now” she added.

Robert smiled at his step-mother. Someone had to the peacemaker. Even if it was a thankless task.

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“THREE.........................My eldest brother and my brother-in law.........................”
“Right, now I’ll have to go and talk to that Matron. Thank her for letting us visit on a Wednesday” Robert explained

“Uh huh” said Aaron as he parked the car in the drive.

“I mean, the next visiting day is Saturday, because of Christmas so this is a big favour. I managed to sweet talk her of course”

“That right?” said Aaron

“I think she fancies me” said Rob, “Well. She is only human I suppose” he added with a satisfied smile

“Oh!” he added, as Aaron poked him in the side.

Aaron smiled, “I'll get those books from the boot” he said

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Aaron had just started to walk up the long staircase in the middle of the sanatorium when he heard a voice calling him

“He's not up there. The boss I mean” said Sam

Aaron turned around on the staircase, “He's not been moved has he? I mean he's not got worse or anything?” he asked worriedly.

“No! He's better” said Sam, “He's down in the day room. I'll show ya”

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“That's why there's all them benches outside” explained Sam as he escorted Aaron down a long corridor on the ground floor.

“That's how you can tell who's ready to go home. How far they can make it across the grounds on their own like”

“Too parky for that, this time of year. It's how far you can get round this place”

Aaron walked with Sam to the entrance of the day room. He could see Patrick sitting over by the far window, reading. Aaron smiled to himself. He definitely looked better.

“Course. The Doctors do tests an' all” said Sam, “It's not all walking”

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“I'll have to write and thank Robert for all those” said Patrick as he walked up the stairs, nodding briefly towards the bag of books Aaron was carrying.
“You can tell him in person” said Aaron, following his friend, “He'll be along in a bit, once he can tear himself away from that Matron”

“Don't tell Daniel when you see him” said Patrick as he eased himself onto his bed, “I want to surprise him. Last time he was here I couldn't do the stairs”

Aaron beamed, “You're doing well then” he said

“Actually, I think the Doctors aren't being fair” said Patrick

“Well I can't rush about like some of the others at the best of times. I haven't got the balance have I?”

Aaron reached over and gave Patrick's solitary hand a gentle squeeze.

The silence was broken by Robert bounding in “Hey. What's this I hear about you gallivanting all over the building?” he asked, with a smile that seemed to light up on the room.

The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Friday 23rd December 1949

It had been going so well too. Daniel had turned up at the Guesthouse and had been really pleased with the books that Robert had picked out for him. Aaron had explained that he was going to drive his Nan and Danny over to the sanatorium on Christmas eve. He even suggested they take Patch along. Aaron said he'd walk him around the grounds so Pat and Danny would have a bit more time together.

And when Robert had walked in saying “Wasn't it great about Patrick doing so well? Managing that massive staircase and everything”. He had genuinely meant it. He really thought it was great.

Then Daniel had gone all quite and mumbled something about putting those books away.

“That was supposed to be a surprise” Aaron hissed once the young sailor was out of the room

“Aaron. You never said” Robert hissed back.

Aaron decided to stick to what he knew. He waited for what seemed like a decent interval and then made a cup of tea for Daniel and himself.

“I brought you a cuppa” said Aaron as he knocked on the door of Patrick and Daniel's room.

“Oh. Come in” Danny replied.
As he walked in Aaron saw Daniel quickly put a piece of paper back on Patrick's desk and cover it with the cowboy books.

“Sorry about Robert blurting that out. I know Patrick wanted to surprise you” said Aaron, sitting down on the bed and handing Daniel a mug.

“It's alright” said Danny, “It's just I wish I'd seen it first. I mean, he is my lad” he said quietly as he sat down.

“Well, I wish I'd told my lad to keep it quiet” said Aaron, “Then again. Not really Robert's thing is it? Quiet” he added with a smile.

“I know it's daft.....” Daniel started

“Go on” Aaron encouraged

“But I still wished he was coming home for Christmas” said Daniel, “I still thought he might”

“You wait till you see him on Saturday” said Aaron, “He's really turned a corner. I promise you”

Daniel looked at Aaron. His dark eyes looked sad. He obviously wasn't convinced.

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The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse Blackpool - Friday 3rd February 1950 – late evening

Daniel trudged up the road to the Guesthouse. Even in the dark it was easy to spot Robert's car. It was not as if you saw many cars in the road, unless Dr McGann was doing a house call. Danny remembered Robert offering to move the car out of the way, or at least getting Aaron to move it. But Mrs D had insisted it should stay, especially if the landlady of the Seaview could see it. You didn't get many cars pulling up at her place.

Daniel hadn't been home since New Year. A repeat one-month Baltic trip had come up and Patrick had insisted he took it again. And Pat had looked so much better on Christmas Eve, Daniel didn't feel so bad going away. Still, Christmas without him had been every bit as rotten as Danny had feared and that month away had been too long. Sunday, could not come quick enough.

He had just dumped his kit bag on the floor and hung his jacket and cap in the hall. He tiredly ran his hand through his curly hair as his landlady walked out into the hall.

“Hello Mrs D” he said with a smile.

“Hello love” said Faith. “You couldn't go and get that dog of yours down could you? I forget to give him his tablet earlier. I think he's up in your room.

“Course” said Daniel as he started up the stairs.

In the lounge Robert was sitting on the sofa, his arm across the back while the radio hummed quietly in the background. Aaron was taking advantage of the other guests being out to cuddle up against him. He looked up at Rob and gave him a smile.
And in the kitchen, Patch was curled up asleep in his basket.

“Right, where are you....” said Daniel as he opened the door to his and Patrick's room and stopped dead in his tracks.

“Hello” said Patrick with a smile, turning around from where he was sitting at his desk, in his pyjamas and dressing gown.

“What?.........when did you?” Danny stammered.

“This morning” said Patrick, standing up.

“Oh Pat. Come here” said Daniel, walking over quickly and wrapping his arms around the young man in a hug.

“Watch out” said Patrick, still smiling, “You'll have me back in the sanatorium if you're not careful”

Daniel pulled his head back a little, his neat beard brushing against Patrick's soft skin as he did so. His urgent embrace became more gentle.

“You're not going anywhere Patrick” he said insistently, staring into his partner's eyes.

He pressed his lips against the other young man's. He broke away, safe in the knowledge that was just the first of many and embraced him again.

“I love you so much Pat. So much” Daniel whispered, holding tight as if Patrick was going to vanish.

Pat smiled and buried his head into Danny's strong shoulder. He could feel a tear trickling down the scarred side of his face. But what did it matter. Now he was home. Now he was really home.

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The middle of the night.........

Daniel woke with a start and sat up in bed. He didn't know why. The night was cold, but he didn't feel it. He looked down at the over-sized pyjama top he had on that Pat had borrowed from Mrs D. As Danny's eyes adjusted to the dark he looked over to the side of the bed. Patch was sleeping quietly in his small basket next to the night-stand. Well, as Patrick had said, he'd got used to being in there when Daniel was home. They'd have to let him in now, every time he was there. Well, almost every time.

Daniel rolled onto his side and looked at his partner. He was wearing his t-shirt instead of the pyjama top they'd made him wear in the clinic. He knew how much Patrick had disliked that long, empty sleeve that had resulted from that. He listened for a moment, not exactly sure what he was listening for. A change in Pat's breathing? Something to show his lungs weren't as strong as they were?
But Patrick sounded fine. In fact, he sounded wonderful, just because he was there. Danny leaned forward, and planted a quick kiss on the back of his neck, just above the thin silver chain that was holding his dog-tag in place and then lay on his back. As he did so, Pat turned in his sleep and Daniel felt his arm curl across his middle. Danny just smiled and drifted off to sleep. A lot happier than he'd been in such a long time.
"All my lads at home for once"

A small step back, before we move on again....... 

Blackpool - The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse - Christmas Eve 1949

It had become a small tradition, Beryl coming round on Christmas Eve and helping Faith decorate her tree. It took a good couple of hours to complete. Not because the tree was ever particularly large or elaborately decorated. It was just that a bottle of sherry and a good natter kept getting in the way.

"I think this paper chain's on its last legs" said Beryl as she lifted a slightly battered strip of coloured paper from the decoration box.

"I know how it feels" said Faith, wistfully

"Wasn't that young Daniel I saw heading out earlier?" Beryl asked, "With one of those showgirls"

"He'll be off to St. Barnabas's. You know for Mass" said Faith as she headed for the sideboard and, more importantly, the sherry decanter.

"I always thought he was one of those" said Beryl as she collapsed into the sofa.

Faith paused for a moment as she poured the drinks, "One of those what love?"

"You know. Roman Catholic" said Beryl, "Him being Spanish and everything"

"Half-Spanish" Faith corrected her friend as she passed her a glass of sherry, "Anyway. He's not been to church for years. That Carol's been taking him" she added as she sat down.

"Ooh. Do you think romance is in the air?" asked Beryl with a smile.

"No love. I don't" Faith replied, sipping at her sherry. "Not really his type" she added.

"Talking of romance" Beryl started, "I was in Hardings in the week. You know, our Frank used to have that Saturday job in the gents section"

Faith nodded

"And Cynthia was in there with Mr Petty, picking out her wedding dress" said Beryl

"White of course" said Faith

"Of course" Beryl replied. She shifted a little on the sofa and turned to her friend, 'I always thought it was unlucky though. The groom seeing the dress before the day"

"He's marrying Cynthia" Faith replied, "I think he's had all the bad luck he's going to get in this life"
Tuesday 27th December 1949 - just before midnight

Aaron dried his hands on the towel in the bathroom. He had just started to open the door to head out when he saw that one of the girls from the theatre was outside Patrick's room, talking to Daniel who was standing there. He decided to wait till they'd finished, seeing as he was only in his vest and boxer shorts. Perhaps Robert did have a point about wearing pyjamas after all, he thought.

".........I told you" said Daniel, "I'm off in a couple of days. I'll be away for a month"

"Well" said Carol with a smile, “The offer's there” she added. And with that she walked away.

Daniel quickly closed the bedroom door. Aaron headed to his and Robert's room. He paused for a moment and frowned. Then he shook his head and carried on.

The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse - Saturday 4th February 1950 - 1:30pm

It was cold and dark and there was still no sign of the rain letting off. Aaron leaned on the table in the lounge and looked at his partner next to him. Robert was in full flow.

"And the thing is I'm still doing all my book-keeping, several local businesses in Hadleigh" said Rob

"But I still do all my places here" replied Patrick, who was sitting opposite him. "Your Nan used to bring their books in for me in the sanatorium” he said, turning to Aaron.

"Yes, I do see that", said Robert,” But I'm responsible for a lot of Trust properties now. And that means their accounts too. There's our place, and Garston Manor and Bide-A-Wee and..."

"Loggerheads" Aaron finished for him with a sigh

"Yes. Thank you Aaron and Loggerheads. So, when you think about all that. I think it's obvious. I should be the banker"

"Well, it's my game" replied Patrick in a childish tone as he took the lid off the Monopoly Box.

Aaron gave his friend a pleading look. "Fine" Patrick said with a sigh, "Robert can be the banker".

Robert grinned as Patrick passed him the lower part of the box with all the fake money.

"But I'm getting first pick of the pieces. I'm having the hat" said Patrick, leaning over and grabbing the small metal token.

"Oh" said Robert. "Actually......"

"And I'm having the car" Aaron cut in quickly.
"Daniel. What piece to you want to be?" Patrick asked.

Danny looked up from the rug over by the fire. He was kneeling down and playing with Patch who was enjoying chewing a yellow rubber ring. "What's left then? I've not played this game before"

"There's a boot, a thimble, an iron and a ship" said Patrick

"No animals?" said Daniel with a frown, "Better be the ship then I suppose" he added. He gave Patch a tickle under the chin before heading over to the table.

"I wanted to be the hat" Rob muttered sulkily as Daniel sat down.

"You can be this" said Aaron handing his partner the iron, "It's an iron. I know you've heard of them Robert. Even if you've never used one" he added sarcastically.

Daniel looked at his small metal ship. He didn't look impressed. "They're a bit rubbish, some of these" he said, "They should have a cowboy. Or a little dog or something"

"That's a smart looking hat though" he added, looking at Patrick next to him with a warm smile.

Robert pouted. Aaron reached under the table and gave Rob's leg a squeeze, "Come on Rob" he said, "You're in charge of the bank remember"

Robert's face immediately brightened. He smiled and started to count out the money for all the players.

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Later........

Rob could definitely be a poor loser. But as Aaron knew from experience, he could also be a poor winner. On balance, it was better to listen to him being a bit smug about how he had won rather than hearing him complain about how he been cheated. Not that he and Daniel had minded Robert's triumph. They were the first two out of the game and had ended up both playing with the dog on the rug.

Patrick had been determined to 'make a game of it' though and Aaron had been convinced it was going to start to get dark before they'd finished. When he finally won, Patrick announced he had to go and have his lie-down, so headed out with Daniel in tow.

“Right, I'll make us some tea” said Aaron as he got up and headed to the door.

“Hmm? Good idea” said Robert, grinning broadly as he looked down at his pile of admittedly fake money and large London property empire.

Aaron smiled to himself and ruffled up Robert's blonde hair as he walked past. As he entered the hall and headed for the kitchen he just overheard the end of his friends chat. Daniel was standing at the bottom of the stairs, with Patrick a couple of steps above him.

“Why don't you come up? You know, just for a cuddle” Patrick asked.

Danny smiled at his partner, “No!” he said, “You're supposed to be resting, remember? Anyway, I've got something to do”
“What?” asked Patrick

“Just an errand. Now, bed you!” said Daniel.

Patrick sighed and headed up the stairs.

Aaron had just put the kettle on the stove when he heard the front door closing in the distance.

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A little while later on the South Pier

“Why did you have to argue with that bloke?” said Aaron as he walked along the pier, Patch padding along ahead of him on a lead.

“Aaron. He was just being awkward” Robert replied, “And I was right, there's nowhere on that sign of his that says 'no dogs' “

“Anyway” said Rob, looking around the almost empty boards, “You'd think they'd welcome people coming on here. It's almost dead !”

“Well, it's Winter still isn't it” said Aaron, feeling as if he should defend his home turf, “Come on, let's walk Patch to the end and back”

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Aaron leaned over the rail and smiled, enjoying the feeling of the breeze on his face, even if it was cold. He looked down at Patch who's tail was wagging. He was obviously enjoying the long walk. It was just Robert that looked miserable as he leaned on the rail next to him.

“This is what I like here” said Aaron, staring out at the sea, “Just all this...space”

“I like looking at space too” said Robert, “Ideally, from the other side of the window. When I'm inside in the warm”

Aaron turned around, “You've been spoiled, growing up in the countryside. You should ask Daniel about Manchester”

“I will. Isn't that him over there?” said Robert, nodding to the nearest building. Daniel had emerged from the side door to the theatre and was heading quickly up the pier towards the exit, his cap and scarf pulled tight against the cold.

Aaron looked at Robert as they headed over to the building.

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“What the show on here now?” said Robert as they walked around the front of the theatre. He stopped in front of a display hoarding of several paintings of mermaids.
“Sirens of the sea” Rob read out loud. He walked over to where a sandwich-board shaped stand was propped up with black and white photos of some of the ‘stars’.

“Talk about tat. Still one or two don’t look too bad” said Robert, shaking his head as Aaron walked over to him, “During the War, I went to the Windmill once with Lewis and I’m telling you, the girls they had there were absolutely......” he began

“Never mind” he added hastily when he saw the sour expression that was now on Aaron’s face.

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Later back at the Guesthouse

“Right, I’ll put the kettle on” said Aaron as he hung his coat up in the hallway, “Seeing as I could die of thirst before you did” he added sarcastically.

Robert was about to reply but his partner had already headed for the kitchen. He bent down and unclipped the lead from around Patch’s collar.

“Looks like I’m the doghouse with you little feller” said Rob, giving the dog a quick smooth before Patch darted into the warm living room to flop down on the rug.

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“Did you have a nice walk love?” asked Faith as Aaron walked into the kitchen.

“Yeah. Suppose” said Aaron, heading over to the stove, “We went round the South Pier a bit”

“That’s where the girls are performing. Carol and Diane” his grandmother said, “I went one night in the first week. I was quite surprised at that Carol really. Seeing as she’s so religious”

“Is she very pally with Daniel?” Aaron asked

“He’s gone to church with her a few times, but not especially. Why do you ask?” said Faith

Aaron frowned.

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Later that night

“Aaron, will you just get into bed?” said Robert, who who was already under the covers with his nose in a book. “What are you doing anyway?” he asked his partner.

Aaron had opened the bedroom door slightly and was looking into the hall. He sighed.

“I wanted to catch Daniel that’s all. He's in the bathroom” he said

“Why don’t you knock on their door? If it’s that important” said Rob
“I want to catch him alone” said Aaron

“Why?” Robert persisted

“Just....because!” said Aaron. He walked over and sat on his side of the bed so he could still look into the hallway.

“I thought we'd drive back on Wednesday” said Rob, “If that's alright” he added

“Why?” said Aaron, turning around to look at him, “I wanted to stay so we can see that Patrick's settled in properly”

“We'll know by then won't we?” said Robert, “Anyway, I've got to see the Vicar Wednesday evening”

“What for? Joining the Parish Council are ya?” said Aaron sarcastically as he turned back to look into the hallway.

“Well, actually.....” Rob started

“Aw Rob, you haven't!” Aaron said, turning back around.

“Lauren asked me” said Robert. Aaron just rolled his eyes.

“Reverend Thomas gets pushed around all the time with the Major and Nicola King on there as it is. It's only one meeting a week” said Rob

“One more meeting a week you mean” said Aaron, “So, when's that going to be?”

“Just on Sundays – eight thirty” said Rob, putting his book down.

“Oh great!” said Aaron, “So that's Variety Bandbox out the window!”

“Aaron...” Robert started, reaching over with his hand. But his partner had got up and was heading out of the room.

“Daniel's out of the bathroom now” he muttered as he left the room

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“Everything alright?” Robert asked as Aaron slipped into bed.

“Yeah. They're fine” Aaron replied turning over on his side.

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A little later.......
“Aaron” he said, his voice low, to no response. He slid his hand under the covers and onto the young man's hip.

“Aaron, what are you upset about?” he asked.

“I'm not upset” Aaron mumbled, in a sulky voice.

“This isn't because of the Parish council is it?” asked Robert, “It's only one night a week. We can curl up in front of the radio on other nights can't we?”

“Your time. Your decision” Aaron replied, still not turning over.

Robert thought for a moment and drew his hand away. Then he tried again.

“This isn't about that show is it? Come on. You don't really think I want to go and see some daft girls standing around in their drawers do you?” he asked.

“Do you?” Aaron asked, finally rolling over onto his back and looking at Rob.

Robert curled his arm onto Aaron's left side.

“When I've got you at home instead?” Robert smiled, “No contest” he added, leaning down and giving Aaron a soft kiss.

He was pleased when Aaron smiled back. He leaned down again, this time Aaron reached up and ran his hand through Rob's blonde hair, then pulled him close.

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The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse - Monday 6th February 1950 – 8:30am

Daniel walked into his bedroom, a mug of tea in each hand.

“Pat. Made you a cuppa” he said quietly, as he put one mug down on his partner's nightstand.

“Thanks” Patrick mumbled, sleepily pushing himself up. Daniel smiled and walked around to his side of the bed, slipping off Pat's dressing gown and sliding back under the covers.

Patch looked up from his basket at the sound of talking. Danny patted the bed and the small dog jumped up onto the blankets before lying down in between the two-young men and promptly falling asleep again.

“We've overslept!” said Patrick looking at his clock, “I'm sorry Daniel, that's my fault. You'll never make the train now and......” he added

“Shh!” said Daniel with a grin, putting a finger on Patrick's lips for a moment, “I don't have to go back today” he went on.
“Why not? You never said” said Patrick

“I'm going back on....the third of April” said Danny, “That's a Monday. Yes, the third”

“Don't they mind?” said Patrick

“It's fine. I'm missing out on one trip to Sweden, that's all” said Daniel. He put his mug on the stand and rolled onto his side.

“Don't worry though. I won't be under your feet” he grinned. Patrick put his tea down and slid back into bed. He rolled over too so he was level with the other young man.

“You know old Mr Dunn? He works in the theatre on the South pier where those two girls are. Only he can't cope, not really. Not on his own. So I'm going to work there for a couple of months” said Danny

Patrick's dark floppy fringe had fallen a little over his eyes. Daniel reached over and brushed it gently away from his forehead with his left hand.

“Just while this show's on. Stage hand and electrician” said Daniel, “Electrician really. That's what swung it for me”

“So” he went on, “I'll be working in the evenings, and a couple of afternoons. But I'll be home for a couple of months. That sound good to you?” he smiled

“Sounds great” Patrick beamed back.

Daniel leaned a little forward and paused. He checked to see where Patch was lying but he was near the end of the bed between his and Pat's feet, so out of harm's way. He leaned a little more forward and pressed his lips softly against Patrick's.

As he backed away a little, Patrick reached over and softly ran his fingers through Daniel neat beard and to around the back of his neck. Danny smiled and leaned in again.

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Wednesday 8th February 1950 – mid-morning

“Aw, goodbye love” said Faith, wrapping her arms around Aaron in a tight hug.

“It's alright Nan” said Aaron, “We're only going to Derbyshire. I've not joined the Foreign Legion or anything” he added as his grand-mother kept holding on.

“Well” said Faith as she let go, “It's been nice for me these last few days. Having all my lads home for once”

“It's been nice for us too” said Robert with a smile. He quickly put a hand on Aaron's shoulder and took a subtle step to left so he was standing behind him, just in case Faith went in for another hug.

“I'll ring you at the Royal tonight” said Aaron, “At seven”
mid-afternoon

Daniel was lying on top of the bed in their room, a book in his hands. He quickly checked his watch. Good, it was ages before he had to head off to work. He looked down at Patrick, curled up asleep next to him and smiled. He’d been worn out by their long beach walk earlier. But as he had said, if you’ve been stuck inside a hospital for months on end you’d jump at any fresh air. And anyway, Patch had enjoyed it. He returned to his book.

”....'Black Jake killed my Pa. And he wants our land Mom. So I'm gonna make sure that varmit goes to kingdom come' said Jeb as he saddled his trusty horse. 'But Jeb!' the grey haired woman on the porch pleaded, her hands wringing her apron as she spoke, 'Black Jake is your Pa!' “

Daniel frowned. He hadn't read this before, it was one of the books Robert had given him before Christmas. He flicked through the front of the book to find the publication date. 1929. Then the penny dropped. He'd not read this book, he'd seen the film..................

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The back streets of Manchester - the late 1930s.

Archie headed down the alleyway towards the Perez house, Sandra and Ingrid walked close behind arm-in-arm.

“Right” said Archie, “We'll be going to see the Western on at the Roxy. I mean, not my choice really but Danny wouldn't have come otherwise”

“I don't mind” said Sandra with a smile. She just wished this could have happened when they were all still at school. She'd have loved to see the look on the girls faces if they saw that Daniel Perez was taking her out!

“We never see the film anyway. Not with my Archie!” Ingrid giggled as they walked into the back yard of the tiny house.

“Oh. Have they got a rabbit?” said Sandra, looking into the hutch along one wall.

“They did have” said Archie as he rapped on the back door, “Danny sort of lost interest when his Dad died”

Sandra smiled as the door opened and a tall, handsome man walked out in a dark jacket and with a cap pulled on top of his dark curls. “I'll see you later mam” Daniel said into the house as he pulled the door closed behind him.

“You remember Sandra?” said Archie, “And my Ingrid of course”.

Daniel's nod was polite, but not very enthusiastic.

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Sandra hooked her arm through Daniel's and sat a little closer to him on the sheltered seat. He didn't react, but then he didn't pull away either. She glanced through the pane of glass into the next seat along where Archie and Ingrid were continuing from where they had left off at the back row of the cinema. Daniel had headed nearer the screen, 'so they could see better'. 'I must be losing my touch' she said to herself.

“Picture was good I thought” she said, trying to prod the young man out of his silence.

“Yeah” said Danny enthusiastically, “Especially that bit when his mother told him the villain was his real Dad”. Then he fell silent again.

“Why do you like Westerns so much?” Sandra asked.

“You've just been to our house haven't ya?” Daniel asked, finally looking at the young woman.

“Course” Sandra replied, “It's just like ours”

“Yeah, well that's the point isn't it? “ said Daniel, “You can walk from ours and go for miles and all you pass is the same houses. Row after row. Then you get to the mill where my Dad......used to work.....then it's just more houses. Oh, and the canal”

“I mean. Isn't there more in the World than that?” he asked

“I've been to Blackpool. On a coach with the girls from the factory” Sandra offered.

“Yeah, but you look at America. All those big, wide spaces” Daniel said eagerly

“You sound just like our Charlie. You know, my eldest brother. He's in the merchant navy”

“Is he?” said Daniel, suddenly sounding interested.

“He's been to America. Went to Texas once” said Sandra, “And he says he has a girl in every port” she added, leaning close.

“Has he?” replied Daniel with a smile, “Wow” he said turning away from the young lady, “Texas!”

Sandra sighed. Still, she thought to herself, he's lovely to look at.........

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse – Thursday 9th February 1950 – early evening

Aaron continued washing the dishes. He could hear Robert talking away in the front room on the phone. Probably telling someone how the Government wouldn't get in again probably. That was a favourite topic lately.

He heard Rob's footsteps as he walked over to the sink and hooked his hands around Aaron's waist. Rob leaned in and rested his head on Aaron's shoulder.

“Go away. I'm working” said Aaron, with a smile.
“How would you..” said Robert, giving him a squeeze, “Like a trip to Surrey?”

“Why do you want to go there?” asked Aaron.

“I’ve been invited to a wedding” said Rob, grinning.

“So you mean how would I like to drive you there?” Aaron asked, turning around from the sink to face him.

“Lewis is getting hitched, finally. So you'll get to see me in uniform again. Actually, between you, me and the bedpost, I think Lewis is having to get married”

“What was that about a bedpost?” said Aaron with a smile as he hooked his own arms through Rob's and arched his head upwards for a kiss.................
A small step back again, before we move on.....

Golden Palmtree Guesthouse, Blackpool - Monday 6 February 1950 – early evening

“Right, I'm off to work now” said Daniel as he walked into the kitchen.

Patrick looked up from the table where he was reading the local paper. “What time will you be home?” he asked. He smiled to himself. It was just nice to be able to ask Danny that and the answer not be 'two weeks' or 'a month'.

“Depends. After eleven but before twelve. I said I'd escort the girls home, just to be friendly. So, you can always wait up if you want to....” Daniel began. He stopped when Mrs Dingle turned around from the washing-up with a broad smile on her face.

“......talk about my first day” he added quickly.

“Oh. I've done you a snack to take” said Pat as he stood up and picked up a small metal tin from the kitchen table.

“Aw. Have you?” Danny replied with a grin. He took the tin and held it in his hands.

“This reminds me of when my Dad used to do nights at the Mill” he said, “Course, Mam always used to kiss him goodbye”

Patrick took a step forward and stopped. He turned to look at Faith, still watching from the sink.

“Don't you boys mind me” she said, turning back to the washing-up.

Patrick leaned forward and pressed his lips against Daniel's.

“I'll be up when you get back” Pat said softly, “I'll definitely want to......hear about your first day”

Danny just smiled and headed out of the kitchen.

Patrick sat down at the table and returned to the paper.

“That takes me back” said Faith, sitting down and joining him, “I can remember not long after I was first married. Sitting up in bed, waiting for a lovely young man to come off the late shift”

“Oh. Where did Mr Dingle used to work?” asked Patrick.

“Who said anything about Mr Dingle?” Faith replied.

- - - - - - - - -
“So what day is the wedding?” Robert said into the phone as he opened his leather-backed diary and reached for his fountain pen.

“First of March. It's a Wednesday” Lewis replied down the line.

“Bit short notice isn't it?” said Rob, “I thought these things took ages to organise. You know, for you 'top drawer' types” he added with a grin.

“Well, the things is Suggers” said Lewis, “How can I put it? We've, uh, anticipated the honeymoon a little. So it will have to be March”

“Oh” said Robert, “I'm not sure if I should have said 'congratulations' now”

“No. It's absolutely fine” Lewis insisted, “I mean, Jenny is the one for me. This has just forced our hand a little that's all”

“But, even better, it's forced the old man's hand. He's cleared my debts now. Finally! “ he added.

Aaron looked up from the washing-up as he heard Robert laugh in their living room. This phone call seemed to be going on a while.

“.................and Jennifer's brother is going to be best man. Not my choice, but I'm getting used to that. Anyway, I was hoping you could be an usher. I've asked Will as well”

“Course. I'd be pleased to” said Rob. He hadn't thought he'd have got a best man invite and at least it would mean he didn't have to make a speech.

“And I think all of us RAF boys ought to be in uniform. After all, we did our bit didn't we?” said Lewis

“Sure” said Robert, “Now, is there going to be a lot of driving about? I'm presuming your wedding breakfast isn't going to be at the village hall”

“No. It'll be at Renwick Hall. That's Jennifer's people's place” said Lewis, “There won't be any problem with lifts”

“Well I'd rather my man drove me” said Rob, grateful that Aaron was in the kitchen at that precise moment, “He'll have to bring me up to Surrey at it is”

“Oh, that won't be a problem” said Lewis, “There'll be a couple of tables for the servants. There's a few who've known Jenny since she was small. And I have to fit Nanny in somewhere. Your man can go in with that lot”

“You sure it's no trouble?” asked Robert. He decided that it was best not to tell Aaron that he'd got him a space at the servants table. Not just yet.

“What's another mouth?” said Lewis, “My future father in law can afford it!”
Robert put the phone down and smiled. Now he just had to tell Aaron. Or at least, ease him gently into what their trip would entail. A few details at a time......

Golden Palmtree Guesthouse, Blackpool - Tuesday 14th February 1950 – early evening

“Was that someone at the door?” asked Beryl, looking up from her knitting as Faith walked back into the lounge.

“Something just come by hand” her friend replied, sitting down at the table next to her as she opened an envelope and took out a small card.

“I don’t know how anyone is supposed to read this tiny writing though” said Faith, holding the card out a distance from herself.

“Let me look” said Patrick, putting his pen down on the ledger.

“You’ve been invited to Miss Rudge and Mr Petty's wedding” he said as he read the card, “Lucky old you” he added sarcastically.

“Wednesday 1st March at St.Marks. Afterwards at the Function Suite– Sea View, Albert Avenue” he continued.

“Function Suite, who's Lettie Chorley trying to kid?” said Beryl, “All she does is shift the tables around in her dining room a bit”

Faith nodded, “I'm not surprised it's a Wednesday either”

“Why not?” asked Beryl as she continued to knit.

“Half-day closing. That'll be down to Mr Petty. He wouldn't shut the shop up if he didn't have to. Not even to get married” said Faith

“You'll probably find your invite when you get home” she added.

“Will you going with Bernard then?” asked Beryl

“No love. He did tell me he'd have liked to have escorted me, but unfortunately he's giving the bride away”

“Not that unfortunate” said Beryl, “He's being trying to get shot of her for donkey's years”

“It says 'plus guest' “said Patrick

“What's that love?” asked Faith
“It says you can bring a guest” said Patrick.

“Well if Bernard won't take me” said Faith, “I'll have to find a handsome young man to do the honours”

“What are you doing on the first?” she asked, leaning over and giving Patrick's forearm a squeeze

“You're asking me to her wedding?” asked Patrick, “What did I ever do to you?”

“There'll be a chicken dinner after. I know that for a fact” said Beryl encouragingly.

“There you are!” said Faith brightly, “You never know. Cynthia could choke on a bone. You wouldn't want to miss that now would you?”

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Sunday 26th February 1950 – Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse – 6:00pm

Give Robert something to organise and he'll grab the opportunity eagerly. Aaron was well aware of that as he sat on the sofa with his arms folded while his partner sat at his desk and rattled through the list in his notebook.

“...and I've got my stick. I probably won't need it, but I've told the hotel I need you in the room to help me get about, so best take it” said Rob

“Uniform, cap, my book I was reading...” he continued

“Do we have to do this now?” asked Aaron, “We're not even going till tomorrow”

“I've got the Parish Council at eight thirty” Robert replied, trying not to notice Aaron's frown as soon as he said it, “And we've got your suit...”

“For when I'm sitting with the other servants you mean” said Aaron sulkily.

Rob got up and walked over to the sofa, plonking himself down next to the young man.

“Come on Aaron” he said gently, “You know that's not down to me. We'd go together if we could”

“You know that” he added, giving his partner a light nudge with his elbow.

Aaron turned and looked at Rob. He didn't appear absolutely convinced.

“And we're staying in a nice hotel for a couple of nights. That'll be good, won't it?” he prompted.

“Suppose” said Aaron. There was a hint of sulkiness in his voice, but Robert knew this was just a last-minute going through the motions.

Robert sighed and curled his left arm around Aaron's shoulders.

“Anyway” he said, “That's enough wedding talk for now. Come here.”

Aaron smiled this time, as Robert leaned in and pressed his lips against his.
Monday 27th February 1950 – The Riverside Coaching Inn, near Godalming Surrey – early evening

Another thing Robert was good at was complaining. Aaron was aware of that too.

“But I said, quite clearly, in my letter that I needed a double room with two single beds” Robert said to the unfortunate man behind the desk of the hotel.

“Yes, well there has been an oversight” the man replied, “We can offer you two single rooms instead”

“Well that's no good to me now is it?” said Rob, making great play of gripping his walking stick, which he no longer really needed. “And I'm not wandering around looking for another hotel. I have appointments tomorrow!”

“We only have one free double room. With a double bed” said the man. He was starting to get nervous. Some of other guests were starting to look. Trying to see what the fuss was about.

“Fine” Robert sighed theatrically, “I'll have that. But I shall expect a reduction” he added

“I'd have to speak to the manager about that” said the man as he handed over a door key

“Make sure you do. Or I certainly will” said Rob, snatching up the key and heading for the stairs. Aaron walked behind him, carrying two large cases.

Aaron was making his second trip to the room, this time carrying both a suit and Robert's RAF uniform. Rob was sitting on the end of a double bed, with a pleased grin on his face.

“Hmm. Quite comfy” he said, pushing his hands down on the covers.

“Thought you were angry about that” said Aaron with a smile, as he hung the uniform up in the wardrobe.

“What do you think?” said Robert as he patted the empty space at the edge of the bed next to him. Aaron slipped out of his jacket and hung that up before sitting down next to his partner.

“I mean” said Rob, leaning forward, “Fancy me having to share a bed with my...helper” he added

“We could always put a bolster down the middle” said Aaron, still grinning.

“No, you're alright” said Robert, leaning forward and kissing Aaron.
“Only me” said Beryl as she walked into Faith's bedroom. Her friend was rummaging around in the large wardrobe.

“Won't be a minute love. Just need a brighter tie for Patrick” she said as she looked among the collection of men's clothes.

“You've gone for one your old favourites I see” said Beryl as she sat down on the chair next to the bed.

Faith looked down for a moment at her two-piece burgundy suit. “Well I wasn't going to get anything new, not just for Cynthia”. She took a red tie out of the cupboard and smiled for a moment, remembering where it had come from.

“Is that a new hat Beryl?” she asked as she sat down at her dressing table, looking at the dark round hat her friend was sporting.

“I thought it would see me out” Beryl replied, “I can always take the flowers off if anyone dies”

Faith picked up a small red hat with a gauze veil.

“This'll probably be more like a funeral than a wedding as it is” she said

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The Riverside Coaching Inn, near Godalming Surrey - Wednesday 1st March 1950 – lunchtime

“Come here” said Robert with an indulgent sigh, “Let's do that tie properly shall we?” he said as he undid Aaron's brown striped tie.

Aaron just smiled. Robert looked immaculate in his RAF uniform. And gorgeous, of course.

“Now” said Rob as he re-did the tie, “There's a coach taking most of the guests from the church over to Renwick Hall. You might not believe this, but some of them don't have their own cars”

“What?” said Aaron with a grin, “You don't mean they'll be some common people at this wedding do ya?”

“But I want you” Robert went on, “To bring the car over to the Hall, so we can head straight home after the do. You'll be able to find your way won't you?”

“Robert! I drove you there yesterday” said Aaron, “I've not forgotten!” he added.
Robert tucked Aaron's tie inside his brown suit jacket. He kept his hand resting on the front.

“You should wear a suit more often” he said with a smile.

Aaron looked down for a moment. He hadn't worn this suit since Adam and Victoria's wedding and that must be nearly five years ago, he thought.

“No need to is there?” said Aaron, “We don't get asked out much do we. Servants “ he added with a smile.

Robert smiled back, knowing that Aaron was just teasing him.

“Well, you look very smart” said Rob. “Wait a minute though!” he added, a look of mock surprise on his face, “There's something on your mouth”

“What?” said Aaron, looking puzzled. He thought he'd been careful when he shaved earlier.

Rob just smiled and leaned forward for a long kiss.

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PART TWO- COMING VERY SOON
“Ooh. It's very organised isn't it?” said Beryl as she stood in the hallway of the Sea View. There was a well-polished desk jutting into the hall with a leather ledger on top. Behind the desk, a wooden set of pigeon holes was fixed to the wall.

“Why don't you have a register?” she asked, nosily opening the ledger and looking at the signatures inside.

“I used to when I first opened. Wasn't much point though. Most of the young couples put false names in anyway” said Faith. She looked dismissively around the room.

“Well I think the Palmtree is much nicer than this” said Patrick, “Much more homely”

Faith smiled.

“It's very clean though” Beryl persisted, looking down at the floor, “You could eat your dinner off that” she added.

“Yes” said Patrick, “It reminds me of the sanatorium” he added with a frown.

The door to the 'function suite' opened and a young lady in an apron walked into the hall.

“Are you the first?” she said cheerfully, “Well come through” she went on as she walked back into the dining room.

“Anywhere you want us to sit love?” Faith asked.

“Big table's for the happy couple” the young lady, “But you can please yourself besides that”

“Now you help yourself to drinks” she said, nodding to a table at the far wall, “I've got to get back to the grub” she added before heading out of the room.

Faith walked over to the table. There were two crates of brown ale, several large carafes of orange squash and a silver tray with some glasses of sherry on it.

“Talk about no expense spared” she said, helping herself to a sherry.

“Well, the church wasn't exactly packed to the seams was it?” said Beryl

“Which is more than you can say for that dress. I don't know how they flaming got her in it!” said Faith

“Used a shoe-horn most like” said Beryl, pouring herself a squash.

The front door to the hotel opened and the sound of other guests talking away rang into the dining room.

“Let's sit here” said Patrick, indicating a table in the far corner, “It'll be nice and far away”
Aaron didn't know what to do with himself, being the first here. The house was massive for a start, it definitely put Hadleigh Manor House in the shade.

He'd parked the car on the long gravel drive and walked up some marble steps into a huge hall. You could probably have squeezed the gatehouse in here, in a pinch, he thought. Now though, he was standing on a very expensive rug in the centre of the hall, wondering where to go.

Fortunately, a smartly dressed man in what looked like a butler's uniform walked over to him with a silver tray.

“Champagne sir?” he said, in well modulated tones. He seemed far too serious for his age. Now he was up close, Aaron realised he can't have been any older than himself.

“Oh, thanks” said Aaron, reaching for a glass and then stopping, “I don't know if I should. I'm not really a proper guest. I'm driving my boss” he tailed off, feeling a bit embarrassed.

“Oh. Is that your car?” the young man said, his posh tones vanishing, “Let's have a quick butchers before the family get back” he said as he put the tray of drinks down on a sideboard.

“Course, I do all the driving” the young man said as he walked over to the car, “They're too mean to fork out for a chauffeur and a footman” he said over his shoulder. Aaron walked behind him, his polished shoes crunching on the gravel drive.

“Look, the servant's table is right back at the end of the hall, obviously, and the speeches will go on for ages if it's anything like the last do” said the young man, who had introduced himself as Edward.

“You slip out and I'll show you the garage. The old Bentley is fantastic” he enthused, as he pushed his unruly blonde hair back from his face.

“Yeah I will” Aaron smiled.

There was the sound of a coach engine in the distance as a vehicle appeared at the end of the very long drive.

“Hello. Cavalry's here!” said Edward, “Better get back to work. They don't give us a minute's peace do they?” he grinned as he headed into the house.

A little later...........

Robert looked around the vast dining hall until he could see where Aaron was sitting in the far corner. He didn't look particularly happy, but then Rob expected that. He was sat between a grey
haired old gentleman and a white haired lady that could have passed for a Dowager Duchess, if she hadn't been sitting on the servants table. Still, she looked as if she was talking to Aaron, so that was something.

“I'm sorry?” Rob said, when he realised that the woman sat next to him had been talking.

“I hope you don't mind being paired up with me” said Bunty. The young lady was in fact called Beatrice Holbrooke, but to one and all she was just 'Bunty'.

“No, not at all” said Robert, flashing her a smile.

“I mean. I wanted to bring Edgar. But we had this enormous row over it” said Bunty as she tucked into some neatly sliced salmon, “Just because he's one of your lot”

“My lot?” asked Rob, confused.

“You know, divorced” said Bunty, “You know the score. Wartime wedding, didn't work out”

“Thing is” she went on, “If his ex-wife got hit by a bus, he'd be a widower and Mummy and Daddy wouldn't mind a bit about Edgar!”

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Sea View Hotel – Albert Avenue, Blackpool – early evening

“Well that finished earlier than I thought” said Beryl, as she stood on the doorstep outside the hotel.

“I'm not surprised” said Faith, “Cynthia will be keen to get the Honeymoon started’

“Where are they going?” asked Beryl

“Weekend in Fleetwood. Her new husband won't close the shop longer than that”

“She did look happy though” Beryl conceded

“Oh she looked happy. He looked like a condemned man to me” said Faith, rummaging in her handbag, “You pair hang on a moment, I've left my gloves on the table”

“How was your chicken?” asked Beryl, turning to Patrick, “I think I'm about ready for a new set of teeth”

Patrick indicated the brown paper bag he was carrying, “I've kept mine for Patch”

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Faith paused near the door out of the dining room as she put her gloves into her handbag. Her ears were definitely burning. Lettie Chorley was at the front door and had just opened it a little to let Renee Culshaw out.
“...well all I can say, if that's the best she can do these days” said Lettie

“Oh, I know” Renee agreed, “And to think, she used to have the pick of the fellers round here!”

“Of course. It would be one of her lodgers” said Lettie, “That's the thing with her place. She lets them overstep the mark”

“Well it's a guesthouse, not a proper hotel like yours Lettie” said Renee

“I wouldn't let one of my guests take advantage of me” Lettie said primly.

'No danger of that' Faith thought angrily to herself as she snapped her handbag shut.

“Mind you” said Renee, “He's always tries to look smart. I'll give him that. Considering I mean”

“Oh, I'd give him that. Considering” Lettie agreed, “But however you look at it Renee, he's still just a cripp...”

Lettie stopped as Faith walked into the hallway, a false smile fixed on her face.

“Lovely reception Leticia ” said Faith, “I said to Bernard, no need to waste your money on professionals is there? Stick to cheap and cheerful, that's what I say”

“And people won't forget that chicken in a hurry. I certainly won't!” she added.

Mrs Chorley fumed, but Faith didn't give her time to speak as she walked though the two women.

“Your Dennis does a lovely job of my windows Rene. Gets into all my little corners” she said, still smiling, “Lovely touch he's got. Puts me in mind of his Dad”

Faith pulled the front door behind her, leaving the other two women inside. She hoped Patrick hadn't heard their discussion, but she could tell from the look on his face that he had.

“Pay not attention to those daft biddies love. They're only jealous” said Faith, in a voice she hoped was loud enough to be heard inside. She hooked her arm through Patrick's and they headed home, Beryl in tow.

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Renwick Hall – Surrey – early evening

The speeches had gone on for what seemed like forever to Robert. Still, it had been worth coming just for the spread.

“Do you ever see that ghastly Christine?” Bunty asked.

“Oh. Only once since the divorce” said Robert, “And that wasn't planned. I was Fortnums. We didn't even speak”

“We saw her. Edgar and me I mean” said Bunty, “In this little gallery in Chelsea last January. They were exhibiting some pictures by that sister of her's. You know, the dotty one who's holed up in Cornwall”
“I only met her once or twice” said Rob

“You've not missed much” said Bunty. “I was at school with her. She didn't put in an appearance. They say she's quite a recluse these days. Probably best if you ask me”

Robert smiled and looked around to check how Aaron was getting on. But his chair was empty. Rob frowned until he saw him walking in, shortly followed by a footman. Aaron gave this young man a nod as he sat down.

“Lewis tells me you're something big in the National Trust now” said Bunty

“You'll probably know all the places I'm in charge of” said Rob, “Lewis seems to. Have you been to Garston Manor?”

“Oh yes....” Bunty replied enthusiastically

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The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Blackpool – early evening

Patrick was standing in front of the dressing table in his room. He sighed at the reflection of his jacket. However much he adjusted the left side it still didn't look quite right. It was easier in the Army, he could soon make a shirt look smart if you pinned it properly. His train of thought was broken by the sound of Daniel walking in and closing the door behind him.

“I thought you were working” said Patrick, sounding a little tired

“Nah. I did the matinee. Terry's on tonight” Danny replied, “Well, let's have a look at you, all spruced up then” he said

“Very nice” he beamed walking over to his partner.

“I was going to have a lie down” said Patrick, unbuttoning the front of his jacket.

Daniel smiled and slipped the garment from his partner's shoulders as Patrick pulled at the knot on his red tie. Danny hung the jacket on the back of the chair and started to undo his tie for him.

“This new Pat?” he asked

“No. It's from Mrs D. You know, from her collection of gents clothing” said Patrick

“Gets through a lot of blokes, doesn't she?” said Daniel with a smile as he put the tie neatly on the back of the chair.

He hooked his arms around Patrick's waist and pulled him close, “I think she should find one bloke. You know a really nice one, that stands out. Then she should stick with him. That's what I did” he beamed.

Patrick curled his hand around to the small of Danny's back and told him about the ladies at the end of the wedding do.

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“It's just a couple of daft old women” said Daniel kindly, “I don't know why you let it get to you”
“I bet others there were thinking that too though” said Patrick

“Then they're all daft” said Danny

“I wanted to look smart for Mrs D. I know she's upset that Mr Rudge didn't take her. Even if she didn't say so” said Patrick.

Daniel gave Pat a warm smile. “Come here” he said, pulling his partner in for a close embrace.

“I bet you were the best looking lad at that wedding” Daniel said softly

“You weren't even there” said Patrick. He buried his head in Danny's shoulder. Just putting his cheek against his rough shirt and feeling his arms around him was making him feel a little better.

“Didn't have to be” said Daniel, “You're my lovely lad”. He moved his head back and planted a kiss on the scarred side of Patrick's face, just catching a tear from his partner's left eye as he did so.

“My Mam always cried at weddings” he went on, “She never knew why. She told me she even cried at hers”

“Well, this wasn't my wedding was it?” said Patrick, trying to force a smile.

Danny thought carefully for a minute as he stared at the other young man, “Yeah, but you've already got a husband haven't ya?” he asked, his voice soft. He leaned in to press his lips against Patrick's.

“And he loves you” he added as he broke away.

“And......I love you too” Patrick said quietly. Daniel beamed and held on to him tightly.

“Come on” Daniel said, brushing his hand down the back of Patrick's shirt, “Let's have a lie down for a bit”

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Somewhere North East of Reading – the evening

“Was it alright, on your table I mean? “ Robert asked as he stifled a yawn. The huge wedding breakfast and generous drinks were beginning to take their toll.

“Yeah” said Aaron as he slowed the car down as they approached a junction, “That old Nanny wasn't too bad in the end. I thought she'd be telling me to get my elbows off the table but she was fine, once she'd had my champagne”

“Didn't you have any? It was very good” said Rob

“Oh yeah. Cause you drink it all the time, don't ya?” said Aaron, a cheeky smile on his face

“I've drunk enough” Robert replied, smiling back

“I couldn't have much, seeing as I'm driving. I just kept it for the all those toasts” said Aaron, “Anyway you looked....”

Aaron stopped. Robert was quietly dozing.
Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse - just before midnight

“I feel really refreshed, after that little nap” said Robert as he climbed into bed next to Aaron

“Little nap?” said Aaron, “You were asleep for ages”

“I'm not tired now” Rob smiled, reaching over and running his fingers through Aaron's hair.

“Well I am” Aaron muttered. He knew what that particular smile meant.

“Uh. Where did you go off to during the speeches?” asked Robert, trying and failing to keep his tone casual.

“I went to see the cars. The ones your mate's father in law has. They've got **six**, including this old Bentley” said Aaron, “The chauffeur was showing me. Well he was a footman as well”

“Nice feller. Did you see him?” said Aaron, “He was handing out the drinks when you came in”

“I don't think I spotted him” said Robert, unconvincingly

“Yes you did. Blonde, good looking” said Aaron, “Young. Well, more my age than yours anyway”

“I've a good mind not to tell you my surprise now” said Rob, pouting.

Aaron was quiet for a moment.

“Well, he wasn't **that** good looking” he said with a grin, “What the surprise?” he added,

Robert smiled and lay back on his side of the bed. “Come here you” he said, opening up his arms. Aaron lay his head on Rob's chest and cuddled up against him.

“Lewis is off on his honeymoon. Two weeks in France. So he says I can borrow his flat while he's away. How would you fancy a trip to London?”

“That'd be great” said Aaron, curling his arm around Robert's middle.

“You were talking to that sister of his a lot” he added.

“Oh, Bunty” said Robert, wrapping his right arm around Aaron's shoulders, “I was just being polite. She couldn't bring her bloke. Her folks don't approve”

“From Yorkshire is he?” said Aaron

“Hey Dingle! So are you! You weren't born in Blackpool” said Rob, “Anyway, she was asking me why I hadn't got married again. I said it was difficult, with the divorce and everything”

“Course, I didn't tell her the **real** reason” he added.

Robert brought his right hand up so he could run it gently through Aaron's hair again.
“I couldn't tell her that I was married. Well, in every way that counts. Could I?” he said softly.

“Isn't that right?” he asked Aaron, his voice almost a whisper.

“Yeah. It is” said Aaron happily as he cuddled up to Robert some more and drifted off to sleep.
Blackpool - The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Monday 3rd April 1950 – early morning

Daniel put his kit-bag down on the floor as Patch rushed across the hall towards him.

“You're going to miss me aren't you boy?” he asked, as he bent down and smoothed his hand over the small dog's head. “Never mind. Pat'll look after you” he added looking over at his partner.

Patrick was sitting on the stair carpet, a few steps up, his dressing gown wrapped over his t-shirt and striped pyjama bottoms. He said nothing.

Daniel sighed. “Come on Pat” he said, keeping his voice low, “We've been here before haven't we? I mean, you knew I was at sea when we met”.

Patrick was still silent so Daniel walked over to the stairs and leaned on the end of the banister, Patch playfully poking at his feet with his nose.

“So, when are you back?” Patrick asked.

“Could be a couple of weeks. Could be a month. I'll write and let you know as soon as I know” said Daniel, “I promise”

“Look after yourself” said Danny, leaning down and putting his hand gently on the other young man's shoulder and giving him a quick kiss before heading to the door.

“And look after that little feller too!” he said with a smile as he opened the door to the Guesthouse and left. As soon as the door had closed, Patch scampered back into the kitchen and flopped into his basket. It was obvious who his favourite was!

A little later.....

“Why are you sitting here love?” asked Faith as she walked down the stairs, slowing easing herself into the day.

Patrick looked up at his landlady and gave her a small shrug.

“Oh. I know that face” said Faith as she sat down next to the young man, “Our Daniel's gone I take it?” she added, as she straightened her dressing gown over her knees.

“He's been gone before. You'll cope” she added kindly.

“I've never asked him to stay before” said Patrick.

“Come on love” said Faith, patting Patrick on the leg, “This sounds like we need the kettle on”
“Course our Cain has always been the same” said Faith as she poured the contents of the kettle into the china tea-pot on the kitchen table.

“That's sailors for you. Get them on dry land for five minutes and all they want to do is head back to the crashing waves and all that rigging” she said as she sat down.

“What did Mr Dingle used to do? When you were first married I mean?” asked Patrick

“Safes mostly love” said Faith, “Occasional church roof, if his back wasn't playing him up”

“But was he at least at home?” Patrick went on.

“Well, *most* of the time. Couple of holidays at 'His Majesty's Pleasure' of course” Faith replied

“Anyway. I don't think Shadrach is the right comparison for Daniel” said Faith, looking wistful for a moment, “Would have been glad to see the back of him half the time”

Patrick frowned, “The thing is” he said, “I thought it was great, having him here. And I *know* he did a really good job at the theatre. One of the girls told me he was the first man doing the lights who didn't spend all his time ogling them”

“Well, course not” Faith agreed.

“And I thought he liked being here too. But he can't have done can he? Or he'd have stayed” Patrick said sadly.

“He'll be back soon” said Faith, giving Patrick's hand a squeeze.

“I think he enjoys being with that dog more than with me” said Patrick, looking over at Patch who was snoring away quite happily in his basket.

“Be fair love” said Faith, “He can't give you a wash in a tin bath in front of the fire can he?” said Faith with a smile as she picked up the tea cups and headed to the sink.

Patrick at least smiled back.

“I think we've got some bad weather coming” said Faith, looking out through the kitchen window at the dark, cloudy sky.

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Chelsea – Lewis Holbrooke's flat – Tuesday 4th April 1950 - lunchtime

Aaron leaned casually next to the front door to the flat. Two suitcases were down at his feet in the polished hallway.

“ Took your time didn't ya?” he said to Robert as the other young man walked up the stairs towards him.

“Aaron” said Rob, putting the key in the front door, “I had to be friendly”
Aaron frowned as he picked up the cases and followed his partner into the flat.

“She is one of Lewis's neighbours after all” said Robert as he hung up his hat and coat on the hall stand.

“Now, as we're here for a bit I don't want us to make any mess....” Rob began as he walked into the living room.

“Any more mess don't you mean?” said Aaron as he put the cases down and took in the disorder in the room. The remains of a party were strewn everywhere. Dirty food plates littered the coffee table and there seemed to be a drink glass on every other surface. One solitary red balloon was lying on the mantelpiece.

“I know they were having a party before they went away. But Lewis said his cleaning woman would be in the day after” said Robert, surprised.

“Looks like they packed in a hurry an' all” said Aaron, carefully picking up a pink, silk slip that was lying on the back of the nearest armchair.

“This cleaning woman's not coming round while we're here is she?” asked Aaron, putting the slip back down.

“No. We're fine” Rob replied, “Lewis has given her the week off”

“So........” he added, walking over and hooking his arms around Aaron's waist, “No-one is going to disturb our little love nest”

“Love nest?” said Aaron looking around the room, “Pig-sty more like”

“Aaron” said Robert with a sigh

“What?” said Aaron

“Shut up for a minute” said Rob, as he leaned in for a lingering kiss.

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Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Wednesday 5th April 1950 - lunchtime

“Right, that's you all done Mrs Dingle” said Dennis Culshaw, as he hefted his ladder back onto his window-cleaning cart in the alleyway.

Faith leaned against the open back gate and smiled.

“Suppose you'll want paying now?” she asked the young man.

“Oh, er no. You're alright” Dennis replied, “You're paid up till the end of the month”

“But you've been hard at it for ages” said Faith, “You must want a little extra”

“No, you can keep it for my Christmas box if you like” said Dennis
“Long time till Christmas” said Faith, taking a step forward.

“See you next Wednesday Mrs Dingle” said Dennis hurriedly as he made a sharp exit.

Faith stood and watched the young man pushing his cart down the alleyway. She was just about to turn and shut the gate when the rain started. Cursing, she quickly rushed over to the washing line and started to collect the bed sheets that were hanging there.

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Blackpool – Outside a shop near the side of the railway bridge – lunchtime

Frank Clayton reached out to rap on the wooden front door but paused for a moment. He read the brass sign in front of him, “V. Woodfield – Veterinary Surgeon” and thought to himself. Best to stick to his plan and keep it simple. Canada, that would be a good tale to tell. After all, Vanessa had no more been there than he had! And it wasn't as if she'd ask for his passport and check for a stamp. And what if it had been in the local papers? That had been in Torquay which was, mercifully, a long way away. And in any case, she wouldn't turn her own father away. Not even after all this time, surely. He put his case down on the doorstep and knocked.

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Chelsea – Lewis Holbrooke's Flat – 4:10pm

Aaron turned the television set off and closed the doors of its cabinet. He hadn't thought much of the film. Something about a man coming back from Australia after twenty years. But it had whiled away the time while Robert was out. He walked over to the window, his hands thrust into the pockets of his slacks. He had thought about walking over to the high street and having a mooch around, but decided against it as the rain continued to tumble down. He looked over at the clock on the mantelpiece. It wasn't that long till six, when Rob was due back.

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Blackpool – Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – 5:00pm

Patrick leaned in though the door to the lounge. He was obviously heading out as he had his cap and jacket on.

“Before I forget, Daniel's coming home on Friday Mrs D” the young man said

“That's a bit soon isn't in love?” said Faith as she started to remove the bed-sheets from the clothes horse in front of the fire.

“I don't think he'll be in a good mood either” said Patrick with a frown, “He missed out on going to Sweden and the Dutch run. He's having to work in a warehouse in the docks for now”

“He'll find something soon love. Bound to” said Faith as she propped another sheet across the top of the wooden frame.

“I'll just take Patch down the end of the lane” the young man replied, “May as well do it now, I
don't think the rain's going to stop any time soon” he added as he left.

“Have you seen Patch?” Patrick asked quickly as he came back into the room, “He's not in his basket’

“He was in the kitchen earlier on” said Faith, “I know that because he was there when I got the washing in”

“Have you checked out in the yard?” she suggested. Patrick nodded as he left again. There was the sound of the kitchen door opening in the distance, followed by footsteps as someone quickly went upstairs and down again.

“He's not in the yard or our room” said Patrick said, looking a little worried, “And the back gate's wide open”

“I'll have to go and look for him” Patrick added.

“But it's chucking it down love” said Faith

“I'll have to” said Patrick, “What's Danny going to say when he get's home if I don't?”

Chelsea – Lewis Holbrooke's flat – 6:30pm

Aaron got up and clicked the radio off as he heard the front door to the flat open and close. Robert soon walked into the living room, both his long coat and hat dripping wet.

“What happened to you?” asked Aaron, grinning just a little

“What do you think?” asked Robert, “I got off one stop too early on the bus. Had to walk the rest of the way and got drenched!” he added in his best hard-done-by voice.

“Come on. I'll run you a bath” said Aaron, his smile warm this time.

7:00pm

“That's better” said Robert as he walked back into the living room, a dark blue dressing gown with a monogram of “LH” on the pocket on top of his own striped pyjamas. He flopped himself down on the floor in front of the fire and put down the towel he was carrying.

“Right. Get this down ya” said Aaron as he walked in, a steaming cup of tea in both hands.

“So. How was your drink with 'Bunty' ? “ asked Aaron as he handed his partner a cup and sat down on the sofa.
“Bunty and Edgar” Robert corrected him, “That divorced bloke her folks don't approve of. Well I'm telling ya, that's about the only thing interesting about him!”

Aaron reached over and brushed his hand through Robert's still damp blonde hair.

“Come here” he said, picking up the towel from the carpet.

Robert smiled and turned around, leaning against the side of the sofa between Aaron's legs.

“Think we better stay in tonight don't ya?” said Aaron, as he gently toweled Robert's head.

“We could watch the Television. If you like” he went on.

“What are they showing?” Robert asked.

Aaron leaned over to look at the Radio Times, lying open on the sofa.

“There's a comedy programme. Someone called Terry Thomas. And some boxing later”

Robert turned his head and looked up at Aaron. “I'm not really in the mood for sport” he said, “Well, not boxing anyhow” he added with a smile, his voice soft.

“That right?” Aaron grinned back. He leaned down and pressed his lips against Robert's.

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Blackpool – Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – 8:15pm

“We'll put him in here. He'll be more comfy” said Faith as she put the small dog basket down on the rug in front of the fire.

“And you go and get out of those wet things” she added.

“What? No. I'm alright” said Patrick, not looking up. He was sat on the edge of the rug trying to towel down a very still looking Patch, which wasn't an easy task one-handed.

“You're soaked through” said Faith, “Come on, I'll do that. We don't want you ending up with pneumonia as well”

“Don't say that” said Patrick quietly.

“Go on love” said Faith, putting her hand on the young man's shoulder, “You go and have a hot bath. I'll take over here”

Patrick stopped rubbing Patch with the towel. “Hot baths may be taken strictly between 6pm and 7pm only” he said.

“What's that?” asked Faith, confused.

“It's on a notice over the road in Seaview. I saw it when we were at that reception” said Patrick as he stood up, “Very fond of rules, Mrs Chorley, so I'm told” he said as he headed to the door.

“Well, that's Lettie for you” said Faith as she started to rub Patch vigorously with a towel.
“It’s daft anyway” said Patrick, “You don’t need ‘strictly’ and ‘only’. We wouldn’t have written it like that in the Army. That’s just rubbing it in. The miserable old cow” added Patrick sourly as he stood in the doorway. But his heart wasn’t in what he was saying. He was looking at the small dog on the rug.

Chelsea – Lewis Holbrooke’s flat – 8:20pm

Aaron smiled happily to himself. It turned out you could cuddle up in front of the television as easily as when you were listening to the wireless. He lay his head on the front of Robert’s borrowed dressing gown while the other young man laughed at something the gap-toothed man on the tiny screen had just said. Maybe this television thing would catch on after all, Aaron thought to himself. Once the sets were a bit cheaper. Robert laughed again, given Aaron’s shoulder a squeeze as he did so.

Blackpool – Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – 9:00pm

“Here we are” said Faith as she put two cups of cocoa down on the table in front of the sofa.

“Are you sure you'll be alright on this?” she asked as she moved the pillow and blanket to one side so she could sit down.

“I’ll be fine” said Patrick as he lifted his mug.

“If he's no better in the morning, I'll go and fetch the vet” he added

“Oh, I can do that love” said Faith, picking up her own mug and sitting down, “Least I would if I knew where it was. Who is the vet round here anyway?” she added with a frown.

“It’s a lady. That's probably why you don't know her” said Patrick, “Her place is just the other side of the...railway....bridge” he added, before letting out a massive sneeze.

“I'll get you another blanket” said Faith, looking concerned.

Chelsea – Lewis Holbrooke’s flat – Thursday 6th April - 8:45am

Robert waked into the bedroom, with a wooden tray in his hands and a self-satisfied smile on his face.

“Aaron” he said quietly as he put the tray down on the dresser. He shook his head as the other young man remained curled up on his side of the bed, his eyes tight shut.

“Aaron” he said, a little more loudly, reaching over and giving his hip a small shake.
“Eh, what?” said Aaron, as he pushed himself up into a sitting position. He was too cosy to get up right now. Lewis's mattress was just too comfortable.

“I've made us breakfast in bed” Rob grinned as he slipped his dressing gown back off and folded it over the back of a chair.

“Why, it's not my birthday or anything” said Aaron, a little grumpily

“Aaron” said Robert as he put the tray in the middle of the mattress, “You'd think I'd never made us breakfast in bed before!” he added as he climbed into his side of the bed.

Aaron reached over and grabbed a slice of toast and munched it for a moment while he thought.

“You haven't” he said eventually, spraying crumbs as he spoke.

Rob just smiled and shook his head.

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Blackpool – Vanessa Woodfield's Veterinary Surgery - 9:00am

“It's very nice darling I'm sure” said Frank, as he put his tea-cup back in the saucer, “But don't you think you'd have been better off in the high street?”

Vanessa looked over from the sink, “You've got crumbs in your moustache” she replied before turning around and carrying on with the washing-up.

Frank ran his fingers across his grey moustache before going on, “And have you thought of a getting a telephone?”

Vanessa sighed and looked out into the back yard. The rain poured down on top of the small set of hutches under the lean-to.

“Dad!” said Vanessa, “I've opened up here cause it's cheaper than the high street and I can't afford a telephone and the car. Now, any more suggestions?”

“Well, I don't understand why you moved here. I thought you were alright in the country” said Frank

“That was a year ago” said Vanessa, pointedly, “They can be very funny about lady vets sometimes, farmers”

“It's probably the same in Canada” she added as she turned around.

Frank was about to say something but, fortunately, there was a knock on the front door.

“I'll get that” her father said quickly as he got up.

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Chelsea – Lewis Holbrooke’s flat - 9:00am

Aaron scoffed down the last piece of toast and put the plate back down on the dark wooden tray in the middle of the bed.

“You've left some pattern on that plate” said Robert as he sat up in a bed, a cup of tea in his hand.

“What?” said Aaron as he licked a tiny piece of butter from his finger.

“Still” said Rob, putting down his tea and leaning over, “You do need your energy I suppose” he added with a smile.

Aaron smiled back as Robert leaned over for a kiss. He paused as he heard the front door to the flat opened and closed shut again.

END OF PART ONE
“I think we've got some bad weather coming” (Part Two)

Blackpool – Vanessa Woodfield's Veterinary Surgery - Thursday 6th April 1950 - 9:05am

“You do realise that this is a vets?” said Frank as the two young men walked into the front room.

“I know” said Patrick as Dennis Culshaw helped him sit onto one of the wooden chairs that lined the walls, “I'm here about my dog. I just slipped on the steps on that flaming bridge coming here”

“Oh, I see. I'll just get my daughter” said Frank as he left the room

“You alright now?” said Dennis

“I'll be fine when I get my breath back” said Patrick, just before he started a bout of coughing.

“Thank you for helping me over” Patrick added afterwards.

“No trouble” said Dennis with a smile, “I'm not working today. No point in this weather. Your dog not well then?” he added, seeming a little reluctant to leave,

Patrick put his hand to the small of his back and winced, “He got caught out in the rain yesterday. I found him round the back of the Seaview. He was probably looking for food”

“That's on my round, it's always filthy that back yard” said Dennis, frowning, “You'd think it'd be all tidy, what with the front being so posh.”

“Our landlady says that's Mrs Chorley all over” replied Patrick, “Y'know, all fur coat and no……”

“Hello Patrick” said Vanessa with a smile as she walked into the room, “Where's Patch then?” she added

“He's at home” Patrick explained, “Could you come over sometime today?” he asked as he stood up painfully.

“I'll come over now if you want” said Vanessa, “I'll give you a lift back in the car”

Chelsea – Lewis Holbrooke's flat – Thursday 6th April 1950 - 9:10am

“You stay here” said Robert quietly as he pulled on the dressing gown and walked into the hall. Aaron frowned as he quickly pulled his shirt on over his vest. Robert closed the bedroom door behind him firmly and headed to the living room. The sound of a woman humming both loudly and tunelessly was coming from within.

“Excuse me. What are you doing here?” Rob demanded, adopting his best 'lord-of-the-manor'
A dumpy, middle aged woman looked up from dusting the coffee table. “I might ask you the same thing!” she said haughtily.

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“Well he didn't tell me he was expecting a guest” said Mrs Spriggs angrily. “Oh, well next time Mr Lewis invites a friend to stay in his home, I'm sure he'll ask your permission first!” Robert shot back.

“He thought you were taking the week off. You know, once you'd cleaned up after the party” he added pointedly.

“I got behind didn't I. He's not my only client. I'm very much in demand” said Mrs Spriggs. Robert found that hard to believe. “Well, as you can see it's all tidy now. So you can have your week off after all can't ya?”

Mrs Spriggs sniffed and looked around the living room. It was spotless but she was in no mood to admit it.

“I ought to do the bedrooms, just while I'm here” she added

“No need” said Rob quickly.

“Oh I see. Like that is it?” Mrs Spriggs asked, a sly hint of triumph creeping into her voice.

“I don't think Mr Holbrooke would be happy if you've brought some floozy back here”

Robert folded his arms. “And I know he wont be happy when I tell him you didn't clear up after the party and this place was looking like a pigsty when I arrived!” he replied

“I told you I got....” Mrs Spriggs started.

“Behind” said Rob, “Yes. You said. Well he still won't be happy. If I tell him that is”

Mrs Spriggs could see she wasn't to get anywhere.

“I can always do next week, I suppose” she said as she marched into the hall.

“Course you can” said Robert, now all smiles.

“Well. I can't waste my time talking to you all day!” said Mrs Spriggs “I'm in demand” she reminded him as she put on her hat and coat and headed out of the flat.

Robert sighed and pushed the bolt firmly across the top of the door.
“It’s alright. Just some battleaxe of a cleaner....” Robert started as he opened the door to the bedroom. But Aaron's wasn't there.

Robert walked into the hall and opened the door to the spare bedroom. Aaron was sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Anyway, I soon told her....” Robert started. The he noticed the worried expression on Aaron's face. “Hey. What's wrong?” he asked as he sat down on the bed next to his partner.

“Thought someone was going to find us” said Aaron quietly.

Rob hooked his arm around Aaron's shoulders, “It's alright” he said, “I sent her packing with a flea in her ear”

“I heard you”, said Aaron, nestling his head against Robert's chest.

“And I've put the bolt on the door” Rob added, pulling Aaron close, “We'll be alright now” he said softly.

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Hull - A public house in the dockside area– Thursday 6th April 1950 – 8:00pm

“....and I just missed the Swedish run. Only by a couple of days” Daniel complained as he put his pint of bitter down on the table

“Yeah, well you might not have got on that this time” the other sailor replied

“What do you mean?” asked Daniel, confused.

“Well, didn't come back in February did ya?” said the other man, “Some people say that's cause you're unreliable”

“You been saying that?” Daniel shot back angrily

“Course not. Course not” the man replied hastily, “I just mean some people have said that”

“I couldn't come back could I?” said Daniel, “My.....Nan had just come out of hospital. I had to get a job in Blackpool for a bit”

“Well I know that, don't I” said the other man.

“Is that why they told me the Dutch run is full? Is that why I've been stuck in that flaming warehouse?” asked Daniel

The other sailor just shrugged and sipped his pint.
Robert didn't need to ask Aaron if he was enjoying himself, his face told it's own story.

“Who's this then?” asked Aaron, pointing at the painting on the wall in the small, dark room. The lack of enthusiasm in his voice was obvious.

“Let's see. 'Unnamed Dutch Merchant' “ said Robert, reading from the very small guide. The guide that he had, more than once, pointed out to Aaron was overpriced in his opinion.

“Blimey. That's worth knowing” said Aaron sulkily.

Rob said nothing. He looked at the picture of the man with a ruff collar and then at Aaron and back again a couple of times.

“What?” said Aaron, once he realised he was being scrutinised.

“I was just wondering what you'd look like with a beard” said Robert with a smile.

Aaron frowned.

“Can be very attractive a beard. I mean, look at Daniel” Rob teased

“Shurrup!” said Aaron, embarrassed. He looked around quickly but the this part of the tour was deserted right now.

“Might make you look a bit more grown up too” Robert added.

“Hey. Behave yourself!” said Aaron, quickly giving Rob a light slap on the seat of his slacks.

Robert just grinned.

Blackpool – Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Friday 7th April 1950 3:00pm

“Coming” said Faith briskly as she marched to the front door and pulled it open.

“Good afternoon” said Frank, flashing what he hoped was a winning smile.

“Hello love. I thought you were the Doctor” said Faith, giving him an appreciative smile.

“No, I just wanted to check on Mr Seaton actually. I have got the right address haven't I? He came to my daughter's surgery yesterday. Took a bit of a tumble on the way. Anyway, as I was passing....”

“Yes love. Come on in” said Faith taking a step back, “Patrick's having a lie down right now and the Doctor's due soon” she added as Frank walked into the hall.
“I'm sure you won't say no to a cup of tea. While you wait”

“I rarely do” said Frank as he took off his hat and pushed his fingers through his grey hair.

“Course I had to insist on the Doctor coming over. Patrick said not to bother. You know what you fellers are like. You need looking after” said Faith as she headed to the kitchen.

“I'm Frank by the way” said the man as he followed her “My daughter tells me that a Mrs Dingle is the landlady here. Your mother perhaps?” he added with a broad smile.

Faith smiled back. She knew he was only trying to flatter her, but it was nice all the same.

“No. I'm Mrs Dingle” she replied “But you can call me Faith ” she added, resting her hand gently for a moment on the front of Frank's tie.

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London – Hampton Court Palace - Friday 7th April 3:30pm

Robert had drawn up a schedule for their trip to Hampton Court. But that didn’t surprise Aaron for a moment, Rob loved planning. And three thirty meant the maze. Only, it didn't go to plan.

They'd only made one turn into what was obviously a dead end when Robert had stopped in his tracks. He'd stood there for a moment, just staring at the wall of green ahead of him. They could both hear the sound of children playing in the maze nearby. Screams of “Help!” and “I'm trapped!” but then loud laughter straight after.

“Let's not do this” Rob said quietly.

“We don't have to. Not really” said Aaron gently, putting his hand on the small of Robert's back. Rob had a distant look in his eyes. One Aaron hadn't seen for a very long time.

“I mean. It could be a lot of walking” said Robert as he headed back the short distance to the entrance, Aaron in tow. “And I didn't bring my stick”

“And we've got to walk to the station later” Aaron agreed, “Let's do the cafe. That's next on the list”

“Good idea” said Rob, forcing a smile. That look in his eyes had gone.

As they walked away, there was another scream of someone pretending they were scared. Pretending they were trapped. It was the playful sound of someone who had never been trapped. Who didn't know what it would feel like for a moment.

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Blackpool – Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Friday 7th April 4:00pm
Daniel put his kit-bag down on the floor and hung his jacket up on the stand. He heard the sound of laughter echoing out of the kitchen and started to walk towards it. As he did, he looked through the open door into the lounge and was anxious straight away.

“Hey, what's the matter with you boy?” said Daniel, leaning over the dog basket and giving Patch a smooth. The small dog didn't react, he just stayed sleeping, his breathing seeming slow.

“What's the matter with Patch Mrs D?” asked Danny, his eyes full of worry.

“It's a fever” said Faith, “He got caught out in the rain in the week for ages. The vet's been round though and...”

“Why was he out in the rain?” Daniel demanded.

“He just ran out’ said Faith, “Anyway...”

“Is he going to be alright?” said Danny, giving the dog another smooth

“We hope so love. Touch wood” Faith replied

“Where's Patrick?” said Daniel

“He's in bed” said Faith.

Daniel looked angry for a moment. He got up and headed out of the room.

“Leave it a minute though” said Faith to the young man, “The Doctor's only just come” she added, but he didn’t hear her.

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Daniel sprung up to the stairs to his and Patrick's room. The last week in Hull had been terrible, but he’d consoled himself that at least he would have a good weekend. Or at least he would before he had to go back to another week in that warehouse.

Patrick was sitting up on Daniel's side of the bed when he walked in. Danny didn't notice the black Gladstone bag resting on the dresser.

“What happened to Patch?” Daniel asked brusquely without so much as a greeting.

“What?” asked Patrick, sounding a little confused, “He got out in the rain”

“It's only looking after a little dog Patrick!” said Daniel, “I mean, even you should be able to manage that!”

Patrick looked at him sharply. If Daniel had meant to be hurtful, he had managed it. With just those two words. Even. You.

“I mean” Daniel stammered, his temper receding when he saw the look on his partner's face, “He looks half dead down there” he added quietly. He finally noticed that Patrick didn't exactly look a picture of health himself.
“Right here we are, I knew I'd left it in the car” said Dr McGann as he walked quickly into the bedroom carrying a stethoscope.

“Oh. Sorry Doctor” said Daniel, “I'll leave you to it” he said as he stepped out of the room, leaving the door open so he could hear what was being said.

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“Right” said Dr McGann, “Now let's look at these bruises shall we?” he added as Patrick stood up. He helped him take his t-shirt off over his head.

Daniel looked through the gap in the door. There was a nasty looking deep mark, right across the small of Patrick's back.

“And how did this happen?” the Doctor asked, gently pressing his fingers around the bruises.

“I slipped coming down the railway bridge” said Patrick

“Well try and be more careful in future. Nothing's broken though” said Dr McGann

“Anyone can slip Doctor” Patrick replied, defensively. But what he didn't say was that other people might have broken their fall. Other people might have been able to grab the handrail that ran down the left hand side of the steps instead of landing on their back. Other people wouldn't have ended up feeling useless and have to rely on a passing young window-cleaner had to help them walk to the vets.

“Yes, well” Dr McGann, “Even so. No more sleeping on that sofa downstairs. Dog or no dog. Bring his basket up here if you must” he said.

“It's too cold Doctor. We had to keep him by the fire. He got soaked through” said Patrick, sitting down on the side of the bed.

“Talking of which” said the Doctor, “I think we'd better listen to that chest of yours hadn't we?”

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Doctor McGann sat on the edge of the bed as he put his stethoscope into his bag.

“Now Patrick, you were a nurse. I shouldn't have to tell you this. You of all people” said the Doctor, keeping his voice calm and reasonable.

“I wasn't out in the rain that long” said Patrick

“Three hours Mrs Dingle said” the Doctor replied

“Well, she's not very good with figures. You ask her her age if you don't believe me” said Patrick.

The Doctor smiled for a moment but his face was soon serious again.

“Look. I'm sure you don't want to end up back in the sanatorium. You're just going to have to leave
some of these things to other people from now on” he said.

“But what am I supposed to do when there's only me?” asked Patrick

“Ah. Well, what are we going to do if you're not here” said the Doctor.

In the hallway, Daniel frowned and thrust his hands into his trouser pockets. He stared down at his boots, uncomfortably.

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“Another cuppa?” said Faith as she sat at the table in the kitchen.

“Oh. Why not?” said Frank with a smile, “Who was that who came in by the way?” he added

“That was Daniel. Another one of my regulars” said Faith as she got up headed to the stove, “He's in the merchant Navy. You should have a chat with him. He's spent some time in Canada”

“Has he?” said Frank. He frowned, but Faith's back was turned.

“Actually Faith, I've just remembered” said Frank standing up, “I promised to go out with Vanessa this evening. Meet some friends of hers”

“Aw” said Faith, sounding disappointed, “Another time perhaps?”

“Now” said Frank, “How could I possibly turn down the chance of such **delightful** company” he said smoothly.

Faith smiled.

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**London – Hampton Court Palace - Friday 7th April 4:15pm**

Aaron was pleased to see Robert was feeling better. He'd already started to criticise the cafe.

“I knew we shouldn't have come here” said Aaron, as he put his tea-cup back in it's saucer.

“Aaron. All I said was how they could improve this place a bit” said Robert

Aaron sighed, “Yeah. Well you've made a long list of improvements today haven't ya? You are supposed to be on holiday remember? This isn't one of your buildings” he said.

“You know, you should just relax, a bit” said Aaron, his voice softer. He was hoping that the concern on his face wasn't too obvious as he said it.

Robert leaned back in his chair. “I would love to a run a place like this. They should get some films made here for a start. It's all free promotion then. I mean, you've got that Tudor front and it's all seventeenth century round the back....”

“Yeah? So's this bun from the look of it” said Aaron with a grin, putting his hard cake down on his
plate with a small thump.
Rob smiled back. A warm, relaxed smile.

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Blackpool – Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – 7:00pm

Daniel walked into his and Patrick's bedroom, carrying a bowl of soup on a small wooden tray.
“Mrs D's done you some soup Pat” said Daniel. His partner was curled up in bed with his back to him.
“Just leave it on the dresser. I'll have it in a bit” said Patrick, not turning around.
Daniel put the tray down and headed to the door. “Your prescription's there too. It's in a bottle so...” he started to say, his hand on the side of the door frame.
“It's alright. I think I can manage that” said Patrick.
Daniel thought for a moment.
“Listen Pat. About earlier. I didn't mean it when I.....” he began
“Doesn't matter” said Patrick, cutting in.
Daniel closed the door behind him. It was painfully obvious to him that it did matter.

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8:00pm

“Hardly touched his soup” said Faith, as she sat down in the armchair opposite the fire and picked up her knitting. “I gave him his medicine though. Why didn't you do it?”
Daniel was sitting on the sofa, looking guilty. Patch had clambered out of his basket and was now asleep across his lap as the radio hummed quietly in the background.
“He didn't want me to” Danny mumbled in reply.
“He made himself ill looking for that little feller. I hope you appreciate it” said Faith.
“Course I do” said Daniel, “I...I just wish I'd known. Before I mean”
“Before what love?” said Faith, knitting away.
Daniel was silent and smoothed the dog on his lap,
“I thought I'd better sleep down here tonight. Just to keep an eye on Patch” he said eventually.
“Course love. Very sensible” said Faith.

9:00pm

Faith knocked on Patrick's bedroom door before letting herself in. The young man was lying in bed on his side. Even though only the lamp on Daniel's side of the bed was on, she could see he wasn't happy.

“Though I'd see if you wanted some cocoa” said Faith as she walked over and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Yes thanks” said Patrick, awkwardly forcing himself up into a sitting position.

“Shall I send Danny up with it. Or are you still not talking to him?” Faith asked

“Had he said something?” said Patrick, frowning

“He doesn't have to love. I'm not so green as I'm cabbage looking” said Faith with a smile

Patrick looked confused, “What do you mean? You don't look like a cabbage”

“It's just something my old mother used to say” explained Faith.


“Look love” said Faith, “I mean I can tell when there's an atmosphere. Whatever Daniel's done, I'm sure he's sorry”

“He hasn't said so” said Patrick

“That's fellers for you” said Faith with a sigh, looking distant for a moment.

“He certainly looks sorry” said Faith.

“It's not nice being told you're useless. Especially when you've been feeling that” said Patrick

“Oh. He never said that did he?” said Faith

“No. It's what he meant though” said Patrick

“I think he's been feeling a bit useless himself. You know they turned him down for that Holland job he used to do. Someone putting it around that he's unreliable, just cause he stayed here for a bit”

“He didn't tell me that” said Patrick quietly.

“I'll send him up with the cocoa shall I?” said Faith, “Can't have my boys falling out now can I?”

“Alright” said Patrick with a resigned sigh.

“Someone has to be the sensible one. And I know that's no fun” said Faith, “That's why I've never done it” she added with a smile, giving Patrick's hand a squeeze.
A little later....... 

Daniel was sat on the side of the bed, his cocoa mug in his hand.

“Patch is a bit better” he said, “Well, he got up on my lap anyhow”

“He's bound to be glad you're here” said Patrick, putting his cup down on the nightstand.

“He was always pleased to see me when I came back. When you were away I mean” said Daniel, “It's always good when someone's pleased you're home. You know, like you are, usually I mean” his voice tailed off and he looked down.

Daniel took a deep breath and put his mug down as well.

“Look Pat” he began, “You always said we shouldn't row when we see each other. You said it was daft for us to fall out when we're apart so much” he added, taking hold of the young man's hand.

“So. Let's not fall out. Not just cause I said something daft” he added, as he gently ran his thumb over the back of Patrick's fingers.

“Alright. We won't. Fall out I mean” Patrick replied, his voice sounding tired.

Daniel smiled, keeping hold of Patrick's hand.

“You know I'm on the sofa tonight?” he said, “I want to keep an eye on Patch. Just for tonight though?” he added, his voice uncertain.

“Yes. Just for tonight” Patrick agreed.

Daniel leaned forward and gently pressed his lips against Patrick's. He drew back and looked at him intently

“Pat” he said, “You won't get sick again will ya?” he asked.

“I'll do my best” said Patrick

“Good” said Daniel quietly, “Come here” he added as he wrapped his arms around Patrick, carefully avoiding his injured back.

Daniel mumbled something as he held the other young man. It might have been 'sorry', but Patrick didn't ask him to repeat it. He just enjoyed Danny nuzzling into the side of his neck and holding him in a tight embrace.
“I am worn out!” said Robert as he slipped into his side of the bed, “I don’t think I’ll bother reading”

“All that walking today wasn't it?” said Aaron, putting his own book down on the nightstand.

“So. How worn out are you? Exactly I mean?” said Aaron with a smile, turning to his partner.

“That’s enough from you” said Robert, leaning over for a quick kiss.

“You floozy” he said quietly with a smile as he backed away. Then he leaned in again.......
The Charmer (Part One)

A shabby looking house in Blackpool – October 1950 – early one evening

“Same time next week?” the middle aged man said as he buttoned up his dark coat.

“If you like” the young blonde woman in the silk dressing gown replied disinterestedly, as she leaned against the side of the doorway to her ground floor flat.

Robert smiled to himself as he stood in the entrance to the building. The sound of a train rattling across the nearby tracks echoed into the hallway. The other man seemed to suddenly realise that Rob was there and made a hasty dash out into the street, almost knocking into Aaron as he walked up the path.

“You my six o'clock love?” the young woman asked, smiling at the handsome blonde stranger.

“Uh. No. Just visiting a friend” Rob replied.

“Pity” the young lady said as she walked back into her flat and closed the door.

Robert stood there for a moment until he felt a sharp poke in the back of his jacket.

“Come on Casanova” said Aaron, “It's the top floor we want”

Robert's distaste for the house had been clear on the walk up. He had turned to Aaron as they passed the door to the first floor flat and the sound of shouting coming from within. He had rolled his eyes on the second floor as they both squeezed past the clothes-horse covered with wet washing that was out in the landing. And now, as he paused at the very top of the stairs he looked around with disgust at the damp walls and peeling paper.

“Listen” said Rob, “Falling out or no falling out, we're not letting him stay here another night. I'll book him at the place across the road if he won't come home”

“What about Patch? She won't take dogs over at Seaview” said Aaron

“Well” said Robert, thinking for a moment, “We'll have to see about that. You'd be surprised how money talks”

Aaron sighed and took a step closer to his partner, “It's you I want to talk Robert. I don't want him in a hotel. I want him back at Nan's”

“I'll do my best” Rob replied. He leaned forward and knocked on the door.

A little later.........

Aaron was halfway down the first flight of stairs when Rob caught up with him.

“Aaron, wait” said Robert.
Aaron paused. As he did so, Patch plonked himself down on the tatty carpet and stared up at the two young men.

“Why are you storming off?” Rob asked

“I'm not” said Aaron, “I'm taking the dog for a walk. You're the one who said I wasn't helping”

“I didn't say that” said Robert, “I just meant it wasn't helpful, going on about how rotten this place is” he added

“I only said what you said before!” said Aaron

“I wasn't going to say that to his face was I!” said Rob, “Come on. You know what Patrick's like. He was bound to get defensive. You can see the effort he's made in there. And it can't have been easy, getting somewhere that'd take a dog”.

Aaron frowned and sat down on the stairs. He reached down a little to give Patch a smooth.

“He agreed about the stairs being a bit much” he said, only a little sulkily.

Robert sighed and sat down too. “Yes. He did agree about that” he conceded. He reached over and gave the back of Aaron's shoulders a quick, gentle rub.

They sat in silence for a moment.

“I thought he'd jump at the chance of going back home” said Rob, “I didn't think much about how to persuade him”

Aaron was about to say something about Robert's charm failing for once, but the look of disappointment on his partner's face stopped him.

“At least you tracked him down” said Aaron kindly.

Robert gave Aaron a grateful smile. “He must be more upset than we thought” he reasoned, “I mean, you've known him longest. What'll make him come home? This isn't all just down to pride is it?”

Aaron thought for a moment before answering. “No. It's not just that. I mean, he'd have to know that flaming feller has definitely slung his hook...”

“Which he has” said Rob, firmly

“...and as long as Nan says she knows he wasn't lying. And that cow over the road was just stirring” Aaron added

“Which she will” said Robert

“But that's not all of it. I don't think he wants to prove he was right all along. You know, come back and say I told you so. He's not like that. I think he wants to be needed. And that must be hard to believe. After Nan threw him out, I mean”.

Aaron stopped and frowned again, “I'm not making any sense am I?” he asked.

Robert smiled, “No. You're making a lot of sense” he said, reaching over squeezing Aaron's shoulder.
“Go on” Rob went on, “I know what I'll say now. I think it'd be easier with just me there. You take this little feller over to that park. By the time you're back, I bet Patrick will have started packing”

“You think so?” asked Aaron as he stood up.

“Course I do. I said we'd fix this didn’t I” said Robert, as he got up from the stairs.

“We can do anything, me and you” Rob beamed.

Aaron beamed back.

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But of course, back in April, no-one knew that there would be anything to fix..................

Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse - Saturday 8th April 1950 – early morning

Patrick paused at the bottom of the stairs into the hallway and looked over to the kitchen. He could hear Faith saying loudly, “I like a man with a good appetite” through the almost closed door. At least that meant Danny would be busy eating breakfast for a bit. So he cut over to the lounge and walked in, leaving the door open a little.

He walked over to the basket in front of the fireplace and knelt down. “Yes. You're looking a lot better aren't you?” he said, reaching in and smoothing the little dog lying inside. He didn't hear the young man walking back across the hall, who was now standing just outside the door.

“Don't tell anyone. But I'm supposed to be in bed” said Patrick as he tickled Patch under his chin.

“Aw. You want your other Dad really don't you?” he went on, “He's your favourite I know. Well, that's alright. I mean, he's my favourite too after all.

Outside in the hallway, Daniel smiled.

“Course, I'll have to look after you. Cause he's going away again soon. So no more running out in the rain and getting into trouble. For either or us” said Patrick

“He's only going away for work though. It's not because he doesn't love you” 

In the hallway, Daniel frowned. He ran his hand through his curly dark hair for a moment and thought. After a moment, he took his cap and jacket from the hall stand and headed for the door. He would decide when he got there, he told himself. After all, it might not even be an option.

Chelsea – Lewis Holbroke's flat – Saturday 8th April 1950 – early morning

Robert looked over at the clock on the nightstand. He had to squint to tell the time as Lewis's expensive, plush curtains kept the bedroom in darkness. And the flat was just far enough away
from the high street to avoid the usual noise. Normally, Rob would be up and about this time of day. He looked over to his right at Aaron, who was curled up with his back to him, still sleeping away. Well, it was a holiday after all, he told himself. And that's what mornings were for on holiday, a bit of snuggling. With a smile, Robert rolled onto his side and curled around Aaron, hooking his arm around his middle. He closed his eyes and snuggled.

Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse - Saturday 8th April 1950 – mid-morning

“Hey, you're supposed to be in bed young man” said Faith, as Patrick walked into the kitchen.

“Is there any tea going?” asked Patrick as he sat down at the table, “I'll go back up straight after”

“I'll put the kettle on” said Faith, patting the arm of Patrick's dressing gown as she headed to the stove.

“Go on with what you were saying Beryl” she added as she filled the kettle from the tap.

“Oh. I'm not sure I should do. Now I mean” her friend replied, looking at the young man sitting opposite her.

“You're alright love” said Faith, leaning back against the sink and folding her arms, “Patrick's very broad minded”

“Well all I was saying is that I saw him coming out of the back of No.49 again this morning” said Beryl.

“That young Policeman?” asked Faith

“That's right. He had his uniform on and everything” said Beryl

“Well, I should hope so” said Faith with a smile, “So where's her husband when all this is going on?” she added

“On nights at the gas works” said Beryl, “And never sets foot in his own home before 10 o'clock of a morning. Not to my knowledge anyhow”

“Course I asked her about it. The last time I mean. When I happened to bump into her. She said she'd called the police cause she thought a burglar was trying to get in”

“In Allerdyce Street?” said Faith, disbelieving. “What's to steal?”

“Well, exactly” said Beryl, “Course, I'm not one to judge.......” she began

“No, course not” said Faith as she sat down.

“But there's this young feller. Sneaking down our back alley, bold as brass” said Beryl

“Can you actually do that?” asked Patrick with a frown. In the distance, the front door opened and closed.

“What's that love?” asked Faith
“Sneak around. While you're being 'bold as brass' at the same time I mean” Patrick went on.

Faith and Beryl looked puzzled for a moment, but fortunately Daniel walked in.

“You timed that well” said Faith as she started to pour the tea, “You were out a bit early weren't you love?”

“I had something to sort out” said Daniel, “Actually, you got a minute Patrick?” he asked, “I wanted a word about moving Patch, back up to our room I mean”

“Oh. Yes, alright” said Patrick, picking up his mug of tea and following Daniel out of the room.

“Why don't you put Daniel in the attic room?” asked Beryl, once the young men had left, “With Patrick being ill”

“I've got my commercial traveler coming this week. He'll be in there” said Faith quickly, “Anyway. It's better to have someone else in the room. In case Patrick has a fall in the night. Or anything” she added.

Beryl smiled, happy with her friend's explanation.

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“Do you need to go back to Hull for anything?” Patrick asked as he climbed into bed and slipped back under the covers.

“Nah” replied Daniel, as he put a dozing Patch down on the end of the bed, “All my stuff from there is in that” he added, nodding towards his kit bag leaning against the desk in the corner.

“Well, everything I want is right in this room” he added with a smile as he climbed onto his side of the bed and sat on top of the blankets.

“I'll write to my old landlady in Liverpool. See if she can put me up at the end of the month” he went on, leaning across to give Patch a quick smooth.

“And you don't mind? Going back to the theatre for a bit?” asked Patrick

“Better than that warehouse” said Daniel as he huddled up against his partner.

“Listen Pat” he added, curling his arm around the young man's shoulders, “I wont know what kind of haul I'll get. When I get to Liverpool I mean. I'll try and make it sure it's not too long though”

“Least you're here now” said Patrick

“Course I'm here” said Daniel, flashing a warm smile, “Got to look after my two boys haven't I?” he added. He looked down at Patch for a moment, who seemed quite happy curled up asleep.

He looked back at Patrick and leaned over to press his lips softly against the young man's.

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse - Sunday 23rd April 1950 – bedtime

“How was your programme?” asked Robert as he buttoned up his pyjama jacket.
Aaron was already stripped down to his vest and boxer shorts and was perched on a stool, looking through his telescope at the night sky.

“Used to be our programme” Aaron muttered in reply.

Robert sighed. “Aaron. It was the Parish Council” he said as he climbed into bed, “I wasn't out enjoying myself. Believe me ” he added as he reached over for his murder mystery on the nightstand.

Aaron kept looking through his telescope, pausing every so often to check the book on his lap.

“Oh. I've invited them over for tea. The Parish Council I mean” Robert said, trying to sound casual.

It was Aaron's turn to sigh. “When?” he asked.

“Thursday. I've said ten thirty. I didn't want it too near till lunchtime, in case they except a big spread” said Rob

“Good. Cause they won't be getting one” said Aaron as he looked across at his partner, “I'm working in town on Thursday. I'll want to be gone by eleven”

“It has to be Thursday” said Robert, “It's the only day I'm not doing stuff for the Trust. Anyway, it'll just be a few sandwiches and tea to lay out. Lauren said she'd bring a cake”

“That's nice of her” Aaron mumbled and looked back at his telescope. “So, who's coming then?” he added

“Well, Lauren” Rob started, “And the Vicar, obviously, the Major and his wife and Nicola”

“She bringing anything?” asked Aaron, looking up

“Just a list of complaints” replied Robert with a grin.

Aaron grinned back.

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Blackpool – Vanessa Woodfield's Veterinary Surgery – Wednesday 26th April 1950 – 3:00pm

“Well, he seems fine to me now” said Vanessa, looking down at the little dog lying on the table.

“I thought he was” said Patrick, “Just wanted to make sure. Mr Perez is going away next week and it's his dog really. He'd have brought him round himself, except he's working”

“Oh. Where's he going?” said Vanessa as she headed over to the sink to wash her hands.

“He doesn't know yet. The merchant navy's a bit like that sometimes” Patrick replied.

“Vanessa.....” Frank started as he walked into the consulting room, “Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't know you had a patient”

“There's a parcel for you in the back room Dad” said Vanessa as she wiped her hands on a towel,
“Who do you know in Devon?” she asked.

Frank paused for a moment, “Devon?” he asked, seeming surprised.

“Well the address on the back said Torquay” said Vanessa, “I thought you'd just been to Canada”

“Oh, Torquay” said Frank, acting as if the penny had just dropped, “Yes. I do have friends there. Must be a birthday present”

“Bit early” said Vanessa

“So, how's this little chap?” said Frank, looking down at Patch and quickly changing the subject

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse - Thursday 27th April 1950 - 10:45am

Major Witherby leaned across the dining table from his chair, his hand stretched out. Several small trays had been put out, all with a tea-towel neatly laid on top.

“Roger!” Mrs Witherby said sharply.

The Major frowned and withdrew his hand.

Robert was stood by the fireplace, his hands thrust into the pockets of his slacks, “I'm sure the others won't be long” he said with a smile.

The Major kept frowning. Fortunately, there was a knock at the front door. Aaron walked out of the kitchen, an annoyed look on his face and headed out into the porch.

“I hope we're not too late” said Reverend Thomas as he walked into the living room, “We had a little trouble finding Mrs King's new cottage”

“Can't think why” Nicola snapped, “My directions were perfectly clear” she added, ignoring the scowl on Lauren Gillespie's face.

“Well, at least you're here now” Robert said

“About damn time!” the Major muttered

“Roger!” Mrs Witherby hissed.

“Let me take that Miss” said Aaron, nodding towards the cake tin the young woman was holding.

“Oh. Thank you Aaron” said Lauren as she handed it over.

“Shall we?” said Rob, extending his arm and pointing over to the dining table. As they all drew up a seat, Aaron walked back in the room and put a sponge cake down on the table on a china plate.

Robert was about to say something about a cake stand. He was sure he had seen one in the back of the cupboard. But given the look on Aaron's face, he decided against it.

“I'll just be off into town now Mr Sugden” said Aaron as he scooped up the tea-towels, revealing
two plates of sandwiches and some biscuits.

“Yes, thank you Aaron” said Rob.

“Well. No standing on ceremony. Everyone tuck in” he added as Aaron headed to the kitchen.

Lauren picked up the silver tea-pot in the centre of the table, “Shall I be mother?” she asked, looking at Robert with a smile. There was a loud thump from the kitchen.

“Yes. Thank you” said Rob, looking over his shoulder to the kitchen door for a moment.

“Aaron works in the radio shop in town, now and again” he said, thinking some explanation was needed.

“Hah!” said the Major, “We never had any of that before the War. If a chap worked for you, he worked for you. None of this other job nonsense!” he added, spraying crumbs from his cucumber sandwich across the table cloth.

“You have to have a bit of give and take with staff these days dear” said Mrs Witherby.

“And that Dingle chap's damn rude if you ask me” the Major persisted. Robert looked over his shoulder towards the kitchen. Luckily, Aaron must have gone out of the back door.

“Well he's perfectly polite to me” said Mrs Witherby, looking at her husband pointedly.

“Yes. I can't agree with you there Major I'm afraid” said the Vicar, his voice almost apologetic, “I've always found Aaron a very amiable young man. Don't you agree Lauren?”

“Oh, yes” said Lauren with a smile as she stood up and started to cut up her sponge cake.

Nicola said nothing.

Blackpool – A cafe facing the sea - Thursday 27th April 1950 – 3:00pm

“You'll have to come over to mine for tea. You free on Sunday afternoon?” said Faith

“Who'd be there?” asked Frank

“Beryl and Patrick. And Daniel of course. You know, my regular in the merchant navy. You've not met him yet have you?” said Faith

“Do you know” said Frank, “I don't think I can. Not this Sunday”

“Oh. That's a shame” said Faith, “Daniel goes to back on sea on Monday”

“I think I'm free on Tuesday” Frank suggested

“Then it's a date” said Faith with a smile.

“Pot of tea for two” said the young waitress, leaning over the table and giving Frank a smile.

“Thank you” said Frank, smiling back.
“Shall I pour?” the waitress asked.

“That's alright love” Faith replied quickly “We can manage”

“Very kind of you to offer” said Frank, still beaming.

Faith waited until the young women was out of earshot.

“How do you know her then?” she asked, nodding over towards the waitress as she poured out the tea, “In school with your Vanessa was she?” she added

“Now Faith, really” said Frank, still smiling, “I was only being polite”

Faith handed him a cup of tea.

“Now why would I want to bother with a young slip of a girl like that?” said Frank, “When I can spend my time with a beautiful lady of........experience” he added, choosing his words carefully.

“If it's experience you want” Faith said with a smile, “You've come to the right place”

“Do you know what Faith?” said Frank, reaching over and taking her hand, “I think I have”

END OF PART ONE
Robert hung his hat and jacket up on the stand near the door to the porch before heading into the kitchen.

“You're back early” said Aaron without looking around. He was scrubbing away at a white shirt in the sink.

“Lauren gave me a lift” said Rob, leaning casually in the doorway to the kitchen.

“That right?” said Aaron levelly as he kept working.

“She liked our front room” said Rob, keeping his tone light, “You know. When they all came over in the week. Mrs Witherby said it needed a woman's touch though”

“Yeah? Well you don’t” said Aaron grumpily.

Robert let out a small sigh. “Why are you doing that now? I thought you'd be listening to the radio” he asked.

“Won't wash itself will it?” Aaron replied, “I don't how you get your shirts so dirty anyway”

Rob stepped into the room so he was standing behind the young man.

“It's from going to Garston all the time” Robert explained, “I've got to inspect what the workman are doing there haven't I? Some of that house is still in a right mess” he added

“I didn't get my stuff this dirty when I in the engineering works” said Aaron, “Or when I was down the mine!”

Rob thought for a moment. It was obvious that Aaron was in one of his moods. He could try and talk him out of it. But he decided against it. Instead, he hooked his arms around his partner's waist and leaned in from behind, giving him a quick, soft kiss on his neck.

“You trying to get round me or something?” said Aaron, his voice now far less grumpy.

“I might be” said Robert, leaning in and kissing Aaron's neck again. “Is it working?” he asked as he pulled Aaron close against him.

“Might be” Aaron replied with a smile as he let the shirt drop into the kitchen sick.

Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Monday 1st May 1950 – 7:00am

Daniel always found these goodbyes awkward. In his head, he knew exactly what he wanted to say. He knew the feelings he wanted to get across and the assurance he wanted to give. It just didn't always come out like that. Sometimes he thought it would be easier if it was the other way round.
If it was Patrick that was going away. Pat was the one who was good with words.

Daniel put two mugs of tea down onto the nightstand next to Patrick’s side of the bed and headed back to the door. He closed it tight and turned the key in the lock. Not that anyone else in the guesthouse would be up and about, but it was better to be careful. He crouched down next to the basket at the end of the bed, just to give Patch a quick smooth as he slept away. Smiling, he got up and sat on the edge of the mattress next to his partner.

“Patrick” he said quietly, giving him a gentle shake of the hip to stir him. The other young man pushed himself up awkwardly and leaned back against the pillow.

“Is it time for you to go?” he asked, sounding tired and disappointed at the same time.

“No. Ages yet” said Daniel with a smile, “I got us both a cuppa. You know, so we can have a proper talk before I head off” he added, leaning over to the nightstand and passing Patrick a mug.

“A proper talk?” asked Patrick.

“I'll do my best” Daniel replied, still smiling, as he leaned over for his own cup.

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A little later......

“...but you're always here. In my heart” said Daniel intently. He was still sitting on the side of the bed and pressed his hand on the right side of his chest for emphasis.

Patrick leaned over, a warm smile on his face, “More about here Danny” he said softly, taking Daniel's hand and moving it over to the middle of his shirt.

Daniel beamed back at him, turning his hand around and curling his fingers gently around Patrick's.

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8:30am

Daniel hooked his arms around the back of Patrick's dressing gown and pulled him close, pressing his lips against his in a deep kiss.

“It won't be too long. I promise” he said as he pulled away, his arms still tight around the young man's waist.

Patrick didn't say anything. He just leaned in for another kiss.

“Don't come down” said Daniel, “I'll see myself out. Soon as I know. I'll write to ya”. With a final smile, he let go and headed for the bedroom door, glancing down at the still sleeping Patch in his basket as he did so.

As Daniel closed the door behind him, Patrick sat down on the bed and listened to his footsteps as he headed down the stairs. As the front door to the guesthouse opened and shut, Patrick looked around the bedroom. Suddenly, it seemed all too empty.
4:00pm

“Who’s that coming through your gate?” said Beryl, looking through the kitchen window and out into the yard.

Faith looked up from her magazine, “It’s Mabel from number eleven” she replied as she stood up and headed for the door. “Probably on the flaming scrounge again”

Sure enough, the bird-like woman at the door was clutching a small cup to the front of her pinny.

“You couldn’t lend us a cup of sugar could you Faith?” she asked, “I’ve got right through our ration and you know my Charlie. He has to have his sweet tea”.

Faith sighed as she took the proffered cup and headed to the larder, “I think I can manage half a cup” she replied over her shoulder.

Mabel seemed reluctant to leave for some reason once Faith had handed her cup back.

“Was there anything else love?” the landlady asked

“Well I thought I ought to say something. I mean. He is such a close friend of yours after all”

“You’ve lost me Mabel” said Faith, folding her arms across the front of her blouse.

“And I said to my Charlie. I’m sure she’d want to hear it from a friend. Not have some busy body just sticking her nose in and telling her”

At this remark Faith looked over to Beryl and shared a knowing look.

“Telling me what?” Faith asked.

“Oh? Didn’t I say?” said Mabel, “About Bernard Rudge and this new housekeeper he’s got living in”

Faith didn't reply.

“What new housekeeper?” asked Beryl, seeing the look of surprise on her friend's face. Mabel tuned to look at the other woman.

“Blonde piece she is. Can't be more than twenty five. They were in the corner shop lunchtime. So I said hello, just to be friendly. And he said she was his brother's eldest and he was giving her a job as a favour. But if you ask me, I think its obvious who's doing who the favour, if you know what I mean” Mabel said with relish.

“Thank you for letting me know Mabel” Faith said briskly, walking over and opening the kitchen door.

“Oh” said Mabel, sounding a little surprised, “Well. I must get back” she replied as she walked over to the exit.

“Thanks for the sugar” she added as she left.

Faith closed the door. Beryl waited until the other women had left through the gate before speaking.
“Niece? Bernard only had one brother” she said, “That was their Jacob and he dropped dead outside the Bricklayers Arms in 1910. So I think that explains why your Bernard’s been so busy lately” she added.

“You’re not upset are you?” she asked quietly when Faith didn’t respond.

“It’s his life Beryl. Nothing to do with me” Faith replied as she headed to the sink and turned her back on her friend.

“Oh. Are you free tomorrow love?” she asked casually as she started to wash the cups lying in the sink, “Frank’s coming over for tea. You’ve not met him yet have you?” she asked.

“Course I’ll come” said Beryl, “Always nice to meet someone new”

“Yes” Faith replied., “Someone new” she added quietly, staring out into the yard for a moment.

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A little later...

“I’ll just get you that pattern” said Faith as she headed to the kitchen door, “Sorry love” she added as she almost bumped into Patrick who was walking into the room with Patch on his lead.

“Nothing wrong is there?” he asked once his landlady had left the room.

“Well, I’m not one to gossip...” said Beryl as she stood up and started to do up her coat. Patrick smiled to himself as he leaned down to unclip the lead from Patch’s collar.

“But Mr Rudge is knocking around with some fancy woman young enough to be his daughter. Mabel Earnshaw was just round telling us”

“That was kind of her” said Patrick dryly. He gave Patch a quick tickle under the chin before the little dog scampered over to his basket.

“Oh, Faith’s taken it in her stride though” said Beryl.

Patrick frowned. It hadn’t looked that way to him.

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Hadleigh Public Library – Tuesday 2nd May 1950 – 11:00am

“So. What can I do for you today? Work or pleasure?” Miss Phipps said with a smile as she stared at Robert over the library counter.

Rob was confused for a moment. “Oh. My books you mean?” he asked as the middle aged woman reached for her date stamp.

“Work I’m afraid” said Robert, “I’m reading up on dry-rot”
“I thought it must be” said Miss Phipps, “We don't usually see you foraging in our handicrafts section” she added as handed Robert his copy of 'The practical woodworker'.

“More Mr Dingle” she added.

“Well. There's a lot of it at Garston Manor” Rob explained, “Dry rot I mean”

“Actually, I have been meaning to ask. Do you think Mr Dingle could look at my radio for me?” said Miss Phipps

“Well if he's got the time, I'm sure...” Robert started

“I would take it to Mr Arkwrights in town, but with him having shut down” she said.

“No. He's still open. Aaron, I mean, Mr Dingle was there last week” said Rob

“Oh. He's definitely closed down” Miss Phipps insisted, “He had a stroke before Easter. It's all boarded up now”

Robert was nonplussed for a moment. “Yes, Mr Dingle did say” he said quickly, “He's just been round to...clear out the stock” he explained.

“I'll ask him about your radio” Rob added with a smile as he headed for the door.

“I'd be most grateful” Miss Phipps gushed as he left.

As he stepped out into the street, Robert frowned. Aaron hadn't said anything about Harry being ill and shutting up shop. Not a word.

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Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse- Tuesday 2nd May 1950 – 4:30pm

When Patrick was asked by Robert and Aaron later on, he said that this was the time he started to get suspicious. The time Faith brought him round for afternoon tea and introduced him to Beryl. It wasn't what he said. In fact, it was more what he didn't say. And when you have to be cautious about what you tell people about your own life, maybe you notice it when someone is being the same.

Yes, he was a charmer. Or at least the ladies seemed to think so. But maybe if Mrs Dingle hadn't been upset about Mr Rudge and his so-called niece and housekeeper, she wouldn't have been so keen to take him at face value. A lot of hurt could have been avoided if she'd been just a bit more suspicious herself.

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“So. You've just got the one child then?” asked Beryl as she turned to the grey haired man sitting next to her at the table in the lounge.

“Well. Just the one that I know of” Frank Clayton replied with a smile.
“Oh Frank. You're a caution!” said Faith, laughing as she slapped him lightly on the forearm.

Patrick said nothing and sipped his tea.

“Now Faith was telling me that you're a grandmother too Beryl” said Frank, as he idly ran his finger through his moustache.

“That's right” Beryl replied, beaming. “My Elizabeth has two daughters. She lives near Harrogate with her Albert. He's a chemist” she added.

Faith raised an eyebrow at this. For one, it was usually “Lizzie and her Bert” and for another Bert only worked behind the counter in Boots. And it was in Ripon.

“I have to say, it's hard to believe. A young, slip of thing like you. Isn't that right Patrick?”

Patrick said nothing and smiled. Well, sort of.

“I'll just bring in the cake” said Faith as she stood up from the table.

“Can I give you a hand?” Frank Clayton asked smoothly.

“No. You stay there nice and comfy love” said Faith with a smile.

Frank smiled back as the landlady headed out of the room. Patrick mumbled an excuse about needing the bathroom and followed her out.


A little later................

Patrick was standing in front of the mirror in the hallway, checking that his shirt was tidy. Which it was, of course. Really, he was just avoiding going back into the lounge for a little longer. Faith was still in the kitchen but he could hear Frank and Beryl talking away through the partially opened door.

“I'd have thought Faith would be sitting on a little goldmine here” said Frank, “The landlady in the Royal Oak was telling me all about Sea View the other night. She was saying it's always busy there”

“Oh, she likes to just to stick to just her theatricals these days. And a few of her regular commercial travelers. Then there's her residents of course. Patrick and young Daniel, when he's not at sea”

“But surely that can't keep the bank manager at bay?” asked Frank.

“Well, she only does it for company. I mean, she doesn't need the money. Mr Lesley left her this place in his will. So she doesn't have to be at anyone's beck and call. Not really” Beryl answered.

“So this place is all hers? Outright I mean?” Frank asked, his eagerness just a little too apparent.

Outside in the hallway, Patrick paused as he needlessly straightened his floppy fringe. There was something about Frank's voice he didn't like all of a sudden.
“Didn't Daniel spend a lot of time in Canada?” said Beryl, turning to the young man sitting at the table next to her.

Patrick put his tea-cup back down on the saucer. Faith had broken out the “good china” in honour of her gentleman caller. Based on what he had seen and heard of Frank so far, Patrick found it hard to see why.

“Yes. That's right” he replied.

“Really. Which part?” Frank asked

“The East Coast. Nova Scotia mainly” said Patrick, “Where were you?” he asked, staring across the table at the older man.

“I was on the West Coast, in the Yukon.” said Frank quickly, “You couldn't be further West without falling in the sea. And we wouldn't want that, now would we?” he added, turning to Beryl and flashing her a winning smile.

“No. We wouldn't want that” said Beryl with a girlish laugh.

“You'd fall in Alaska first” said Patrick dryly, “What were you after in the Yukon. Gold?” he asked

Frank's smile faded for just a moment.

“I'll just do a fresh pot” said Faith brightly as she put the china tea-pot onto a wooden tray and stood up. Frank was all smiles again.

“Let me help you” he said as he stood up. He opened the door for Faith and followed her out.

“They seem to be getting on like a house on fire” said Beryl, once the couple had left the room

“Don't they just” said Patrick

“If you ask me, I think someone's smitten!” said Beryl with a smile.

“Which one?” asked Patrick, “Mrs Dingle or Errol Flynn's Granddad ?”

Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse- Tuesday 2nd May 1950 – 4:30pm

Robert looked up from his desk again. He thought he'd heard Aaron pulling in the car a good ten minutes ago. He turned back to his book and scribbled down another thing he intended to ask Mr Foster, the caretaker at Garston Manor the next time he was there. In the distance he heard the back door to the kitchen opening.

“You took your time” said Rob as Aaron walked into the room.
“I told you. I had to take the car to the garage today” Aaron replied as he hung up his jacket and cap.

“It’s not that far away. The garage” said Robert, leaning back in his desk chair and looking at his partner.

“I came the long way back didn't I?” said Aaron, “Anyway. I've got to start on tea” he added as he headed back to the kitchen.

Robert got up and followed the young man into the kitchen.

“I saw Miss Phipps in the library” said Rob, as he leaned against the door frame.

“Well she works there doesn't she?” Aaron replied grumpily from inside the larder.

“She asked if you could look at her radio for her. I said you would. If you had the time” said Robert

“Yeah. I can do that” said Aaron

“I told her she could always take it to the shop.....” Rob started, leaving his sentence hanging there

“Do you want sausages for your tea?” said Aaron, emerging back into the kitchen.


“Good. Cause we haven't got any” said Aaron with a grin, “We'll finish off the stew then” he added, nodded towards a large pot on the cooker.

“Stew it is” said Rob.

Aaron walked over to the sink and started to watch his hands. Rob looked over towards him, thoughtfully.

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Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse- Thursday 18th May 1950 – 6:30pm

“I'm sorry Mr Anstruther” said Patrick, “I don't know where Mrs Dingle has got to. She must have been delayed somewhere. I can heat you up some soup if you like?” he offered.

“I suppose that will have to do” the middle-aged man sitting at the lounge table said with a sigh. As the young man left the room, he returned to his crossword.

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Patrick could hear the laughter and chatter as he put the saucepan into the bowl to soak.

“Mr and Mrs Smith!” said Faith as she walked into the kitchen with Frank in tow, “She didn't believe us for a minute you could tell”
“Oh hello love” she added as she saw Patrick at the sink.

“I thought you'd be back ages ago” he said

“Well, we got a bit delayed didn't we Frank?” said Faith, reaching over and putting her hand on the front of her companion's shirt

“You know what it's like” said Frank, “When you get out into the country and start to see the sights. You just lose track of time don't you?”

“I've given Mr Anstruther his tea” said Patrick, “I've got to take Patch out now” he added.

“Thank you love” said Faith as the young man walked out of the kitchen.

Frank waited until Patrick had gone before hooking his arms around Faith's waist.

“Now, I haven't got you into trouble now have I?” he asked, “I mean, this is your home after all, isn't it? When all is said and done. I think your guests forget that sometimes”

“No. Patrick was right. I'd clean forgotten about Mr Anstruther” Faith replied as she hooked her arms around him, “That can happen. When you're sight-seeing” she went on with a smile.

“Do you know what Faith?” said Frank, “I can't help but think something”

“What's that love?” the landlady asked

“I can't help but think you deserve so much more than looking after all these waifs and strays and....society's unfortunates” said Frank.

In the hallways, Patrick hooked the lead onto Patches collar and scowled as he looked over to the kitchen and its half-open door.

“Come on then little feller” he said, tickling the small dog behind the ear before they headed out into the street.

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Garston Manor, Northamptonshire – Monday 22nd May 1950 – 4:00pm

“It'll have to be sorted” said Robert as he marched up the drive to the cottage on the estate, “We can't move the tea-shop”

“Course” said Mr Foster as he followed in Rob's wake, “I had a bet on with Ted over at Loggerheads about that back wall. I'll have to treat him to a pint now!”

Robert sighed as he put his hand on the gate to the Fosters' cottage, “Actually Mr Foster, I'd like to you to concentrate on treating the dry rot for now”

“Right you are” the caretaker replied.

As Robert opened the door to the kitchen he smiled. He could hear Aaron and Mr Foster's son chatting away animatedly as he walked into the room. But as soon as he did, the room fell silent and Warren quickly closed the magazine he and Aaron were reading.
“I'll uh, just get the car started Mr Sugden” said Aaron as he got up, looking a little guilty. “Thanks for the tea Warren” he added, “Oh and thank your Mum for the cake”

Robert turned to the caretaker next to him, “I'll be back round next week. I'll get some estimates about the cafe. We can go through them then”

Mr Foster nodded.

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“You and Warren seemed thick as thieves” said Robert as he climbed into the passenger seat of his car, “What were you talking about?”

“Just...radios and stuff” Aaron mumbled after a moment. Then, for the rest of the ride home, he was quiet.

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse- Thursday 25th May 1950 – 10:45am

“Who's your letter from?” asked Robert, looking over from the table in the front room where he was working. Aaron had been sat on the sofa quietly for the last half an hour.

“Patrick” said Aaron shortly, as he continued reading.

“Everything alright?” asked Rob distractedly

“Not really” said Aaron, “Patch got out in the rain. They both nearly had pneumonia, him and the dog I mean, and Patrick hurt his back when he fell on the bridge by the vets. Oh, and Daniel's away until August. Got a job for three months this time”

“That's not too long, is it?” said Rob, leaning back in his chair

“He's worried about Nan too. She's hooked up with some feller and he's round the house all the time. A right smoothie he says”

“Well, if anyone can take care of herself when it come to men, your Nan can” said Rob, looking back at his paperwork spread out in front of him.

“He wants to know when we're next going up” said Aaron

“Aaron. You know I'm up to my eyes with Garston right now” said Robert, “Why don't you write back and sort out a chat on the phone? For this weekend or something” he suggested. “Course, it would be a lot easier if your Nan would just get a phone” he added.

“Ah. Well not everyone's as modern as you are they?” Aaron replied as he got up from the sofa, “I'll write to him later. Anyway, I better get to the shop” he added as he headed over to the door to pick up his jacket and cap.

Robert was quiet as he stared at the papers in front of him. Nothing was sinking in for the moment.
He was jolted out of his thoughts when he felt a quick kiss on his right cheek.

“See you later” said Aaron as he headed for the kitchen.

Rob watched his partner walk away.

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10:45pm

Robert put his Agatha Christie book on the bedside table and looked over at Aaron, who was fast asleep. He’d said he was worn out when he got back from the shop. Rob realised how true that was when Aaron didn't even make his regular complaint above him reading in bed.

Rob clicked out his bedside lamp and slid under the sheets. Miss Phipps must have got it wrong about the radio shop closing down, he told himself. Otherwise, where had Aaron had been going? Robert lay back and started into the dark, thinking.

A few minutes later, Aaron rolled over and Rob felt an arm curl across his middle in a hug. Yes, Robert told himself. She must have been mistaken.

TO BE CONTINUED
“Mildred Pierce is on at the Rialto tonight. Shall we go?” asked Patrick looking up from the newspaper spread out on the kitchen table.

“I was thinking of having a quiet night in in front of the radio love” replied Faith, who was standing at the sink drying the dishes with a tea-towel.

“It's a good picture. And you usually love Joan Crawford” said Patrick, sounding disappointed.

“No. I'll stay in I think” said Faith

5:30 pm

Patrick walked over to the bay window in the lounge and stared out into the street to check the weather. He'd better get the tram to the cinema, he decided. It looked like rain and he knew he'd never hear the end of it from Daniel if he get soaked through again. Mrs Dingle walked into the room and headed straight over to check her appearance in the mirror over the fireplace.

“You're a bit dressed up aren't you?” said Patrick, looking over from the window, “For a night in front of the radio I mean”

Faith turned around, one hand resting on the buttons on the top of her blouse.

“You never know love” she replied, “Somebody might pop round”

Patrick turned back to the window for a moment. “Oh, I think I know” he said to himself, very quietly. He had already spotted Frank along the street, chatting to Mrs Chorley outside Sea View.

7:00 pm

Frank took another sip from his whisky glass and looked over to the old radio set in the corner of the lounge. He shifted a little on the sofa and turned to face Faith who was sitting next to him.

“Have you thought of getting a new set Faith?” he asked, “I was talking to this chap in......the pub, the other day. Yes, that was it. Apparently you can get a good discount. If you buy an ex-display model”

“Ex-display?” said Faith raising an eyebrow, “Do you mean something that's been handled by every Tom, Dick and Harry that walked into the shop?”

“Oh, I think you'd find it was all still in good working order” said Frank smoothly, “Even with a lot
Faith looked over to the radio. “Mr Lesley brought that brand new when I started here. You know, all this used to be his” she said, indicating vaguely to the rest of the room with her own glass.

“And Charles knew quality when he saw it” she added with a smile, “I've spent a lot of happy times in front of that set”

“Oh. I'm sure of that” said Frank with a smile.

Faith thought for a moment. Well, not all the times had been happy. Far from it.

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Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse - 3rd September 1939 – not long after 11:00am

“Turn it off now please love” said Faith to Aaron as she sat on the sofa, the words sinking in.

Aaron frowned and headed over to the radio in the corner.

“Nan...” he began as he turned around.

“Could you pop the kettle on” Faith interrupted, “I just want a quick word with Beryl”

The two ladies waited until the young man had walked out of the lounge.

“Well that's that” said Beryl, “Course, my Lester had been predicting this for months and...”. She paused when she noticed how quiet her friend was being.

“Are you worried about your Cain?” she asked, “I mean, he's a bit old to be called up isn't he?”

“He's still at sea though” said Faith, “This'll just make it more dangerous. But no, it's not him so much. I'm worried about our Aaron” she added, looking over towards the open doorway.

“He's still a bit young for the army.” said Beryl, trying to be reassuring, “Anyway. He wouldn't go straight away. They'll be doing War work at Fenwicks. They'd need a proper replacement for him first”

“And it could all be over by Christmas” she added.

“Like last time you mean?” Faith replied. Beryl reached over and took her friend's hand.

A few minutes later Aaron walked back into the room and put a wooden tray down on the table with a china teapot and three cups on it.

“Come here love” said Faith, getting up and wrapping her arms around her grandson in a hug.

“It's only a pot of tea Nan” said Aaron as he hugged her back, “No need to go over the top”

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But that was then. Time to step back to the now.
“Here’s your cake” said Aaron as he put a small plate on the living room table, next to Robert’s extensive paperwork. Rob felt as he couldn't win sometimes. Aaron didn't like him going out on Sunday evenings but now, when he was home for a change, he didn't seem to like that much either.

“Not a very big slice, is it?” Rob said, putting his pen down for a moment.

“It's all that's left. I thought you'd be out tonight, didn't I? Doesn't Lauren usually bring something to the Parish council meetings?” Aaron replied defensively as he sat down on the sofa and picked the Radio Times back up from the table in front of him.

“It was canceled” said Robert, “The vicar's sciatica is playing him up”. He paused for a moment before his next comment, “Anyway, I thought you'd get some food in on Thursday. You know, when you were working at the shop”

“I was busy” Aaron replied, not looking up from his reading.

Rob thought for a moment. “When's Patrick going to ring you?” he asked

Aaron put the magazine down, “I told him I'd be in tonight. I said after eight cause it'd be quiet with you being out. Which you are. Usually”

“What about Variety Bandbox?” asked Robert, “That's on at nine. I thought you liked to listen to that”

At that exact moment, the phone on Rob's desk started to ring. Aaron picked his mug of tea up from the table and headed over to Robert's desk chair.

“No Robert. We used to like to listen to that” he said grumpily as he picked up the phone.

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Robert helped himself to another gulp from his mug of tea as Aaron chatted away in the corner.

“Which bridge did you slip on?” asked Aaron, “Kitchener street? Yeah, I know it. I should do. Had to walk across that to school every day for years”

“Billy Hardcastle used to wait for a train to go by. He said he could spit further along the top of the carriages than anyone else.....”

Rob rolled his eyes at this comment and put his slice of cake he was just about to bite into back down on the plate.

“.....and he could” Aaron added.

Robert just shook his head.
“....was it back in February?” Aaron asked, “Thing is we've been really busy. Well, Robert's been really busy. There's the new Manor House over at Garston to get ready. And all his committees here, of course. I'm still working too...”

Rob looked across at his partner, but said nothing.

Despite reading through several pages of the history book in front of him, Robert had yet to find a solitary interesting fact about Garston Manor that would be worth putting in a guide book. Aaron had been chatting quite happily in the corner for a while. Well, not entirely happily. There was the occasional grumpy aside, aimed in his direction. But right now, Aaron seemed to be in listening mode.

“.....I know it seems ages till August, but you've managed before”, Aaron said, his voice a bit quieter, “You've always kept yourself busy Patrick. Can't you take Nan out? She always enjoys that. Oh? Right. I didn't realise he was around that much.......

“....Nan goes through these phases with blokes. You know that. They never last long. I mean, he's still staying at his daughter's isn't he? He'll probably move on when she's had enough of him”

Aaron glanced towards the clock.

“Look Patrick. I'd better go. Variety Bandbox is on in a bit. You look after yourself and we'll try and get up soon. Bye now”.

Aaron put the phone down and thought to himself for a moment. Then he roused himself and walked over to the radio in the corner next to the fireplace and clicked it on. The set started to hum quietly as it heated up.

Robert felt a pair of strong hands resting on his shoulders from behind as he looked at the book in front of him.

“Come on you. That's enough work for one evening, alright?” said Aaron, as he gently massaged Rob for a moment.

Rob smiled and put his pen down.

“I'll put the kettle on” said Aaron as he headed into the kitchen.

“Everything alright back at home?” Robert asked as Aaron handed him a hot mug of tea.

“Yeah.I think so” said Aaron, “Well, I'm pretty sure” he added as he sat down next to his partner.

“It was a good idea of yours. Arranging a chat I mean” said Aaron, “I think it cheered him up”

“Thing is” Aaron went on, “I don't think he's back on his feet yet. Since he came out of that sanatorium I mean. He's lost confidence. A bit”
“Well. These things take time. I know that” said Robert softly.

“He just misses Daniel. I think that the real problem” said Aaron as he snuggled up against Rob.

Robert curled his arm around Aaron's shoulders and pulled him in a little closer.

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Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Sunday 28th May 1950 – just after 9:00pm

Patrick crossed the road from the Royal Oak and took his key out of his jacket pocket. As he opened the door and walked into the hall he noticed a suitcase, which had seen better days, lying next to the hall stand. He didn't have to wait long to find out who the owner was.

“Right then, let’s get you settled in” said Faith as she walked out of the kitchen with Frank in tow. “Hello love “ she added as she spotted Patrick.

Frank picked up the case and followed the landlady to the foot of the stairs.

“This is awfully kind of you” said Frank as he used his free hand to smooth down his grey hair.

“Don't be silly love” Faith replied as she turned on the stair “You're very welcome” she added with a smile.

Frank smiled back and followed her up. Patrick hung up his cap and started to undo his jacket.

“We can't have you walking the streets now can we?” said Faith as she turned the corner of the stairs.

“Can't we?” Patrick said to himself.

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Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Monday 29th May 1950 – 9:00am

Frank strolled casually into the kitchen, a dark blue dressing gown with 'CL' monogrammed on the pocket over the top of his pyjamas. He relaxed into a chair opposite Patrick, who was drinking a cup of tea while reading the paper. The young man did his best to ignore the new arrival.

“Morning love” said Faith as she walked in from the yard, an empty laundry basket under her arm, “Did you sleep well?” she asked with a smile.

“Wonderfully” Frank replied, “I slept like a log. I think I'm going to be very cosy. In that top room, I mean” he said, beaming.

Faith gave him a quick squeeze on the shoulder as she walked past him.

“Most people find that mattress very uncomfortable” said Patrick, “In the top room, I mean” he
“Do they now?” Frank asked levelly

“Don't you remember Mrs Dingle?” asked Patrick, “Mr Fosdyke complained the last time you put him in there”

“Well Patrick. What can I say?” said Frank, “I must be made of sterner stuff” he added, as she shot a smile at Faith.

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Hadleigh – Dr Gillespie's Surgery -Wednesday 7th June 1950 – 11:30am

“Can I give you a lift home?” said Lauren Gillespie breezily as she walked into the hall of her father's surgery, pulling her gloves on as she spoke.

Robert thought for a moment and leaned on his stick. He didn't need it much at all now. And definitely not for only going to the village. It was just there because Aaron insisted he take it “In case you get distracted and dragged off on a long walk somewhere, like you do”.

“Well, I was going to walk” Rob replied, “But no, I will have a lift. Thank you”.

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“I'm going into town actually. Just a few errands to run” said Lauren as she slid behind the wheel of the car. Robert sat in the passenger seat next to the young woman.

“I couldn't tempt you to a spot of lunch could I?” she asked

“Best not” said Rob as he looked at his watch, “They'll already be something for me back home. You know what they can be like if you don't give them notice” he said, “Staff, I mean” he added quickly.

“Cup of tea perhaps?” Lauren persisted.

“Alright. Tea it is” Robert said with a smile.

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Robert wasn't really listening as Lauren got out of the now parked car in the town centre. She was explaining where she needed to go but the young man was concentrating on scanning the high street. In the end, he spotted what he was looking for. Or, to be more accurate, he found what he hoped wouldn't be present. But there it was, on the opposite side of the street. Arkwright's Electrical Appliances, closed and boarded up. The shop where Aaron still said he worked.

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“Nothing wrong is there Robert?” Lauren asked Rob over the table in the cafe, “You've gone awfully quiet”

Robert wished he could say something. But he couldn't. Not to Lauren in any case.
“No. Everything's fine” he said instead.

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That night Robert sat up in bed looking at his book as Aaron continued to hog their bathroom. He couldn't concentrate on his reading. It was times like this when he wished there was someone he could turn to for some advice. For a start everyone was far away. Well, far enough away. Only Lewis was on the telephone, and he could hardly tell him that Aaron wasn't just his live in handyman after all now could he? And it wasn't as if he was close with any of the rest of the RAF lads. So who did that leave? He didn't even consider his father as an option. That would never happen. Never in a million years. And Diane would only end up telling Dad, even if he could talk to her. And Victoria would be bound to let it slip to Adam who would then almost certainly tell Aaron. That only really left Patrick. At least he would appreciate the need for being discrete. It would be easier if there were a phone at the Golden Palmtree. Not just for times like this. He'd happily pay for it to be put in himself, but then Faith wouldn't hear of it. That's the trouble sometimes. Even with the money and the willingness to help you could tread on people's pride.

Robert's train of thought was broken as Aaron walked into the bedroom, stripped down to his white vest and striped boxer shorts.

“You gonna read long?” he asked as he walked over to his side of the bed, “I've got an early start tomorrow” he added as he slipped under the blankets.

“No. I can't really get into it tonight” Rob replied, putting his book to one side.

“No” said Aaron, clicking his bedside lamp off and rolling over.

“Night” said Robert as he did the same.

He lay in the dark for a while, thinking. He'd missed his best friend from the list in his head. That was the whole problem. His best friend was curled up in bed next to him. There was only one thing for it then. The only person he could ask about Aaron, was Aaron.

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Blackpool – Petty's Hardware Shop, the High Street – Thursday 8th June 1950

“Thank you love” said Faith as Cynthia Petty handed her her change and a small brown paper bag, “Well, we must be making tracks, mustn't we Francis?” she added as she turned to her male companion.

The couple headed to the door, with Frank making great play of opening it and stepping to one side to let Faith depart.

“Such a gentleman” said Faith, with a final smile in Cynthia's direction as the couple walked out into the high street.

“Now, tell me Faith” said Frank, as he offered her his arm, “Did you really need a new plug for the kitchen sink” he asked as they walked along

“A spare will always come in handy” Faith replied, “Besides, why shouldn't I show you off to
Cynthia?” she added as she hooked her arm through his, making sure that the lady in the shop had seen her do so.

“So that's Cynthia? The one you said was a friend of yours?” Frank asked

“Not really” said Faith with a slight frown, “More the sister of a friend”

“I thought you said she was a real dragon. She seemed perfectly pleasant to me” said Frank

“Course she's pleasant at the moment” Faith conceded, “She only married Mr Petty in March. That's wedded bliss for you”

“Ah, well I'm sure they’re happy now”, said Frank, leaning in towards her in a conspiratorial fashion, “But what happens when her looks go?”

“Oh, Frank!” said Faith with a laugh as she squeezed his arm, “You're terrible”

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse- Thursday 8th June 1950 – early evening

Robert already had it clear in his mind. He wasn't going to accuse Aaron of anything. Besides, what he could he actually accuse him of? The truth was, he didn't know what to think. He was just going to ask him where he had been going for the last few weeks and hope for the best.

“Aaron. Where have you been today?” Robert asked calmly. He was stood in the kitchen, his hand resting on the back of one of the chairs at the table

“What do you mean?” asked Aaron, as he pulled his green apron on over his front and headed over to the sink, “I've been at work haven't I?” he added as he reached for a saucepan from the stove and started to fill it from the tap.

Rob waited until Aaron had switched the tap back off.

“Aaron” he started again, “The radio shop's been closed since before Easter”

“Ah” said Aaron, not turning around.

“Never mind 'Ah'” said Robert, leaning on the back of the chair with both hands, “Where've you been going?”

“How do you know about the shop? You never go into town. You're always too busy” Aaron replied defensively as he turned around.

“I was in town yesterday with Lauren and I saw...” Rob started. He wished immediately he hadn't mentioned Lauren. It would be like a red rag to a bull as far as Aaron was concerned.

“It would flaming well be her, wouldn't it?” said Aaron, “Were you spying on me?”

“I don't see why you're taking the high ground Aaron” Robert replied, “You're the one who's been sneaking off into town with no good reason”
“I had a good reason!” Aaron shot back.

“Then tell me!” said Rob. He paused before speaking again, “Just, tell me. Please” he said, his voice cracking just a little.

“Fine” said Aaron, “If that's what you want” he added as he marched out of the kitchen door and headed towards the garage. Completely confused now, Robert followed him out.

By the time Rob had walked around to the garage, Aaron was on the floor, pulling away an old blanket that had been covering a large wooden box under the workbench than ran along the far wall.

“Give us a hand then” said Aaron, as he started to pull the box out into the middle of the room. Robert walked over and quietly helped him.

“What's this got to do with anything?” he asked.

“Just help me get it into the front room ok?” said Aaron.

Frowning, Robert did just that.

“Right then” said Aaron, as he put the lid of the small crate down on the floor next to the sofa, “What's that then?” he asked, as he sat on the floor behind the wooden box, looking over at Robert.

Rob ran his fingers through his blonde hair before answering. He hadn't known how his questioning of Aaron was going to turn out. But he hadn't expected he'd be sitting on the sofa looking inside a packing crate as a result.

“It's a television” said Rob.

“Well you're nearly right” said Aaron. There was no anger in his voice now and if anything his grin was cheeky.

“That is the only television Harry had in his shop. I got it for you. It's an Anniversary Present. Well, sort of....”

“....it's ex-display, but there's nothing wrong with it. And he gave me a big discount on top of that cause he had to get rid of all his stock when he had to close the shop down....”

Aaron rattled on for a bit. But the only thing that had really registered with Robert were those two words. Anniversary present.

“....thing is” Aaron was still talking at a fast pace, “it still cost a bit. But Nan lent me the money. That's why I've been working in town. There's this engineering workshop. Well, ok, it's a big shed behind the back of Woolworths. They fix a lot of mining equipment so I've been working there. Course, I couldn't say. Cause you'd have wanted to know why I wanted the money and....”

As Aaron spoke, Robert got off the sofa and crouched down on the floor so he was sitting next to the young man.

“Aaron. I...I don't know what to say” said Rob, “You've got this for me?”
"You could say thank you" said Aaron, "I mean, even if it is a bit early. Which is your fault. And it's for both of us really. I'll wanna watch it too"

Robert hooked his arm around Aaron's shoulders, "Thank you" he stammered, "This is wonderful. Really"

Aaron smiled, "Couldn't let it go by could I? Five years is five years " he said

Rob smiled back. He leaned over and pressed his lips against Aaron's.

"What did you think I was up to?" Aaron asked as Robert broke away, his face looking serious.

"I didn't know" Robert replied, "I....well, I just didn't know". He leaned over and kissed Aaron again.

In fact, a few possibilities had run through his mind. But now, he didn't want to think about them at all.

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Later that evening

"It's no good checking that" said Aaron as he slid into bed next to Robert, "I've got to put the aerial up on our chimney stack first" he added, nodding towards the Radio Times that Rob was reading.

"Do you know how to do that?" Robert asked

"It's not that difficult" said Aaron, "I only need old Tom to bring a bid ladder over. Warren talked me through how to do it. They finally sold a set at that shop he works in over in Garston"

"I was an electrician remember?" Aaron persisted, folding his arms across the front of his vest. "Or at least I was, before I became your skivvie"he added with a grin.

"Aaron. You're not my skivvie" Rob replied with a sigh.

"I feel like your skivvie" said Aaron.

"Well you're not, ok?" said Robert as he put his magazine onto the nightstand.

"Come here" he said softly, curling his arm around Aaron's shoulder

Aaron hunched down into the bed and leaned over, resting his head on Rob's chest. Robert reached over and clicked off his lamp before wrapping his other arm around his partner in a hug.

"Actually, I want to say something...." Rob started

"Sounds like your serious voice to me" Aaron said quietly

"Well. I do want to be serious" said Robert, "The thing is. These last five years together. In this place..."

"It's not five years yet" Aaron corrected him

"Ok, well....." said Rob
“It's five years in a fortnight” Aaron went on

“Aaron?”

“What?”

“Just listen a minute, will ya?” said Robert. Aaron fell silent.

“All this time. Me and you. It's been so great. When I came back to the Manor House after the....well, you know after what. Right then, I thought I'd never be happy again. Not for a minute. And then, when I met you. It all changed. Everything”

Aaron smiled and curled his arm around Rob's waist under the covers.

“And I know, sometimes, it looks like all I'm interested in is the job and my committees and....” said Rob

“It's alright” Aaron interrupted, “I know you love all that 'Lord of the Manor Stuff’ “

“No. I don't love it. I do enjoy it, A lot. And, well, let's say you'd grown up with someone spending half the time telling you you'd never amount to anything and the rest saying you were wasting the talents God gave you. Wouldn't you want to be a success?”

“Just to show them you mean?” asked Aaron.

“No. Not to show them” Robert replied, “To show me. And to show you Aaron. You're the only one I want to impress, really”

“You don't have to worry about that. You've been doing that since the first time I saw ya over in that House” said Aaron, “Well, most of the time” he added cheekily.

“So...if you think I'm taking you for granted. Just remember I don't mean to. Cause, well, you know, I love you” said Rob.

“That's good” Aaron said quietly.

Robert waited for a moment in the dark. “Don't you want to say anything?” he prompted gently.

Aaron thought. He felt a bit on the spot now. In fact, he always did when he was asked about his feelings. He usually had to take a few trips around the houses before he could come out and say anything. Even to Rob. Even after all this time. He lifted his head up from Robert's chest and shifted around in the bed so he was looking at him properly. Or at least, as well as he could with just the moonlight coming through the bedroom curtains.

“Do you remember me telling you about Wendy Fairfax?” Aaron asked.

“Wendy who?” Rob replied, puzzled.

“I was at school with her in Blackpool. We went out a few times. She was interested in me. But I wasn't. In her I mean” said Aaron

“Funny time to bring her up” said Robert, lying down on his side of the bed.

“Well. I did like her” said Aaron, “Not like that obviously. But I did like her”

“Is this stroll down memory lane going anywhere?” asked Rob
Aaron put his hand onto the front of Robert's pyjama jacket and played idly with one of the buttons.

“I think. Adding it up. I must have bought her a couple of cinema tickets and maybe two port and lemons at the Palais” he said

“And?” Rob asked

“I only liked her” said Aaron, “As for you, well. I just bought you a whole television set, didn't I? I mean, that's got to show you. Well, something hasn't it?”

Robert just smiled. Aaron leaned forward and pressed his lips against Rob's. His partner reached up and gently curled his hand around the back of his neck, pulling him close.

Enough talking. For now.

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Distant Friends – Part One

Emmerdale – The Sugden Farm – Friday 9th June 1950, the middle of the night

Adam stirred himself and tried to focus on whoever it was standing in front of his side of the bed. Disappointingly, his dream was starting to fade. He had been in his Detective's office. In New York, of course. Lauren Bacall was sitting on the edge of his desk and has just started to lean towards him when he felt someone prodding him in the back. Or, to be more accurate, in his actual back in the real World.

“Daddy” said Sarah quietly, who had stopped poking him now he had woken up and turned over.

Adam looked over his shoulder at Victoria, who was still fast asleep. He turned back and tried to focus on his daughter. “What's the matter sweetheart?” he whispered.

“Mr Rabbit is scared” said Sarah, “See”, she added thrusting the stuffed toy in her hand in front of the young man's face.

Adam looked at the toy rabbit who, if anything, looking quite relaxed and at one with the World.

“Aw. What's he scared about?” Adam asked indulgently

“The monster outside my bedroom window” said Sarah

“Do you mean the tree?” Adam continued. His daughter nodded.

“Well” said Adam, pulling back the blankets climbing slowly out of the side of the bed, “You two better sleep in here then hadn't ya?”

“Don't wake Mummy though” he added as Sarah climbed up into the middle of the bed.

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It wasn't long before Sarah was fast asleep. Victoria had rolled over now and whispered to her husband.

“Scary tree?” she asked softly

“Scary tree” Adam replied with a yawn.

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Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Friday 9th June 1950 – late at night

Patrick sat up in bed, woken by the thump in the hallway outside which was followed by laughter. Even with his bedroom door shut tight he could tell it was Mrs Dingle and that she was not alone.

“Faith, really now” said Frank sounding aggrieved, “I bashed my toe on that table”

“Least it was just your toe” Faith replied, “Now I told you didn't I? Try and keep it quiet”

“Well, I'll do my best” Frank replied smoothly.
Patrick knew he'd have that sly grin of his on his face as he said it. He heard their footsteps as they walked down the long hallway to Mrs Dingle's bedroom. The young man lay back down in bed and tried to get back to sleep. 'That didn't take long', he thought to himself.

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Garston Manor – Northamptonshire, Wednesday 11th June 1950 – mid-afternoon

“Here’s George now” said Mrs Foster as she looked out of the kitchen window in the cottage, “And he looks in a right mess”

Aaron looked up from where he was sitting at the table and put his astronomy book down. He had discovered that it was best to come prepared for one of Robert's “site visits”. His partner's regular assurances that “We'll be there an hour, at the most” seemed to be disproved by events as soon as they actually arrived.

“Then again. He usually comes back from that house in a mess!” she added as she walked past Aaron into the living room.

Aaron started to read again but was jolted by a shout from Mr Foster as he struggled through the door, a limping Robert leaning on his shoulder.

“Give us a hand son!” said Mr Foster.

“Robert...I mean, Mr Sugden. What's happened?” said Aaron, the concern in his voice apparent. He rushed to the young man's side and helped the caretaker ease him into a chair.

“George!” said Mrs Foster as she walked back into the room, a newspaper in her hand, “You're filthy! You might have given me a chance to get this lot down”

“Never mind newspaper woman!” Mr Foster replied, “Go get that first aid kit. It's that green army tin under the stairs”. His wife nodded and left the room.

“I'm alright, really” Rob insisted, “I just twisted my ankle, I think”

“It was that old staircase up to the roof” Mr Foster explained, “Mr Sugden only went up a few steps and it broke”

“Right. Best take a look then” said Aaron, forcing himself to keep his voice businesslike. He began to undo the laces on Robert's left shoe, now plastered with dust.

“We can fetch the Doctor from the village if you'd like” said Mr Foster

“No. I'm sure it's not that bad” said Rob

“Can you move your ankle about?” asked Aaron after he had slipped off Robert's long grey sock. Rob winced as he moved his painful joint.

“George! I can't find it!” Mrs Foster called through the doorway. Her husband muttered under his breath and headed out into the hallway.

“All this fuss” said Rob.
Aaron looked up as his partner, holding his foot gently.

“When we get home, I'm ringing Dr Davison to come over and have a look”

“Aaron....” Robert started

“No arguments. You could have jolted your hip, or something” said Aaron.

“Would have to be my left foot wouldn't it?” said Rob, ruefully.

Aaron looked over his shoulder to check the Fosters were out of earshot.

“It's alright. I'll look after ya” he said with a smile.

Robert beamed back.

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Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Wednesday 11th June – late evening

Frank looked up from the sofa at the sound of the two young women chatting to each other as they walked through the hallway, closing the front door to the Guesthouse behind them with a loud thump.

“Well” he said, turning to Faith who was sitting next to him, a glass of sherry in her hand, “If those two girls are as loud as that on stage, they'll have no trouble hearing them in the back row”

“Oh, they don't speak” said Beryl from her armchair, “They're not even supposed to move. It's all very artistic, really”

“Is it now?” said Frank, his interest peaked, “So what exactly do they...”. Over at the table, Patrick shook his head and went back to his ledger.

“Never you mind” said Faith

“Now, where are my manners?” said Frank, “Your glass is empty. Let me get you another” he said with a smile as he stood up.

“How about you Beryl, room for a small one?” he asked. The lady just smiled and passed over her empty glass. Frank smiled back and walked over to the sideboard.

“What about you Patrick?” said Frank as he looked across at the young man, “Can I tempt you?”

Patrick looked up from his ledger. He wanted to reply, 'You couldn't tempt me if I drank the whole bottle'. But instead, he settled for a “No thanks” and went back to his accounts.

“Do you know” said Frank, as he handed the ladies their drinks, “I have to say, I really feel, well, that I've fallen among friends here”

He sat back on the sofa and picked up his own drink which had hardly been touched. Mainly, as far as Patrick could see, because he kept talking all the time while Faith and Beryl seemed to hang on his every word.
“When I fell out with my Vanessa” said Frank, his voice a little quieter, “It made me realise something”

“What was that love?” asked Faith

“I don't have a single friend in the World” he replied, looking towards the landlady with a sad look on his features.

“Aw” said Beryl sympathetically as she took a swig from her glass. Faith reached over and patted Frank gently on his hand.

“What about your friends in Devon?” said Patrick from the table, without looking up.

“What was that Patrick?” asked Frank.

“Your friends in Torquay” said Patrick, now staring across the room at the older man, “The ones that sent that birthday present to the vets for you”

Frank was silent for a moment before speaking, “Oh those friends” he said, as if a realisation had suddenly hit him.

“They were actually friends of my late wife” said Frank, “I was in touch with them, briefly. More out of politeness than anything. When my dear wife passed away, well, a lot of our friendships died with her. I'm sure you two ladies understand”

“Oh I know love” said Faith sympathetically, “Beryl and me are both widows. It can be very lonely. I've often felt starved for male company”

“Actually ladies, I must just go and....wash my hands” said Frank as he stood up.

Faith leaned over towards her friend, “Have a look in that magazine rack will you Beryl? I think I put that new knitting pattern in there”. Beryl leaned over and started to rummage, “I can't see a pattern” she replied.

Frank headed for the door. As he got to the table he leaned over and spoke quietly to Patrick, “That's quite a memory you have there” he said. The young man looked up at him, “I'm going to have to watch myself around you” he added. Frank's voice was light, but his face was unfriendly.

“Oh it's alright love” said Faith as Frank left the room, “I've just found it under Frank's cushion”.

Beryl looked across at Patrick for a moment who had gone back to his ledger. She leaned forward in her chair towards her friend.

“Starved of male company?” she said, slightly sarcastically, “You?”

“Well, maybe not starved” Faith replied as she patted in her hair at the side, “But I've been hungry from time to time” she added with a grin.

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse - Saturday 8th July 1950 – early evening
“Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse” said Robert in a clipped voice as he picked up the phone ringing on his desk.

“It's alright. No need to go all posh. It's only me” said Victoria down the line.

“Hello sis” said Rob, “Can you hang on a sec?” The young man leaned away from the mouthpiece. “Can you turn the television down please Aaron?” he said, loud enough for his sister to hear.

Aaron looked up from the sofa, where he was sat polishing Robert's shoes and rolled his eyes. The set wasn't even switched on.

“Since when have you had a television?” asked Victoria

“Oh, quite a while” replied Rob, “You have to keep with the times” he added. Aaron shook his head and picked up another shoe from the stack lined up in front of the sofa.

“Anyway” his sister interjected, “The reason I'm ringing is we want to know if you're coming up for our do next month. You know, the one I told you about it my letter last week”

“Course we're coming” said Robert, “I was going to let you know. I've had to juggle some work stuff because of....”, he paused looking over at Aaron for a moment, “Well, just because”

“Good” said Victoria happily, “We'll have Aaron here and you can stay at the pub as usual”

“Yes, I suppose I'll have to” said Rob with a sigh.

“So, you two alright?” said Victoria, switching topic

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“That was Victoria” said Robert as he plonked himself down on the sofa next to his partner.

“I worked that out” said Aaron, grumpily as he reached for another shoe from the floor.

“Leave that a minute” said Rob

“I haven't finished have I?” said Aaron. Robert sighed.

“Why've you got so many shoes anyway?” Aaron asked, “You'd think you had, I dunno, three pairs of feet or something”

“You're hard work sometimes” said Rob

“You mean I do all the hard work” Aaron replied.

Robert reached over and massaged Aaron's right shoulder with his right hand.

“Well” said Rob, “Leave that for a minute and I'll tell you my surprise treat I've got planned”

“Huh, not so much of a surprise now. We have been sharing a bedroom for five years now” said Aaron.

“Not that! ” Robert replied with a grin, “Come here a minute and I'll tell you”

Aaron finally stopped polishing Rob's shoes and leaned back on the sofa, his partner's arm around
his shoulders. He folded his arms defensively.

“What's this big surprise then?” he asked.

“You know we're having this long weekend at Victoria and Adam's next month?” Robert asked

“Course I do” said Aaron, “It's their wedding anniversary”

“Well, instead of coming straight back here. How would you like a little anniversary trip of our own?” asked Rob

“Where?” said Aaron, his mood suddenly perking up.

“How does two weeks in London sound?” Robert asked.

“Sounds great” said Aaron with a smile.

“Thing is” said Rob as he pulled Aaron a little closer, “Lewis says we can have the flat for a fortnight at the end of August. He's going to stay with his wife. She's been hiding away in Norfolk”

“Is that because of the..?” Aaron started

“The baby. That's right” replied Robert, “It's due about then. All going well, she'll go back to London at Christmas and then they'll be a bit, well, hazy when it comes to telling people when he was born. Or when she was born. If it's a girl”

“So” said Rob, “It means I'll be able to spoil you for a bit”

“For a change” said Aaron, though he smiled as he said it.

“As you said yourself” said Robert, leaning close and pressing his lips against Aaron's, for a quick kiss

“Five years is five years” he said as he moved back a little.

Aaron smiled and leaned in for another kiss.

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Blackpool – Vanessa Woodfield's Veterinary Surgery- Monday 10th July 1950 - lunchtime

“Are you sure he's alright?” said Patrick, giving Patch a quick smooth as he lay on the examining room table, “He doesn't seem to have much energy”

“He's fine” said Vanessa as she headed over to the sink to wash her hands.

“He's probably missing Daniel” said Patrick, “I mean, he's his real owner. The house isn't the same when he's away”.

“He's not taken to your father either” Patrick went on. “Surprisingly” he added, making it sound as if it were anything but.

“I hope Dad's not making a nuisance of himself” the vet replied as she dried her hands.
“Mrs Dingle's laid out the welcome mat for him” Patrick replied, “Among other things” he added under his breath.

“I wish you hadn't kicked him out after you had that argument though, to be honest” the young man added.

Vanessa looked confused. “We haven't had a falling out. Well, not since he turned up here anyway” she said.

It was Patrick's turn to look puzzled. The pair were interrupted by the sound of someone rapping on the back door.

“Excuse me Patrick” said Vanessa, “That'll be young Dennis doing the windows. I'll have to sort him out before the next patient comes in”

“Come on little feller” said Patrick, lifting Patch down and putting him on the floor, “Let's get you home”

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“Hello love” said Faith as Patrick walked into the lounge, “I can't stop. We're going out with friends of Frank's” she added as she checked her hair in the mirror.

“Oh?” said Patrick, “I didn't think he had any”

“New friends” the landlady replied, “We're driving out to look at some holiday cottage”

“Actually, about Mr Clayton...” Patrick began to say

“Oh. I nearly forgot” said Faith, interrupting, “There's a letter for you with an American stamp” she added with a smile as she handed the young man an envelope from the mantelpiece.

Patrick frowned as he looked at the back, which was stuck down fast. Faith took it back and opened it for him.

“Now we'll probably be back late” she said as she handed the letter over, “I've left something cold on a couple of plates in the larder for the girls when they get back from the theatre”

“Or at least, I think I have” she added as she darted out of the room.

Patrick sat down at the table and started to read. It didn't take long for the young man to finish but the content was still difficult to digest.

“...............and I know I promised this wouldn't happen again, but it's not my fault. Really it's not. And I will be home in October, definitely. Look after Patch. And yourself of course. I'll make it up to you. I promise”

“So, could you put them out on the table for me before you go up to bed?” Faith asked as she
walked back into the room, now pulling a light coat on top of her blouse.

“What's the matter love, it's not bad news is it?” she asked as she saw the look on Patrick's face.

“Daniel won't be home next month. They've changed the route. It'll be October now” said Patrick

“Oh, I'm sorry to here that” said Faith

Patrick said nothing. They both heard the sound of brisk footsteps in the hallway, heading for the front door and opening it.

“Faith. They're here!” Frank called from the hall.

“I'll have to go” said Faith, “We'll have a chat when, well, when I see you” she added, giving Patrick a quick, gentle pat on the arm before she headed out of the room.

Patrick said nothing.

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse - Monday 17th July 1950 – 1pm

“Hey you” called Robert as he walked over towards the small garage. Aaron stopped rubbing the front of the bonnet of the car with a wet rag and looked up.

“What?” he asked, using his other hand to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

“Put this on” said Rob, handing over the white cricket hat he was holding.

Aaron frowned as he took the headgear from him, “Is it yours?” he asked.

“I did play one Summer when I moved here. During the War” Robert replied as his partner put the hat on. “Well, I didn't actually play because of well, you know, but I was the....”

“Umpire” the two men said in unison. Aaron smiled a little. That figured. He bent down to pick up his bucket, now full of dirty water and headed over to the drain.

“Course, we didn't get to play much that year” said Robert, following his partner over, “Too many of the villagers kept getting called up”

“ We could have played” said Aaron as he headed to the back of the gatehouse and towards the kitchen, “The pit lads I mean”

“I said that!” said Rob as he walked behind him, his hands thrust into the pockets of his slacks, “Major Witherby put the tin hat on it though”

“There was no point asking you lot” he went on, “He said you'd all be too common” he grinned.

“Yeah?” said Aaron as he started to fill his bucket from the stone sink, “Well we didn't have a proper roof at my school. Never mind a cricket pitch” he added as he turned around.

Robert hooked his hands around Aaron's waist and pulled him towards him.
“Nothing wrong with being a bit, well, earthy” he said with a smile.

“Earthy?” said Aaron, as he curled his own arms around him.

“It's going to get really hot, this afternoon” said Rob

“That right?” said Aaron with a grin

“They said on the radio” replied Robert, “So, if you wanted to, you know, take your shirt off while you clean the car. I don't think anyone would mind” he added, beaming.

“You're supposed to be working today. So we can have this romantic break next month, remember?” said Aaron.

“Well, we could have a small romantic break now, couldn't we?” Rob pouted.

“Later” said Aaron with a grin, “Get back to your desk” he added, giving Robert a playful slap on the seat of his slacks before moving away.

He was still grinning as he head back to the car.

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Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Monday 24th July – 7:30pm

Patrick walked into the lounge and put the canvas satchel he was carrying down on the sofa. He had just taken off his cap and started to unbutton his jacket when he spotted the note leaning against the clock with a large letter “P” on the front. It wasn't a very long read.

“Gone dancing with Frank. Back late. Plates for girls in larder if you wouldn't mind. Some fish and chips in the oven for you. Faith”.

Patrick put his cap back on and walked out into the hall. He closed the front door behind him as he headed over to the Royal Oak.

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse - Monday 24th July 1950 – 7:45pm

Aaron leaned forward on Robert's desk in the living room, the phone pressed to his ear.

“...yeah, well this has gone on a bit longer than usual” he said as Rob walked down the stairs into the room

“But if he's a wrong 'un like you say he won't fool Nan” Aaron said, trying to sound re-assuring.

“Who is it?” Robert mouthed quietly as he sat down on the sofa.
“Patrick” Aaron mouthed back.

“Won't Daniel be back soon? I mean, that'll.....oh, October. Yeah, no, that is too long” he said as Rob walked over to him.

“Robert wants a word, I think” said Aaron, passing the phone to his partner.

“Hello Patrick. I was just going to ask if you wanted anything from our London trip? Oh, didn't he? We're going up straight after Victoria's party” said Rob.

“Didn't he say? Oh, well it's just a quick family visit. But we're in London for a while so if you wanted something for yourself. Or for Daniel. No? Oh, alright. Well, bye for now”

Robert put the phone back in its rest.

“What?” he asked, seeing the scowl on Aaron's face.

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Blackpool- The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – 8:00pm

Patrick sat on his side of the bed and removed his slip-on shoes. Patch looked up for a moment from his basket in the corner, then lay down again straight away, as if disappointed.

The young man clicked off the bed-side lamp and lay down. His head was thumping. Maybe it wasn't such a bad thing that the place was so quiet. He closed his eyes and listened to the silence.

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse - Monday 24th July 1950 – 8:25pm

Aaron handed Robert a mug of tea and sat down on the sofa next him. His cross expression was still etched across his face.

“I'm sorry, I didn't know did I?” said Rob with a sigh.

“He was almost begging us to come up for a visit’ said Aaron, leaning forward and putting his mug on the table in front of him, “And I said we couldn't get away cause of how busy you are at work”

“I am busy at work” said Robert

“I wasn't going to mention London, or Adam's do. Especially since he didn't get an invite” said Aaron

“Well it's family isn't it?” said Rob

“Some people don't have any family, do they?” said Aaron. Robert leaned over and started to rub Aaron's shoulders with his left hand.
“Look” he said, “We'll get him a nice present when we're away. Then we'll go up for a weekend when we're back from London. It'll have to be then. I've had to shift loads around just so we can have our break as it is”

Aaron turned around and looked at the other young man.

“He really doesn't like this new feller of Nan's. I've told him she can look after herself but...” he started

“It'll be something and nothing” said Rob gently, “You know what's it like. He's just got too much time on his h... I mean, he's bound to feel a bit lost with Daniel away, again”

“I'd be the same, if it was you” he adding, moving his hand up to the back of Aaron's neck, “I'd miss you loads”

“So?” Aaron said with a smile, “Television?”

“It's a horse show. I had enough of all that growing up thank you” said Robert, shaking his head, “There's a new serial on the Light Programme at half past though”

“Radio” said Aaron with a nod. Robert turned around and leaned over to the set which had been displaced by the television and moved to the right hand side of the fireplace.

Robert stretched out on the sofa as some inoffensive music started to drift across the room. Aaron lifted his legs off the floor and made himself comfortable, his head laying on top of Rob's chest.

“I'd miss you too” Aaron quietly.

“Shh!” said Robert, “The drama's about to start” he added with a smile as he pulled him close.

END OF PART ONE
“It's alright Doreen, I'll serve Mr Clayton” said the landlady with a smile as she walked over to the solitary figure standing at the far end of the bar.

“Good evening. A pint of my usual and a port and lemon please” Frank said, flashing what he liked to think was still a winning smile.

“I shouldn't serve you really” the landlady said, before leaning over the bar, “Considering how much is on your slate” she added, lowering her voice.

Frank looked over his shoulder to where his companion was sitting. Faith was well out of earshot, fortunately.

“Now, Agnes” he said, “Would that really be fair? After all, I don't come in here to drink. It's only your charming company that brings me back all the time”

Frank leaned across the bar, his own voice now very low, “Does you Arthur have another bowls club meeting this week?” he asked.

“Wednesday afternoon. He's off soon as we close for lunch” Agnes said in a whisper.

“I shall remember that” Frank replied quietly as the landlady passed him his drinks.

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“You took your time” said Faith, as she lifted her glass from the table,”Thought I was going to have to rescue you for a minute there” she added, staring over to the bar, “What were the pair of you talking about?”

“Oh, you know what it's like with these matronly types” said Frank, “They think men need looking after, if they're unattached”

He leaned closer to Faith. “But then” he said in a quiet voice, “We know I'm not unattached, don't we?”

Faith smiled and took a sip from her drink.

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Blackpool - The South Pier– Monday 31st July 1950 – 10:30pm

Mr Dunn grumbled to himself as he picked up the sandwich-board bearing the legend, “Belles For All Seasons” from outside the theatre and carried it awkwardly to the stage door. It was at times
like this he wished young Daniel hadn’t gone back to sea. You could always rely on him to do the heavy lifting and tidying up at the end of a show. And he didn’t spend half his time chatting up the showgirls like the other stage hands did. Just as he reached the door, two of the performers were walking out.

“Night girls” he said as he carried the sign indoors.

“Good night” said Carol, as she tied her headscarf around her neck. Her companion, Lillian, just nodded to the old man.

“Anyway...” Lillian began, pausing to take a box of cigarettes out of her coat pocket, “So, I told her straight. I mean, well you have to don’t you? I told her...”

“Hang on a second Lil” said her friend, “Isn't that Patrick over there?” she asked, nodding towards the rail at the side of the pier.

“Which one?” said Lillian, stopping to light her cigarette.

“The one on his own” said Carol. She pointed over to where a man was standing with a hand on the rail, staring out to sea. He was a little away from two courting couples, who were oblivious to all around them.

“Aw” said Lillian, “He's a nice looking lad too. When you take account for, well, you know”

Carol shook her head and walked the short distance over to the side of the pier.

“Hello Patrick. You been to see the show?” she asked.

The young man turned around, “Oh, hello” he replied. “No. I've just been for a walk. Thought it might tire me out. I haven't been sleeping very well lately”

Carol looked at him carefully for a moment. He looked very distant.

“Well” she said, “Would you mind walking Lil and me home? We're just off”

“I don't think I'd be very good company” Patrick replied

Carol smiled and hooked her arm through Patrick's, “Don't worry about that” she said as she steered the young man over to the stage door, “Lil will do most of the talking. She usually does”

Patrick managed a small smile as the three of them headed down the pier towards the exit.

“Anyway” said Lillian as they walked along, “I said to that Miss Spring. 'Ethel', I said, 'You stick that shepherd's crook in front of my face one more time and I'll shove it where the sun don't shine’”

The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – a little later

“Cold ham and lettuce. Again?” complained Lillian as she sat down at the table in the lounge.

Patrick looked up from the sofa, where he was sitting with the newspaper open at the crossword.

“You've got an egg. Between you” he said, thinking he should defend Mrs Dingle at least a little.
Lillian was about to reply when they heard the front door opening and Faith coming into the hallway.

“Well I had to tell her straight didn’t I?” said Faith, “You have to with that sort”

“Oh. I do agree” replied Frank.

A moment later, he had walked into the lounge as his companion headed into the kitchen.

“Good evening Ladies. Patrick” he said smoothly, “Everything all right?” he asked the young women.

“Yes thank you” replied Carol.

“Supper’s a bit on the thin side” said Lillian, contradicting her friend.

Frank smoothed his grey hair away from his forehead.

“Now I’m sure Faith is only thinking of you. You two girls need to keep your figures don’t you? Especially when they’re both so, attractive. If you don’t mind me saying so”

He put his hand across the back of Lillian's chair and leaned in a little

“In fact” he said, lowering his voice, “I have been meaning to take a look at your show myself”

“Lounge lizard” said Patrick, looking down at his paper and tapping it idly with his pen.

“What was that Patrick?” said Frank, straightening himself, a frown now on his face.

“Oh, sorry” said Patrick, looking up, “I was just thinking aloud” he added as returned to the crossword.

“Well” said Frank, looking at the two young women again, “Why don't I see if I can rustle up a little desert shall I?”

And with that, he turned on his heels and headed for the kitchen.

“I can see what Mrs Dingle sees in him” said Lillian with a smile, once he had left the room, “Even if he is old enough to be my Dad”

“He's old enough to be her Dad” said Patrick from the sofa.

Carol turned around in her chair to look at the young man “You don't like him very much do you?” she asked.

“Is it very obvious?” Patrick replied, looking over at her.

“Yes” said Carol.

“Good” said Patrick, returning to his paper.

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse- Monday 31st July 1950 – 10:45pm
Robert was sat up in bed, his book open. But he wasn't concentrating on the text, he was looking over towards the bedroom window. Aaron was sitting at his telescope, stripped down to his vest and striped boxer shorts in the heat.

“What is it?” said Aaron as he looked up for a moment

“What's what?” Robert replied

“You. Every time I look up you're staring at me” said Aaron, “You're putting me off. Why can't you read your book or something?”

“This? It's about work” said Rob, “Anyway. I'm enjoying the view aren't I?” he added with a cheeky grin.

“You could always have a look at stars. You know, learn something different” said Aaron as he gave up and headed towards the bed.

Robert put his book down and stared at his partner, “The only heavenly body I'm interested in is right in this room” he said

Aaron rolled his eyes and climbed into his side of the bed.

“And how long exactly have you been waiting to say that?” he asked.

Rob adopted a look of mock hurt, “Aaron, that was completely spontaneous”

Aaron folded his arms across his chest and looked at the other young man.

“Oh. Alright For about the last half hour” Robert admitted, a little grumpily. “Anyway...” he added as he turned and put his book on the table, “Now I've got your attention. Finally. I want to ask you something”

“That right?” said Aaron with a smile.

“No! Be serious. What are we going to get Victoria and Adam for their anniversary?”

“As well as a card you mean? Why are we getting them anything? We've not bothered before” said Aaron

“Aaron, it's a milestone” replied Rob, “I mean, they've not had an anniversary do before have they?”

“Suppose” said Aaron with a shrug

“Well” said Robert, “As everyone knows, your fifth anniversary is wood”

“I didn't know that” Aaron replied

“Alright” said Rob with a sigh, “As almost everyone knows. So, I was thinking.....”

“Did you know?” Aaron interrupted him

“Well no, I didn't” said Robert. Aaron smiled.
“I knew you wouldn't know” said Aaron cheekily.

“Shut up a minute will ya? I did know who to ask though. So, according to Miss Phipps at the Library, it's wood. So, I thought something like a rocking chair. I remember my Gran sitting in one and doing all her sewing”

Aaron squinted a little, concentrating, “You mean, like the one they've already got. In their front room?” he asked.

“No, they haven't. No, wait a minute, you're right. It's the same one” said Rob, disappointed.

“Besides, it's both their anniversary. If you were going to get them a chair, you'd have to get them one each. Really” said Aaron

“Forget it. You've said. They've already got one!” said Robert

“Oh they could take in in turns, I suppose” said Aaron, “No very romantic though is it? A chair”

“I wish I'd never asked you now!” said Robert sulkily. He slid under the covers and turned over on his side with his back to his partner.

The couple lay there silently for a moment.

“You know that antique shop in town. The one near where Harry's place was?” Aaron asked

“Yeah. What about it?” Rob replied grumpily

Aaron slid under the covers and rolled onto his side.

“I was thinking” said Aaron, talking to the back of his partner's head, “Why don't I drive you round there one day and you can see what they've got”

“I mean” he added, “If anyone can spot something that would be right, it'd be you wouldn't it?”

Robert rolled over so he was facing Aaron, “I do have good taste” he said with a grin, “I've been told”

Aaron smiled back. He reached across and stared to idly play with the top button on Rob's pyjama jacket.

“Sure you're not too hot in these?” he asked.

“Well” said Robert, leaning forward to press his lips against his partner's for a quick kiss, “I don't have to keep 'em on all night, do I?” he added before leaning in again.

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Patrick had just hang his cap and jacket up in the hallway. He heard a now, all too familiar, male voice in full flow coming through the open door and decided to head to his room.
“Hello love” said Faith, as she emerged from a kitchen, carrying a china teapot on a small tray.

Patrick had just started to climb the stairs.

“Why don't you join us?” his landlady asked, “Beryl's here too”

“I've got some....things to do” the young man replied, trying to make his excuses.

“Well, come in for a cuppa at least” Faith said encouragingly as she headed into the lounge. Patrick followed her, his lack of enthusiasm apparent. The sound of Mrs Axelby laughing at Frank's latest witticism rang into the hall. Patrick frowned.

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A little later

Frank was sat on one end of the sofa with his hands held up a foot or so in front of his face while Faith wrapped a long length of wool around them.

“Your hair doesn't look any different to me” said Faith

“My hair?” Frank replied, confused

“I thought you went to the barbers this afternoon” Faith replied

“Oh, yes of course” said Frank, “I did go to the one in the high street but he'd shut for half-day closing”

“Oh” said Faith

“He doesn't usually. Close I mean. Mr McDonald” said Patrick from where he was sat at the table, sipping his tea.

“I was thinking I could take you two ladies out for a drink later” said Frank, quickly changing the subject, “Over to the Royal Oak. No, not there. Somewhere different. The Railwayman perhaps?”

“Not tonight Frank” said Faith, as she continued winding the wool, “I've got to cook something hot for my theatricals later. I can't fob them off with a cold collation again”

“Now Faith, really” said Frank, “Surely when we get to our age, it's time to relax a little. Let the young people do all the running around.”

He looked across to Mrs Axelby, who was amply filling the chair opposite them.

“You'll realise that too Beryl, when you're our, vintage shall we say” he said with a wink.

“Beryl's actually older than I am. Aren't you love?” said Faith, a little frostily

“Now, we can't use that word to describe either of you ladies now, can we” said Frank, “Especially when you're both so, well, young at heart” he added, earning him a smile from Faith.

“While we're on the subject of taking things easy, did Faith tell you about the holiday cottage we went to look at?”

“It was lovely Beryl” said Faith, “Not far from Southport. This couple Frank know have just bought it for when they retire”
“There was another one nearby for sale” said Frank, “We thought it was a very attractive prospect. Didn't we Faith?”

“Oh, you wouldn't move away would you?” said Beryl

“It's only Southport love, not the other side of the world” Faith replied

“But what about this place? What about your regulars?” her friend persisted

“There are other guesthouses Beryl” said Frank, “All over town”

“But it wouldn't be the same. Tell her Patrick” said Beryl, turning towards the young man, “Where would there nice Mr Perez go when he gets back from sea?”

“You wouldn't want to bury yourself away would you Mrs Dingle?” said Patrick seriously, “This isn't just a guesthouse is it? It's a home. Your home. And your Aaron's too”

Faith looked thoughtful for a moment, “It was just an idea, wasn't it Frank?” she replied.

“Yes, of course it was” said Frank, all smiles.

“Well excuse me, but I need the little girls room” said Beryl, getting up from her chair and heading to the doorway.

“I'll just go and put the kettle on” said Faith. She put the end of the ball of the wool she was winding down on the sofa and followed her friend out of the room. Patrick noticed that Frank's expression changed as soon as the ladies had gone. There was no trace of a smile now.

The young man looked over to the clock on the mantelpiece. “I've got to take the dog for a walk” he said as he stood up from the table to leave. As he reached the edge of the sofa, the older man turned to him

“You will be careful won't you? After all. Even a small dog like that can be, well, quite a handful sometimes” said Frank.

Patrick said nothing. He just glared.

“I expect you're excused this. I mean, considering” said Frank with an unfriendly smile as he indicated the length of wool wrapped around both his hands

"I wish it was around your throat" Patrick replied before leaving.

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“Patrick gone?” asked Faith as she walked back into the lounge, carrying a fresh pot of tea on a tray.

“Taking that dog for a walk” replied Frank, “He seems quite attached to it, I must say. He was forever round our Vanessa's with the little chap”

“He's Mr Perez's dog really. You remember, my regular in the merchant navy” said Faith

“What's that you're talking about?” asked Beryl as she walked back into the room.
“We were just saying how Patrick's devoted to Patch” said Faith as she poured the tea.

“Oh, yes. He loves that little dog” her friend agreed.

“Yes, he does, doesn't he?” said Frank, almost to himself.

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Emmerdale – The Woolpack – Friday 4th August 1950 – 6:00pm

“Hello Robert, come through” said Diane with a smile as she let Robert into the hall at the back of the pub. Rob, smiled to himself. Well at least someone was glad to see him, he though to himself as put his suitcase down on the floor and followed his step-mother into the living room.

“Showing your face at last then” said Jack, looking up from the table where he was polishing his shoes.

“Hello to you too Dad” said Rob, “We would have been here this afternoon, but we had trouble with the car”, he added turning to Diane

“Suppose we're lucky you've come at all, with all these houses you're in charge of” said Jack grumpily.

Robert had already decided that he wasn't going to rise to any digs from his father this weekend, however annoying they may be.

“Yes pet?” he asked.

“Right. Well, I'll just get unpacked” he said, heading for the door.

Diane waited until he had left the room. “I've told you once Jack Sugden” she said

“Told me what?” said Jack, stopping his polishing for a moment.

“Best behavior this weekend” Diane said, firmly. Her husband just shook his head.

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Emmerdale – The Sugden Farm – Saturday 5th August – 6:00am

Adam was in a thoughtful mood. He'd been awake for half an hour but, today, he just felt like dragging out the time he spent lying in bed next to Victoria just a little longer.

“Morning, Mrs Barton” he said as his wife finally woke and rolled over to look at him.
“Is it already six?” she complained, reaching over for a cuddle.

“Yeah” said Adam with a smile, curling his arms around her.

“Do we have to get up?” Victoria asked, even though she knew the answer.

“It doesn't make any difference to the animals” said Adam, “Just cause it's our anniversary”

“You're right” she replied, disappointed. “What time shall I wake Aaron up?” she asked.

“I think we should let have a lie in” said Adam, “He usually has to get up while your brother lazes about in bed. You know, frying his kippers, or something”

“He does work for him. As well as, well, you know” said Victoria

“We'd better get up” said Adam, giving his wife a squeeze

“Just five more minutes” said Victoria

“How about five more years?” said Adam softly, “Not in bed. I mean, you know, in general”

“I want you for longer than that Mr Barton” said Victoria, “A lot longer”

Adam beamed.

11:00am

“You sure there's nothing I can do?” asked Aaron. He was feeling a little guilty standing about with a cup of tea while Victoria was busy around the kitchen.

“Aaron, you're a guest” said Victoria, “Besides I've got it all sorted out”.

Aaron nodded and headed over to to look at the small row of cards on the fireplace.

“I see Adam's mum sent you a card. That's something, I suppose” he said

“Yes, it's something” Victoria agreed as she spread a clean tablecloth over the kitchen table,

“And one from Patrick” Aaron said with a smile as he nosily peered inside another.

Victoria picked the card up and opened it with a smile, “We had a nice letter from him too. He's got lovely handwriting. He was lucky he was right-handed what with the....oh, well, I don't mean lucky, I just sort of meant......” she added before tailing off, a little embarrassed

“I know what you mean” said Aaron, with a reassuring smile, “Where's Adam?” he asked, to change the subject

“He'll be working in the lower field by now” said Victoria, “He'll be back at one”

“So I want you” she said, jabbing a finger towards the young man, “To make sure he puts his Sunday best on when he gets back”

Aaron smiled.

“And you'll be alright to go and pick Robert and Dad and Diane up later?” she asked.
“Course” said Aaron, “Can't wait” he said. The smile was suddenly getting harder to keep up.

Emmerdale- Outside The Woolpack - 2:30pm

“Oh, let me get that for ya” said Aaron, opening one of the rear doors of Robert's car for Diane to step in.

“Thank you pet” said Diane, smiling at the young man. “At least there's one gentleman around here” she said pointedly to her husband as he climbed in the rear of the car from the other side.

“Where's Robert?” Jack asked, ignoring her comment.

“He's getting the present he bought I think Mr Sugden” said Aaron from the driver's seat.

“I don't know why we have to go in this car anyway” Jack complained.

“Jack, for the last time” said Diane, “I'm not walking to the farm and back. These are my best shoes”

“I don't see why I had to get dressed up an' all” her husband replied

“It's your daughter's anniversary and you're wearing your best suit” said Diane.

Jack scowled and leaned forward towards Aaron.

“You've never married have your son?” he asked, “Very sensible. I wish I hadn't sometimes”

“Jack!” said Diane, “What'll Mr Dingle think of us?” she said. “You pay no attention to him” she added leaning forward.

Fortunately, Robert arrived at that moment, carrying a neatly wrapped parcel. He was smartly dressed in a suit and tie but, unlike his father, seemed perfectly at ease.

Emmerdale - The Sugden Farm – 3:30pm

The small party was in full swing. Victoria was sat down at the kitchen table with Diane, her father and two young women she had been at school with.

“Now, as everyone knows. Your fifth anniversary is your wooden one” said Robert, as Victoria unwrapped the present on the table in front of her carefully.

“I didn't know that” said one of Victoria's friends. Robert glanced over to Aaron who had just walked in from the living room, after taking a couple of bottles of brown ale to the two farmhands that had come along. Aaron smiled quietly to himself.

“Oh, it's lovely. Thank you Robert” said Victoria and she opened a held up a small wooden box, with an intricately carved lid and several compartments, all lined with green felt.
“You’ll have somewhere to put your jewelry” said Diane

“I’ve not got much” said Victoria, “Just some bits of Mum's and Nan's”. She felt Adam put a hand on his shoulder.

“Well, it is for both of you” said Rob, “There's room for for a watch in there too”

“Thanks Robert” said Adam with a smile.

While the conversation around the table continued, Adam walked over to Aaron, who was now leaning with his back against the stone sink.

“And thank you” Adam said in a quiet voice, “I know it's from the pair of ya, really”

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Emmerdale – The Woolpack 6:00pm

“Thank you pet” said Diane as Aaron parked Robert's car just outside the pub entrance, “Come on Jack” she added, turning to her husband, “Let's get in and get the kettle on”

“You've been drinking tea all flaming afternoon” her husband responded

“I can't take you anywhere, can I?” his wife said with a shake of the head as she opened the door.

“Actually, Aaron, could you come in a minute? There's something I'd like you to take back to the farm”

“Course Mr Sugden” Aaron replied.

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Inside the pub, Aaron followed Robert up the stairs. He looked over his shoulder to check that Jack and Diane were out of earshot in the living quarters.

“That speech of yours wasn't bad” he said.

Rob turned on the stairwell with a smile, “Someone had to say something didn't they? And Dad wasn't going to was he?”

“What was the best bit?” he went on as he opened the door to his room.

“Uh. I think the best bit, was that it was so....short” said Aaron with a cheeky grin as he walked into the room.

“Hey. Behave!” said Rob, giving Aaron a quick slap on the seat of his slacks as he followed him in.

“So, what do you want me to take back to the farm?” Aaron asked, looking briefly around the small bedroom.

Robert smiled as he closed the door behind him. He walked over to Aaron and hooked his arms around the young man's waist as he pulled him close towards him and planted a soft kiss on his lips.
Rob leaned back and smiled at his partner. Aaron grinned back.

“I mean, is it heavy? “Aaron persisted, “Will I need to ask your Dad for a hand or...”

Robert rolled his eyes, “That's enough” he said with an indulgent smile,”There's isn't anything, as you well know”

Aaron smiled and hooked his own arms around Rob.

“Now come here. We've not got long before you go back. Unfortunately” Robert added, leaning in for another kiss.

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Blackpool - A Chemist next to Petty's Hardware Store - Monday 7th August 1950

“It's alright Ada. You serve this gentleman first” said Cynthia Rudge, “I'm in no hurry. I only popped in for change”

“What can I get you?” the lady behind the counter asked the smart looking gentleman opposite.

“Actually” Frank replied as he took off his hat and smoothed back his hair in a well practiced manner, “I just needed some bandage material. Something suitable for the hand”

“Oh, have you cut yourself?” Cynthia asked nosily.

“No” said Frank, giving her a smile, “But I find that it's best to be prepared. Don't you think so?”

“Oh, definitely” she replied.

Frank handed some money over the counter as Ada passed him a small package.

“Ladies” Frank said with another smile as he put on his hat and headed for the door.

Cynthia waited until he was out in the street.

“That's him. The lodger up at that Dingle woman's. Well I say lodger” she added, leaning on the counter and getting herself comfortable.

“She's no better than she should be” said Ada as she turned around and continued tidying the shelves, “I don't know how she manages it. Her time or life”

“Well, to be fair. She wasn't that bad looking” Cynthia said , grudgingly, “In her day I mean” she added quickly.

“Oh, yes. In her day. You have to give her that” said Ada

“Well at least she's stopped throwing herself at my Bernard” said Cynthia

“How's his new housekeeper getting on?” asked Ada, “You're niece isn't she?” she asked with a sly smile.

“They're getting on fine, thank you” said Cynthia brusquely, keen to steer the topic back to Faith.

“Course, the thing with her is she's always carrying on with her male guests” she added.
“Not all of them Cynthia, surely? Not that nice young Mr Seaton?” said Ada, turning around with surprise, “You know, him with the arm. Used to be a nurse”

Cynthia was more than happy to give her own opinion of Patrick another time, but not now.

“Well, maybe not all of them” she conceded instead, “But I know that house and...”

“Course love. Cleaner there weren't you?” said Ada with another smile

“That was in the Lesley's time” Cynthia sniffed, “They had class”

“Anyway, that Dingle women has plenty of fellers to choose from. She has got five bedrooms to rent out after all”

“Six. If you count her own” said Ada

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The Golden Palmtree – Guesthouse – a little later

Frank sat down on the bed in the small room at the top of the house. He took the small roll of white bandage cloth out of the bag, and smiled to himself.

END OF PART TWO
Robert reached the bottom of the stairs in the living quarters and paused as he heard the conversation inside.

“I think it was a lovely gesture. Buying Adam and Victoria an anniversary present” said Diane as she settled into one of the comfy armchairs near the fire.

“Well. He's got money to burn hasn't he?” Jack replied, scowling over his newspaper as he sat opposite her.

“It's the thought that counts Jack” Diane replied, “Oh, I could murder a hot drink” she added as Rob walked into the room.

“I'll put the pan on shall I?” the young man asked as he headed to the kitchen area. His father had shown no sign of moving.

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“Oh. Thank you pet” said Diane as Robert handed her a mug. His father said nothing as he put another down on the small table for him.

“Do you have a Radio Times anywhere?” Rob asked casually as he sat down at the table.

“I think you father's sitting on it” Diane replied, “Did you want to look up something special?”

“No. Not really” said Rob, lifting his mug towards his lips, “I just like to see what I'm missing on television . When I'm away from home”

The look on Jack's face was a picture. Robert smiled quietly to himself and enjoyed his cocoa.

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Aaron and Adam were sitting on one of the low stone walls in the farmyard, both with a cup of cocoa in their hands.

“Lauren Bacall, really?” asked Aaron, a little surprised.

“Yeah!” replied Adam, a big silly grin on his face, “A few times now”

“I wouldn't tell your wife, if I were you” said Aaron.

“Aw, come on Aaron!” Adam laughed, “I'm not daft. Besides, It's not like I'm gonna bump into her in Hotten on market day is it?”
“There is that” Aaron agreed with a smile.

“Haven't you ever fancied a movie star?” Adam asked, “You know, uh, a feller, I mean” he added, lowering his voice.

Aaron looked around a little embarrassed. They were a good distance from the house and there was no way the two young men could be overheard. Even so, he sounded a little unsure as he answered his friend.

“Do you remember that Flash Gordon serial? The one before the War?” he asked.

Adam thought for a moment, “Yeah. I do” he replied, “I used to go to the Saturday morning pictures. Who was that guy? Buster something”

“Buster Crabbe” Aaron replied.

“I remember him” said Adam. “Tall and blonde wasn't he?” he added, looking directly at his friend, another silly grin on his face.

“What?” said Aaron, as Adam continued to grin at him. But Adam said nothing.

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The Sugden Farm – Monday 7th August 1950 – mid-morning

“You don't have to do this sis” said Robert as he sat at the kitchen table.

“It's no bother “ Victoria insisted as she continued to fill up a small basket with food. “Some of this is left over from the do anyway. It'll save Aaron running after ya when you get home”

“Thank you then” Rob said with a smile.

“I thought you'd be going on to Blackpool, you usually do don’t you?” Victoria asked.

“There's no time. Not this visit anyhow. We're off to London tomorrow” her brother explained, “I already had to shift loads of work stuff so we could do this visit”

“I keep forgetting how important you are” Victoria teased.

“Well, it was good to see the pair of you. Even if it did mean a weekend with Dad” said Robert.

“Did you tell him about your television?” Victoria.

“Oh. I think I might have mentioned it” said Robert, smiling, “Once or twice”.

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Blackpool – Mr McDonald's Barber shop – Monday 7th August 1950 mid-morning
“There you go” said the barber as he handed Patrick his change, “Something for the weekend?” he added in a quiet voice.

“Oh” said Patrick as he put his cap back on his now-trimmed hair, “No. Thank you” he added quickly as he left the shop.

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“Hello son” said the middle-aged man walking up the street towards him.

“Hello Mr Fosdyke” Patrick replied, “Are you on the way to Mrs Dingle's?” he asked as he spotted the suitcase the other man was carrying.

“What?” Mr Fosdyke asked as followed Patrick's gaze, “Oh no. These are my samples. Besides, I'm staying over at the Silver Moon”

Patrick was about to ask why, but the other man continued talking.

“Of course, I would have liked to stay at Mrs Dingle's as usual but as that man said when I called round, when you're full you're full. And it's not as if I wrote and said I was coming. Well, she's not usually all booked up now is she?”

“No. She's not” Patrick replied, his voice even, “What man was this?” he asked.

“Didn't say his name. Tall feller with a tache” Mr Fosdyke replied, “Anyway son, I must get on. Calls to make” he added with a friendly smile as he headed off.

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse - Monday 7th August 1950 – early-evening

“Right that's the grub put away” said Aaron as he walked out of the kitchen. Robert looked up from his desk where he was re-checking some of his paperwork.

“I'll bring some for tomorrow. You know, in case we don't want to go out straight away when we get there” Aaron added as Rob got up and walked over to his partner.

“Come here a minute” Robert said, putting his arms around Aaron's waist and pulling him towards him.

“How come you're always like this when I'm busy?” Aaron asked with a smile.

“It's good to be home, isn't it?” Rob asked

“We're only here tonight. We're off to London first thing, remember?” Aaron replied as he hooked his arms around Robert.

“I didn't like you having to be at the farm and me at the pub” said Robert, “Even if it was only for a few nights”

“We've got a couple of weeks to make up for that haven't we?” Aaron grinned.

“Definitely” said Rob with a smile, leaning in and kissing his the young man.
“And at least everything's alright. Back at your home” said Aaron.

“You're not worrying about your Nan are you?” asked Rob with a sigh, “We'll go up there as soon as we can. I promise” he added, before planting another kiss on Aaron's lips.

“Adam said something funny when we left by the way” Rob said suddenly.

“Did he?” Aaron asked

“Yeah. He said, 'See you Buster' “ said Robert, looking confused, “What was that about?”

“Oh, yeah” said Aaron thinking quickly, “That'll be an, er, an American thing”

“An American thing?” asked Rob

“Yeah. It's sort of like, uh, 'buddy'. He's been watching a lot of gangster films. It's the only fun thing they get to do. Going to the cinema in Hotten. Now and again”

“Ah” said Robert, “That's the thing when you're a farmer. No time for yourself”

“Not like you then” said Aaron cheekily

“Not like us “Rob corrected him,”Well, not for the next two weeks anyway” he added, leaning in for a close embrace, "Just me and you".

Aaron buried his head in Robert's shoulder and beamed.

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Blackpool – The Royal Oak – Monday 7th August 1950 – 8:00pm

Patrick had hoped for a bit of peace. In which case, he'd have been better off if he'd gone to another pub, as it turned out. He was quietly nursing a small whisky in the corner when Faith walked over.

“Hello love” she said, sitting down in one of the empty chairs opposite him, “Mind if I join you?” she asked as she slipped off her coat.

“Are you on your own?” Patrick asked.

“Beryl's at the bar” Faith replied, “That's not your usual, spirits” she adding indicating his glass.

“Makes a change” the young man replied with a shrug.

“Look. I know I've been a bit busy with Frank” said Faith, “But I can see you're not your usual self. Is it because of Daniel being away?” she asked quietly.

Patrick didn't get a chance to reply as Beryl had just arrived with the drinks.

“Somethings put a spring in her step” she said, nodding in the direction of the landlady, “And it won't be her husband, I've tell you that for nothing” she added.

“No, I wouldn't have thought so” Faith agreed, “Nor Arthur”
A little later

“Oh. I bumped into Mr Fosdyke earlier” said Patrick

“Horace?” said Faith, “I didn't know he was in town”

“He's told me he was staying at the Silver Moon because.....” Patrick started

“Oh, not there” said Beryl, “I know her who runs it. Right Madame she is”

“Anyway” said Patrick

But it was that moment that Frank sat down at the table.

“I'm glad you're here Patrick” he said, “What have you got to say about this?” he asked, holding out his left hand which now had a bandage wrapped around it.

“What do you want me to say about it?” Patrick replied, the empathy that came from his medical training abandoning him for a moment.

“This” said Frank, indicating his hand, “Is down to that dog of yours. He bit me”

“Patch has never bitten anyone!” Patrick shot back

“You'll back me up won't you Agnes?” asked Frank. The landlady was collecting some dirty glasses, which was unusual for her, and was hovering near the next table.

“Yes, that's right” she said, “I just happened to be walking past your back yard this afternoon”

“I only let the little chap out for a moment to get some air. Then he went for me” said Frank

“And you just happened to be going past our yard did you Agnes?” Patrick asked sarcastically.

“Let's discuss this at home” said Faith as she stood up. She was aware that other drinkers in the pub were starting to pay attention.

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The Golden Palace Guesthouse- a little later.

“Why don't you let Patrick take a look at your hand?” asked Faith as the pair walked into the kitchen.

Patrick was in the corner, crouching down and smoothing Patch who was sitting up in his basket.

“It's a bite Faith, not a ledger!” Frank snapped. But he recovered himself quickly, “I mean, its an injury, isn't it?” he said in a more reasonable voice.

“Patrick was a nurse” said Beryl as she headed for the kettle, “In the Army, weren't you dear?” she added

“No need” Frank said quickly, “I went to the surgery near Vanessa's. They sorted me out”
“I don't know that one” said Faith, folding her arms.

“Who did you see?” asked Patrick

“I'm sorry?” Frank replied as if he did not understand the question.

“Who did you see?” asked Patrick, “Did you see Dr Goldman? Or did you the other Doctor. Dr Harris”

“Dr Harris” Frank replied quickly, “Anyway, surely this is all besides the point? The point is what are we going to do about this dog?”

Frank turned to look at Faith, “I mean. It's not me I'm worried about, not at all. But what if he bites someone else?”

“If he even did bite you” said Patrick

“Now, really” said Frank, sounding exasperated, “If we can't discuss this properly without accusations...”

“Excuse me Frank” said Beryl as she walked over to the kitchen table and filled the china teapot from the kettle.

“I mean” said Frank, turning to Faith with a sad expression on his face, “If he did bite someone else, well, they might have to put the little chap down”

Patrick looked at the older man, his face like thunder.

“Let's sit down in the front room and sort this out over a cup of tea” said Faith, heading towards the kitchen door.

Beryl put the teapot onto a tray and followed her friend out of the room. Frank began to follow and Patrick hung back a little, waiting until they were the only ones in the room.

“There isn't a Dr Harris at that surgery” he said coldly.

“I'm sorry” said Frank turning around.

“There isn't a Dr Harris” Patrick repeated

“It must have been the other one. Dr...?” Frank started to reply.

“Dr Goldman?” Patrick prompted

“Yes” said Frank.

“There isn't a Dr Goldman either” said Patrick. He looked away from Frank and continued to stroke Patch.

“Well Patrick. You have got a good memory. I'll say that for you” said Frank with a sly smile, “If nothing else” he added sourly. Then he turned on his heels and left the room.
Later that evening....

Faith walked up to Patrick's bedroom door and paused before knocking. They'd all agreed that Patch should be restricted to Patrick's room from now on. Or at least, Frank had insisted and Faith had agreed, despite the young man's protests. Patrick had then angrily moved the small dog's basket and bowls up to his room, rebuffing Frank's offer of assistance.

“It's just for now eh?” said Faith, as she sat next to Patrick on the side of her bed.

“Patch has always had the run of the house. Long before he ever came here” Patrick replied.

“Let's just see” Faith said kindly, “Frank will stop going on about it in a day or two, I'm sure”

“I'm not” said Patrick

“Could you try and get on with him love?” said Faith, “For my sake. I don't want to have to take sides” she added.

When Patrick did not reply, Faith gave him a gentle pat on his left leg and left the room. As she closed the door, the young man went over to the dog basket and sat crossed legged on the floor next to it.

“I won't let the nasty man hurt you” he said, tickling Patch under his chin.

Patrick glanced over to his bed-side table and the framed photograph on it. It was the one of Faith, Patch and Daniel that Danny had given him to keep in the sanatorium last year.

“I wish your Dad was here” Patrick said wistfully.

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Tuesday 8th August 1950 – 12:30am

There was a gentle knock on Faith bedroom's door. She put her book onto the bed-side table and patted in her hair before quickly loosening the front of her negligee a little.

“Come in” she said in a stage whisper.

Frank appeared, in a pair of bold, striped pyjamas and closed the door.

“I'd nearly given up on you” the landlady said.

“I am sorry Faith” he said as he walked over and climbed into bed, “It was those damn showgirls. They took an age to finish their supper. Every time I started down the stairs I thought I heard one of them coming up”

“Still, you're here now” said Faith with a smile.

Frank hooked his left arm around Faith and looked thoughtful.

“Something wrong love?” she asked.

“It's this business with Patrick” said Frank, “You know Faith, absolutely the last thing I wanted
was to be the cause of any ill feeling”

“It'll be alright now, won't it?” Faith asked, “How's your hand by the way”

“Oh. Fine. On the mend anyway” said Frank, looking at his bandaged right hand for a moment.

“But, you know” Frank continued, “I can't help thinking that I was being a bit harsh. Not about the dog of course. I mean, safety first”

“Oh, of course” said Faith

“But, well, it was the way Patrick reacted. So over the top. Calling me a liar and..” said Frank

“Oh, he never said you were a liar Frank” Faith corrected him.

“Well, no, not outright. That's true” Frank said, appearing to concede the point, “But hasn't he stuck you as seeming a bit highly strung lately? Didn't you say he was in a sanatorium for a while?”

“Oh now!” said Faith sounding a little disappointed in her night-time companion, “He had TB, poor lad, he wasn't in there for his nerves”

Frank recovered quickly, “It can be a big mental strain though, a serious illness. I remember with my poor late wife...”

“What did she have again?” asked Faith

Inwardly, Frank cursed. He hadn't prepared this part of this discussion beforehand.

“I...I don't like to talk about it” he said instead.

“I understand love” Faith said sympathetically.

“You don't think, perhaps, they let him out of that clinic too early?” asked Frank, keeping his voice soft.

“But the Doctors said he was alright” said Faith, “And we all wanted him home so much” she added

“Ah” said Frank, leaning in a little, “But we don't always get what we want in this life do we?” he asked, as he pressed his lips against Faith’s.

“But we do sometimes” he added as he moved in again.

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse – Tuesday 8th August 1950 – 10:00am

Robert put the phone back in its rest and leaned back in his desk chair, holding his head in his hands for just a moment.

“That's the third call this morning! I wish I'd never put this phone in sometimes” he said in annoyance.
“No you don’t” said Aaron, who was sitting on the sofa reading his astronomy book.

“Alright, but you'd think they could cope without me up at Garston for two weeks, wouldn't you?”

“You wouldn't want that either” said Aaron, turning a page of his book and not looking up.

Rob got up and walked over to the sofa.

“You're not going to be like this all the time are you?” Robert asked as he plonked himself down next to the young man.

Aaron said nothing.

“It's not because of what I said earlier is it? About you sitting in the back of Lauren's car when she gives us a lift to the station” said Rob

“Why can't we get a taxi?” asked Aaron

“I think it was nice of her to offer” said Robert, “I know we're going together but you're coming as my helper, as far as Lauren knows so, it just looks better” Rob said

“I can go on the roof with the cases if you'd like?” said Aaron, sarcastically

“Uh uh” his partner replied, “I want you where I can keep an eye on ya”

Rob smiled but Aaron shrugged.

“Come on Aaron” said Robert, “This is our anniversary trip after all”

“Our anniversary has been and gone” said Aaron, “I moved in here before Victoria and Adam's wedding remember?”

“Course I remember” said Rob, “And I'm determined we're going to enjoy this trip, even if you're not”

Aaron was silent, so Robert reached over to where he knew Aaron was ticklish, just above his left hip.

“Hey, get off!” Aaron laughed.

“Keep that smile going then!” said Rob with a grin. He bunched closer to Aaron on the sofa and hooked his arm around him.

“Listen. I know our trip can't have been easy for you” said Robert, his voice sounding serious, “I mean. You had a weekend with your in-laws there and it's not even as if they know. That they are your in-laws I mean”

“We got through it though didn't we?” Aaron replied.

“Yeah we did. And we know don't we?” Rob asked, “We know you're not just the hired help. That's what's important isn't it? That we know?”

“Course it is” said Aaron, smiling back at him.

“So, you all packed?” Robert asked.
Aaron nodded. “Talking of that” he said, “You make sure you bring your stick”

“Aaron, I don't really need it” said Robert

“Robert, you're bringing it” Aaron replied firmly, “We don't know how much walking we'll have to do”

“Ok” Rob replied with a smile, giving Aaron a quick squeeze around his shoulders.

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11:00am

“Thank you Aaron” said Lauren Gillespie as she briskly followed the young man through the long porch to the Gatehouse and into the living room.

“Mr Sugden” Aaron called up the stairs, “Miss Gillespie is here”

“I'll just take the cases to the car” he added.

“Fine” Lauren replied, not really paying him any attention as he left.

“Hello Lauren” said Robert with a smile as he came down the stairs.

“Goodness, you've got a television!” the young woman replied, noticing the box in the corner to the left of the fireplace.

“Yet it was a pres.......a bargain” Rob replied, “When Arkwright's had to close down in town. It's the first in the village, I know that for fact”

“Trust you!” said Lauren with a grin, “You always have to be just that little bit different don't you?”

Robert smiled quietly to himself at her comment.

“Well, we'd better be...” he said, reaching over and taking his stick from the stand next to the door to the porch.

“Yes of course” said Lauren as she headed out.

“Isn't that your phone ringing?” the young women asked as Robert locked the front door to the Gatehouse.

“It won't be important” said Rob as he followed her to her waiting car.

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Let's step back, just a little............

Blackpool - The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – 6:00am

Patrick had not slept well at all. Even Patch must have picked up on the atmosphere in the guesthouse as he had leaped onto the bed and paid him the kind of attention he usually reserved for
Daniel. Patrick had started to turn over options in his head. There was no use talking to Mrs Dingle it seemed. She appeared to be willing to give Frank the benefit of the doubt all the time. If only Mr Rudge hadn't taken up with that young housekeeper of his. He had a lot to answer for, in Patrick's opinion.

Perhaps a break would be a good idea, he mused. Give his landlady a chance to get Mr Clayton out of her system. That was what Aaron kept saying would happen. He could even visit the lads in Hadleigh. Not that they had asked him back and, to be honest, he didn't like inviting himself.

He could wait until Daniel came home. But that wasn't until October. And what if he didn't hang around for a long time? It could be back to square one as soon as he left.

“It's no good” Patrick said, reaching over and giving Patch a gentle smooth, “I'll have to ring Aaron again. I can't keep turning this over in my head on my own can I?”

Patch looked at him.

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10:00am

“Right” said Patrick, hooking Patch's lead onto his collar, “I'm not leaving you here on your own” he added as he headed out of the guesthouse and down the steps to the road.

In the front room, Frank watched them leave, a cup of tea in his hand and a smile on his face.

“Penny for your thoughts?” asked Faith as she started to pick up the breakfast things from the table.

“Just appreciating the.....finer things in life” he replied silkily as he looked across at her.

Faith smiled back as she headed to the kitchen.

Frank looked back out of the window. He could just see Patrick and Patch turning the corner.

“One more push, that should do it” he said quietly to himself.

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11:00 A phone-box in the high-street

There was no answer. Patrick put the phone back in it's cradle and looked down at Patch on the end of his lead.

“Not having a lot of luck are we little feller?” he said, “Never mind. I'll call again later” he added.

And at three o'clock and six o'clock the same day, the phone on Robert's desk rang unanswered in an empty Gatehouse.

END OF PART THREE
Just On My Way

Chelsea – Lewis Holbrooke's Flat – Tuesday 8th August 1950 – early evening

“Posh place like this, you'd think the lifts would always be working” said Aaron grumpily as he plonked a pair of suitcases down onto the floor in Lewis's front hall.

“Have a sit down. Get your breath back before we unpack then” said Robert as he hung up his hat and jacket.

“But” he added, “First things first” he said as he slid the bolt across on the front door.

“This way, if Mrs Mopp turns up unannounced, she can't get in” he said firmly.

“She wont be though will she? Turning up I mean” said Aaron as he hung up his cap and jacket and headed for the living room.

Robert was a little distracted. He had picked up a note from the hall table with the word “Suggers” written on the outside.

“Well” he replied as he sat down on the sofa, “Lewis said she wouldn't be. No point paying her while he's away. Besides, he knows how tidy I am”

“That right?” said Aaron, folding his arms.

“I had the neatest bunk in our hut on the base, I'll have you know” said Rob with a grin. He returned to the note. “It's alright, that cleaning woman won't be coming here. He says so here” he said as he read. “Listen to this”, he went on, “...I hope you'll be comfortable in the guest quarters. Jennifer and I decided that the master bedroom needed redecorating. Or, to be honest, she decided it needed doing and I agreed”

“Hope it's got a double bed then” said Aaron

“He says he'll ring if 'you know what' happens” said Robert as he kept reading, “You know, he means the baby” he added when Aaron looked blank.

“Come on” said Rob, enthusiastically, “Let's check out the spare room”. The young man got up from the sofa and marched into the hall.

“Actually” he said, heading to the main bedroom, “Let's just have a quick look first” he added as he opened the door.

“Not that you're nosy or anything” said Aaron with a smile as he walked behind him.

“Blimey. That's very pink” he said as he took in the decoration of the room.

“Hmm” Robert agreed closing the door. “I think we can see who runs the shop now” he said as he opened the door to the spare room.

“This looks fine to me” he said as he sat down on the edge of the double bed.

“Right, I'll get the cases then” said Aaron.

“Come here first” said Rob patting the space on the bed next to him
“Why?” asked Aaron

“Come here” said Robert, his voice a little more insistent.

Aaron sighed and plonked himself down next to his partner. Rob smiled and hooked his right arm around the young man's shoulders.

“Happy anniversary” he said softly, pulling Aaron towards him for a kiss.

“It's not our anniversary though” said Aaron with a grin.

“Do you want me to stop then?” asked Robert, his voice a little quiet

“No” said Aaron, his own voice low.

Rob smiled and leaned in for another kiss as Aaron put his own left hand softly onto Robert's side.

Unpacking could wait for now.

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Blackpool –The Pleasure beach– Wednesday 9th August 1950 - 11:00am

“Hello Patrick” said Dennis Culshaw, as he spotted the young man sitting in a deck chair. Patrick looked up at the young man, who had stripped to his vest and had his shirt slung casually over his shoulder.

“Oh. Hello” Patrick replied, trying not to stare.

“I'm having a day off. It's too hot to clean windows” said Dennis. “Hello boy” he added as he crouched down and gave Patch a smooth. The little dog was curled up on a blanket next to the chair.

“Careful he doesn't bite you” said Patrick

“What?” said Dennis, confused, “He wouldn't bite me”

“He bit Mr Clayton. You know, Mrs Dingle's new lodger” said Patrick, “Well I say 'new'. Seems like he's been at our place for ages now”.

“What fancy Fred? Yeah I've seen him about” said Dennis, sounding unimpressed.

“Listen I know if a dog's nasty. There's loads of dogs on my round” he went on, “And you're lovely, aren't you boy?” he added, giving Patch a rub around the head.

“Well he said he bit him. And Mrs Wentworth at the pub backed him up” said Patrick

“Ha. Well that's no big surprise” said Dennis

“What do you mean?” asked Patrick

Dennis looked at the path just above where Patrick was sitting. The Walls ice-cream man had just peddled up nearby on his cart,
“Get us an ice cream and I'll tell ya” said Dennis, flashing Patrick a broad smile.

“Oh, alright “said Patrick, reaching into his trouser pocket, “You'll have to go through” he added, “Get me one as well” he said as he handed over a coin.

“Back in a mo” said Dennis with a wink.

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Chelsea – Lewis Holbrooke's Flat – Wednesday 9th August 1950 – 11:00am

“Right. I'm back” said Robert, as he slid the bolt shut on the front door.

“You took your time” said Aaron, as he put his mug of tea down on the table, “Thought you were only going to the newsagent”

“I did” said Rob as he put down a small stack of magazines onto the table, “I went to the one in the tube station though”

“Sure you got enough there?” said Aaron, nodded toward the purchases in his partner's hand.

“Aaron. It's just a few movie magazines. And a couple of local papers” said Robert as he sat down on the sofa. “I mean. If we're going to enjoy this holiday properly, we're going to need some planning aren't we?”

“You didn't get me anything then?” Aaron asked.

“Ha. You're wrong” said Robert, reaching into his jacket and taking out a small box with “Lyons” written on it from his left outside pocket.

“I've got you a pie for your eleven-sees” said Rob

“Since when have I had eleven-sees?” asked Aaron

“Aaron. We're on holiday. You're supposed to be enjoying the high life” said Robert with a smile.

“I only like apple” said Aaron, seemingly determined to find something to grumble about.

But Robert just kept smiling and reached into the right outside jacket pocket.

“Lucky I bought two then isn't it?” he said, producing a different small pie.

“Fine. I'll put the kettle on!” said Aaron as he stood up.

As he walked around the back of the sofa and passed Rob he ruffled his blonde hair.

“Clever dick” he said, a warm grin on his face.

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Blackpool –The Pleasure beach– Wednesday 9th August 1950 - 11:10am

“There you go” said Dennis, handing Patrick an ice-cream and plonking himself down on the
blanket next to Patch.

“Why don't you take your top off?” he asked, “Aren't you boiling? I am”

“I don't do that” Patrick said quietly

Dennis looked up and at Patrick's neatly folded left sleeve which was pinned to the shoulder of his shirt.

“Sorry. I didn't mean...” said Dennis, “It's heaving here today, isn't it?” he said, quickly changing the subject and indicating the crowded beach with his ice cream. “Be worse on the weekend”

“You wouldn't know my brother Mark would ya?” Dennis asked

Patrick shook his head.

“He was a mate of Aaron's up at your place” said Dennis, “They used to make money out of the holiday makers in the Summer. They'd meet people at the station and tell' em they'd get them a space on the beach. It wasn't a con mind. One of them would run down here and the other would help with their stuff. Course, this was long before the War. He's dead now. Mark. North Africa”

“Oh. I'm sorry” said Patrick

“I was telling you about Mrs Wentworth wasn't I?” said Dennis, giving his ice-cream a quick lick

“Well I know she's pally with Mr Clayton. I don't thinks there's an older woman round our way he hasn't chatted up” said Patrick

“Ah” said Dennis, leaning close to the side of Patrick's deck chair, “But he doesn't visit them all on Wednesday afternoons does he?”

“How do you know?” Patrick asked quietly

“You see a lot on a window cleaning round“ Dennis replied with a smile

“So I've heard” Patrick replied

“Like, which pub landlady has her bedroom curtains drawn in the afternoon. When her husband is down the bowls club” said Dennis

Patrick frowned, “She could be having a lie down or something. I suppose” he said

“If she is, she likes company while she does it” said Dennis, “I've seen him walking out the back of the pub a couple of times. That Clayton feller. When I've been doing the back of Sea View”

“Are you going to say anything. To Mrs Dingle?” Dennis asked.

“I don't think she'd believe me” said Patrick, frowning as he thought for a moment. “I'd better get this chair back and head off”

“It's alright. I'll sort this stuff out” said Dennis, “You take this feller and I'll carry your blanket for you. I was heading home for dinner anyway”

“Thank you” said Patrick as he stood up and unhooked Patch's lead from around the leg of the chair.
“Always happy to help” said Dennis as he started to roll up the blanket.

“You remind me a lot of our Mark” the young man added as he folded the deck chair and hoisted it by the frame.

“In a good way I hope” Patrick replied.

“Yeah. In a good way” said Dennis with a smile.

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“Cup of tea love? Kettle's on” said Faith as she stood in the kitchen doorway. Patrick had just hung up his cap on the stand in the hallway.

“I'll just get this one upstairs” said Patrick, looking down at Patch on the end of his lead “You know, before someone complains”

“You're alright for now. Frank's gone out” his landlady replied.

“No. I'll take him up. He'll get confused about where he's allowed to go otherwise. Wouldn't be fair would it?” the young man said as he headed up the stairs.

“Well, if you say so love” said Faith

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“They're still not getting on then?” asked Beryl as her friend rejoined her at the kitchen table, “Him and Frank”

“You could cut the atmosphere here with a knife sometimes” said Faith with a frown

“It's not like young Patrick to be unfriendly” said Beryl

“Or Frank” Faith replied, “Oh, I meant to tell you. We're off to look another cottage in Southport on the weekend”

“You're not thinking about moving again are you?” said Beryl, sounding slightly exasperated.

“No love” said Faith, “This would be to rent out. Besides, the one Frank liked has been snapped up. Shows there's demand though doesn't there? This other one would need a lot doing to it mind. Do you fancy coming for the drive? Frank's borrowing his Vanessa's car”

“They've made it up then have they?” asked Beryl

“Well he doesn't like arguments” said Faith, “He was telling me how much this falling out with Patrick had upset him”

“I suppose he'll be moving back to his daughters then” said Beryl as she lifted her tea cup to her mouth, “I mean” she added, a sly look on her features, “Better than up in your top bedroom, isn't it?”
“Oh. I think he's quite comfy here love” Faith replied with a grin.

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Chelsea- Lewis Holbroke's Flat – Friday 11th August 1950 – 9:00pm

Aaron put two mugs of tea down on the table in front of the sofa and sat down. Robert was looking in the sideboard next to the living room table.

“What are you looking for?” Aaron asked.

“You didn't bring a tape measure with you did you?” Robert asked

“Why would I bring a tape measure?” said Aaron.

Robert walked over to the sofa, a little awkwardly, “I just wanted to check how big this television screen was, that's all” he mumbled as he sat down.

“Robert, it's fine” said Aaron with a grin, putting his hand on his partner's leg, “Your set back home is bigger”

“Are you sure?” said Rob, frowning

“Yeah. Definitely” said Aaron, gesturing towards the set in the corner, “I've seen this one in the catalogue. It's older than ours”

“That's good then” said Robert with a smile, “Is this all that's on?” he asked, staring at the screen. The programme seemed to be about a canoe.

Aaron looked down at the paper in front of him. “Politics soon. You'll like that” he replied.

“How's your side now?” he asked, reaching over and gently putting his hand on Robert's left hip.

“Just a bit stiff” said Rob

“I'll give a rub-down before bed” said Aaron with a grin, “It's your own fault though” he added, “All that walking around today. You're the one that wanted to see Harrods”

“You liked the pets” Robert replied

“I liked that dog” said Aaron

“That little dark one?” said Rob, “He looked a bit grumpy to me. I mean. Talk about coals to Newcastle”

Aaron frowned and removed his hand from Robert's hip. He leaned forward on the sofa and lifted his mug. Rob reached over with his left hand and started to massage the back of his partner's neck.

“Is my rub-down off the agenda?” Rob asked, pouting slightly.

“Drink your tea” said Aaron, “We'll see” he added with a grin
Frank was sitting in the front room, the newspaper spread out on the table in front of him. But he wasn't concentrating on the content. He heard the front door open and closed and quickly darted to the bay window. Out in the street, he could see Carol heading up the road. “Two down, one to go” he said quietly to himself.

A little later......

Frank heard the front door open and close again. This time Patrick was heading up the street with his dog. Frank smiled and walked over to the fireplace. He smoothed down his grey hair and ran his fingers across the front of his moustache. “Yes Clayton, you've still got it” he said to himself as he walked out into the hallway and headed up the stairs.

“And make sure you do a proper job” said Mabel Earshaw in a sour voice as she stood on the doorstep of No.11 Albert Avenue. “I mean, I am paying you” she added.

Dennis was at the top of his ladder and said nothing. He waited until the woman had gone back into her house. “You'll be lucky. Tight fisted old cow” he muttered to himself.

“Dennis. Could you do me a favour?” asked Patrick as he reached the front of the house.

“Hello Patrick” said Dennis as he climbed down.

“Could you look after Patch for me for a bit? I've got to take the books over to the Penny Arcade. I can't manage them both. I won't be too long”

“Can't Mrs Dingle look after him?” asked Dennis

“She's out shopping this afternoon. I don't want to leave him in the house with that bloke”

“Ok ” said Dennis, bending down to give the little dog a pat, “Come back in quarter of an hour. I'll have finished here then. I'll be having me dinner on the cart in the ginnel”

“Thanks” said Patrick, “I'll take him for a walk first”

Blackpool – Outside a bank in the High Street

“All done Beryl” said Faith, as she walked up to her friend who was staring in the window of a hat shop.

“You took your time” said Beryl, “I had to go over to the Co-op and use theirs”

“I had to move some money about, that's all” said Faith, “Took a bit longer than I thought”
“Where did you want to head off to next?” asked Beryl

“I want to go into Hardings. See if I can get a new nightie” said Faith

“You and nighties!” said Beryl, “They don't seem to last five minutes. I've had my old one for years! “

Faith just smiled to herself as they headed off up the road.

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The Golden Palmtree – 1:30pm

Patrick had locked his bedroom door and put the key in his jacket pocket. He had just bent down to pick up the small case he used for carrying his ledgers when he heard the laughter from down the hallway. It was a high-pitched feminine laugh, coming through the door to the room which Carol and Lillian shared.

A smiling Frank emerged into the hallway a moment later.

“Oh. Patrick” said Frank, pulling the door closed behind him quickly, “I thought you were out” he added.

“Just on my way” the young man replied.

Frank looked down and noticed that one of the buttons on his shirt was undone.

“I don't suppose you've seen my ........watch have you?” said Frank, “I seem to have put it down somewhere. Thought the girls might have found it”

“Do you mean the one you're wearing?” said Patrick

Frank looked at his wrist, “No. My....other one” he replied.

“I can't help you” said Patrick, “I need to go” he added as he turned and headed down the stairs.

“Yes, you do don't you” Frank said to himself, his voice cold.

TO BE CONTINUED
The Final Straw

Blackpool – The High Street – Monday 14th August 1950 – 8:15pm

Patrick frowned and put the phone back on its rest. There was no answer, again. Which was strange really. Aaron had often complained about being stuck in the gatehouse on his own while Robert was dashing about to one of his committees. It was no good, he told himself. He'd have to write to him.

The young man leaned back on the heavy door to the telephone box, his hand busy holding onto the end of Patch's lead. “Come on you” he encouraged as he led the small dog out into the street. Patrick turned things over in his mind as he headed back home. Well, that was one thought for a start. Could you even call it home now? Not with that man there. He knew he'd have to say something to Mrs Dingle but this evening has definitely not been the right time. As soon as she'd got back from shopping, Frank had leaped on her. Wrapping his arms around her from behind as she stepped into the hall and whispering sweet nothings. She'd replied with a big smile and a “get away with you”, while holding tightly onto his hands. That was the sad thing about all this. She seemed so happy.

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Blackpool – Vanessa Woodfield's Surgery- Monday 14th August 1950 - 8:15pm

Vanessa had just finished tidying up the consulting room and was gratefully heading upstairs when there was a knock on the front door. She walked over with a sigh, already having a fair idea of who was there. And sure enough it was Mollie from next door.

“Parcel came for you when you were out”, the elderly woman said handing over a brown package. Mollie's face was miserable, as if she had the weight of the World on her shoulders, and not in fact a tatty old cardigan.

“It's from my old surgery” said Vanessa, reading the address at the back.

Mollie said nothing, but gave no sign that she was going to leave.

“Would you like a cup of tea Mollie?” Vanessa offered.

“Only if you're making it anyway” the woman replied as she walked in, “Don't make one special just for me” she added morosely as she followed the young vet up the stairs.

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London- Shaftesbury Avenue – Monday 14th August 1950 – 8:15pm

“Hey” said Robert as he walked briskly up the street, “The Windmill theatre is down there” he added, pointing down the side-street.

Aaron stopped under the street light and gave him what Rob had long realised was one of “those
looks”.

“I think Patrick will like that book we got him in Hatchards” said Robert, quickly moving the subject on, “I think it's better to have it sent home. Less for you....I mean, less for us to carry on the way back then”

“You bought enough for yourself, again “ said Aaron

“I got a cowboy book for Daniel” Rob said in his defence, “Besides, it makes more sense doesn't it? The postage is still the same and......”. The young man stopped when he realised his partner was no longer keeping step with him. He turned around and looked at Aaron who was standing in front of a theatre.

“Robert. Come and see this” said Aaron with a grin. He was pointing at a large front of house display in the entrance.

“See what?” said Robert, puzzled. Aaron was pointing to a board with some black and white pictures of the cast of the show.

“London Laughs?” said Rob, reading the title, “Huh! I bet it doesn't”.

“Look at the picture. Don't you recognise him?” said Aaron.

Robert stared at a picture of a row of men in garish striped blazers and boaters.

“That's Bobby!” said Aaron pointing to one of the older dancers, “He used to stay up at my Nan's. Right from before the War.

Rob still looked blank.

“You remember? He was there when we stayed the Christmas before last. We've got to go and see this while we're here” said Aaron, enthusiastically

“Well if it's anything like the shows they have in Blackpool it'll be a right....” Robert began. He had wanted to say something about it being cheap and tacky but he could see the disappointment on Aaron's face. His disappointment in him. He knew that Aaron would look at a show like this in a different way. Even if it was awful, it featured one of his Nan's old regulars and it meant a small slice of home.

Instead, Robert made great play of taking a look at his watch. “We've missed the start. It's twenty past eight now. How about we go later this week. Let's see what they've got at the box office shall we?”

“Yeah. Great” said Aaron with a smile.

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Blackpool – Vanessa Woodfield's Surgery- Monday 14th August 1950 - 8:30pm

Vanessa decided to open her package. She had calculated that, if she looked busy, Mollie would take the hint and drink up her tea and head home. But she calculated incorrectly.
“I see your Dad's staying over with that Dingle woman over in Albert Avenue” the older woman said.

Vanessa paused for a moment. It was rather telling the number of people who referred to Faith as “that Dingle woman”.

“He didn't want to be here under my feet” Vanessa replied as she discovered that her package contained a pile of letters with a small note attached.

“Sounds likes he's got his feet right under her table. From what they were saying in the Royal” said Mollie, “Still, she's always been like that. Man mad” she added, her tone making it clear that she herself was anything but.

“That's a lot of letters” she went on, staring down at the small pile on the table.

Vanessa glanced up from the note. “It's from the old surgery I used to rent. They couldn't find a new vet to take over so they're turning it into flats”

“Fancy” said Mollie, “What's this then, old bills?”

“No. Just some post from people who didn't know I moved from the look of it’ said Vanessa as she rifled through the pile.

“Right” said Mollie, “Can't sit chatting here all night” she added as she stood up, “I'll see myself out” she went on as she shuffled out of the room and headed for the stairs.

Vanessa watched to see that her neighbour had gone and took a second look at the two letters that concerned her. They were in brown envelopes and would have looked official even without ‘On His Majesty's Service' printed across the top. And they were both addressed to her father, care of her old address.

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Blackpool - The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – 11:45pm

Patrick lay in the the double bed in his room, sticking to the right hand side, even though it was only him in it. He heard the sound of one of the showgirls walking noisily passed his room on the way to bed, followed by the other shushing her. He guessed the second one would be Carol, who always tried to be considerate when staying here. Patrick rolled over onto his other side and sighed. It was no good, he couldn't sleep. He pulled back the blankets and headed over to his desk in the corner. As he clicked on his lamp, he looked over towards Patch, sleeping happily in his basket near the door, undisturbed. The young man turned over the top of the writing pad and reached over for his pen. He started to write, “Dear Aaron............”

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Blackpool – Vanessa Woodfield's Surgery – 11:45pm

Vanessa walked briskly into her kitchen, pulling her dressing gown over her night-dress. It was no
good, she told herself, she would have to open those official looking letters. Yes, she could have handed them over to her father. But something deep down told her that this was important and, crucially, would get swept under the carpet if she left it to him. It wouldn't be the first time, she thought with a sigh. If what her late mother used to say was anything to go by.

She opened the top letter and read....

"As you will recall, your scheduled meeting with the probationary services was moved from the Exeter offices to Manchester at your own request. However, our records indicate that you did not attend those offices on 8th May 1950. I should not need to remind you that as a condition of your prison release......"

Vanessa stopped reading.

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Chelsea – Lewis Holbrooke's Flat – 11:45pm

Robert leaned down and pressed his lips against Aaron's as his partner curled his had around the back of his neck. He ran his fingers through the end of Robert's blonde locks and pulled him in close. Rob backed away, just a little and shifted himself a little as he lay on top of him. He leaned in for another kiss when the sound of a telephone ringing echoing in from the living room. Rob closed his eyes in frustration.

“Let it ring” Aaron breathed softly

“I can't” said Robert, “It could be Lewis”. He stretched across Aaron and clicked on the lamp on the bedside table.

He sighed and leaned in gave Aaron a quick peck on the lips.

“Just marking my place” he said, a silly grin on his face as he slipped out of bed, pausing at the door to pull a dressing gown on over his trunks.

Aaron sat up and shook his head as the blankets slid down the front of his bare torso.

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“Lewis?” said Robert as he picked up the phone, “What, just now? Congratulations! A boy? You must be pleased. And your Dad I suppose. How are they both doing? That's good. Really good. Me? I'm having a great time. I'm, uh, keeping myself busy. You know, making the most of the sights and.....things. Listen, we'll wet the baby's head at the RAF reunion before Christmas. Love to Jenny"  

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Robert was smiling when he walked back into the spare room and hung the dressing gown up.

“Look like there's going to be an announcement on the front page of the Times. Not now, in December of course because of, you know....” said Rob as he climbed back into bed. “They had a boy” he went on, “Which is good. I mean they'd have been happy with a girl but it's something to do with the inheritance and the big house his Dad owns and.......”
“And?” said Aaron quietly as he looked intently at him

“And.....why don't I tell you in the morning” said Robert as he rolled onto his side. He stretched over and clicked the light off again.

“Now, where was I?” he said softly.

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Let's take a bit of a step back, to another happy event....... 

Emmerdale – The Woolpack living quarters- during the War

“Robert, come in pet” said Diane to the tall, blonde haired man standing on the doorstep, “It's good to see you” his step mother continued, giving him a quick peck on the cheek.

Rob held tight to his walking stick and walked into the hallway a little unsteadily.

“Did you get a lift from the station alright?” said Diane as she took his suitcase from him and put it on the floor.

“I got that taxi. You know Stubbs” said Robert as he took off his hat, “Well, it's old Mr Stubbs back again now since his son was called up”

“Well you know what your Dad would say about wasting good money” said Diane

“He can pick me up himself then if he's that bothered” Rob replied as she helped him off with the coat

“He's up at the farm. Arguing with the new manager” said Diane

“Nothing changes, does it?” said Robert

“Well, *some* things do pet” said Diane with a smile.

Robert smiled back, “Can I go up and see them?” he asked

“Course you can. Now, will be you alright with your stick?” his step mother asked.

“I'll be fine. Just need to to take it slow” Rob replied.

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“Hello sis” said Robert, as he peeked around the door of Victoria's bedroom, “Can I come in?”

“Course you can” his sister replied. Rob leaned over and gave her a quick hug.

“This is your new niece” said Victoria as Robert sat down on the edge of her bed, gripping his walking stick in one hand.

“I'm glad you told me” said Rob with a grin as he peered down at the tiny figure asleep in the cot, “I mean. I'd never have guessed otherwise”
“Same old Robert” said Victoria rolling her eyes.

Rob looked away from her, “Well, not quite the same” he said, his voice a little quieter.

Victoria reached over and put her hand gently on the back of his shoulders, “You'll still the same to me” she said.

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A little later...

“I thought you'd be happier sis” said Robert, “I mean, look at her. She's lovely”

“I am. I am happy” said Victoria

“But?” Rob prompted.

“But what happens in the future? How I'm going to manage on my own?” Victoria asked.

“You won't be on your own” said Robert.

“The whole village knows I had to marry Pavel, thanks to Dad. And now he's gone. What feller is going to want to take me on? A widow's pension will only go so far”

Rob reached over to take his sister's hand, “Plenty of lads would be lucky to have you. You'll meet someone”

“Not round here” Victoria responded

“All right. Maybe not round here” Robert agreed, “But actually, there was something I wanted to ask you. You know I'm moving into the Manor House in Hadleigh”

“Wouldn't you rather come home?” his sister asked.

“What, help in the pub and listen to Dad moan about the Home Guard every night? No thanks” said Rob, “Besides, there's a proper job to do. There's the estate to run and we've got a load of Land Girls billeted and.....”

“And....?” Victoria prompted.

“And I was wondering if you wanted to come back with me. Be my housekeeper. I've got a cook, Florrie, from the village and a couple of women who come it to clean. And there's Old Tom, but you'd really be a big help sis” said Robert

“It'd be a great place for this little one” Rob went on, “We're well away from the big towns. Sometimes, the War.......”, his voice dropped a little, “Well, sometimes the War seems very far away”

Victoria looked thoughtful.

“Don't decide now” said Robert, “You see how you get on now she's arrived and let me know”

“I will” said Victoria, smiling

“Actually, have you thought of a name for her? Can't keep calling her 'she' can we?” said Rob
“I have” said Victoria, “I thought Sarah, after Mum”

Robert smiled warmly. “She'd have liked that” he said.

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Now time to go forward again.......... 

Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse- Wednesday 16th August 1950 – 1pm

It was the unpleasant atmosphere in the guesthouse that was to blame, Patrick told himself. Usually, he'd never have walked out of the house and left the key to his bedroom in the lock. He'd always been so careful about that. As he walked up from the stairs, Patch trailing along on his lead he saw his bedroom door. Well, at least the key was there. At least he hadn't lost it while walking over town. He'd never have found it. Especially as he'd been making Patch's walks longer and more rambling, just to avoid coming home.

But as he bent down inside the room to unclip the little dogs lead, his relief soon faded. As Patch scampered over to his basket, Patrick noticed the green metal box lying on his bed. The box itself was not so odd. It was ex-army issue and definitely his. It just shouldn't have been there. It should have been hidden at the bottom of his wardrobe.

He walked quickly out of the room and back onto the landing. He heard a door closing in the distance. It could have been the door to their kitchen, but he couldn't be sure. He walked back into his room and locked the door, moving quickly to sit on the bed.

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A little later

Everything was there that should be. Daniel's post office savings book. Patrick's Army discharge papers and pension details. Even some money notes in an envelope. But he hadn't moved the tin out of the cupboard earlier. He knew he hadn't. Then an disturbing thought crossed his mind. He went over to the wardrobe and opened the door. There, at the bottom of a cupboard, lying in the space where the tin usually was a book on chess. Normally, it lay at the back, the tin propping it up. Not there was anything special about the book, Patrick thought to himself as he took it out and put it on the bed. After all, there were plenty of books on the small shelf above his desk. A couple on book-keeping, some murder mysteries and science-fiction, a medical encyclopedia, just in case, and some western novels that were Daniel's.

But none of that was important. What was important, was a letter hidden away at the back of the chess book. The envelope was a bit tattered around the edges. Well, it had been written during the middle of the War and been read and re-read on several lonely nights. Thankfully it was there. The one letter he'd kept from Daniel was still there.

After he had tidied everything away, Patrick lay down, his head starting to pound as he tried to process what had happened. The more he thought, the more his worry faded and his anger rose. He knew who had done this. He just knew. And the person he was sure had done it, had meant it as a warning.
Something needed to be done. And it was too late to wait for Aaron to reply to his letter. In any case, it would have only arrived in Hadleigh that morning. Patrick decided what to do.

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London – Shaftesbury Avenue - Wednesday 16th August 1950 – 5pm

“That was great wasn't it?” said Aaron enthusiastically as he and Robert walked out into the street from the theatre with the rest of the matinee crowd.

“You can tell it's the West End though can't ya?” Aaron continued as he headed down the small side-street next to the theatre, “It was much, well, bigger than the shows back home”

If he was honest, Robert had not enjoyed the review that much. But then Aaron had and that was all that mattered. After all, he had dragged his partner along to the cinema two nights this trip and most of their activities has been planned by him.

“It was very......colourful” said Rob, which right then was the best he could manage. “Where are you going?” he asked.

“We got to say hello Robert” said Aaron as he walked to the stage door and headed for the desk.

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“As I live and breathe! It's Aaron isn't it?” said Bobby as he turned around in his chair. The room backstage was large, with tables running down both sides and room for six performers. A mirror surrounded by light-bulbs was above each and, Robert noticed as he looked around, most of them were working. There were three other men in the room, all younger than Bobby and in various stages of undress. Rob turned around when he realised that he was being spoken to.

“You remember Robert. My, uh....boss” said Aaron

“What did you think of the show?” asked Bobby

“You could see how hard you were all working” said Rob. To his ears, that sounding positive without being dishonest

“I know it's all terrible isn't it?” said Bobby

“Speak for yourself” said the good looking young man at the next table along.

“That's Archie. Ignore her” said Bobby, rolling his eyes, “Now where are my manners. You boys will stay for a quick drink won't you?”

“Yeah, great” said Aaron, sitting down on a free chair before Rob had had the chance to say anything.

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“Actually” said Aaron, wincing as he tasted some vodka he had been had handed in a tin mug “I thought you'd have your own dressing room. Aren't you the lead dancer?” he asked.
“Lead dancer? Her? It's not the thirties anymore” said Archie from the next table as he continued wiping off his stage make-up

“Well I do have the most experience..” said Bobby

“He's talking about dancing love” said Archie as he got up and headed towards the door. As he left, two other young men, still in stage costume walked in.

“You in the chair Bobby?”, said a blonde young man, “Hey. Where have you been hiding this one?” he asked, flashing Aaron a big smile as pulled up a chair and sat down next to him. Robert frowned.

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A little later....

“Top up Robert?” said the dark haired man now sitting next to Rob, who had introduced himself as Jerry.

“Uh. Yes please” Robert replied, a little distracted. Aaron and Bobby were laughing about some story about Faith from before the War, while the blonde next to him, who had been identified as Connor seemed to hang on every word.

“Are you an actor?” Jerry asked as he topped up Rob's drink.

“What me? No!” Robert replied in surprise.

“Really? You've got a marvelous speaking voice” said Jerry. “Hasn't he Bobby?” he went on, “Robert here”

“What's that?” said Bobby turning around

“Hasn't Robert here got a marvelous speaking voice” Jerry repeated. Robert felt a little awkward now.

“Oh, yes” Bobby agreed, “Very....commanding” he added.

“Well, I do a fair bit of public speaking” said Rob, his smile a little nervous.

“I could just see you doing Henry the Fifth” said Jerry, “Of course, this is variety here”

Aaron just smiled.

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Blackpool – Vanessa Woodfield's Surgery- Wednesday 16th August 1950 – 6pm

Frank stepped out onto the pavement outside his daughter's surgery and thought for a moment. This was going to need careful handling. But then, Faith was such an understanding person, he reminded himself. In fact, if he played this the right way, then it may actually turn out to his advantage. He started to walk back to the Guesthouse, already practicing in his head what he planned to say.
“Hmm. Come here you” said Aaron, walking up behind Robert in the flat's small kitchen. He wrapped his hands around his partner's waist while resting his head on the back of Rob's left shoulder.

“Kettles on. I think we could both use something non-alcoholic” said Robert as he twisted around and hooked his arms through Aaron's.

“Fun this afternoon, wasn't it?” said Aaron, his eyes still looking a little on the glazed side.

“Hmm” said Rob, “I was glad to get you out of there. It was obvious that Connor fancied you”

“No he didn't. Anyway, what about you?” Aaron replied, “That bloke going on about your voice”

“Oh?” said Robert, a smug smile playing on his lips, “You mean the one that said I sounded sexy?”

“He never said that” said Aaron

“Well. No, not those exact words” said Robert

“No-one said sexy” said Aaron

“Fine, I didn't like any of those chorus boys anyway” said Rob, a little grumpily.

“Shall I tell you who I liked?” said Aaron

“Go on then” said Robert with a sigh.

“You” said Aaron, leaning up a little so he could plant a kiss on Robert's lips.

“You're not so bad yourself” said Rob, leaning down to kiss him back.
“I don't know what I'm going to tell our Aaron”

Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse - Wednesday 16th August 1950 – 7pm

“So when my business partner ran off” said Frank, “I was left carrying the can. I mean I didn't know he was running up all these debts but of course it looked terrible”

Frank leaned over the table in the front room and took Faith's hand in his

“And, well, I didn't tell you I'd been in prison as I wasn't sure how you'd react. But I decided I just had to tell you Faith. It's been preying on my mind. Especially as we're buying this cottage together. I mean, it would be just awful if you thought I was being dishonest with you”

“I couldn't bear that. Not when you've been so.....kind” he said, gently stroking her hand and flashing his very well-practiced smile.

“That can't have been easy for you to admit Frank”, Faith said sympathetically

“I knew you'd understand” he replied smoothly

“It's not as if you're the first feller I've known who got on the wrong side of the law” said Faith

“You're the first person I've told. I couldn't even bring myself to tell my own daughter. I was, well, I was just too ashamed” said Frank.

“I'll put the kettle on” said Faith with a smile as she got up. As she left the room, Frank leaned back on the chair with a satisfied smile. That went even better than he planned. Now, even if Vanessa did tell Mrs Dingle as she'd threatened she would, he could brush it aside with a “Now, Faith knows all about my time in prison”. In fact, that was the only part of what he'd told the landlady that was true. That he'd been in prison. Of course, she was prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt. That's what had made it easy.

Frank looked up as the door opened. Patrick walked in, his face looking like thunder. Frank frowned. Unfortunately, he couldn't charm himself around everyone.

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Faith heard the raised voices as she walked back into the hall carrying the tea-pot on a tray.

“I don't know what you're talking about” said Frank, standing up and walking to the fire-place. He knew just what to do with this sort of confrontation. It was far from the first time it had happened after all. The best thing was not to argue at all. To even appear sympathetic to the person putting him on the spot. Of course, the performance wasn't for Patrick's benefit.

“What's the matter?” said Faith, as she put the tea things down on the table, the concern in her voice clear.

“Ask your friend” said Patrick, “He's the one who's been going through my things”

“Now Patrick, why on earth would I do that?” said Frank, deliberately keeping his voice reasonable.
“I left my room unlocked this afternoon. And when I came home someone had gone through my paperwork” said Patrick, “My....private, things”

“Is anything missing love?” said Faith, unsure of how to react.

“No” said Patrick, “But you could tell it had been gone through. My army tin was out on my bed”

“Now Patrick” said Frank quietly, “Are you sure you didn't just leave it there and forget?”

“Course I didn't” said Patrick

“It's easy to do” said Frank, “And you have seemed a little, shall we say, strained lately. Both Faith and I have been worried about you, haven't we Faith?”

“Well, it was more Frank that...” Faith began as Patrick gave her a hurtful look.

“And I know you've not been happy about having to keep that dog upstairs, but we thought that was for the best. We didn't want it to lead to any bad feeling. Not at all” said Frank.

Faith felt torn. “Perhaps you did just leave it out as Frank said?” she suggested.

“I know it was him” said Patrick angrily, staring across at the older man as he spoke.

Frank sighed, “Now Patrick, this is all just a misunderstanding” he said, his voice as calm as he could make it sound, “But there is no need for anyone to fall out. Now, Faith and I, we've had, well, a bit more of experience of life than you”

“Well, I have anyway” he said, with an insincere smile in the landlady's direction, “But there is no reason why we can't all be friends now is there? “ he added, taking a step towards the young man.

“After all, you have to make allowances for people when they, how can I put it, when they have a more artistic temperament. You know, people, a bit on the sensitive side”

Patrick glared. He knew exactly what Frank had meant by that. Thoughts flashed across his mind. Perhaps he was guessing. Perhaps Mrs Dingle had said something, not deliberately of course. Or perhaps, Frank had had more of a look through his things than he first feared.

“It doesn't matter what I say does it? I mean, you'll come up with an alibi whatever. You'd get that cow over in the pub to back you up. Or Lillian!” Patrick replied

“Alibi Patrick?” Frank cut in quickly, feigning surprise, “You're talking as if a crime's been committed. Now come on, let's keep this sensible. There's a good lad. I mean, if nothing has been taken it's not as if we need to call the Police or anything. I'm sure you wouldn't want that, would you Patrick?”

Patrick was silent. He paused, not knowing what to say. After a moment he managed to speak.

“I'm.......I'm not staying here another night while you're under this roof!” he said.

“Oh Patrick, don't say that” said Faith

“Well, of course, this isn't my house” said Frank, with a small shrug.

“You wouldn't make me choose would you love?” said Faith, looking pleadingly at Patrick.

Frank sat down at the table, confident that he was going nowhere.
“I think you already have” said Patrick sadly, before turning around and walking away.

Faith was about to follow him but Frank reached over quickly and held onto her arm.

“No. Leave him to calm down” he said

“But...” Faith started

“Now Faith” said Frank, “Patrick isn't going to walk out now is he?”

Faith sat down at the table.

“Look at it from his point of view” said Frank leaning over and putting his hand on hers, “He's got himself all worked up, throwing out accusations and now he knows he's wrong. If we give him time to, well, calm down we can all move on. There's no ill feeling on my part. None at all”

“Are you sure?” asked Faith. Frank's reply was interrupted by the sound of the front door opening and closing.

“There you are” said Frank, “He'll have gone out to clear his head”

Faith still looked unconvinced.

“Let's go over the pub for the evening” said Frank. “I promise you Faith. Things will all look very different in the morning” he said with a smile. In fact, he was counting on it.

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Blackpool – The Royal Oak - Wednesday 16th August 1950 – 7:30pm

“Oh, I've got the estimate from the builders in Southport” said Frank, his voice casual, as he reached into his jacket pocket and took out a type-written sheet.

“I'm afraid it's a little more than we thought” he added, “So I was thinking, perhaps we ought to put a bit more into the account”

Faith squinted at the document. It was no good, she was going to have to wait until she got home and then use her glasses.

“Shouldn't we wait until the sale's gone through?” asked Faith

“I'm sure you're right. Still, at least this way we'll know what we'll have to deal with” Frank replied, “Now, I must get another round in” he added as he got up and headed to the bar.

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Frank had managed to avoid the landlady so far, but his luck couldn't hold all evening.

“Where were you this afternoon?” she hissed as she leaned over the bar and passed him his drinks.

“I had some business to transact Agnes” Frank hissed back.

“Never mind business...” she started. She stopped as her husband walked into the bar, carrying a
small crate of brown ale. Agnes patted in her hair at the side and turned around as if she hadn't been talking to Frank at all.

Over at her table, Faith noticed Frank and the landlady talking. What was it that Patrick had said earlier? Something about Agnes being bound to stand up for him? Her train of thought was halted as Beryl sat down in a free chair next to her.

“Oh, I'm glad you're in” said Beryl, “I've been stuck with Mollie Davies for the last half hour. And you know what she's like. It's only being so cheerful that keeps her going”

“Everything alright love?” Beryl asked, seeing the look on her friend's face.

“Bit of a row back home” said Faith, “Patrick said he thought Frank had been in his room, going through his things”

“Well, what would he want to do that for?” Beryl asked

“He says he didn't” said Faith, “Frank thinks Patrick's not very well. That they might have let him out of the sanatorium a bit early. But he's been home ages and he's not been ill”

“He did have that fall” said Beryl

“Well, yes but...” Faith agreed

“And he did nearly catch his death looking for that dog that time” Beryl went on

“But he's never complained about being ill Beryl” said Faith

“They don't sometimes though, do they? That sort. It's pride. You remember my younger brother James? Lost half his right leg at Ypres. When he came home he wouldn't let anybody do anything for him”

At that moment Frank returned with the drinks and sat down at the table. He nodded to Beryl who smiled in return.

“What did Agnes want?” said Faith

“Oh, Agnes” said Frank, thinking quickly, “She was pestering me about my slate. I mean, it's not on is it? Either you give your customers credit or you don't”

“Now, this won't do will it Beryl, you've not got a drink” said Frank, getting up again and heading back to the bar.

“Patrick's said he's leaving” said Faith, once Frank was out of hearing distance.

“Oh, he's not is he?” asked Beryl

“Frank thinks it'll all calm down by the morning” said Faith.

“Well I'm sure he's right” her friend with a smile.

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Blackpool – The home of the Culshaw's – 7:30pm
Dennis looked over his shoulder into the kitchen and shouted into the house, “I told you Mam! It's for me alright!” he called angrily.

He turned back to Patrick, who was standing in their yard, “Do you even know where you're going to go?” he asked.

“Not yet. But, I've got to look after this one” said Patrick, nodding down towards Patch on his lead, “I was thinking Crimea Street. They usually take in anybody”

“Aw Patrick! It's dead rough round there” said Dennis

“Will you help, please?” said Patrick

“Course I will” said Dennis, “Look” he said, glancing over his shoulder for a moment, “Do you want me to say anything. To Mrs Dingle I mean, cause I will if you want”

“I don't think she'll listen. And I think...well, I think he might cause trouble if I did, for me I mean” said Patrick his voice quiet.

“What can you have done that's so bad Patrick?” said Dennis with a smile. Then he saw the worried look on Patrick's face. The young man stopped looking him in the eye, so Dennis decided not to push him on it.

“I still don't think it's fair” said Dennis, “You've been there years. He should be the one to go. I bet Aaron won't be happy”

“He's not here though is he?” said Patrick

“Tell you what” said Dennis, “I'll bring my cart round tomorrow and we'll move you stuff over to ours. Then you can have a look about. There's loads of rooms around here. I don't mind shifting you again later”

“Thank you” said Patrick

Dennis crouched down and gave Patch a smooth, “We'll see you alright, won't we boy?” he said, “When shall I come round?” he asked, looking up at Patrick again.

“Can you come at ten? I'll be ready. There's not all that much to move really. I know they'll be out then. They've got an appointment at the bank”.

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Blackpool – The Royal Oak - Wednesday 16th August 1950 – 7:45pm

“Where did you say you were going Beryl?” asked Frank. He had been trying to listen to the damn woman but he felt like the landlady's eyes were burning into the back of his neck and it was putting him off.

“Just to my sister's in Whitby for a few days. She's in catering you know” Beryl replied as she stood up, “Must just powder my nose”

“Catering?” said Frank, once Beryl had safely moved away.

“She's a washer-up in a hotel kitchen” said Faith.
Faith let out a sigh. Frank reached over the table and gave her hand a squeeze. And all the time he swore he could still feel those eyes on him.

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Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree 10:30pm

“Well?” said Frank as he took the kettle from the stove and filled the teapot.

“The lights on. He's definitely in his room” said Faith with a smile as she walked into the kitchen.

“Now, what did I tell you?” said Frank, “You go and sit in the front room and let me bring in the tea. I knew Patrick wasn't going to storm out in the middle of the night”

Faith left the room.

“I mean” Frank thought smugly to himself, “There's that dog, and his things. And that arm to contend with. He'll probably go in the morning”

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse – Monday 21st August 1950 – early evening

“Disgusting what a taxi costs, when you think how near the station is” said Robert as he walked back into the living room and slipped his wallet into the pocket of his slacks. He had decided a taxi ride was a better option than ringing Lauren Gillespie for a lift. Especially as Aaron was in such a good mood. Or at least, he had been.

“Is the kettle on?” Rob asked as he walked over to the living room table. Aaron looked up from where he was kneeling in front of the fire-place, two suit cases open on the floor in front of him as he started to sort out the washing.

“It's alright, I'll do it” Robert said quickly when he saw the frown on Aaron's face. Rob headed off into the kitchen.

“The stove's that metal thing by the wall” Aaron called out sarcastically. The young man picked up a couple of shirts and stood up. As he did, he felt Robert's arms curl around his waist from behind.

“Hey” said Rob, “Don't be cheeky” he added, leaning in and giving Aaron a quick kiss on the cheek

“I've only just started unpacking” said Aaron

“Can't it wait?” said Robert

“No!” said Aaron with a laugh.
“There's a pile of post on that table, all laid out nice and neat, thanks to Miss Phipps. And I'm leaving all that till tomorrow”

“Yeah. Well I want to unpack” said Aaron

“Later then?” asked Rob

“Yeah. Later” Aaron said, grinning.

Robert smiled and leaned in for another quick kiss on the cheek before letting go of his partner.

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10:30pm

“You nearly done in there?” said Robert, tapping gently on the bathroom door.

“Give us five minutes” Aaron replied. Rob could hear the young man moving around in the water, “It was your idea to have a bath anyway”, Aaron went on, “It's not like it's Sunday, or anything”

“Well, it's the train isn't it?” said Rob, grinning on the other side of the door, “Bound to get you dirty”

“Hah!” said Aaron, “You want to try working in a mine sometime”

“Nah, you're alright” said Robert, running a towel through his still-damp hair. “I'll take your word for it”

“Why are you taking so long anyway? There's not that much of you to wash” he added

“You're lucky there's a door between us” Aaron replied.

Rob just smiled and headed into the bedroom. He quickly reached under the bed and took out the small, brown parcel he'd just managed to sneak upstairs while Aaron was cooking. Luckily, Aaron hadn't paid much attention to the post laid out on the table. But Robert knew from the Jermyn Street address on the back that this was what he was expecting. With a quick look over to the bathroom door, he smiled and started to undo his dressing gown.

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Aaron padded into the bedroom, now in his white vest and striped boxer shorts. A towel was wrapped around his neck as if he was in a gym.

“Well, what to do you think?” asked Robert with a smile as he stood in the centre of the room with his arms outstretched.

“New are they?” said Aaron, looking at the maroon pyjamas his partner was now wearing.

“I ordered them when I was in Jermyn Street” said Rob, taking a step forward and putting his hands around Aaron's waist.

“I don't remember you going there” said Aaron

“Well, we did a lot didn't we?” asked Robert, “Hard to remember it all”

“I'm determined to get you into a pair of these one day” Rob went, on grinning.
“Rather get you out of ‘em” Aaron replied cheekily, hooking his hands around Rob and pulling him near.

“It’s good to be home” said Robert

“You enjoyed the trip though didn’t ya? I did” Aaron asked.

“I loved it” said Rob. “And I love you” he added softly as he leaned in for a kiss.

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse – Tuesday 22nd August 1950 – 10:30am

“I still don't think these builders over at Garston are any good” said Robert, putting his mug of tea down on the living room table, now covered with the correspondence he'd missed while in London.

“I told Mr Foster. You get what you pay for and...” Rob stopped talking when he realised Aaron wasn't listening to him but was engrossed in his own letter.

“Anything wrong?” he asked, seeing the look on his partner's face.

Aaron looked across from the sofa, “It's from Patrick” he explained, “He's really worried about Nan's new fancy man now. They're making him keep Patch locked in his room. This feller says he bit him”

“That's rubbish” said Robert, “I mean, we've taken him out haven't we. We never had any trouble”

“He says he thinks this bloke is messing Nan around too” said Aaron, “He better not be” he added angrily.

“I can't see your Nan being taken in by some charmer” said Robert

“Patrick says he's a real smoothie and he's got Nan and Auntie Beryl wrapped round his finger”

At that moment the phone rang.

“You'd need a big finger” Rob said with a smirk as he headed to his desk.

“Robert. This is serious. I'm going to have to write back, get him to ring us”

Rob nodded as he picked up the phone.

“Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse” he said, “Good morning, I was just talking about you. What? Last Night? God, no. Was anyone hurt? “

Aaron looked up, concerned. Robert held the mouthpiece of the phone against the front of his shirt for a moment and hissed “Mr Foster” towards him.

“Look. I'll be over there as soon as I can. And don't worry. I know it's bad but we can deal with this”
Rob hung up and put his hands to his face for a moment.

“What's happened?” Aaron asked walking over to him.

“There's been a fire over at Garston” said Robert, “He says most of the ground floor's been gutted. No-one was in there, luckily, but it's a disaster. We'll have to drive over”

“Course” said Aaron, reaching over and putting his hand gently on Rob's upper arm

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Garston Manor, Northamptonshire – Tuesday 22nd August 1950 – mid-afternoon

“There you go son” said Mr Foster, putting a mug of tea on the table in front of Aaron, “Course” he continued turning to Robert, “It's hit the missus hard. She thinks our livelihood has gone up in smoke”

“That won't happen Mr Foster” said Robert, “There are plenty of other places in the Trust if it comes to it”

“It was midnight that was the worst. Seemed to take forever for the fire brigade to get here. We had to watch it all go. I thought of trying to get the garden hoses but...”

“No. You were very sensible to hold back” said Rob, grabbing the top of his walking stick firmly, “Anyway. Let's go and see the damage”

“That's another thing” the caretaker as he opened the door out of the cottage, “It doesn't look so bad from the outside. But once you go in! All I can say is thank God all the bits and pieces got put up in the attic before the builders came”

Aaron took a sip from his tea and watched the two men leave. He waited for about five minutes and them stood up, his mind made up. He put his cap on and headed out of the cottage.

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It was going to be alright. It was just a building. No one was hurt. It was just a fire. Robert kept telling himself that as they walked up to the Manor.

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“You weren't wrong about this” said Robert as he looked inside what had once been the dining room. The walls were charred, every surface black. The smell hit you long before you got to the room.

“I'll just go and see what the lads are doing” said Mr Foster, “They were clearing out the kitchens last time I looked”

“Fine. I'll be in the study” said Rob, his voice a little quieter as the older man walked away.

Robert headed quickly to the small room at the other side of the hall and sat down on a long sofa, covered with a white dust sheet. His head was pounding. He covered his face with his hands for a moment and leaned forward, trying to concentrate. There was a loud clatter as his walking stick fell
over onto the wooden tiled floor. He ignored it.  

Suddenly he felt a hand curving across his back and gently, but firmly holding onto his left shoulder. He didn't have to open his eyes to know who it was. He knew who it was.  

“Thought you were staying in the cottage” said Robert  

“Thought I'd better follow you” Aaron replied, his voice soft  

“It's the stench of it Aaron” Rob said, trying to explain, “It's not like, it's not like the plane. It's worse. This is like the barn. This is what it looked like when Mum....”  

“It's alright. I know what you mean” said Aaron  

“You think you're past this stuff” said Rob, sadly, “Then it creeps up on you again”  

“You don't have to get past it” said Aaron, “Not for me, anyhow”  

Robert was quiet for a moment. His face thoughtful.  

“Do you remember that wreck of a man? The one you use to find wandering the halls back at home back in the War” said Robert, angry with himself.  

“Course I remember him” said Aaron, a smile playing on his lips, “Fell in love with him, didn't I?”  

Rob managed a smile back and he sat there quietly for a little longer, Aaron's arm keeping him close.

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Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree – Wednesday 23rd August 1950 – 10:30am

“And he went? Without so much as a word? Well!” said Beryl, putting her tea-cup back down on the kitchen table.  

“We'd just got back from the bank on the Thursday. You know, that day you were off to your Enid's” said Faith, “We'd been sorting something out about the cottage ”  

“And he's definitely gone for good?” said Beryl  

“All his things have gone. Except that big adding machine of his. You know, the one he does his book keeping on”  

“Probably, a bit much to shift. Well, considering” said Beryl, trying to be tactful.  

“There was a note” said Faith, heading over to the mantelpiece and picking up a small envelope which she handed to her friend.  

Beryl opened it up and started to read.

“Dear Mrs Dingle. I have left my key and please find enclosed the rent that is outstanding” she
read out loud.

“He's got lovely hand writing hasn't he?” said Beryl. Faith just folded her arms and looked at her friend.

Beryl continued reading out loud, “Thank you providing what has been for many years a very happy home. Yours Patrick”.

“Aw. That's nice” said Beryl.

“Of course, Frank blames himself” said Faith as she sat down at the kitchen table, “He's been ever so upset about it”

“Well, it's a shame isn't it” said Beryl, “I mean, how long has he been here?”

“Five years” said Faith, “Ever since the War”

“I don't know what I'm going to tell our Aaron” she added.
Emmerdale- The Sugden Farm – Saturday 26th August 1950 – 11:45am

“Dad's still arguing with those two farm hands about the lower field” said Victoria as she closed the kitchen door behind her. “Can't you go out there and break it up?” she asked her husband.

Adam looked up from the table where he was sitting next to Sarah, a photo album out in front of them.

“Nah. He's happy enough” replied Adam, “Besides, it's nearly dinner time isn't it?” he added.

“That's Nana's” said Sarah pointing at a picture.

“That's right sweetheart” said Adam, “That's Uncle Robert when he was a pilot. And those are...some of his friends” he added, sharing a quick sideways glance with his wife.

He moved the album over to the next page. Fortunately, none of the pictures there featured Victoria's first husband. That was a discussion for another day. Sometime never hopefully, Adam thought to himself.

“That's Uncle Robert's house and his car, well you've seen his car haven't you?” said Adam

Sarah nodded.

“Oh, and that's one of his porch. Don't know why we've got that” said Adam, looking puzzled.

Victoria looked over from the oven, “That porch was very expensive” she said. Sarah remained unimpressed.

“Why have you got a funny hat on Daddy?” she asked, pointing at the opposite page.

“It's a helmet. That's when I worked in the mines, years ago. When there was the fighting. That's Uncle Aaron next to me. That's where I met him” said Adam

“Where was I?” asked Sarah

Adam thought for a moment, “Uh...this was a long time ago. I hadn't even met Mummy then” he said

“Why hasn't Uncle Aaron got his own house?” asked Sarah, changing the subject.

Adam looked over to his wife for help.

“He looks after Uncle Robert” said Victoria, “You know. Because Uncle Robert has a bad leg and he can't drive a car”

“You can drive a van, can't you Daddy?” said Sarah

“Yes sweetheart” said Adam, glad that the topic seemed to have moved on.
“Why's that man's only got one arm?” asked Sarah.

Adam looked down at the picture. He himself was beaming at the camera while standing next to Aaron, who had just about managed a smile. Their friend Dafydd was towering over the pair of them and Patrick standing to their right.

“Oh” said Adam, “That's Patrick. He worked with Daddy and Uncle Aaron. He...had an accident” he added, hoping that was sufficient.

“Has he got his own house?” said Sarah, obviously keen to establish a theme as they looked through the photographs.

“He lives with Uncle Aaron's Nana” said Victoria, “She's got a big house with lots of rooms at the seaside”

“I think” said Sarah, staring at the picture, “I think that he's got a kind face”

“Yes” said Adam with a smile, “He's a nice person”

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Uncle Robert and Uncle Aaron, who looks after him..............

Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse – Wednesday 30th August 1950 – 2:00am

Aaron moved the covers away on his side of the bed and sat up, trying not to disturb Robert as he did so. But it barely took him a moment to realise that his partner was not there. He quickly looked over to their closed bedroom door, hoping for the tell-tale sight of the light under it that would have told him that Rob had needed the bathroom too. But it was off. Aaron reached over to the other side of the mattress. It was cold.

Please, not this again, he thought to himself. He knew the fire at Garston had brought back unpleasant memories for Robert. But these days, with his hip and leg being so much better and the memory of the War fading a little with every day Rob had seemed fine. There had been that time in Hampton Court when the maze had unsettled him a little. The confined space and the noise seeming to affect him in a different way to other people. But, other than that and their first visit to the Manor after the fire, Aaron couldn't remember another recent incident. Robert was better. He deserved to feel better.

Aaron padded out onto the landing and peeked down the stairs into their living room. He could see Rob's familiar, tall frame leaning over the table and moving papers around. Inwardly, he sighed with relief and headed to the bathroom. Not that it was a good thing that Robert was up working at this hour. He'd work himself into the ground if Aaron let him. But at least it wasn't anything worse.

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Robert leaned onto the table, his arms stretched out, as he stared at the documents he'd sorted. He was sure he could solve this. So what if the inspector from the Trust had said they should write the Manor off as a going concern because 'no one would pay to look at the ruined rooms'. Couldn't they move the cafe and the admin offices into there? It would still leave the rest of the place for visitors. But would it cost too much? He was sure he could work it out if he just tried hard enough. He picked up the estimates sheet for the fifth time and frowned. He could hear that voice in his head, “Oh, you put the effort in when it suits you, I'll give you that!”'. He'd love it if this all turned
out as a failure for him, even if the fire wasn't his fault. But then, that was his Dad for you.

Suddenly he felt a hand resting on the small of his back and a familiar voice

“Do you even know what time it is?” asked Aaron, who had walked up towards him silently.

“I didn't wake you did I?” asked Robert, “Sorry. I was trying to keep quiet”

Aaron shook his head. “Don't worry about that. But it's gone two Robert. We're back at Garston again tomorrow, so.....bed, alright?” he replied, his hand rubbing Rob's back in small circles.

Robert smiled and turned around, wrapping his arms around Aaron in a hug.

“You're the boss now is it?” he asked, with a warm smile.

“Had to get rid of the last feller didn't we?” said Aaron with a cheeky grin, “Terrible he was”

“Oh, was he now?” asked Robert

“It's like you always say” said Aaron, “Can't get the staff can ya?”

“Ok then, bed it is” said Rob. He leaned forward to give Aaron a quick, soft kiss before unwrapping his arms from him.

“I was thinking” said Robert as he headed over to the stairs, “If we moved the cafe and the offices into the burnt out rooms, we could still open for visitors. Course, we can forget about that happening this year!” he added as he started to walk up the stairs.

“Hmmmm?” said Aaron as he followed him.

“I was saying about moving some of the rooms at the Manor” said Rob

“I was just thinking” said Aaron, “These new pyjamas of yours. They're a bit snug aren't they?”

Robert looked down for a moment at his maroon coloured nightwear. He looked over his shoulder and smiled. “Is that bad?” he asked.

Aaron stood next to him on the stairs, resting his right hand on Robert's behind.

“Nah. It's uh....very good” he replied with a grin, moving his hand just a little. “Come on. Early start tomorrow” he added.

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8:30am

“Ready to go?” said Aaron. Robert was picking some papers from the desk and putting them in a leather case.

“Ready” replied Rob, “I want Mr Foster to have a look though some of this. See if we can rescue this disaster. You know that awful bloke from the Trust is coming back in a couple of weeks? I'll need all the support I can get”
“Oh, have you got that parcel?” he added as he headed over to the doorway, “The books to send to your Nan’s”

“Yes, It's already in the car” Aaron replied

“And did you put your letter in it?” Robert asked

“Yes!” said Aaron, “It's all sorted. I'll drive over to the village while you'll in the Manor.

“Right. Well, let's get going then” said Rob, as if Aaron had been the one delaying him. But Aaron just smiled and followed him out into the porch.

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The man with the kind face..................

Blackpool – A dingy block of flats in Crimea Street – Friday 1st September 1950 – 8:00pm

The man rushing down the path away from the house had his coat collar pulled up and his hand titled down. There were a lot of visitors like that to the ground floor flat, Patrick had noticed. He pushed open the front door and let Patch into the hall. There was no lock on the door, but then thieves didn't come round here. They had more taste.

“Hello darling” said the young blonde standing in the doorway of the flat, “You settled in alright?” she asked.

“Uh. Yes, thank you” said Patrick.

“He's a lovely little chap, isn't he?” said the woman, bending down to give Patch a smooth, “That's the thing here. No trouble will dogs. They turn a blind eye to that. And a load of other things”

“They didn't like dogs at my last place” said Patrick, “Least, some people didn't” he added, his voice a little quieter.

“You're Patrick aren't you?” she asked, “I heard that young lad say when he helped you move in” Patrick nodded.

“I'm Veronica” said the woman, “You know, like the filmstar? Veronica Lake?”

“I know who you mean. I like the pictures” said Patrick. It was at that point that shoutng started echoing down from the first floor.

“Sounds like they're at it again” said Veronica, a little wearily, “Puts some of my customers right off it does”

“I better get him upstairs, he'll want feeding” said Patrick.

Veronica looked up at the young man and gave him a proper look. He had a handsome face. You could hardly see the scar, from the right angle. And he had that nice, floppy dark fringe. He looked like Gregory Peck. Well, a bit, anyway. She stood up.

“I usually like to keep my customers and this place separate” she said, “Saves things getting all in a mess”

“Oh. That sounds..... sensible” said Patrick awkwardly.

“I could always make an exception” Veronica with a smile, “I mean. You wouldn't have to worry about your arm. You're like an athlete compared to some of my fellers”

Patrick was stumped for what to say at first. “Can I think about it?” he eventually managed. He already had, but thought an extremely firm, “No thank you” might not go down well. And, to be fair, this was the only person in the block that had even given him the time of day so far. So he ought to be polite.

“Course you can darling” said Veronica, “Well, better go. No rest for the wicked!” she added before closing the door of her room.

“Come on you” Patrick said to Patch, “Let's get home before we get into any more trouble”

“I mean. What would your Dad say?” he added as they started the long walk up the stairs.

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*The lady with the big house with lots of rooms at the seaside*

Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Saturday 2nd September 10:30am

“It's a parcel for Patrick” said Faith as she walked into the kitchen from the hallway, “From our Aaron” she added, as he read the address written on the back.

“Can you send it on?” asked Beryl, who was sitting at the table.

“I'd have a job. I don't know where he's gone. Frank says....” started Faith, before stopping.

“Go on love” said Beryl encouragingly

“Well, he says it's a bit soon to start worrying. I mean, it's only a *little* over two weeks since he left”

“Frank did go and ask at the Penny Arcade. You know, just to put my mind at rest, but they told him he's stopped doing book-keeping”

“That's a shame. So no-one you could ask then?” said Beryl

“Not that I can think of” said Faith.

“Where is Frank by the way?” Beryl added, glancing around the kitchen as if she'd overlooked him.

“Oh, he's gone to see a friend in the building trade. Trying to sort out something for the cottage. For once it's ours” Faith replied

“He's making a lot of new friends isn't he?” said Beryl, “Well, in general I mean”

“He's a friendly person Beryl” said Faith.
“Oh. Hello son” said Mr Dawson as he walked into the small cramped office at the back of the arcade. Thanks to his size, the middle-aged man had just made it that bit more of a squeeze.

“Is it alright to do the books here Mr Dawson?” asked Patrick as he looked up from the ledger, “I don't have the room at my new digs and...”

The older man waved a pudgy hand as he spoke, “No. You're alright. I only need the key to one of the machines” he added as he opened the top drawer of a wooden filing cabinet by the door and took out a pile of knitting.

“He been handed in or something?” he added as he spotted Patch curled up on the floor next to Patrick's feet.

“No he's mine. He's not a problem is he?” the young man asked.

“Wouldn't be the first dog in here. You've met the wife haven't ya?” Mr Dawson asked in a grumpy voice as he put the knitting on top of the cabinet.

“No. I haven't” replied Patrick

“Wish I had your luck” Mr Dawson said as he took out a large bunch of keys and headed out of the office

Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Saturday 2nd September 10:45am

“Enid's asked me to go to hers for Christmas” said Beryl

“She's got in early. It's only September after all” said Faith as she poured the tea out. “Wouldn't you rather do something more lively”

“Such as what?” her friend asked.

“More lively that your Enid's?” said Faith, thinking. “You could go over to St.Marks. I suppose. Sit on that bench they've got in the graveyard”

“I take it you'll be bursting at the seams here, as usual” said Beryl

“Not exactly bursting Beryl. But our Aaron is due to come. Once he's taken his boss to see his family in Yorkshire. And my showgirls will be coming back, for the pantomime. And there's Frank”

“You're welcome to join us” said Faith, “I mean. We've had some good do's here haven't we?”

“Some of them weren't too bad” agreed Beryl.
One of those do's - not so long ago

Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – late one December during the War

Beryl was standing in the kitchen, pouring some gin into a bowl of punch on the kitchen table.

“Not so much of that Beryl” said Faith, as she came out of the larder and put a couple more glasses on a tray. “That bottle's got to last the duration. I wouldn't even have that if it weren't for Mr Fosdyke's contacts in the trade”

“Funny day to have a party” said Beryl, “Why didn't you wait until Christmas?”

“Half my lodgers will be working love. There is a War on” said Faith.

“Those show girls seem to getting on with your Canadian lads” said Beryl, as she gave the punch-bowl a stir.

“Oh, I think the boys are just being polite” said Faith, “Anyway. I think we should give everyone another drink, then have a game of sardines” she added as she picked up the tray of glasses

“Will they know how to? Being foreign I mean” asked Beryl as she carefully picked up the punch bowl.

“Oh, they're fast learners love” said Faith with a grin as she headed into the hall, “Do you think we should wake your Lester?” she asked as she walked into the lounge.

Beryl looked across at her husband, fast asleep in the corner by the wireless. “Seems happy enough to me” she said

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“So, what does the second person do?” asked Ethan. Faith took the arm of the strapping, young blonde Canadian in her's.

“It's simple love. I go off and hide somewhere in the house. Then the first person to find me has to get in there with me. Then the next and so on. The game finishes when we're all in there together”

“I think I understand” the young man said, flashing her a smile with his very white teeth.

Faith walked over to the door to the hall, “Now. No peeking you lot” she said to the group crowding the room.

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A little later

“Shh a minute” said Faith, turning to Ethan who was sat next to her in the cupboard under the stairs in the hall.
They heard the sound of one of the chorus girls giggling and then steps as she walked away.

“We want to make it more of a challenge, don't we love?” said Faith with a smile.

“I thought someone else would have found us” said Ethan, “I found you almost straight away ma'am” he went on, “It seemed a real obvious place to hide”

“I don't think the others have your...talents” said Faith. “Cosy in here, isn't it?” she went on, hooking her arm through his.

“It certainly is, uh, very comfortable” said Ethan, patting the cushion below him. "Lots of room too", he added, as he squinted a little in the dark. He could just see with the light from the hall coming in through the gaps around the door.

“Oh, I cleared this out in case of an air raid” said Faith, “Best place to sit it out. Anyway, quiet again” she added, lowering her voice, “Someone's coming”

The handle to the door turned, but it remained closed. Soon after there was the sound of someone walking away and heading up the stairs.

“Did you lock the door Mrs Dingle after I came in?” Ethan asked.

“I think I must have done” said Faith giving Ethan's arm a squeeze, “Wasn't that silly of me?” she smiled.

“Uh......shall I unlock it?” the young man asked

“In a bit love” said Faith with a smile, “In a bit”

Chapter End Notes

An update including a festive Faith flashback for all my readers who have stuck with this epic tale of 1940s (now 50s) Robron and friends. Merry Christmas and thank you to those who take the time to comment (you know who you are).

Just as an aside, except for having dark black hair, Patrick does not look much like the (then) contemporary US Actor, Gregory Peck. That was his new neighbour, Veronica, projecting.

I have a modern British actor in my mind when writing Patrick. But as a MOC character, readers can imagine him however they like, taking account of the brief physical descriptions that have been given in this series.

Also, Adam reference to his best friend as "Uncle Aaron" is common practice among British working families when referring to close friends of a child's parents (more common in the 50s than now). Aaron, in the same way, has referred to Mrs Axelby, his Nan's oldest friend who has known him since he was little as "Aunty Beryl" even though she is not a relative.
“Only me” said Beryl, as she let herself in through the kitchen door.

Faith put her pen down and quickly took off her glasses. “Is it three already?” she asked.

“Yes, but no need to rush” said Beryl, “We're only going along to No.11 after all” she added, pulling up a chair and sitting down at the table.

“Mind you, that's a first” Beryl went on, “Mabel handing out an invitation”

“Be fair love” said Faith, “She's bound to want to celebrate their Nerys getting engaged. She's been on the shelf since the General Strike. She probably thought she'd be there forever. You know. Like your Enid”

“Enid is very particular when it comes to men” said Beryl, “Which is more than I can say for some people” she added with a sniff.

“Anyway” Beryl went on, “I don't expect Mabel will be pushing the boat out much today If there is any food on offer it'll probably be from your larder”

Faith nodded.

“Who you writing to anyway?” Beryl asked nosily

“I'm writing back to our Aaron” Faith replied, “He's ever so busy right now. Having to drive back and forth to Garston all the time”

“Where's that exactly?” asked Beryl.

Faith frowned for a moment, “I'm not sure Beryl. Somewhere down there. But either way it's a lot of driving” she said

“Oh, I wouldn't like that” said Beryl, “Being in a motorcar all the time. I still don't think they're safe. Still it shows his boss must think a lot of him”

“How do you mean love?” asked Faith

“It shows how much he trusts him” said Beryl, “You know. That's he's willing to put himself in his hands so often”

“You're not wrong there” said Faith, smiling to herself.

Beryl looked over to the mantelpiece, where a small brown package had been placed next to the clock.

“You saying anything about your old lodger? In your letter” she asked.

“Well. Aaron did ask if his parcel had turned up. He's been expecting Patrick to get it touch” said Faith, her smile vanishing.

“Frank thinks”, said Faith, “And I think he's right. Frank thinks we shouldn't mention the, well, the
falling out. That wouldn't be fair on our Aaron. He'll only want to rush up here to sort it out and that wouldn't be right. Not when he's so busy. And with his boss relying on him so much right now”

“So we thought we'd just say Patrick had decided to get himself a place on his own and that we knew he was busy settling in and we expected to hear from him soon” Faith added

“You don't think he might come home before your Aaron's next visit then?” asked Beryl.

“Well I still hope he will love. So does Frank. He's been ever so worried since Patrick walked out” said Faith

“Is Frank not coming to this do this afternoon?” asked Beryl, idly looking around the kitchen.

“He's gone out love” said Faith, “Something to do with the cottage”

“That place seems more trouble than it's worth if you ask me” said Beryl.

Faith nodded. “I'll finish this later” she said, as she got up from the kitchen table.

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Blackpool – The back of the Sea-View hotel – 3:15pm

It was lucky Dennis had a head for heights. With his long ladder resting on the flat roof of the hotel kitchens, he could reach the second floor. He whistled to himself as he started to clean one of the bedroom windows.

Still you got a good view, he told himself. As he worked away he looked over to the Royal Oak. You could see right into their back yard from the position he was in. It was right then that he spotted a familiar face. A tall, slim man, had just walked out of the back door and was smoothing back his grey hair. A moment later, the landlady appeared wearing a black dressing gown in an oriental print. She looked nervously around as if she was expecting to see someone else in the yard. She didn't look up. But then, why should she? She handed the man his hat and, in a moment he was gone.

Dennis shook his head and started to climb down so he could shift his ladder. It was Mrs Dingle he felt sorry for.

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse- Thursday 28th September 1950 – early evening

Robert couldn't say the argument had come out of nowhere. He knew he'd been complaining too much about the problems at Garston on the way home. And, if he was honest, for the last couple of weeks too. And he knew he'd said the wrong thing to Aaron when they'd walked into the guesthouse. His partner was only trying to be supportive after all. On the landing, he leaned against the door of the spare bedroom for a moment.

In the spare bedroom Aaron sat down on the bed, pausing to briefly wipe at his eyes. There was a knock on the door and Rob's voice. He decided to ignore it and instead grabbed a pillow and put it
on the floor. The chess set was laid out on the floor in front of the window, where he'd left it. He reached over and took a book from the nightstand, “Chess problems for beginners” and flicked through to where he had left a marker. He stared at the pieces laid out on the board for a moment then shut the book with an abrupt snap and put it on the floor. It was no good. He could no more solve what he was staring at then help Robert right now. Or at least, that was how it felt.

The last couple of weeks...........................

“Aaron, could you turn that radio down” said Rob, not looking up from the pile of papers spread over the table.

Aaron sighed and leaned across to the wireless. The sound was barely audible. He got up and wandered over to the table.

“Is there anything I can do?” he asked, his hands thrust into the pockets of his slacks.

“No. I just need some quiet” said Robert.

Aaron just nodded and walked over the kitchen. To see if he could do something useful in there.

Robert was sat at his desk, flicking through his address book and scribbling down the names of various builders on a piece of paper.

“I'm going up now” said Aaron, standing behind him.

“Yeah. Fine. You don't have to wait for me” said Rob

“Don't stay up too late” said Aaron

“Aaron” said Robert, “I won't be long I promise. This man at the Trust keeps shifting the goal posts. I've got to get some quotes sorted out”

Aaron nodded and walked over to the foot of the stairs. “And eat that sandwich I made you” he added, nodding towards the table in front of the sofa where a corn-beef sandwich was lying on a plate, looking neglected.

“Don't fuss!” said Rob. He looked over to his partner for a moment and saw the frown. “I'll eat it later, I promise” he said. Aaron nodded and headed upstairs.

A little while late he was sat up in bed reading his book on chess. He should have got the board out to follow it really, he thought. But there wasn't the room in here. He started to read but his eyelids were heavy.

In the morning Aaron woke and pulled back the covers. He noticed that Rob was fast asleep next to him. He leaned down to retrieve his chess book that had fallen on the floor and put it on his nightstand. Minutes later he was walking down stairs and heading for the kettle. As he walked through the living room he noticed the sandwich still sitting there on the plate.
“Go on, drink that” said Aaron, as he handed Robert a mug of tea.

“You don't have to stand over me” said Rob.

“Don't I?” asked Aaron, as he walked over to the sofa and picked up his letter again.

“Have you got a minute?” he asked.

“Actually” said Robert, looking at his watch, “I'm expecting Mr Foster to call any minute. Is it important?”

Aaron was about to speak when the telephone on Rob's desk started to ring and the young man headed over to pick it up.

“Suppose it isn't” Aaron said under his breath and he walked out of the room, carrying his letter.

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“Aaron, have you moved my committee papers?” said Robert, looking in frustration at the documents spread out on the table. He walked over to his desk and searched there too.

“What's that?” said Aaron, walking out of the kitchen and drying his hands on a towel.

“My Parish council papers. I need them. Have you shifted them somewhere” said Rob, as he put his leather case down on the desk and opened one of the drawers.

“Why would I do that? You could always not go” said Aaron. “Don't you have enough to do right now?”

“Let's not start this now Aaron” said Robert, opening the next of the drawers, “I've told you to leave this stuff alone”

“Have you looked in your case?” asked Aaron angrily.

“Well, of course they're not.....” said Rob as he undid the zip on his holder, stopping as he spotted what he had been looking for.

The silence in the room was interrupted by the sound of a car pulling up outside the Gatehouse.

“That'll be Lauren” said Aaron, his voice even.

“Right....I'd better go” said Rob, but Aaron had already turned around and walked out of the room.

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Then they headed to Garston. Again.

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Thursday 28th September- early evening.......... 

“And you know the worst thing?” said Robert, as he furiously put his leather case down on the living room table.

Aaron sighed and just leaned on the back of the sofa.

“That man at head office told me. He told me to go ahead and plan for re-opening. He knew the
electrical report would put and end to that. He must have done!"

“Robert, I don't know what to say to you. Everything I said in the car was wrong!” said Aaron, “Maybe it's time to, I don't know, to draw a line under it” he added quietly as he started to head to kitchen.

“And how is that going to look then?” asked Rob as he sat down. “You just stick to your driving will ya?”

Aaron stopped in his tracks and took a deep breath. When he turned around, Robert knew he had said the wrong thing.

“Aaron, look...” he started to say, as he saw the anger in her partner's eyes.

The other young man took the car keys out of his pocket and walked over to the table.

“No boss ” he said, slamming the keys down on the table, “Next time you want to get to that flaming house, you drive yourself there”

“You know I can't do that” said Robert, keeping his voice quiet now, “Don't be daft. Well, I mean...”

But there was no mollifing his partner at that moment.

“Get that stuck-up cow in the village to drive ya then!” said Aaron as he headed for the stairs.

“Aaron!” called Robert, but the other young man just kept walking.

Rob got up and started to follow him, but by the time he got to the top of the stairs Aaron had closed the door of the spare bedroom behind him. He reached out to turn the handle, but the door wouldn't move.

“Aaron. Come on” said Robert, “You can't lock me out in my own house” he pleaded

“I know it's your house Robert!” Aaron replied angrily through the door, “You don't have to tell me that!”

Rob cursed inwardly. He hadn't wanted to make things worse. “I didn't mean it like that Aaron” he said, “Come on. Let me in”.

“Just leave me alone” said Aaron.

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Robert had been leaning quietly against the door. He decided to try and let things cool down. He headed back to the living room and took his paperwork out of his case. Aaron had been right, of course. It was time to draw a line under Garston Manor House. The best he could manage now was to try and find a new job for the Fosters. He’d promised them he wouldn't let them down. But as he looked through the documents in front of him, his thoughts kept drifting to that locked door and the young man behind it,

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Rob looked over to the clock on the mantelpiece. Aaron had been upstairs for over an hour now. He’d been expecting him to come down off his own bat. He wasn't sure what to do. They had never had a bad row. Well, not for years in any case. Robert got up and headed for the kitchen. He was
soon checking through the larder. He knew there was a tin of cocoa in there somewhere. Even if Aaron did tease him about “never setting foot in the place”. He headed over to the stove and reached for the pan.

“Aaron?” Rob asked through the bedroom door, “I’ve brought you up a drink”. There was no answer.

Robert sighed and crouched down, putting two mugs onto the floor outside the room. Then he sat on the floor, trying to make himself comfortable despite his weaker hip.

“You were right about Garston” said Rob, hoping this might encourage a response, “I just didn't want to hear it. Not been a good month really has it? Come back from our holiday and all this, I must have been a bit difficult to live with. I know that.”

“Thing is. Is was like that bloke from the Trust was glad it had happened. You know, knock me off my pedestal a bit. It was all going all right until that fire. First time anything had. I'm used to it you see? You know that. It was like that with my..... well, when I got married. And then in the RAF. I think I'm going somewhere them, all of a sudden I'm not”

“It's different with you though Aaron” said Robert, “I know we don't always get it right. I know I don't always get it right. But you. You're what's most important. You know that”

“Don't ya?” he pleaded.

Robert heard the key turn in in the lock. Then it opened a little. Relieved, he got up, grabbing the two mugs of hot chocolate before walking into the room.

Aaron was sitting on the floor near the window, resting on top of a pillow and leading back against the hardly-used bed. Rob took it as a good sign that Aaron had put a second pillow down on the floor next to him. He handed his partner a mug and sat down on the spare pillow. Aaron gave a small smile of thanks and started to drink his cocoa. They sat there in silence next to each other for a while.

“Been having a practice have ya?” said Robert, pointing to the chess set laid out on the floor.

Aaron just gave a small shrug.

“Do you know one of the things I liked about going to London?” asked Aaron, breaking the silence.

Robert was all ready to reply, 'the money I spent on ya?' but something told him that would be wrong right then. “No, tell me” he said instead.

“When we were there, I wasn't just your driver....” Aaron began

“Aaron. That came out all wrong earlier” said Rob, “You're not just my driver. I was angry, that's all. Not angry with you I know, but...”
“Listen will ya?” said Aaron.

“Sorry” said Robert

“When we there. We were just me and you. It was better than being at my Nan's, some ways. We didn't have to tell anyone you were my boss. Well, I know I told Bobby that when we went backstage at the theatre. But even then I'm sure those other lads knew. Knew that it was just something we had to say”

“And that's all it is Aaron” said Rob, “Something we have to say. Just so we're safe. If I could tell people I would, you know that”

“What, even your Dad?” asked Aaron, giving a small, hollow laugh.

Robert put his arm around Aaron shoulders, “Yeah. Even my Dad” he replied.

“This being the boss thing. It's not something I want to do. It's just what we have to do” he added softly.

“I know. You get the better part of the deal though don't you?” asked Aaron, turning to Rob and looking at him sadly, “It's me who's walking a few steps behind you all the time. Driving your car. Living in your house.”

“I'm sorry I said that. This may be my house, on paper. But it's our home” said Robert, ”Must be my day for putting my foot in it” he added with a slight smile.

“Last few week's haven't been much fun either have they?” asked Aaron, “You say that House isn't important but it has been. I've wanted to talk to you about stuff and you've just shut me out”

“I didn't mean to” said Rob, “I.......I only want you to be proud of me Aaron”

“Why don't you understand Robert?” said Aaron, “I'm already proud of you. I've always been proud of you. All I wanted to do was help ya. You've let me help before. What's so important about this that you've got to do it all yourself? It's just a house. It's just a job”

Robert thought carefully for a moment before replying.

“I think I've let it become a bit too important. My big success that I didn't need anyone to help me with” he said.

“But I need you Aaron” he said. “And sometimes. Well, sometimes, I need to you to remind me just how lucky I am”

He leaned over and kissed Aaron gently on the side of his forehead.

“Especially lucky that I've got you” he added, his voice soft.

Aaron leaned over and buried his head onto his partner's chest. Hooking his arm around his waist.

“Right” said Robert, “This is what I think should happen. First, I'll forget about Garston. Not about Mr and Mrs Foster. I've already got an idea how I can help them”

“And then, how about I do something to make up for this month being so miserable?” he asked.

“Can we go to Blackpool?” asked Aaron.
“For a visit? Course we can. We could go next week if you want. Do you need to check with your Nan first though?” Rob replied.

Aaron lifted his head off his partner's chest and frowned.

“Come on” he said, as he got up from the floor. “Let's go downstairs”

Aaron instinctively reached over and helped Robert up onto his feet.

“I need to show you something” he said.

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A little later.....

“When did you get this?” asked Robert, looking up from Faith's letter as he sat on the sofa.

“Sometime last week” said Aaron as he sat down next to him.

“Why didn't you tell me?” Rob asked.

“I did tell you. You were too busy!” Aaron snapped, instantly regretting it. He put his hand up to his face and rubbed his forehead above his right eye.

“Hey” said Robert softly as he reached over with his right hand and started to gentle massage the back of Aaron's neck. “I thought we were pals again?” he added.

Aaron let his hands drop to his lap. “Yeah. Course we are. I've just been letting this get to me, And I knew that Trust feller was piling on the pressure for ya.”

“Well, for what it's worth” said Rob, “I'm concerned too. I think we ought to go up there. We can go on Monday if you like”

“What about Garston?” asked Aaron.

“Well, you were right” said Rob, “Don't look like that” he added with a smile as Aaron did a double take. “We'll go there tomorrow, just so I can speak to the Fosters. I've got an idea about them. I'll tie up some loose ends and we can have a long stay in Blackpool. Then we'll find out what's going on”

“Thing is” said Aaron, “I don't think Patrick would move out. Not for a minute”

“Well, your Nan's letter does say he's gone” said Robert

“I think he's gone” said Aaron, “I don't think it was his choice though. He loved it at Nan's. He told me! He'd never had a proper home before. Never. He'd gone from a boys home right into the Army and then to the training centre. He's only been in digs once and he only got through that cause he met Daniel”

“He wouldn't go and live somewhere on his own. He wouldn't walk away from somewhere he could bring his feller and, you know, not have to worry about someone finding out”

“I know” said Rob, giving Aaron's shoulders another rub. “And I think you're right. This doesn't add up does it? The so-called dog bite, turning that regular lodger away, Patrick doing a moonlight
“What about the other women? Do you think he's stringing my Nan along?” asked Aaron

“He could just be a big flirt. But I'll tell you one thing Aaron. Even if he's managed to fool her about what he's like he didn't fool Patrick. And he won't fool me and you either” said Robert.

“We'll sort this out” said Rob, “Now come here” he added, stretching his arms open so he could wrap them round his partner in a hug.

Aaron gratefully leaned in and pressed his head onto Rob's chest.

“Me and you Aaron” said Robert softly, holding tight to the other young man, “Me and you”.

Aaron closed his eyes and smiled.

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Blackpool – A dingy block of flats in Crimea Street- Friday 29th September – just after mid-night

The thump from downstairs and the shouting didn't wake Patrick, but it certainly woke Patch. The small dog scampered from his basket and jumped up onto the bed, climbing over the young man so he was lying in the gap between him and the wall.

Patrick sat up in bed a little. He reached over and smoothed Patch gently as he listened. The shouting stopped moments afterward, but he kept stroking his pet a little longer.

He rolled over onto his awkward side and tried to get comfy as he curled his right arm protectively around Patch.

“We'll be....” he started to stay before he was overtaken by a bout of coughing. He sat up again and reached over to his nightstand and took a gulp from a glass of water.

“We'll be alright” he said as he lay down and closed his eyes, giving Patch a bit of a hug.

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Blackpool – Beryl Axelby’s home – Friday 29th September 1950 – 2:30pm

“What is it you're looking for?” asked Beryl as Faith sat in one of her armchairs, rummaging through her handbag.

“I thought I had a hankie in here” said Faith

“Do you want one of mine? I'm not short of them” said Beryl, “I got one from Lester every Christmas without fail”

“Well he was always set in his ways wasn't he” said Faith, “Well, that takes the biscuit” she added as she took a white square of material out of her bag.

“What does?” asked Beryl, putting her tea cup down.
“I've only gone and left my purse at home” said Faith, “I could have sworn I picked it up. Well, that's it. I'm now, officially, staring to get old”

“Happens to us all love” said Beryl, lifting her tea cup. “Even you” she added.

“It's no good” said Faith, as she stood up, “I'll have to go home and look for it. Otherwise I'll only think I dropped it on the way”

“You had your other bag yesterday” said Beryl walking her to the door, “You must have left it in that”

“You're right, I did” said Faith, “Tell you what. We'll hit the shops tomorrow. I'll see if I can get Frank to escort us”

“That'll make a nice change” said Beryl.

“Well he's had a lot on” said Faith, “He's had his hands full with this cottage”

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Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse Friday 29th September 1950 – 3:00pm

It really wasn't Faith's day, she decided. She'd caught her heel walking in the alley behind the Guesthouse.

“At least it didn't snap till I was almost home” she told herself as she slipped her shoes off in the kitchen. Minutes later, she had padded up to her room in her stocking feet and had opened the wardrobe against the dividing wall. She reached in and took out a dark navy handbag and, with a smile of relief, opened it and took out her purse.

It was the last time she smiled that day. Because it was just as she reached in and took out a pair of black shoes, then that she heard it. A female laugh. A young female laugh coming through the wall. That wasn't so odd. What the girls did in their own bedrooms was their own affair. Live and let live was her motto after all. But it was the second voice that caused her concern. The man's voice that she hear talking.

Frank's voice.

Faith stayed there, standing in silence in front of the wardrobe. After a short time, she headed out of the room. She put her hand on the door knob of Carol and Lillian's room, took a deep breath and opened the door.

TO BE CONTINUED
Faith had ignored Frank as he called out to her when she stormed out of the bedroom. By the time he had dressed hastily and caught up with her she was in his top-floor room. His suitcase was open on top of the single bed and the landlady had already dumped some shirts out of the wardrobe into it.

“Faith please” Frank started to implore, “This isn’t.....”

Faith paused, “Oh Frank. Don't tell me this isn't what it looks like. I've been here before too often for that”

“And I've not always been the one doing the walking in” she muttered under her breath as she headed for the dresser.

“No. No.” said Frank, “I'm not going to lie to you. You saw what you saw. But I swear to you Faith, this is the first time it's happened”

“What difference does that make?” said Faith as she opened the drawer of the small dresser and took out more of Frank's belongings.

“I know you're angry and I know you're hurt” said Frank, all the time keeping his voice smooth and reasonable, “And you have every right to be. Every right”

But Faith appeared too angry to listen. “Patrick said something about you and that girl. I should have paid more notice!” she replied.

“Patrick!” said Frank, dismissively, “He hadn't seen anything. There was nothing to see!” Frank insisted, “Oh, perhaps her flirting with me a little that was all. Then his imagination did the rest. You know what that sort are like Faith. He doesn't understand this side of life. He doesn't understand us”

“There isn't an 'us' Frank” said Faith, “Not any more!”

“But please Faith”, said Frank, leaning forward across the bed towards her, “Please don't throw away what we have. Not because I was weak and foolish. Not just because I gave in to some silly girl who's been throwing herself at me for weeks”

And then Frank saw what he was looking for. That tiny, flicker of doubt in Faith's eyes. The small feeling that was telling her that perhaps, just perhaps, this wasn't his fault. Or at least, not entirely his fault. That was something he could have worked with. He'd worked with it before. Not with Faith, that was true. And he might have been able to pull it off again. But then there was that annoying factor that so often got in his way. Other people.

“Tell her Frank” said Lillian from the doorway. Frank and Faith both turned around.

“It's alright uh, Lillian, I've explained about all this” said Frank quickly moving towards the young woman.
“I told Frank it'd all come out eventually Mrs Dingle” said Lillian.

Frank turned around to look at Faith. The glare on her face told him all he needed to know. There was no talking himself out of this one.

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The alleyway behind the Guesthouse – an hour or so later

“Dennis. Could you do a favour for me?” Faith called across.

The young man looked up from his window-cleaning cart which he was wheeling down the alleyway. Mrs Dingle was leaning against the side of the gate at the back yard of the guesthouse, her arms folded. Normally, he'd be a little wary of her requests. But she seemed a bit more quiet than usual.

“What kind of favour Mrs D?” he asked, letting his cart down for a moment.

“Are you going past Mrs Axelby's?” asked Faith. The young man nodded in reply, “Could you drop a note round for me. It's in the kitchen”

“Course I can” said Dennis.

“Thank you love. I'll just get it” said Faith, turning and heading back into her home.

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Blackpool – Vanessa Woodfield's surgery – that evening

“How could you Dad?” said Vanessa as she sat down at her kitchen table. Her voice was more weary than angry. But then, this was a road they had both walked down before.

Her father put his cup of tea down before replying, “Now” he said smoothly, “It's not entirely my fault. I was tempted. Yes, I'll admit that. But it was a mistake. One single, stupid mistake. I didn't know this Lillian was going to tell Faith a pack of lies now did I?”

“And was it? A pack of lies?” said Vanessa

“Now Vanessa, really” said Frank, “Would I lie to my own daughter?” he added, adopting a hurt expression.

Vanessa said nothing.

“And to make matters worse” Frank went on, “I had to spend all that money on that blasted cottage. We hadn't even bought it properly yet!”

“How did it cost you anything then?” asked Vanessa

“Well, it was empty” said Frank, “And the builders were free so...” he tailed off. “Not that I begrudge it of course. Not at all. I agreed to help Mrs Dingle out in, well, in good faith actually” he said, smiling insincerely.
Vanessa just shook her head.

“So, the thing is….,” said her father, “I know the best thing would be for me to move on. Given all this, how shall I put it, unpleasantness”

“It'll be all round town Dad. I can guarantee that” said Vanessa, “You would have to pick a show girl wouldn't you? It'll be round all the other landladies before you know it”

“Oh, I'm sure of that” said Frank, “But, well, it's not even as if I've got the train fare to leave…”

Vanessa sighed.

Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse- Friday 29th September 1950 – 10:30pm

Robert had been a lot more attentive since they had made up after their falling out. Even, Aaron thought, a little bit on the clingy side. Not that Aaron was complaining. He had stripped down to his vest and trunks and had just walked into the bedroom. His partner was in his pyjamas but standing next to Aaron's telescope, waiting for him.

“I love you” Robert whispered as he wrapped his arms around the other young man and pulled him close for a hug. Aaron smiled and hugged him back, gently rubbing Rob's back with his right hand.

“Why couldn't we go to Garston today after?” Aaron asked as he broke away and walked round to his side of the bed.

“I had to check some things. In my contract” said Rob as he walked over and climbed into bed, “And I had to go and look at some rooms in the Manor House” he added.

“We're still ok to go to my Nan's on Monday?” asked Aaron, picking up his chess book from the stand.

“I've got it all planned” said Robert with a grin, reaching for his own detective novel.

“Course you have” said Aaron with a warm smile.

“We'll go to Garston tomorrow and see the Fosters. Then I thought, on Sunday, we'll drive up and see Victoria and Adam. We can go to your Nan's Monday morning then. I know it's a bit soon, as we were only there last month. But you don't mind do you? We won't do my Dad's this time. I'll stay with you”

“Course I don't mind” said Aaron

“Anyway”, said Robert, “Talking about the Fosters. You know how we don't have a live-in caretaker at the Manor? Here I mean”

“I've never thought about it” said Aaron, frowning a little.

“There's one in all my other places. But not in ours” said Rob

“Why would I think about it?” Aaron continued.

“Look. That doesn't matter” said Robert, “We don't have one. But we could have”
“Is that what you're thinking about the Fosters?” asked Aaron, “Getting them to move here”

“Yes. Well, they wouldn't have a cottage on the estate, obviously, but they'd have their own rooms in the house” Rob explained.

“What about their Warren though?” asked Aaron, “He's already working somewhere else”

“Ah. I thought about that” said Robert with a smile, “I was thinking about your Saturday job”

“What Saturday job?” asked Aaron.

“When you were working in the engineering workshop. To pay for the nice television set you bought me” Rob replied

“I worked Wednesdays” said Aaron

“It's just an expression....” said Robert with a sigh

“I've never had a Saturday job” said Aaron

“Aaron, It's not important....” said Rob

“I had a paper round” said Aaron, “When I was at school”

“Did ya?” asked Rob. He looked over at his partner, trying to imagine a younger version traipsing the streets of Blackpool.

“Oh yeah. Nan always told me not to look at the News Of The World though. Think she thought it was too racy”

“I dunno” said Robert with a grin, “May have been worried she was in it”

“Shurrup!” said Aaron with a smile.

“Anyway” said Rob, “The important thing is whether or not that workshop of yours needs anyone”

“I can find out” said Aaron, “They usually do. They lost two lads when I was there. Off on their National Service. I can put a word in for him too”

“Good then. You speak to Warren when we get there” said Robert.

“I always said we were a good team” he added, leaning over and kissing Aaron softly on the lips.

“I can't remember you saying that. Ever” said Aaron, a playful grin on his face.

“Well. We are” said Rob, leaning across for another, soft kiss.

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Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Friday 29th September 1950 – 10:30pm

Faith sat on the sofa in the front room and sipped at her glass of sherry. She looked over towards her friend, sitting next to her.

“That's a bit big, just for the one night Beryl” she said, looking at the brown suitcase at the end of
the sofa.

“Well, I had to bring a few things. Like my nightdress” Beryl replied, before taking a swig of her own glass.

“I could have lent you a nightie love” said Faith

“One of your nighties? I'd catch my death” said Beryl

“Well I'm glad you've come over” said Faith, changing the subject

“Oh. I couldn't leave you on your own. Not after what's happened”

“Carol's still here” Faith explained, “Well, she's working right now. But I told her she could stay on when I gave that Lillian her marching orders. She'll ask around at the theatre, see if any of the new girls need digs”

“I've made the bed up in the room opposite mine” said Faith, “Where our Aaron usually goes when he's here. Top up?” she added, standing up and heading for the sideboard. Her friend nodded and handed her her empty glass.

“I still can't believe it” said Faith, as she poured herself another sherry.

“Well. He was very charming wasn't he?” said Beryl, “He must have been easy to fall for. He very nearly charmed me”

Faith rolled her eyes at this last comment, but just poured out another drink.

“I have to say though “said Beryl as Faith sat down again, “I was surprised that it was her. That young Lillian”

“Didn't you think she was the type?” Faith asked.

“No. Not that. It's just that I was told. No, never mind” said Beryl

“Come on Beryl” said Faith, “Don't give us half a tale”

“Well it was nothing definite....” Beryl began

“Go on” said Faith

“Mrs Dawson reckoned she saw Frank coming out of the back of the Royal Oak on Wednesday afternoon when Arthur was over at the bowls club. Twice” said Beryl, "She always goes to see her mother round that way on a Wednesday. Because of her feet”

“And were you going to tell me this Beryl?” asked Faith

“I only heard it the other night. Anyway, it's not proof, is it?” said Beryl, “She could have been mistaken.”

“Lillian, well, at least I can understand that” she said Faith, “But not Agnes.”

Faith was quiet for a moment.

“Patrick did say something about 'her over the road'” she said, “When he had that big bust-up with Frank. I thought it was just about her backing him up over that dog”
“Not like her though is it?” said Beryl, “To be helpful for no reason”

“No Beryl. It's not” agreed Faith.

Gartson Manor, Northamptonshire- Saturday 30th September 1950 – 11:00am

Robert noticed it as soon as they arrived at the cottage on the estate. That small difference between the way he and his partner were treated. It wasn't Mr Foster's fault. As far as the caretaker knew, Rob was the area manager and Aaron was his driver. It was all he could know. But, right then, Robert was feeling that little bit more conscious of his partner's feelings.

“Morning Mr Sugden” Mr Foster greeted him, adding a “Hello son” to Aaron.

The caretaker continued, “Our Warren's round in the garage. Got this motorcycle combination he's fixing. Thought you could give him a hand. If that’s alright with you Mr Sugden?”

“You wouldn't mind. Would you Aaron?” Robert asked quickly, concerned that his partner was going to feel slighted.

But Aaron just smiled and replied, “Course not Mr Sugden” and headed over to the garage. He looked over his shoulder and gave Rob a cheeky wink as he left.

“Is Mrs Foster at home?” Robert asked, “There's something I want to speak to both of you about”

A little later

Aaron sat in the car, waiting as the Fosters stood at the gate to see Robert off.

“So” said Rob, “If you want to come up to Hadleigh and have a look around first, that's fine. You can make your mind up then”

“We will do that, thank you Mr Sugden” said Mr Foster. His face broke into a smile, “I said to the other lads. Mr Sugden won't let us down”.

“Didn't I say that love?” he added, turning to his wife.

“You've made someone happy today then” said Aaron as he steered the car down the drive and onto the main road.

“I'll do the same for you when we get home if you want” said Rob, grinning

“Shurrup!” said Aaron with a laugh

“How do you get so filthy anyway?” said Robert, eyeing his partner up and down.

“Working on that motorcycle” said Aaron, rolling his eyes.

“Bath for you later then” said Rob
“Ok, boss” Aaron replied with a smile.

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Blackpool – The Royal Oak, Saturday 30th September 1950 – 7:30pm

“Mr Clayton not with you this evening?” said the landlady as she handed Faith her drinks.

“No need to be so formal Agnes” said Faith, “I mean. Not when you know each other so well”.

The other woman did not rise to the bait. “I wanted a word with him about his bar bill, that's all” she said frostily.

“Well he's not staying at mine anymore” said Faith, “That's between the two of you”

“Not staying at yours? Where is he then?” Agnes asked

“I don't know Agnes” said Faith, picking her two drinks from the bar, “And I can't really say I care”

“I'm not sure I should be serving you!” the landlady said angrily, “Seeing as most of the drinks he brought went down your throat” she added with a glare.

Faith glared back.

“Arthur love” she said.

“Yes Faith” said the landlord, walking up from the far end of the bar and drying his hands on a bar towel.

“How's your bowls going?” Faith asked, “Agnes has just been telling me you've been going round the club every week without fail. Haven't you Agnes?”

The landlady started to nervously fiddle with the string of beads around her neck, but said nothing.

“Oh, not so bad” said Frank, “Good chance of the cup this year. Only Dawson to beat and he's not what he was” the landlord added.

“No. None of us are” replied Faith wistfully as she headed over to her friend in the corner.

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“Did you say anything?” asked Beryl as Faith sat down, “To the old trout I mean” she added.

“She knows that I know” said Faith, “That's enough” she went on as she lifted her glass.

“I don't know why we had to come here” said Beryl

“Beryl, I'm not hiding myself away” Faith replied, “I'm not the one that's done anything wrong. And you can be sure it'll all get out about Frank. That daft girl I kicked out will tell everyone in the theatre for a start.”

“What are you going to do then?” her friend asked
“Do what I always do love” said Faith, “Put on a brave face and act like I don't give a damn”

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Emmerdale – The Sugden Farm – Sunday 1st October 1950 – 3pm

“Wipe your feet!” Victoria called out automatically without turning around from where she was standing at the ironing board.

“Well, my shoes aren't *that* dirty” said Robert with a smile, “I've only walked from the car”

His sister turned around, a broad smile on her face.

“Why didn't you tell us you were coming?” she asked, giving Rob a quick hug.

“Thought it'd be a nice surprise” he replied.

“Course it is. Where's Aaron?” said Victoria as she let go of her brother and went to switch off the iron.

“Where do you think?” asked Robert, “Gone to talk to your husband. Anyway sis, we're on our way up to Blackpool, thought we'd stop one night with you if that's alright?”

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A little later

“It is alright me staying here instead of at Dad's ?” asked Rob as he put down his cup of tea, “It's just, well, I wanted us to have a trip where Aaron wasn't just my driver”

“Fine by us” said Victoria

“He's been a bit sensitive about that recently” said Robert, shifting in his chair a little awkwardly, “Feeling a bit taken for granted”

“*Somebody* say something they shouldn't have?” asked Victoria, peering at her brother over the top of her tea-cup.

“Aw sis! Come on” said Rob with a smile, “You know me”

“That's what I mean” Victoria replied, smiling back at him, “Now eat your cake” she added, nodding towards the plate in front of her brother, “Adam would have wolfed that down if I'd given it to him”

“Well he burns it all off working on the farm doesn't he?” said Robert as he stood up from the table, “Anyway, I've got a present for Sarah upstairs. Got it from Hamleys when we were in London” he added as he headed out of the kitchen.

As Rob walked out of the room, his young niece walked in.

“Hello shorty” Robert said as he passed her.

Sarah just pulled a face and folded her arms in mock indignation, pinning her toy rabbit to her chest as she did so.
“Mum” said Sarah, drawing out the word so her mother knew a question was coming.

“What sweetheart?” said Victoria as she headed to the sink with the tea things.

“Why does Uncle Robert have to share a room with Uncle Aaron?” her daughter asked. Victoria paused in the middle of washing a cup and thought for a moment.

“You know how Uncle Robert needs help with things, because of his bad leg?” she said.

“Yes” replied Sarah, drawing out the word again.

“Well, sometimes he needs help in the night. So Uncle Aaron stays with him” said Victoria, hoping she sounded convincing.

“What sort of things?” Sarah persisted.

“Like,...a glass of water or something” said Victoria.

“Oh” said Sarah. She was only giving her mother half her attention now. The rest was focused on making Mr Rabbit dance across the wooden draining board.

“Sarah” said Victoria.

“Yes Mummy” Sarah replied, still playing with her toy.

“We don't say anything though. About Uncle Robert needing help. Especially not to Nana Diane and Granddad” said Victoria.

“Why?” asked Sarah.

“Uncle Robert doesn't like people talking about his bad leg” said Victoria.

“Daddy's got a friend with one arm” Sarah replied, with a dramatic flourish.

“Uh, yes. He has. He's very nice” said Victoria, a little surprised at this sideways move in the conversation.

Fortunately, Sarah’s inquisitiveness soon shifted when Robert came back in the room, carrying a brown bag with “Hamleys” written on the outside in black letters.

“I think I might have a friend for Mr Rabbit here” said Rob.

Sarah ran over to her Uncle, beaming.

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10:30pm

“I've been talking to Robert about it” said Aaron, his hands cupped around a mug of cocoa, “And I think I've been taking Patrick for granted a bit”

Adam was sat on the sofa opposite his friend, his own mug in his hand.

“How d'ya mean?” he asked.

“I thought, while he was at home, he'd look out for Nan for me. So perhaps, you know, perhaps I
didn't want to *think* there was trouble back there. I know I don't go back enough as it is. But Robert has been *really* busy so.....” Aaron went on

“Your Nan knows he's got an important job” said Adam, “She must do. He's always telling everyone”

“You don't think I'm worrying over nothing?” said Aaron, “About Patrick walking out like that?”

Adam thought before replying.

“Thing is” he started, “I know it's a while back, but when me and Vicky saw Sarge up in Blackpool, right after the War, he seemed really happy there. It was like him and your Nan had known each other for ages”

“That's what I think. They've always got on great. And he has to think about where his...uh, his feller can stay too. He wouldn't leave. Not unless someone made him” Aaron agreed

“This new bloke of your Nan's you mean?” asked Adam

Aaron nodded.

“Yeah” said Adam, “I know all about that don't I? Least she hasn't married him” he added.

Aaron followed Adam's gaze. He was looking over towards the sideboard where a framed picture of his friend's family stood. A picture of his *old* family.

“Do you...hear from your Mum, at all?” Aaron asked carefully

“We got a card for our anniversary” said Adam, looking a little downcast, “One at Christmas, not much else”

He put his mug down on the table, “But, as long as I've got my two girls. I'm happy” he said.

Aaron reached over and gave Adam's shoulder a friendly rub. His friend smiled back at him, “And as long as I've got my best mate” said Adam.

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10:45pm

Aaron walked into the spare room to find Robert kneeling on the floor. The room was only lit by the small lamp on the night-stand on the right hand side of the bed. But Aaron could see Rob was wearing his vest and a pair of striped boxer shorts and going through the suitcases.

“Aaron” said Rob looking up, “I thought I packed my pyjamas” he said, “I can't find them and I've looked *everywhere!*”

“Everywhere?” said Aaron, raising an eyebrow as he walked past his partner and sat down on the side of the bed.

“Yes, everywhere!” said Robert, “I'll definitely need them when we get to your Nan's. You know what she's like. I'd be better off with a suit of armour!”

“Where do we keep them at home?” Aaron asked.
“Well, under the pillow but....” said Rob. He looked over his shoulder at Aaron who had lifted the pillow up on Robert's side of the bed.

“Well I didn't put them there” said, pouting slightly as he sat down on the bed next to his partner.

Aaron handed over the pair of maroon pyjamas which Robert let lie on his lap. He looked at the blonde young man for a moment. He could see that hint of anxiety in his eyes. It was the worry of being too exposed. Even after all this time. Even in front of him. Aaron let his gaze fall down to Rob's left hip. In the lamp-light, you could just make out the edge of a scar along the top of his thigh, before the rest was covered by his shorts.

Aaron reached over and rested his right hand on the top of Robert's leg.

“It's up to you” he said, quietly “But, you know, it's a warm night. You don't have to wear ’em. Not here”

“You know I don't like to, I mean, you know I prefer to...” Rob replied, stumbling over his words slightly.

Aaron shifted a little on the bed. He took his hand away from Robert's thigh and very deliberately, and gently, slipped it under the edge of his top. So that it was resting on the waistband of his shorts and, more importantly, on his partner's damaged hip.

“It's all fine with me” said Aaron, as he leaned forward and arched his head up so he could plant a kiss on the other young man's lips.

“All fine with me” he repeated again softly as he leaned in again.

- - - - - -
“No really darling. I couldn't” said Frank as he stood in his daughter's kitchen, a suitcase in his hand.

“I insist Dad” said Vanessa as she took two large notes out of the metal tea caddie on her mantelpiece and handed them to him. Her father smiled as he put his case down and took his wallet out of his jacket pocket.

They were interrupted by the sound of someone knocking on the front door to the surgery.

“Won't be a minute” said Vanessa as she headed down the stairs.

Frank eyed the tea caddie as she left the room. He thought for a moment, running his finger along his moustache.

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“Are you sure you don't want to hang on for a lift to the station Dad?” asked Vanessa as she stepped out into the street, her small black bag in her hand, “I won't be long. I'm only going round the corner to look at Mrs Anderson's cat”

“That's very kind, but I wouldn't want to impose on you any more than I have” her father answered smoothly, leaning forward to plant a kiss on her cheek.

Vanessa smiled and crossed the road. As she went around the corner she turned to see her father. He smiled and tapped the brim of his hat with his free hand as he started to walk down the street in the direction of the railway station. But once Vanessa was out of sight, he quickly turned around and headed off in the opposite direction.

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The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – 11:00am

“Nothing you want me to get then?” asked Beryl, as she leaned her wicker shopping basket on the kitchen table.

“No thank you Beryl!” replied Faith, who was rummaging among the small pile of letters haphazardly filed behind the clock on the mantelpiece, “I'll get some bits in in the week. There's no rush. Not with just young Carol being here”

“Don't suppose these will get used now” she added as she looked at two neatly printed cards.

“What's that?” asked Beryl as she did up her headscarf.
“Two tickets for the dance at the Masonic Hall” said Faith, “I was going to go with 'you-know-who'“

“Never mind” said Beryl, “You know what I always say. Always someone worse off than yourself” she continued as she headed for the kitchen door, “Bye for now”

“Bye love” said Faith as her friend departed.

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Vanessa Woodfield's Surgery – 3:45pm

“Is it due already?” Vanessa asked the young man standing on her doorstep.

“It's definitely four weeks” said Dennis Culshaw as he poured the dirty water out of his bucket and into the drain.

“I'm sure you're right. I just don't know where the time goes these days” said Vanessa. She took a small note out of the pocket of her white coat and handed it in to the young man.

Dennis took out some small coins from the pocket in his rough trousers and handed it over.

“See you next week” he said as he hitched up his window-cleaning cart and headed down the street.

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Vanessa walked into the kitchen and took the tea-caddie down from the mantelpiece. She dropped her change into the tin. Then she noticed. With a sigh she put the tin down. She might have known! Some people never change.

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The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse- 6:00pm

Faith was just about to light the gas under the kettle when the doorbell rang. She headed through the hallway, pausing for a moment to check her hair in the mirror in the centre of the coat-stand. 'Well, you never know who it might be', she said to herself.

She opened the door to see a very familiar, young face smiling at her.

“Hello Nan” said Aaron

“Aaron!” said Faith happily, opening the door so her grandson could walk in.

“Thought we'd surprise you” said Aaron as he put his suitcase down in the hallway.

“Oh, it's a wonderful surprise” said Faith as she wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug.

Robert walked in, a suitcase in his hand and closed the front door behind him.
“Is everything alright Nan?” asked Aaron. There was something almost desperate in the way his grandmother was clinging to him.

Faith let go of him, “I've just been a daft fool, that's all” she replied, “You come through to the kitchen and I'll put the kettle on. Tell you all about it”

“Do you want me to take the cases up?” asked Rob, “Leave you to it’

“No, you come through too Robert” said Faith as she hooked her arm through his. “We've no secrets in this family” she added as they headed to the kitchen.

“Well, not many” she added as they paused in the doorway.

A little later.....

“Well, I couldn't give him the benefit of the doubt could I? Not after that” said Faith, pausing to sip at her tea.

“Not when I practically caught them at it “ she added

“Nan” mumbled Aaron, shifting in his chair at the kitchen table a little uncomfortably.

“Oh, I can tell you love” said Faith, “You're both men of the World. Especially you Robert” she went on, leaning over to pat the blonde young man's hand. Rob looked bemused at this.

“He tried to talk himself out of it of course. He could a real charmer, I'll give him that” the landlady continued, her voice sounding wistful for just a moment, “I only found out about Agnes after I'd kicked him out. You know, that snooty one over at the Royal”

Aaron glared.

“Where is he now Nan? This Frank ?” he asked, the anger creeping into his voice.

“Now Aaron” said Faith, reaching out putting her hand on his upper arm, “Let's not start thinking about anything like that. He's gone now. That's an end to it, far as I'm concerned”

The pair were silent. “Is it alright to take our cases up?” Robert asked, standing up from the table. It was more for the sake of something to say than anything.

“Course it is love” said Faith, turning to her grandson's partner with a smile, “Your usual room next to Pat....”, she paused for a moment, “Well, you know where it is” she added, lowering her voice a little.

Robert was, very neatly, hanging up his shirts in the wardrobe in the bedroom. Aaron picked up the pillow on the right hand side of the bed and put Rob's pyjamas underneath before heading back to the suitcase, lying open on the floor.

“What did your Nan mean?” asked Robert, a slight frown on his features.

“When?” Aaron replied as he opened the top drawer of the dresser, putting away some underclothes.
“When she said I was more of a 'man of the World' “said Rob, as he walked over to his partner, curling his hands around his waist from behind.

“I dunno” said Aaron, “Probably something to do with you being married before. Suppose” he mumbled in reply.

“I thought I still was. Married I mean” said Robert smoothly as he leaned in and kissed Aaron on the side of his face.

“Geroff!” said Aaron with a smile as he wrapped his hands around his partner's. But he made no effort to get out of the embrace.

“Aw. That's what I like to see” said Faith as she walked into the room, carrying some fresh towels “We could do with a bit of real romance round here” she added with a smile.

Robert instantly let go of the other young man.

“No need to be shy lads” said Faith, as she put the towels onto the bed-spread, “There's only Carol staying here and she already gone to the theatre”

“About that Nan...” Aaron started

“Yes love?” Faith replied

“We want to see Patrick while we're here” said Rob, putting a supportive hand on Aaron's shoulder, “And, well, we both find it a bit hard to believe he just walked out like that”

Faith was silent and crossed her arms across her chest.

“Are you boys hungry?” she eventually asked.

“Not particularly” said Robert, “We had a big meal at my sisters before we left”

“You two get settled in and we'll go over the road for a drink” said Faith, “I'd like to see Patrick myself. The only trouble is. I don't know where he's gone”

Aaron and Rob looked at each other as Faith left the room.

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7:00pm

Aaron was heading from the bathroom back to the bedroom when he spotted that the door to Patrick's room was open. Well, the door to what used to be his room, he reminded himself. He looked through the gap and saw Robert sitting on the edge of the bed, a book in his hand.

“Why you in here?” Aaron asked as he walked over to the other young man.

“I was just having a look around” Rob replied, as his partner sat down next to him.

“Nan's nearly ready. We can head over the pub in a minute” said Aaron.

“She's taking this well don't ya think? About this feller I mean” asked Robert

Aaron frowned as he thought for a moment. “I think she's taking it too well”
“Putting a brave face on it you mean?” asked Rob. His partner nodded in reply.

“Let's you and me have a chat about it. When we're back from the pub” said Robert, reaching over and giving the back of Aaron's shoulders a quick rub with his free hand.

“What's that you've got?” asked Aaron, nodded at the book Rob was holding.

“Oh” said Robert, “It's a bit on the sad side really. It's one of mine. I lent it to Patrick ages ago. Look at this” he added, taking out a piece of paper from the inside and handing it over.

Aaron looked down and started to read out loud the very neatly written note, “To Robert, Thank you as always. Best wishes. Patrick”.

“That's all he's left behind” said Rob, “This Agatha Christie and two more of my books up on that shelf. Oh, and that adding machine of course”

Aaron looked over at the metal machine on the desk by the wall, now a little dusty.

“Probably a bit heavy to shift” said Aaron. “I mean, with his arm, and everything” he added in a mumble.

“We'll have a talk about Patrick later too, OK?” said Robert gently, hooking his arm around Aaron's shoulders.

Aaron nodded and forced a half-smile as he stared down at the note in his hand.

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Blackpool – The Royal Oak Public House – 7:15pm

Faith headed over the road to the pub, her right arm locked tight through Robert's left. Her grandson trailed a little behind the pair.

“Could you get the door Aaron?” she asked as they neared the outside of the building.

“I can do that” said Rob. He tried to break away but the landlady kept her tight grip on him.

“I want to make an entrance Robert”, said Faith, “I'm walking in here on the arm of a handsome young man tonight, I'm going to make the most of it”

“Thanks Nan” said Aaron, a little grumpily as he opened the door wide for them to pass through.

“Aw” said Faith with a smile, “Not that you're not a handsome young man love” she added, putting her hand gently on the front of his jacket for a moment, “I just meant someone who wasn't family”

“Not that you're not family” she went on, turning back to Rob.

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“That table in the far corner's free” said Faith as they walked into the bar, “You get the drinks Aaron, if you don't mind. We'll be able to have a proper chat about, well, about a good few things then”
Robert escorted Faith over to the corner and made a big performance of pulling out a chair for her. Aaron just shook his head.

Mabel Earnshaw was leaning over the bar talking to the barmaid.

“Well that didn't take her long did it?” she said rapidly, “Not that she ever takes long. I mean, her bed will hardly be cold yet, will it? I saw the last one leave. He was a broken man Doreen! A broken man. As sure as I'm standing here. And look at this new one! She must be old enough to be his Gran....”

“Evening Mrs Earnshaw” said Aaron with a fixed grin as he walked up beside the gossiping woman.

“Oh. Uh. Evening Aaron” said Renee, “Come to see your Nan have you?” she added, quickly taking her purse out of her coat pocket and rummaging in it, as if she had just remembered something important.

“I was just saying to Doreen. Always nice to see her in here. Wasn't I Doreen?” she added, looking up for a moment.

The barmaid started to speak, but said nothing.

“Two pints of bitter and a port and lemon please Doreen” said Aaron, his smile still fixed, “When you've got a minute” he added.

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“....and when Frank said the dog had bitten him, she backed him up” said Faith, indicating the pub landlady standing behind the bar at the other end of the room.

“I've let her know I know about the pair of them carrying on. She wanted me to settle his bar bill. The flaming cheek!” Faith added.

Robert looked over towards Agnes. He noticed the sour expression on her face and decided that, however much free drink Frank had got, it can't have been worth it.

“Why did you believe them though Nan?” said Aaron, putting his pint of bitter down on the table. “Patch has never bitten anyone before”

“I had no reason to think he was lying. Not then” said Faith, “Anyway. I....I mean, we only got Patrick to keep the dog in his room. It wasn't like we said he had to get rid of the little feller”

“But it didn't help things. There was an atmosphere after that and Patrick just took against Frank”


“I think Aaron means that perhaps Patrick just saw this Frank couldn't be trusted before you did” said Robert, reaching over and patting Faith on her forearm.

Aaron was about to contradict him, but Rob gave him a look across the table. The young man picked up that Robert was silently asking him not to.

“So why did Patrick walk out in the end?” Robert asked.

“Oh. That was when he thought Frank had been in his room. He forgot to lock it once when he
“...and Frank kept being so reasonable. He said how worried he was about Patrick and thought he wasn't well. And he said he was upset when he realised he'd gone and how it'd all blow over”

“Well, he would do, wouldn't he?” said Robert, “I mean, if he'd acted like he was pleased you'd have rumbled him straight away, wouldn't you?” he said encouragingly.

Faith thought for a moment and made a deep sigh. “What I want to do now, is forget all about Frank Clayton”. She looked briefly around the bar, well aware that she was the topic of conversation on at least one of the other tables. Not that anyone had said anything to her. They didn't have to. It was the sudden false smiles she got when she had looked across and seen another woman had been staring at her.

“And what about Patrick?” asked Rob.

“I wish I'd listened to him” said Faith. She looked at Aaron for a moment. “I know you're busy love. And your Uncle, well, I get the odd postcard now and again but that's all. And the guests come and go. It's been nice having someone living at home all this time. I wish Patrick hadn't gone”

“Well” said Robert, “In that case, me and Aaron will find him”

“But I don't even know if he's still in Blackpool love” said Faith

Robert flashed one of his broad smiles, “If he's here. Me and Aaron will track him down. And you'll help us”

“But I haven't got a clue where he's gone” replied Faith, “I've no address for him or anything”

“We'll have a proper chat first thing” said Rob, “But believe me. I bet you know more that you realise”

“Come on Nan” said Aaron, taking his cap from the table and putting it on, “Let's go home”.

Robert put his hat on and stood up, offering his arm to Faith. She got up from her chair and took it with a smile.

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The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse- 11:15pm

Aaron walked into the bedroom and closed the door behind him. Robert was sat up in bed, scribbling in a notepad with a pencil.

“Drawing up one of your plans are ya?” Aaron asked with a smile as he slipped out of his trousers and draped them over the back of a chair.

“Just so I don't forget a few things” replied Rob, smiling back. “Anyway, it'll wait till morning” he added as he put the pad and pencil down on the nightstand.
Robert curled his arm around Aaron as the other young man climbed into bed and snuggled up against him.

“You were right about your Nan” said Rob, as he leaned over and clicked off the lamp with his left hand, “She is upset about that feller”

Aaron said nothing. He shifted around, trying to get himself comfortable, curled up with his head on Robert's chest.

“She shouldn't be so hard on herself. About being fooled I mean” said Rob, wrapping his partner up in a hug, “After all. They're called con artists for a reason”

“He didn't just fool her anyway did he? I bet that pub landlady and that showgirl thought they had him all to themselves” he added

“He better have cleared out. That's all” muttered Aaron.

“Let's just concentrate on tracking Patrick down for now” said Robert

“You don't think he's moved away?” asked Aaron, “Do ya?” he added. It was clear to Rob from Aaron's voice that he was looking for reassurance.

“No I don't” Robert replied, “Not yet anyhow. Daniel's due back from sea soon isn't he?”

“Sometime this month” Aaron agreed

“There you are then” said Rob, “And Daniel will be coming here. Patrick must have thought about that. He won't have gone that far, I'm sure”

“Yeah. But it's only the second” said Aaron, “It could be weeks before Daniel shows up”

“We're not going to wait until then” said Robert, “We'll talk about it in the morning. But we'll sort this out. Me and you”

“Promise?” asked Aaron with a yawn.

“Promise” Robert replied softly, giving the other young man a gentle squeeze.

Aaron closed his eyes and drifted to sleep.

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Blackpool – The South Pier Penny Arcade– Tuesday 3rd October 1950 - 10:00am

“You were right” said Aaron, walking over to the barrier at the side of the pier where Robert was waiting, sat on bench staring out at the sea.

“I spoke to Dawson” Aaron went on as he sat down, “Patrick is still doing his books. He doesn't know where he lives though. He does them here” he added, nodded back towards the Penny Arcade, “He won't be round again for another few weeks”

“It's a start” said Rob with a smile, “And, at least we know we could leave a message here”

“...if we had to, I mean” Robert added quickly when he saw the frown on Aaron's face.
“I knew we shouldn't take that Frank's word for it. Just because he said Patrick had stopped bookkeeping. He probably didn't even ask here. Just told your Nan he had”

Aaron nodded. He still looked glum. “What now then?” he asked, “This is the only place Nan could remember he worked for”

“Aaron. At least we know he's definitely in town” said Rob, reaching into his jacket and taking his small notepad out.

“What I want to do now is to go along to this vets. There can't be that many in town. There's a good chance Patrick is still taking Patch to the same one. She might have an address for him”

“It's his daughter's though, isn't it?” said Aaron, “Frank's”

“I'm sure he won't be there” replied Robert.

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The Bank, the High Street – 11:45am

Aaron sat in the driving seat of Robert's car, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel in irritation. Finally, he saw his grandmother emerge from the bank, her arm wrapped tightly around Robert's. One look on her face told Aaron all he needed to know. He couldn't say he was surprised. Not after all their trip to see the vet. If a man would steal from his own daughter, he wouldn't stop there.

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The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse– 1pm

Aaron sat at the kitchen table, looking over towards the stove while he waited for the kettle to boil.

“Hello Aaron. This is a nice surprise” said Beryl as she walked into the kitchen from the yard, “Is your Nan in?”

“Hello Aunty Beryl” said Aaron, “She's in the front room”

Beryl caught the look on the young man's face. “Everything alright?” she asked as she undid her headscarf.

“She's had a bit of a shock” Aaron replied

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“How much did he take?” asked Beryl, as she sat next to Faith on the sofa in the front room, a cup of tea in her hands.

“He cleaned out that account for the cottage” said Faith, “There was almost fifteen pounds in there”
“Fifteen pounds!” exclaimed Beryl

“And he helped himself to some of his daughter's money before slinging his hook” said Faith.

“I need something stronger than this” she added, putting her tea-cup down and heading for the sideboard.

“And that's not all” she added as she poured herself a sherry, “There were a couple of invoices he got me to give him money for. Robert had a look at them. Turns out there's no such builders”

“Oh, is Aaron’ boss here with him again?” asked Beryl, “You'd think he'd let him have a break once in a blue moon, wouldn't you?”

Faith sat down on the sofa, “Well, it's Doctor's orders” she said, thinking quickly, “He's been told to get some sea-air. At least this way Aaron get's to use the car here and back”

“That's true” Beryl acknowledged.

“And Mr Sugden's no trouble” said Faith

“Oh no. Beautiful manners” agreed Beryl, “Have you called the police? About Frank I mean?” she went on, changing tack completely.

“What good would it do love?” asked Faith, “I'd have to tell them all the sordid details. In any case, he could be the other end of the country by now”

“If he's got any sense, he'll stay there” said Beryl.

Robert sat down at the kitchen table, handing Aaron a mug of tea as he did so.

“Still wish Nan would go to the Police” said Aaron

“Best to let her decide that” said Robert, keeping his voice reasonable.

“He'll only go and con some other old lady won't he though?” said Aaron, “It's like his daughter said. He's already been in prison for it once”

“Better not let your Nan hear you calling her an old lady” said Rob. Aaron was silent.

“Listen. I haven't said anything to your Nan” said Robert, “But I'm more than happy to make up the loss. If she needs it”

Aaron managed a brief smile.

“What do we do now then?” Aaron asked.

“Well” said Robert, thinking, “OK. So, that vet didn't help us with Patrick but we carry on”

“Won't we have to get back home. For work or something?” Aaron asked

“Aaron. Work can wait. I promised you didn't I? We'll stay and we'll sort this. That feller broke up your Nan's home. We'll put in right” said Rob, sounding determined.

Aaron reached over and rubbed Robert's shoulder.
£15 in 1950 would be worth around £500 today, which explains Beryl's shock.

Aaron's unhappy wartime memory is referring to events in the first story in this series Love On The Home Front (Chapters 6 and 7). He discussed those events here with Robert in Chapter 13.
“We're be all right in here” said Dennis as he walked into the front room, a mug of tea in each hand.

“Mam's gone down the dance at the Labour club” he added as he put the mugs on the table and sat down.

“Does she like dancing?” asked Patrick, as he stopped flicking through the photo album in front of him.

“Nah. She does the coats” said Dennis as he looked down at a black and white picture, “They don't pay much but she gets tips”

“Is Patch alright on your sofa there?” asked Patrick as he looked over to the small dog, curled up asleep.

Dennis took a swig of tea, “Mam will have a moan” he replied, “She doesn't like dog hair”

“Oh, I can move him if you want....” started Patrick

“It's alright” said Dennis, “My house as much as hers. I pay more rent than she does. I paid for that flaming sofa for a start!” he added, frowning.

“Is that you and your brother?” asked Patrick, turning over the photo album. A younger looking Dennis was sitting on a river bank next to a taller, dark-haired lad who was fishing.

“Yeah” said Dennis, his face breaking into a smile, “That's our Mark” he went on as he turned over the page.

“That's never Aaron is it?” said Patrick, looking at a picture of a small group of young people having a picnic. A stack of bicycles were lined up against the trees in the background.

Dennis looked at the young man sitting on the edge of a spread-out blanket, a slim, dark-haired young woman next to him.

“That not long before the War” said Dennis, “They all took their bikes off somewhere. Wouldn't let me go. Said I'd slow them down cause I was too small. Mark brought back some of the grub for me though. He was nice like that”.

The young man was quiet, lost in his thoughts.

“Who's the girl next to Aaron?” asked Patrick, looking at the picture more closely. She was obviously interested in the young man who, by contrast, only seemed interested in the large sandwich he was eating.

“That's Wendy Fairfax. She was his girlfriend” Dennis answered

“Was she?” asked Patrick, trying to keep any surprise from his voice
“Well, she married a Yank during the War. You know, one of them GI brides. Moved to Texas, or somewhere” Dennis replied, “Before he came along though, she was always hanging around with Aaron. Don't think they were ever, you know, serious or anything.”

"I'm sure you're right" said Patrick with a smile

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Blackpool – Patrick's flat, Crimea Street- Wednesday 4th October 1950 – 9:00am

Patrick walked from the toilet at the end of the landing and took out the key to his flat from his pocket. It was only a short walk and, true, it wasn't as if anyone from the rest of the building ever came up here. Why would they? All the other flats had their own washrooms. But he had decided that you could not be too careful. Even if he was only away for a few minutes.

As he locked the front door behind him, Patch looked up from where he was lying on the bed at the far side of the room. He saw that it was Patrick, and immediately lay down straight again.

“Don't worry” Patrick said to the small dog with a sigh as he walked over to a table jammed against the wall, “Your Dad will be back soon. Probably” he added as he sat down.

He picked up a pen and stared at the piece of paper on the table in front of him. He had written “Dear Mrs Dingle” and that was as far as he had got. He didn't know what to write. He’d left enough space in the top right hand corner to put his address in, but had left it blank. That was another thing he hadn't quite decided. Whether or not to include it.

“I don't know what to write” said Patrick, not expecting an answer, of course, “Other than I hope she's alright. I suppose that depends on whether she's caught out her fancy man!”. Patrick frowned as he thought about Frank, sitting in Mrs Dingle's front room and running his finger through his grey moustache. Acting like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

That was the main reason Patrick had decided not to just go around to the guesthouse. In case he was there. He planned to ask Dennis to take a note round for him instead. Then he could make sure Mrs Dingle got it and find out whether or not “Mr Chips” still had his feet under the table. He was sure Dennis wouldn't mind. After all, the young window cleaner had already promised to let Patrick know if he spotted Daniel back ashore when he was on his rounds.

Patrick wrote, “I hope all is well with you” very neatly and then stopped again.

“What now?” he thought to himself. He ought to write something. After all, Mrs Dingle had probably been upset at him walking out after all these years.

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The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse - 9:15am

“Come in” said Faith, as she heard the knock on her bedroom door. She leaned over to squint at the clock on her night-stand.

“Aw, thank you love” she added as Aaron walked in, carrying a cup of tea.
Her grandson handed it over then headed over to draw the curtains.

“Leave them from now Aaron” said Faith, “I'm not ready to face the day yet” she went on, taking a sip of her tea.

Aaron smiled and sat down on the edge of her bed.

“What are you doing up and about anyway?” his grandmother asked.

“Sun's been up for ages” Aaron replied

“If I was in bed with your Robert it'd take a damn sight more than the Sun to shift me” said Faith with a grin.

“Aw, Nan” said Aaron, shifting on the bed uncomfortably. But his grandmother just kept smiling.

“So, what are your plans for today?” she asked

“Robert's going to go through your paperwork for you, like he promised. Then he'll do your books”

“That's kind of him” said Faith, “Course, Patrick used to sort all that out for me.....” she frowned

“I'm going over to the Silver Moon this morning, in case he's staying there. You know, you said that was where Mr Fosdyke had gone when that Fr....when that feller told him this place was full”

Aaron avoided saying Frank's name. Somehow, not mentioning it seemed to help push him in the past.

“Oh, I don't think Patrick will be there. She's a right fusspot that one. She wouldn't let anyone stay with a dog” said Faith

“It's worth asking” said Aaron, getting up from the bed. “We know he's in town. It's just finding where”

Aaron walked past the wardrobe and suddenly noticed the dark, men's suit that was hanging up on the outside.

“Who's is this then?” he asked, lifting up one of the sleeves.

“That belonged to Charles” said Faith, putting her cup down in her saucer, “Now he was a real gentleman. Frank was going to wear it to the dance at the Masonic hall tomorrow night. They were about the same height”

“I was really looking forward to that as well” Faith went on. She paused as if an idea had just struck her. “You don't think your Robert would want to go? I'm sure that suit would fit him” she asked.

“Oh, I don't know Nan. Anyway, better check how he's getting on” said Aaron as he walked to the door. He was pretty sure Rob wouldn't want to take his grandmother out dancing, but didn't want to say so. He opened the bedroom door and paused before leaving.

“Nan” he said, “You're not too upset about this are you? About this daft feller I mean?” he asked.

Faith looked at the concerned look on her grandson's face and forced a smile.

“Oh, you know me love!” said Faith, “I'll bounce back in no time”
“Not seen you round here for a while Aaron. I hear you're a driver now, is that right?” asked Mr McDonald, as he cut away at Aaron's hair, “Up in Nottingham isn't it?”

“No, well I'm nearer Derby”. Aaron replied from the barber's chair, “My boss works for the National Trust so I have to drive him around and look after his house and uh, his garden and all that”

“Right. Bit of everything then?” said Mr McDonald

“Uh, yeah” said Aaron, trying not to smile.

“Where'd you learn to drive then, in the Army was it?” the barber asked as he worked away

“No. I was a Bevin boy. You know, down the mines. One of my mates taught me when we were training. Had to keep stopping and starting though cause we couldn't get the petrol”

“Seems a lifetime ago now to me, the War” said Mr McDonald. Then he stopped cutting Aaron's hair for a moment, “Mind you, the Great War” he said, staring off into space as he spoke, “Sometimes, that seems like it was only yesterday”. The barber shook himself from his thoughts and carried on working.

“Does Mr Seaton still come here?” asked Aaron, “You know, Patrick” he added, finally getting round to the main reason he had called.

“Patrick?” asked Mr McDonald thoughtfully.

“Used to stay at my Nan's” said Aaron, “You'd know him if you saw him. He's only, I mean, he's not got......well, he's not got a left arm and he has a bit of a scar on his face”. Aaron voice tailed off. It felt ridiculous, having to spell it out like that.

“Oh!” said Mr McDonald, the penny dropping, “Yes, he comes here. He was in, oh, must be two weeks ago now. Smart young lad. Always has a trim and a close shave. Not as much call for that now, the shaving. Still, I suppose it must be a bit more difficult for him. You know, considering. I didn't know he was up at your Nan's though”

“He's just moved out” said Aaron, “Only he didn't say where he was going to and he's left some stuff there. He didn't say where he's staying now did he?”

“No, son” said Mr McDonald, “He doesn't say much. They don't sometimes. Blokes that have been injured bad I mean. My nephew's like that. Never the same when he got back from the Western Desert. There, all done” he added

Aaron looked up as the older man changed the subject.

“I'll tell him about the stuff at your Nan's when I see him” said the barber.

“Thanks” said Aaron, disappointed.
“How did you get on love?” said Faith, looking up from the ironing as Aaron walked in the through the back door.

“No luck at the Silver Moon” her grandson replied, frowning.

“Can't say I'm surprised” said Faith, “I told you she won't allow dogs. Gives herself too much airs that one. You wouldn't think her Dad used to clean the drains for the Council” she added as continued to iron her blouse.

Aaron smiled. He would not have guessed that. Not from his brief conversation he had had with the snooty landlady.

“Patrick is still going to Mr McDonald's” said Aaron, “He doesn't know where he lives now though” he added, his voice a bit more quiet.

“Well, worth a try wasn't it?” said Faith, forcing a smile. She returned to her ironing.

Aaron nodded silently and headed out into the hall.

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“So....waste of time really” said Aaron, as he sat on the sofa in the front room, leaning forward.

Robert looked up from where he was sitting at the table and saw the despondent look on his partner's face. He put his pen down on the large leather backed book in which had been writing in before he spoke.

“Well” he started, “I think it's a good sign, actually. Look what we've found out. He's still working in town and he's still keeping himself smart. So he must be looking after himself, mustn't he?”

“I suppose” said Aaron, not sounding at all convinced.

“He hasn't told the Army pension people he's moved either” Rob added.

“How d'you know that?” asked Aaron, puzzled.

“This only came last week” replied Robert, picking up an unopened buff envelope from the table, “It's from the War Office. It'll be about his disability pension”

“See” said Rob, turning the envelope over, “It's the same address mine comes from. So, you know, maybe he wasn't planning a permanent move”

“I dunno” said Aaron, “Loads of official stuff for you kept going to the Manor after you moved to the Gatehouse. And you wrote and let masses of people know. I remember”

Robert sighed and got up from his chair. He walked over and sat down on the sofa next to Aaron, hooking his left arm around his shoulders.

“Come on” he said, “What else is bothering ya?” he added encouragingly

“It's something Mr McDonald said. About me not being up here for a while. And Dawson said it when I went in the Penny Arcade” said Aaron, “And I know I should visit more than I do”
“Well, that's not all down to you, is it?” said Robert

“I was thinking, if I'd come up here, maybe it wouldn't have all happened. You know, Patrick wouldn't have gone and that bloke wouldn't have conned Nan”

Rob thought for a moment and gave Aaron's left shoulder a gentle rub.

“Or....” he replied, “He could have sweet talked his way around us as well I mean, you know what these smoothies can be like, don't ya?” he added with a smile.

Aaron smiled back.

“I thought it would be easier to find him. Easier for you I mean. All those detective books you read”

“Ah, well that's murder isn't it?” said Robert as he leaned against the back of the sofa, gently pulling Aaron towards him, “Not missing persons”

“Suppose you're right” Aaron agreed, leaning into Rob's chest as he cuddled up against him.

“Course, you know what'll happen, don't ya?” asked Robert

“What?” asked Aaron

“It will be like a detective story when it comes down to it. We'll follow all these false trails and then, at the end, we don't solve it at all. Some old dear will bump into your Nan in the street and go, 'Oh, I saw your old lodger the other day. He's staying opposite my sisters' “

“Happens all the time in books” said Rob, “Some big clue out of nowhere at the end. Bit irritating, really” he added

“Long as we find him” said Aaron

“We will” said Robert, giving him a gentle squeeze.

Aaron was silent.

“And whatever way you look at it, that trip to the barber's wasn't a waste. Your hair looks nice for a start” said Rob with a grin.

Aaron smiled.

“I've got some stuff to do tomorrow morning” said Robert, “I'd better ring the Fosters for one, keep on top on what's going on at Garston”

“We won't have to go back will we?” asked Aaron

“No. Course not” Robert replied quickly, “We've got to sort your Nan out first”

Aaron thought for a moment.

“Rob” said Aaron

“Yes?” said Robert

“You don't fancy taking Nan out dancing do ya?” asked Aaron.
“I do hope my case isn't in the way” said Frank, as he leaned forward on his barstool towards the
landlady, flashing her a smile as she did so.

“No, you're alright there” she replied as she handed over a pint.

“By the way, Veronica”, Frank went on smoothly, “Perhaps you can help me? You must know this
place very well. Is there anywhere nearby I could find a guesthouse”

“There's Mr and Mrs Frost a few doors down...” Veronica stated to reply

“Actually, do you know if there are any, well, unattached landladies?”

“Unattached?” asked Veronica, a little puzzled

“Oh, I'm only looking for a room, I assure you” Frank insisted, “But I have found that husbands
can make things so complicated. You only have to make the smallest of compliments to their good
lady and they fly off the handle”

“I mean, you must find that. An attractive lady such as yourself” he added

“You could try Mrs Seymour who runs Belle Vue. That's her over in the corner. Lady in the dark
coat. She's a widow”

Frank turned on his stool to look over at the good looking middle-aged woman sitting near the far
wall, talking to some friends.

“Is she now?” said Frank, a smile forming on his lips.

Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree – 7:00pm

“Well, how do I look?” said Robert, as he walked into the front room and spread his arms out
wide.

Aaron looked up from where he was sitting at the table and smiled. Rob looked good, of course he
did. And he knew it!

“Not too bad, I suppose” said Aaron grudgingly, as he got up from his chair and walked over to his
partner, “A bit old though isn't it?” he added, as he looked at Mr Lesley's dark suit.
“Aaron. This is quality” Robert replied, “It's Saville row!” he added, rolling his eyes

Aaron hooked his arms around Rob's waist.

“What's that smell?” he asked, frowning, as he looked up at his partner.

Robert curled his own arms around Aaron and pulled him close.

“Mothballs, I think!” he said, “Bit of a walk outside will get rid of that”

“You don't mind driving us to this do?” Robert asked, “I'll treat your Nan to a taxi back”

“No, it's fine” said Aaron, pleased that he'd been asked to drive Rob and Nan to the dance, rather than it just being assumed.

Aaron leaned up and planted a soft kiss on Rob's lips.

“Thanks for doing this tonight” he said, as he broke away.

“I'm sure it'll be fine” said Robert, “Well, pretty sure anyway. What are you going to do with yourself while we're out?”

“I'll go out for a pint when I get back. Not over the road. Thought I'd try the Skinner's Arms” said Aaron

“And I thought we were the ones going somewhere fancy” said Rob, a cheeky grin on his face

“Nothing wrong with the Skinners” said Aaron, “They've got a skittle alley in the back” he said with a smile.

“Oh, well in that case, I take it all back” said Rob, leaning down to press his lips against Aaron's.

“Hey! That's enough for now Aaron” said Faith as she walked into the room, a big smile on her face. Her grandson let go of his partner and took a step back

“ I'm borrowing Robert for tonight!” said Faith as she hooked her arm through Rob's.

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Patrick's flat, Crimea Street – 7:00pm

Patrick held his hand in front of the small fire. It was no good, the room was still too cold. With a sigh he walked over the single bed against the wall and folded back the top blanket. He then sat on the bed and reached down to slip off his shoes one at a time.

As he sat up in bed and pulled the blanket back over him, Patch looked up from his basket nearby.

“Come on then you” said Patrick, patting the space in the mattress between him and the wall. Patch bounded onto the edge of the bed, walked over the young man, then slumped down again in the tiny gap.

Patrick unbuttoned the pocket on the front of his shirt and took out the folded letter inside. It was beginning to show it's age. But then it would, wouldn't it, if he kept re-reading it like he did. The young man looked down at the untidy text. Well, you had to make allowances. After all, it hadn't
been written all in one go. It had been jotted down whenever Daniel had got a private moment.

“He’s got terrible handwriting, your Dad” said Patrick to the small dog next to him. Then Patrick smiled to himself. As if his handwriting mattered. Patrick shivered a little, then shifted under the blanket so he was right next to Patch.

“Dear Patrick”, he read to himself, “I've just got home and I can't tell you where I've been. There is a War on! I can tell you this though. It was flaming freezing! But what I really wanted to say was that I've been missing you loads............”

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Blackpool – outside The Masonic Hall – 7:45pm

Faith stepped out of the car as Robert held the rear door open for her. In the driving seat, Aaron wound down the window.

“You have a nice time Nan” said Aaron, “And behave yourself!” he added with a grin.

“Come on love” said Faith, “Make your mind up. One or the other” she went on as she straightened her shawl around her shoulders.

Aaron just shook his head.

Faith smiled as she hooked her arm through Rob's.

“Don't worry” she said, “I'll return him exactly as I've found him”

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Bexhill-On-Sea, Sussex - the Belle Vue Guest House 7:45 pm

“I think this would suit me perfectly” said Frank as he looked around the small bedroom and put his suitcase down on the floor.

“Well I do like to my guests to feel at home Mr Clayton” said Mrs Seymour.

Frank took off his hat and ran his fingers through his grey hair.

“Oh, please” he replied with a smile, “Call me Frank”

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Blackpool – The Masonic Hall – 8:00pm

“Here we are” said Robert as he handed Faith a glass of sherry and sat down at their table, a glass of bitter in his hand.
“It's alright if you want to mingle by the way” he added, “I won't mind”. The landlady had stopped to chat to several couples as they had walked across the edge of the dance floor to find somewhere to sit. The men had all seemed to be pleased to see her, he had noticed. The reaction from their female companions had been more mixed.

“I only wanted to say a quick hello” said Faith, “If I stay too long someone will only ask me about Frank”

“Well, we're here to enjoy ourselves so let's forget about him shall we?” said Rob with a smile.

“Might be easier if his daughter hadn't just walked in” Faith replied, looking over to the entrance to the room.

Robert followed her gaze. Vanessa was standing in the doorway, dressed to the nines and arm in arm with Dr McGann.

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Blackpool – The Skinner's Arms 8:45pm

“Mind your backs” said the landlord as he walked into the skittle alley at the back of the pub. Aaron took a step to one side as the man walked past him and put a tray of drinks down on a corner table.

“Careful now Ted! I've got two bob on this game” said one of the spectators towards the old man about to take his shot.

Aaron drained the last of his pint and headed back into the main room. As he walked up to the bar, a young dark haired woman was standing behind it with her back to him, putting some change in the till.

“What can I get you sweetheart?” she asked as she turned around.

“Pint of bitter please” said Aaron

The woman smiled as she pulled a pint. As Aaron handed her his money, she kept looking at him.

“It's you isn't it?” she asked

Aaron didn't know what to say. Other than, 'yes'. So he decided to wait.

“Aaron. Aaron Dingle!” she went on, “Well I never! After all these years”

Aaron stared back. Then, suddenly, a penny dropped.

“Oh” he replied, “Hello Wendy”

TO BE CONTINUED
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Friday 6th October 1950 - 2 am

Aaron lifted the wooden stool from the corner and placed it down quietly in front of the window in the attic room. There was no need for it to be in here now. Not really. After all, this hadn't been his bedroom for years. The stool had only been put in here so he'd have something to sit on while he looked through his telescope. That self-same telescope was at home now, back in the Gatehouse in Hadleigh.

It wasn't as if he ever slept here. Whenever Aaron and Robert stayed at his Nan's, they were always tucked up in one of the rooms on the floor below. But it still felt like his room. He'd sat right where he was now countless times in the past. Just staring out of the window, and thinking.

And tonight, well tonight had turned out to be a night for looking back. For thinking about the past and about the lonely young man who used to sit here and look up at the night sky.

As he stared into the dark, Aaron heard the bedroom door quietly click open behind him. He didn't need to turn around to know who it would be. He didn't need to turn around to know who it would be. But he turned around all the same. And smiled.

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Let's go back a good few years...........

Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse– sometime during the middle of the War, early one Saturday evening in Winter

Aaron turned around from the open window as the bedroom door slowly opened.

“Pull the curtains back across love, there's a good lad” said Faith as she walked in from the landing, “I can't see what I'm doing here”

Aaron let go of the curtain and the blackout lining underneath and covered up the glass as his grandmother put on the bed-side lamp.

“I don't want a Warden knocking on my door now do I?” she said, “Well, not unless it's that nice looking young one” she added, “Anyway, your girlfriend's downstairs”

Aaron sighed as he got up from the stool, “Wendy's not my girlfriend Nan she's just.....a friend” he said

“You going anywhere nice?” Faith asked, changing the subject.

“Just to see Mark Culshaw” replied Aaron, “He's home on leave”.
The Skinners Arms Public House – a little later

“Well, they'll be gone for ages now” said Mark Culshaw to Aaron as their two female companions got up and headed off towards the ladies.

“I don't know what they do in there” Mark added.

Aaron shrugged in reply. He felt like he was completely the wrong person to ask.

“Your Mam was in a bad mood. I mean, more than usual” said Aaron.

His friend leaned back in his chair, “It's always the same. She says she never sees me when I'm on leave” he said, “And it's not like she's on her own. She's still got our Dennis”

“Course, now she's saying he'll be in the Army next! I told her. The War will be over long before that happens!”

Aaron nodded quietly and sipped at his drink.

“You heard about your call up yet?” asked Dennis, looking over to his friend.

“Nah” Aaron replied, “We're doing War....uh.. stuff in the workshop. Mr Fenwick said he'd write and get us put back a bit if it happens”

“Don't know if that'll make any difference though” Aaron added gloomily, “You know Harry's been called up?”

“Well, he's only in the Post Office isn't he?” said Mark, “Easy to replace. I mean, you're skilled aren't ya?”

Mark looked thoughtfully at Aaron for a moment, “You're doing your bit already Aaron. Don't get too keen to get into uniform. Even if it does impress the ladies” he added with a smile.

Aaron thought to himself, 'Impressing the ladies, as if that was what he wanted to do!'

“Hey talk of the devil!” said Mark enthusiastically

“Hello lads!” said Harry, his trademark smile fixed across his handsome face, "You on your own?" he asked as he sat down on an empty chair between the two friends.

Aaron immediately began to smile, pleased at the young man's arrival. Then he started to worry that he was looking too pleased and shifted a little on his chair.

"April and Wendy are in the....you, know" said Mark, "Powdering their what-nots"

"That's where Shirley has gone" said Harry, casually running his hand through the side of his blonde locks. Aaron tried not to stare.

"Thought you were going out with a girl from the sorting office now?" asked Mark
"I am" replied Harry, "Alison"

"So why are you with Shirley?" asked Mark

"Alison is a very respectable girl" replied Harry, "But, well, I'll be in khaki like you soon. Got to have some fun before I go"

"Haven't I Aaron?" said Harry with a cheeky grin, giving the young man a friendly nudge.

Aaron smiled and said nothing

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"How'd you manage to get new tights?" asked Wendy as she looked away from a mirror in the ladies toilet, "You can't find them for love nor money these days" she added

"Well they didn't cost me any money. Let's leave it at that" said Shirley as she checked her reflection in the next mirror along, "Who are you with tonight?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Aaron" Wendy replied

"Blimey. Aaron Dingle!" said Shirley, looking across at the young woman, "You're not still chasing after that one are ya? I thought it was us girls who were supposed to play hard to get!"

"When did you ever play hard to get?" said April as she walked over to a sink and started to wash her hands.

"Aaron is just shy, that's all. He's a gentleman" said Wendy defensively.

"I know he's nice looking. Well, if you like short, dark and handsome I mean" said Shirley

Wendy crossed her arms across the front of her blouse.

"I blame his Nan" said April

"How do you work that out?" asked Wendy, confused

"Aaron probably wouldn't be so backward in coming forward if she wasn't a....well, if she wasn't such a..." began April, pausing to think for the right word.

"An old trollop?" said Shirley, happy to offer one.

"Shirley!" said Wendy

"That's nothing. You should hear my Mam go on about her!" said Shirley as she took a lipstick out of her handbag

"She's always been very nice to me" insisted Wendy

"Oh she's nice all right. I'll give her that" said Shirley as she started to touch up her lips, "Especially to anyone in trousers"

Wendy looked annoyed and headed out of the ladies.

"I mean. She does it for free! " said Shirley to April as she looked into the mirror, "Never mind
Let's move ahead a little......

Miners Training Centre, the Midlands - towards the end of the War - late one dark evening

Aaron sat behind the steering wheel of the old lorry, parked behind the canteen hut. Even in here it was cold, so he thrust his hands into his jacket pocket to keep them warm. The icy wind was cutting right through the training camp. That was the trouble with somewhere just made up of huts. There was nowhere to provide a proper shield. He stared through the windscreen up and the night sky and tried to think.

He was shaken from his thoughts by a light tap on the side window. He looked out and saw Patrick, leaning close with a his gloved hand clutching the collar of his Army coat to keep it closed.

"What are you doing out in the cold?" Patrick asked

Aaron gave a small shrug.

"You can come over to the infirmary if you like?" Patrick offered, "I've got some cocoa"

Aaron gave a nod. Patrick stood back to give him room to get out of the van.

"Oh. Thank you Aaron" said Patrick as the young man helped him off with his coat and hung it up on the wall in the examination room.

"You weren't thinking of driving off were you?" Patrick asked, briefly running his hand through his floppy dark fringe, "I mean, can you even drive?" he added as he screwed the top off a small metal flask with some difficulty.

"Adam's been teaching me" said Aaron as he sat down on the long examination couch.

"I thought we didn't have any petrol for that old thing" said Patrick as he poured out some cocoa into a metal cup.

"We, uh, borrowed some. From Mr Pollard's car" said Aaron

Patrick smiled indulgently as he handed Aaron his mug, "I think I can turn a blind eye" he said, "Well, this is a training centre after all. Could be very useful being able to drive. After the War I mean"

"We've been careful" Aaron said quickly, "We've only driven round the camp. Oh, and down to the end of the approach road and back"
"It's all right" Patrick assured him as he sat down in a chair a little away from Aaron, "We'll pretend you didn't tell me"

Aaron smiled and sipped at his cocoa.

"Did you just want to get a bit of air. Away from the hut?" Patrick asked. He could tell from Aaron's demeanour that it was more than that. But he thought a vague question might draw him out a little. If that was what he wanted.

"Leo got hold of some booze. Not much" said Aaron, "So the lads had a bit of a drink. Then they started talking about, you know, women"

"I...I just get worried when that starts" he went on, "Cause someone will notice I'm not speaking. And somehow, they'll just.....know. About me."

"Well I won't start talking about women. I promise" said Patrick.

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"Do you think I'll ever meet someone? A, uh....feller. I mean" asked Aaron.

Patrick could see that this conversation was difficult for Aaron. He chose his words carefully before responding.

"I hope you do" said Patrick, "I never thought I would but I was lucky"

"Well, lucky about that anyway" he added quietly

Aaron looked over at Patrick. He knew he had meant his injuries.

"I think your feller was lucky too. Cause he met you" Aaron said kindly

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"......and it can be months and months before I hear from him, let alone see him" said Patrick, "But that's just the War. Daniel's promised it'll be different after" said Patrick, "That what we all have to think about isn't it? Happier days to come"

"Let's hope so" Aaron replied. He was staring down at his hands, lying idly in his lap.

Patrick leaned over from his chair, "I'm sure they'll be someone special out there" he said, "Nice lad like you" he added, giving Aaron's left hand a quick squeeze.

"Better get back to the hut" said Aaron as he stood up. He paused as he reached the doorway and turned around, "Thanks for the drink Sarge. And for, you know, listening" he said.

"Anytime" said Patrick.

Aaron smiled before heading back to the rest of the lads
And a bit further on again.........

Hadleigh Manor House - Derbyshire, towards the end of the War

Aaron set the hand brake on the lorry and turned to the middle aged man in the passenger seat.

"Was that all right?" Aaron asked

"Not too bad" the man replied grudgingly, "Now, shift your backside. I've got to drive the men back to the village"

Aaron grinned and climbed out of the cab. Adam was waiting for him while the rest of the young miners billeted at the Manor House all headed over to the kitchen door.

"See" said Adam, a broad grin on his face, "Told you you'd be fine on the main road. You're a natural!" he added as they followed the rest of the lads.

"Shurrup!" said Aaron, embarrassed at the attention his friend was giving him.

"Come on" said Adam, quickening his pace across the gravel, "Before the rest of lads scoff all the tea"

Aaron smiled as his friend walked ahead of him. He knew food wasn't on Adam's mind. He was hoping Victoria would be in the kitchens. As Adam reached the door, a tall, blonde haired man walked out into the yard, leaning on a walking stick.

"Evening lads" he said

"Evening Mr Sugden" said Adam as he darted past him and into the Manor.

Aaron paused as he walked past the blonde young man.

"Mr Sugden" he said, smiling happily as he spoke

"Aaron" Robert replied. He grabbed the top of his walking stick tightly and glanced over to the open kitchen door. They were both well out of earshot of anybody there, he decided.

"See you later?" Rob asked softly

Aaron just smiled back and gave a quick nod. Rob smiled back in return and headed off into the yard.

Aaron thought to himself as he watched Robert walk away. Patrick had been right. There had been someone special out there. Someone very special

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Aaron walked over to the kitchen table and sat down next to Adam, who had made sure a place had
been kept for him by his side.

"I'll tell you what I can't stand about these flaming Yanks! It's the way they steal our women!" said Donald McTaggert angrily

"Really" Leo drawled in reply, "Do we have to have this again?"

"I'm entitled to my opinion!" the young Scotsman replied

"Yeah?" said Sammy Feldman, "Well I'm entitled to eat my bleeding tea in quiet. So shut it!"

Donald was about to reply when a booming voice rang out, "I think that is quite enough swearing" said Dafydd.

The young Welshman turned to Aaron who was sitting on his left

"What would Mrs Kempinski think if she walked in!" he said.

Donald had an evil grin on his face. "Well you know what I think about her..." he started

There was heavy clunk as Adam slammed his cutlery down on the wooden table.

"Oh yeah? Something to say have ya?" he began angrily.

Donald look at the furious look on Adam's face and decided not to continue. A silence fell across the room.

"I don't know why you blame the Americans Donald" said Leo, in an attempt to lighten to mood, "I mean. You couldn't get a woman before they came over here"

"Oh, very amusing!" Donald replied sarcastically, but the rest of the lads laughed and the conversation moved on.

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Let's get back to the present.....

Blackpool - Patrick's flat in Crimea Street - Thursday 5th October 1950 - 8pm

You got used to the noise after a while, Patrick had found. The family downstairs were rowing at full volume, as usual. Something about rent money being spent on beer. The young man was sat at the table, reading through the short letter he had written to Mrs Dingle. He thought for a moment and then decided. In the blank top right corner of the page, he neatly wrote his address, "Top floor flat, 13 Crimea Street".

"Lucky for some eh?" he said, looking over at Patch, who was still lying on the bed asleep. The small dog had got used to the noise too.

Patrick shivered for a moment as he put the folded letter into an envelope. It was still too cold in here.
Blackpool - The Masonic Hall - just before 8pm

Renee Cumshaw leaned over the counter of the cloakroom as if she was going to impart some great secret to the woman standing opposite her.

"Well, I'm telling you now Mabel", she said, "They'll be fireworks when Faith Dingle sees her showing up" she added, nodding over towards the entrance to the dancehall where Vanessa Woodfield had just walked in on Dr McGann's arm.

"Faith was in the Royal on Monday" Mabel replied eagerly, "Course, she was acting like she didn't have a care in the World. But it was all for show. You could tell!"

"I've no sympathy" said Renee, "Not when you put it about as much as she does. I mean, you can't complain if your feller does the same can you?"

"Well, you wouldn't catch my Charlie carrying on with another woman!" Mabel insisted.

"No, I don't suppose you would" Renee replied dryly

Mabel shot the other woman a look, unsure what she meant. But Renee just smiled.

Faith looked over to the entrance where Vanessa and the Doctor had just come in.

"Go and ask them to join us" said Faith, turning to Robert who was sat at her side.

"Are you sure?" Robert replied

"I don't blame her" said Faith, "Not her fault her Dad's lower than a snake's belly. Besides" she added, as she glanced around the dance hall, "This lot are hoping for a slanging match. So.......

"So?" Rob asked, waiting for her to finish

"They're going to be disappointed" Faith finished with a smile, "Off you go please love" she went on, giving Robert's hand a quick squeeze

"This is Mr Sugden. He's Aaron's boss" said Vanessa to Dr McGann

"Please, it's Robert" said Rob smoothly as he extended his hand for the young Doctor to shake, "Anyway, we've met before"

"Yes we have. How is the leg now?" Dr McGann asked as he shook Robert's hand.
"Much better" said Rob, "Well, I think I can manage some dancing anyway"

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Faith and Robert were at the centre of the dance floor, her hand holding onto his side as they circled around. In fact, holding a bit too firmly in Robert's opinion.

"I knew you'd be a lovely mover" said Faith, smiling broadly.

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"Right" said Dr McGann as he stood up from the table, "I'll just head to the bar"

"I'll give you a hand" said Robert as he stood too.

Faith waited until the two young men were on their way.

"So, how long have you and our dishy Doctor been an item?" Faith asked

"This is our first date" said Vanessa, "He only asked me out on Monday"

"I thought they couldn't go out with their patients" said Faith

"Oh, Peter's not my GP" the young woman replied, "I was round at Mrs Anderson's to look at her cat. Turned out she'd tripped over it. He was fine but her face looked terrible where she'd hit it. Course, she'd not been to the Doctor, she was more worried about her Tabby"

"That's Nora for you. She adores that cat" said Faith, "More than she ever did her husband" she added.

"So I sent a neighbour round for her Doctor and Peter turned up. Just as I was leaving, he asked me out"

"Well I think you make a lovely couple" said Faith.

Vanessa smiled, relieved.

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The band had just started to play another number. Faith stood up from the table.

"Come on Peter" she said to the young Doctor, "This is a ladies choice, the compere just said. And I've picked you"

"Oh, right" said Dr McGann, smiling a little nervously as he stood up.

"I didn't hear the compere say it was a ladies choice" said Rob

Faith leaned over and gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Robert, don't be a spoilsport" she said quietly.
Rob watched as Faith led the Doctor out onto the floor. "Do you want to....?" he started, turning to Vanessa.

"No, I'll sit this out I think, thanks" she replied.

The pair sat in silence for a moment.

"So" Vanessa began, "What is it you do again? You run a Manor House don't you?"

Robert beamed. 'Well actually" he said, "I'm in charge of several properties....."

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Blackpool - The Skinners Arms Public House- 9pm

"It's always the same on a match night" said Wendy as she walked over from the skittle alley at the back of the pub, a tray of empty glasses in her hand.

"Not that it ever gets that busy in here" she added as she stood back behind the bar.

Aaron turned on his stool and looked around. He could see what she meant. There were only two other customers in the place and they were both dragging their pints out.

"You're the first of the old gang I've seen since I got back" said Wendy, leaning on the bar, her arms folded, "Course there's not many of us still around, one way or another"

"I'm uh, sorry about your husband" said Aaron

"It's not as if I'm the only widow in our street" said Wendy, "At least we had a good few years together. Look at poor April Donnelly. She and Mark only got as far as being engaged"

"You staying at your Mam's?" Aaron asked

"For now" Wendy replied, "But, well, I don't need to tell you what she's like do I? I'm looking at a bed-sit tomorrow, over in Crimea Street"

"Ah, Wend!" said Aaron, leaning back a little, "You can't stay there. I used to go through there when I had my paper round. It's dead rough"

Wendy smiled. It had been a long time since anyone had called her 'Wend'. "It's cheap" she replied.

"Yeah. It's cheap cause it's rough" Aaron replied.

"Perhaps you're right" said Wendy.

"Are you serving or chatting?" the landlord suddenly asked as he walked up to the bar, "That lot have just ordered another round in the back" he added as he took some bottles of light ale from a crate and headed off to the back room.

"Look. We can't really talk now. Are you free Saturday morning? We can have a proper catch up then" asked Wendy
Aaron looked uncertain

"About half ten?" Wendy persisted, "I can meet you in the cafe opposite Hardings"

"Sure" said Aaron, as he stood up from his stool. "It a...uh....date" he added with a smile.

Wendy smiled back

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Blackpool - The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse - just before midnight

'Well, this is me" said Robert quietly as he paused at his bedroom door.

"I have to say, I had a marvellous time. Thank you Robert" replied Faith, leaning over and giving him a quick peck on the cheek, "Goodnight love" she added as she headed to her own room.

"Good night" said Rob.

He opened the door. Aaron looked fast asleep on his usual side of the bed. Robert smiled to himself as he spotted the chair nearby. Aaron had left Rob's maroon pyjamas on there, neatly folded, with a wooden coat hanger on the back of the chair for his suit.

A little later, Rob eased himself into his side of the bed. Aaron must have been moving about a bit as the mattress was lovely and warm. Robert cuddled up against his sleeping partner and hooked his arm around his waist as he drifted off to sleep.

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Around 2am........

Aaron smiled as Robert walked into his old attic bedroom.

"What are you doing up here?" asked Rob as he walked over to him.

"Just thinking" Aaron replied quietly, "Used to do a lot of that in here"

"But it's freezing!" said Robert. He looked Aaron up and down. He was in his usual night attire, just his vest and boxer shorts.

"Here, put this on" he insisted as he slipped out of his dressing gown and handed it to his partner.

Aaron smiled and put the gown on and then sat down on the bed. Rob realised that the young man wanted to talk so sat next to him.

"Your Nan had a good time tonight" Robert said with a smile, "So did I actually"

"That's good" said Aaron quietly.

"How about you? You enjoy yourself down the pub?" Rob asked
Aaron thought for a moment before replying.

"Wendy Fairfax was there, working behind the bar" he said, "Well, she's Wendy Costello now. I mean, she was. She's a widow" he went on, stumbling over his words a little.

"Wendy?" asked Robert, "Not the Wendy?"

"Yeah" said Aaron

"Got some competition have I?" Rob asked, flashing Aaron a cheeky grin

"No! Course not!" Aaron replied

"Good" said Robert, curling his right arm around the young man's shoulders.

Aaron fell quiet again.

"So. You have a chat about the old days?" Rob prompted gently

"Talked about the old gang a bit" said Aaron

"That must have nice for ya" said Robert

"Yeah?" said Aaron reaching up and wiping his eye, "Would have been if half of them hadn't died"

"Hey" said Rob softly, pulling Aaron a little closer, "You've got me now. I'm not going anywhere"

"You better not!" Aaron replied

They sat in silence for a moment.

Aaron looked over at his old bedroom window and into the night sky.

"I used to sit in here, looking out that window. And half the time, all I thought, was that I've never meet someone. Someone for me, I mean" he said.

Robert held on to him and let him talk.

"Didn't even know if there was anyone like me. We used to have lads staying here, from the shows. You know, like Bobby. And the boys at the workshop used to make jokes about them. But they didn't know what they were on about. I never saw two blokes, you know, together. Not until Daniel turned up that time at the training camp. That was when I knew. That I wasn't alone, I mean. And I still managed to turn that into a flaming disaster!" said Aaron, hanging his head

"Aaron" said Robert, "You know Patrick doesn't hold that against ya. You'd never have become friends if he did"

Aaron wiped his eyes again and nodded.

"Come here you" said Rob, wrapping his other arm around Aaron and holding him in a hug.

"He told me. Back in the camp once. He said there was someone special out there for me. And he was right" said Aaron.

Aaron moved away a little so he could look Robert in the face.

"I know I don't say it much. But you know I love ya don't you?" said Aaron
"I know" said Rob softly, his face lit up in a smile. He leaned forward and pressed his lips against his partners.

"Let's get back to bed" said Robert before he stood up.

Aaron smiled and followed him towards the door. He paused in the doorway and looked back through the window. He felt a hand take his and Rob quietly saying, "Come on" in his ear.

Aaron followed him out. He'd had enough of the past for one night.

TO BE CONTINUED

Chapter End Notes

This is a Valentine's Day update which I hope will appeal to long-term readers, especially those that have stuck with this AU since Love On The Home Front.
Aaron woke to the sound of rain lashing against the bedroom window. He sat up in bed a little and stretched over to pull back the curtain. He frowned as he looked at the gloom outside. As he did so, Robert rolled over in bed so he was now curled up with his back to his partner. Aaron smiled as he snuggled back down into the warm bed and curled his arm around Rob's middle, pulling him close. The day could wait for now.

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8:30am

Aaron stirred again. Someone was obviously moving around in the room next door. In Patrick's room, he corrected himself. It was probably only his Nan. Sure enough, a moment later he heard the door close and the sound of Faith singing to herself as she walked briskly down the hallway to the stairs. He sat up and and squinted over at the clock on the night-stand.

“Morning” said Robert with a yawn as he pushed himself up on his side of the bed, a big smile on his face.

“Morning” said Aaron, smiling back at the other young man,

“Come here” said Rob softly, before leaning across to kiss Aaron on the lips.

“Do we have to get up?” asked Robert as he moved back, “I'm aching all over after last night. And not in a good way!”

“We are on holiday aren't we? Sort of” Aaron replied, “Spose we can wait a bit.” he added as he lay back down on the bed.

“Good, cause I'm worn out” said Rob as he lay back too, “ Spinning your Nan around the dance floor does that to ya. It's exhausting”

“You couldn't do something for me, could you?” Robert asked as he rolled onto his side and looked down at his partner.

“I thought you were knackered?” Aaron replied, grinning broadly.

“Not that!” Rob said with a smile,

“So...?” prompted Aaron

“So” replied Robert, “You couldn't go and make us a cuppa could ya?” he asked, curling his hand under the blankets and squeezing Aaron's right hip.

“A cuppa?” asked Aaron

“Yeah. For being such a good....grandson-in-law. Or something” said Rob.

“Oh. Is that what you are ?” his partner asked

“Of course” replied Rob. He leaned in again, this time for a longer kiss.
“Ok then” said Aaron, “Only cause you've been good mind” he added.

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Aaron padded slowly through the hallway into the kitchen. He opened the kitchen door to be greeted by the sight of Carol, wearing a silk dressing gown and doing some ironing.

“Morning” said Aaron, “Didn't think you got up this early”

“Morning. I couldn't sleep” she asked, as she ironed away at a blouse, “Thought I'd get ahead of myself a bit”

Aaron thrust his hands into the pockets of Robert's dressing gown, “Is my Nan about?” he asked

“She's just gone round to the laundry” said Carol, “Said she wanted to air out Patrick's room. Well, his old room I mean. She won't be long”

“Do you want a cuppa?” asked Aaron as he headed to the stove, “I'm making one for Rob. I mean, for my boss”

“Oh, yes please” said Carol, “Don't you get five minutes to yourself?” she went on, pausing in her work for a moment, “You know, my mother was in service. Before she got married. You'd think it was marvelous the way she goes on about it”

“It's not all bad” said Aaron with a smile

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A little later............

“Actually. That Frank reminded me a bit of your Mr Sugden, in a way” said Carol

Aaron was puzzled. “How come?” he asked as he leaned back against the sink.

“You know. Bit of a charmer” said Carol with a smile, “He had Lillian wrapped round his little finger. I didn't realise he'd talked her into bed though. Not that that would taken much” she added, “Even so, I couldn't believe he'd con your Nan out of money as well”

“He'd better not show his face here again” said Aaron, a hard expression on his features.

“I don't know. Fellers!” said Carol letting out a sigh.

“You remind me of my Nan now!” said Aaron

“Well, some fellers anyway” said Carol, looking up for a moment at him.

“It's a shame Patrick moved out” said Carol, “Mind you, I don't think he was very happy here. Not for ages. He was missing that pal of his you could tell. They're very close you know. Poor Daniel was ever so upset when Patrick was in that clinic. Course, they've got no family between them have they? I think that must be what accounts for it”

Aaron frowned and stared at the floor for a moment.

“Yeah, must be” he mumbled in reply
Robert flicked over the page of his detective novel and paused as he sat up in bed. The muffled sound of Faith, singing to herself in the next room was coming through the wall. He could just about make out a reasonably accurate version of “Anything goes”. He looked up with a smile as the door opened and Aaron walked in, carrying two mugs of tea.

“You took your time. Thought you’d gone AWOL for a minute there!” said Robert.

“AWOL?” asked Aaron. He put the mugs down on the dresser then turned to lock the bedroom door.

“Absent without leave” explained Rob, as his partner walked over and handed him a cup, “It's what we'd say in the air-force if you didn't show up”

“Ah” said Aaron as he climbed back into his side of the bed, “Didn't have that down the mine did we? Anyway, Carol was down in the kitchen. I was talking to her for a bit. About that Frank” said Aaron

“First Wendy, now Carol?” asked Robert in mock surprise, keeping his voice light, “What is it with you this trip? You've gone woman mad!” he added with a grin.

“Shurrup!” said Aaron, “Drink your tea!”

Rob did what he was told, at least for a minute or so.

“Your Nan sounds happy” said Robert, nodding towards the far wall.

“She's giving Patrick's room a clean I think” said Aaron, “Getting in ready”

The young man fell silent again.

“Carol said she thought Patrick was lonely. Cause he was missing Daniel” said Aaron eventually

“I'm sure she's right. I'll tell you this for nothing. I wouldn't let you....” Rob started to say, pausing as Aaron gave him a stare, “I mean, I wouldn't want you to go off for months on end”

Aaron leaned over and put his mug on the night-stand on his side of the bed.

“I'd miss you too much” said Rob softly, curling his arm around his partner's shoulders.

“She said he didn't have any family either. Patrick” said Aaron quietly.

“Well, that just shows she's not right about everything” said Robert, “Cause he's got us”

Rob leaned across and pressed his lips against Aaron's. As he moved back, the sound of Faith's singing next door grew a little louder.

“All three of us” said Robert with a grin.

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Blackpool – Patrick's flat – Crimea Street - Friday 6th October 1950 - 12:00pm
“Come on, out we go” said Patrick as he led Patch onto the landing outside his front door. He let the end of the lead slide onto his wrist so he could take the door key out of his jacket pocket.

He locked the door and the tried the handle. The door was definitely locked, but he tried it again all the same. Then he checked his top inside pocket. His letter for Mrs Dingle was there. He suddenly let out a big yawn. The lack of sleep from last night was catching up with him.

'Come on Patrick. Pull yourself together', he said to himself.

He checked the door was locked once more and, satisfied, started to head down the stairs, the small dog walking ahead of him

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Blackpool - Hardings Department Store- the High Street - 12:00pm

Aaron had never liked Hardings. The assistants had always been far too stuck up in his opinion, even when his Nan had taken him to the toy department as a lad. Even now he felt out of place in his rough jacket and cap. Robert however had marched in as if he owned the place. But then again, he had done that when they'd been in far fancier shops in London. Nobody looked down their nose at Rob.

Robert was over at the counter in the electrical goods Department. So Aaron lingered at the edge of the menswear section nearby, feigning interest in a rain coat that looked like it had been left there before the War.

“Do you require any assistance, sir” the voice said.

Aaron looked up at a middle-aged man in a smart suit. His expression was anything but friendly.

“Nah. You're alright” replied Aaron, “Just waiting for someone”

The man raised an eyebrow and walked over to a display stand where he began to straighten an already tidy suit on a mannequin.

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“And the address sir?” said the young man behind the counter with an exasperated sigh.

“Oh, sorry” said Rob, turning around to face the assistant. He had been looking over towards his partner.

“It's the Golden Palmtree Guesthouse in Albert Avenue” said Robert, “I forget the number”

“I think our delivery man will manage sir” the young man said dryly.

“It should be pretty easy” Rob replied, “My car is parked right outside” he said smugly, “And it will be delivered this afternoon won't it?”

“Yes sir” replied the assistant

“Good” said Robert as he put his wallet into his jacket pocket, “I wouldn't want it to be late”

“Harrods are never late” he added with a smile before he walked away.
“What've you been buying now?” said Aaron as Rob strolled over to him.

“Tell you in a minute” Robert replied, “They don't half fancy themselves in this shop do they? Right snooty that one was” he added nodding over to the counter in the distance.

Aaron looked over at the assistant, “Can't think why” he said with a frown, “That's only Billy Hardcastle”

“Billy Hardcastle?” asked Rob

“I was at school with him” said Aaron, “Used to spit off the Kitchener street bridge onto the trains”

“Charming” said Robert, “Come on, let's go” he said as he started walking to the lifts.

Aaron paused before following his partner.

“Alright Billy” he called cheekily across the room. The young assistant looked annoyed. Aaron smiled as he walked away

“...But we've got a radio” said Aaron as the lift slowly descended

“No, it's for here” Rob explained, “It's a small one we can put in our room. Well, fairly small. It'll make it more of a home from home. I got two. Thought your Nan could put one in Patrick's room. As a sort of coming home present”

“If he comes home” said Aaron glumly

“Uh uh Aaron” Rob corrected him, taking advantage of the lift being empty to put his arm around the young man and give his shoulder a quick squeeze, “It's not if. It's when”.

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Blackpool – The Culshaws' home - 12:30pm

“I wasn't sure you'd be in” said Patrick as he sat down at the kitchen table.

Dennis put a half-eaten cheese sandwich down on a plate. “Always come home for dinner this time of year” he said “Too parky to sit out on the cart”

“You taking this one out for a walk?” Dennis asked, reaching under the table and giving Patch a tickle under the chin.

“Actually, I was wondering if you could drop off a letter for me” said Patrick

“What's that?” said Dennis as he sat back up again.

“When you're on your round. I mean, if you don't mind....” Patrick began to say. He was interrupted as Mrs Culshaw walked into the kitchen.

“Thought you were putting the kettle on. I'm gasping here” she said to her son as he headed to the
stove.

Dennis looked over at Patrick and rolled his eyes

Patrick drained the last of his tea from his mug. Mrs Culshaw's own cup had gone cold. Every time she lifted it to take a sip, she had thought of something else to complain about.

“Do we have to have that flaming thing in here?” she said, giving Patch a hard stare as she sat at the kitchen table, “I'm sure it's not hygienic”

“Oh yeah” said Dennis sarcastically as he looked around the room, “Cause it's soooooo clean it here isn't it Mam?”

His mother sniffed in reply. “You know I'm allergic. I'll come out in a rash” she said

“I thought it made you sneeze?” replied her son

“Well” said Mrs Culshaw, “It's changeable isn't it? Allergies are like that”

“You were a nurse in the Army weren't ya Patrick?” Dennis asked his friend, “Is that right?”

Mrs Culshaw cut in before Patrick had a chance to reply. “Oh, saw that old landlady of yours last night”, she said quickly.

“At the dance at the Masonic Hall she was. Made a right show of herself. No change there mind. Turned up with a right smoothie an' all. Young feller. Well, I say young. Younger than her anyway. He was right smarmy. Course, I know that sort of old! So he didn't get far with me, let me tell you! And if she wern't dancing with him she was up with that nice Dr McGann. Practically throwing herself at him she was, right under her own feller's nose!” she went on.

Patrick was very quiet as she rattled on. The more she talked, the less he actually listened. One name was being etched into his thoughts. 'Frank'.

“I thought you were on the coats?” Dennis interrupted

“Yes, I was in charge of the cloakroom. Why?” his mother replied

“So how do you know all this was going on? If you weren't in the hall?” her son persisted

“I wasn't stuck there all night was I?” said Mrs Culshaw,”I had to go to the lav...I mean, to the washroom now and again. Anyway, Mabel Earnshaw was there. She told me what was going on didn't she? She said people didn't know which way to look! I don't know where that Dingle woman gets the energy from. She won't see sixty again. I know that for a fact!”

“I'd better be getting home” Patrick said, suddenly standing up.

“Are you sure?” asked Dennis, looking out through the window and up at the dark clouds, “It'll be chucking it down soon”

“No. I'd better go” said Patrick, “Come on you” he added, giving Patch a light pull on his lead.

Dennis followed his friend out of the kitchen and over to the back gate.
“Did you say something about a message earlier?” he asked.

“It’s alright. It doesn't matter now” said Patrick. “I'll see you later” he added as he started to walk down the alleyway behind the house.

“Yeah, see ya” said Dennis. He waited until his friend had got to the end of the alley and turned the corner. He frowned as the first drop of rain hit his face.

“Well, he doesn't have much to say for himself” said Mrs Culshaw as her son walked back into the kitchen.

Dennis just scowled.

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Blackpool – Patrick's flat, Crimea Street – 1:00pm

Patch's lead slipped out of Patrick's hand the moment he walked into the entrance hall of the flats. As he turned to close the front door, the small dog ran into the centre of the room and gave himself a rapid shake. The water from his fur splattered across the wooden floor. Given how dusty the hall was, it was an improvement. Patrick took his soaking cap off and gave that a shake. As he did so, the door to the ground floor flat opened and Patch made a dash towards it.

“Thought I saw you coming up the path” said Veronica as she crouched down and gave the dog a smooth. “Aw, look at the pair of ya, you must be soaked through” she added sympathetically

Patrick looked over at the blonde young women. As usual, she was wearing a silk dressing gown. He'd never actually seen her in anything you could wear outdoors.

“I better get him upstairs” Patrick mumbled

“No. You bring him in mine for a bit” said Veronica, “I've got a lovely fire going”

“Well, I.....” Patrick began to reply.

“Come on sweetheart” Veronica persisted. She stood up to let Patch run through into the room and leaned back against the door-frame.

“It's no trouble” she said as Patrick squeezed past her, “I'm not working this afternoon”

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Veronica's flat was in stark contrast to the shabbiness of the outside of the building. Her living room was very clean for a start. And comfortable too. One thing she wasn't short of was red velvet cushions. But as far as Patrick was concerned, the best aspect of the room was the proper coal fire.

Patch was stretched out comfortably on the rug, with the young man sitting on the floor behind him.

“Just hang this up” said Veronica as she put Patrick's wet jacket onto a wooden clothes horse to the side of the fire.

“And I'll get some towels” she added as she headed out of the room.
Patrick got up onto his knees and took out the letter from his jacket pocket. The envelope was drenched and the words “Mrs Dingle” which he had written neatly earlier had half run away. He thought for a moment as he held the letter in his hand. Then he leaned over and let it drop onto the burning coal. And in just a short time, it was gone.

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“No, it's alright. I can manage” said Patrick as Veronica leaned towards him with a towel.

“Don't be daft” she replied, “You fellers are all alike!” she said with a smile, “Much quicker this way, isn't it?” she added as she gently ran the towel over his damp hair.

“You've got lovely hair” she said, as she continued.

“Oh. Uh, thank you” replied Patrick

“Used to be a hairdresser” said Veronica, “Gave it the elbow in the end. Who wants a job where you're on your feet all day? I mean, not much fun in that is there?” she added, putting the wet towel onto the clothes horse.

“I suppose not” said Patrick

Veronica reached down and gave Patch a smooth. “This one doesn't look like a drowned rat so much now” she said, “So, no harm done”

“Better not me. His Dad...I mean, his owner, wouldn't be happy if he got ill” said Patrick

“Isn't he yours then?” asked Veronica

“I look after him for a...... friend. When he's away at sea” said Patrick

“When's he back then?” asked Veronica, “Your friend I mean”

Patrick was quiet for a moment and stared into the fire. “I don't know” he said quietly.

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Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – 5:00pm

Aaron was sitting at the desk in Patrick's old room, attaching a plug to a radio set.

“Don't know why you couldn't wait for me” he said grumpily as he put his screwdriver down.

Robert was sat on the end of the bed. He just shook his head as he neatly folded up the brown paper the parcel had been delivered in.

“We had better sets than this in Harry's shop!” said Aaron as he plugged the radio in.

“What does it matter? Just so long as it works. That's the main thing isn't it?” said Rob

“Is the one for our room the same?” asked Aaron. The radio had started to issue a buzzing sound now. He reached over and adjusted the dial.

“Course it is” said Robert, “Why would I....”
“Here we are” Faith interrupted brightly as she walked into the bedroom, a mug of tea in each hand.

“One for our little handyman” she added, putting a mug down on the desk, “And one for you love” she added, passing a mug to Rob. “Nice of you to get a radio for the boys. I'm sure they'll both like it. When they come home I mean”

“Thank you. It's nice to be appreciated” said Robert with a smile.

Aaron just tutted and kept turning the dial until a different broadcast could be heard.

“I got one for our room too” said Rob, “Thought we could keep it there for when we visit. If that's alright I mean?” he asked the landlady.

“Course it's finr. Did you get one for me as well?” asked Faith with a smile.

“Oh” said Robert, “No, I didn't actually....”

“That's alright” said Faith, leaning over towards the young man,”I'm used to making my own entertainment” she added giving him a quick squeeze on his right shoulder.

“Aw, Nan!” said Aaron, looking over from the desk. But his grandmother just smiled and left the room.

Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Saturday 7th October 1950 – 9:00am

“You didn't mention” it said Robert, putting his mug back down on the kitchen table where he was sitting.

“Didn't I?” replied Aaron, sat opposite him, “I'm only meeting her for a cuppa and a proper catch-up. Talk about the old gang a bit”

“I thought they were all de....I mean, hasn't everyone else uh....moved on now?” said Rob

Aaron got up and took his breakfast plate to the sink. “I feel sorry for her” he said, his back turned to his partner, “She marries her GI. Moves to America and then he goes and dies on her.”

Robert got up and walked over to the sink.

“And then she's stuck over there with no-one. Can't have been nice for her, can it?” said Aaron

“No. Course it wouldn't be” said Rob, hooking his arm around the young man's shoulders

“It's just for this morning” said Aaron, “What are you gonna do with yourself?”

Robert thrust his hands into the pockets of his slacks as he turned around and leaned against the sink.

“I want to talk to that Carol, when she surfaces” he said

“She should be up early. Saturday matinee” said Aaron
“That's what I was thinking of. Her show. Thought she could ask in the theatre if Patrick had been in. In case he had been there with some friends we don't know about. I mean, he'd stand out a bit. Being.....distinctive” said Rob carefully.

“Don't think it's really his kind of show. Glamour girls” said Aaron, “Or ours. Well, not mine anyhow” he added

“Says the man with a date with his ex-girlfriend” said Robert with a cheeky smile.

“Ow! Gerroff!” he added as Aaron grinned back at him and poked him in the ribs.

“Or at least dry your hands first. This shirt is on new” said Rob, a pained expression on his face.

“Sorry” Aaron mumbled, leaning back on the sink next to his partner.

“I think it's worth a try. Asking at the theatre” said Robert, “Patrick must know some people. He cleared his room out quickly by all accounts. Someone must have helped, mustn't they”

Aaron nodded in agreement.

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Blackpool – Patrick's flat in Crimea Street – Saturday 7th October 1950 – 9:30am

“Thought as much. The outside is rotten on this one too” said Dennis as he quickly closed the sash window next to the stove in Patrick's small flat. “No wonder it gets so cold in here” he added

“Are you sure?” Patrick asked. He was sitting on the side of his bed, still in pyjamas and a dressing gown.

“If there's one thing I know about, it's windows” said Dennis with a smile.

“You don't mind taking this one for a walk do you?” Patrick asked, changing the subject. He leaned down and gave Patch a smooth, “If he has a proper walk now, I'm sure I'll manage to take him out later. Just over to that bit of wasteland and back”

“No, it's fine” said Dennis, his voice reassuring, “You go back to bed for a bit. You look done in”

“It's just a cold” said Patrick, “It was getting caught out in the rain that did it”

Dennis looked at the other man. It didn't look like just a cold. But he decided not to mention it

“Lucky I came round” he said instead, “I mean. You went off a bit sharpish yesterday. Still, you're not the first. Not with the way me Mam is with people. Our Mark used to say she could clear a room in five minutes

Patrick managed a smile.

- - - - -

“Come on then little feller” said Dennis as he walked Patch out onto the main street. He turned around and looked up at the building behind him. Crimea Street wasn't on his window cleaning round. From the look of the building, it wasn't on anyone's round. Frowning, he started to walk up the road, staring down at the little dog in front of him.
As he reached another equally run down house a few doors down, a young dark-haired woman stopped in the street in front of him.

“Well I never” she suddenly said, “If it isn't little Dennis Culshaw. All grown up!”

Dennis lifted his head to look at her.

- - - -

Blackpool – a cafe in the High Street opposite Hardings Department Store – 11:00am

“I've just time for another” said Wendy as she poured her and Aaron a cup of tea out of the china pot between them, “Oh, you were right about Crimea Street by the way, I was there this morning”she said, handing him a cup

“I said it would be bad Wend” said Aaron

“It wasn't a bad room. Not really” said Wendy, “But you can see why it was so cheap. It was riddled with damp. Mind you, you'll never guess who I bumped into”

Aaron thought for a moment. “No, you're right. I wouldn't. Who?”

“Little Dennis Culshaw. Mark's younger brother. Course, not so little now. Got his own window cleaning round”

“Yeah. He does my Nan's. I think” said Aaron

“He looks the spit of Mark. Well, how he looked before the War. Anyway, so I asked him if he lived round there now. And he said he was still at his Mam's in Chapel Road. And I thought to myself, 'rather you than me'. I mean, you remember what she used to be like”

Aaron smiled. He couldn't help but think about the old gang. He suddenly realised Wendy was still talking. He had a strange feeling he's missed something important.

“.........cause he's got this big black patch around one eye I suppose. Not very original is it? But then they're not are they? Dogs names I mean.”

“Sorry Wend” said Aaron, “Who had a dog?” he asked

Wendy sighed, “Same old Aaron” she said with a warm smile, “You always did go off into a World of your own. Dennis was walking a friend's dog for him cause he wasn't very well. His friend I mean”

“What was he called?” asked Aaron

“The dog?” replied Wendy, “I told you. He was called Patch. Nice little thing it was”

“Did he say what his friend was called?” Aaron asked quickly.

“Oh, he did tell me” said Wendy, thinking for a moment, “I was in a bit of a rush to tell the truth. I think it was Peter. No, I tell a lie, Paul. Or something like that”

“Patrick?” Aaron suggested
“Yes, that was it” agreed Wendy, “Patrick. Lives in some grotty flat down there by all account. Still, you've not so many options have ya when you've got a dog. Not when it comes to flats”

“No. You haven't” said Aaron, his face breaking into a smile.

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Blackpool - The Golden Palmtree – 11:45am

Robert was stretched out on the bed reading his detective novel when Aaron walked quickly into the room, his jacket and cap still on.

“Come on you” he said with a big grin, “Get your coat. We're going out”

Rob put his book down and smiled back, “How was your date?” he asked

“What?” said Aaron, “It was fine. And I told you. It wasn't a date. Anyway, never mind about that” he added

“So, where are we going in such a rush?” asked Robert

“We're going to see a man about a dog” said Aaron, still smiling.

TO BE CONTINUED
Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Saturday 7th October 1950 – 11:45am

Aaron emerged from the cupboard under the stairs and put a box of Christmas decorations down on the floor.

“I thought you said we were going out?” asked Robert, leaning on the side of the door-frame.

“We are” said Aaron, who was now kneeling down on the floor inside the cupboard, “I just want to find....ah, here's one. Nan never throws anything out. Grab that will ya” he said passing Rob a small wooden packing crate.

“Uncle Cain was always bringing back stuff when he came home from sea” said Aaron as he rummaged among the junk in the cupboard. “Tins of stuff that he'd been....given... and that” 'Stolen more like' Robert thought to himself. “So what do you want with some old boxes?” he asked

“Because” said Aaron, “You and me are going to bring Patrick home. We'll want something to shift his stuff in”

“Course, we could just use your suitcase” said Aaron, pausing for a moment, “That expensive one you got from Harrods” he added with a grin.

“Actually, I think there's another empty box there” said Robert quickly, “Behind that sewing machine” he added, pointing as he did so.

Aaron stretched over to pick the box up.

“So you know where he is then?” asked Rob.

“No. Well, I nearly” know” said Aaron with a smile, “We just need to make a quick visit first”

Blackpool – Chapel Road – 12:15am

“....and Dennis, he's Mark's kid brother” said Aaron as he got out of the car, “So I reckon we know who helped Patrick shift his stuff now” he said as he started to walk down the nearby alleyway.

“Uh huh” said Robert, half-listening as he walked behind him. “Will the car be alright by there?” he added as he looked over his shoulder where Aaron had parked.

“Why wouldn't it be?” Aaron asked, pausing as he was about to open the gate to the Culshaw's back yard.
“It might get scratched” said Rob with a frown, “By one of those street urchins probably” he went on. At the end of the alley three small boys had stopped kicking a football around and were staring at the car.

“Street urchins?” said Aaron. “If you think it's rough round here, you wait till you see Crimea Street”

“His stuff's here anyhow Didn't think he'd be working on a Saturday” said Aaron as he walked over to the back door and knocked loudly.

Robert looked at the window cleaning cart in the back yard, which had 'D Culshaw” painted across the side.

“Got his own business I see” said Rob, resting his hand on the upturned handle, “Least you've got one posh friend”

Aaron just smiled and shook his head. He gave the back door another hard knock.

“You'll have no joy there love” said a female voice, “He's at the football and she's at the bingo at St.Mark's. I'd be there myself if it weren't for my feet”

Aaron looked across at the middle-aged woman in a pinafore and head-scarf who was peering over the dividing wall.

“It's Aaron isn't it?” the woman went on, looking at the young man intently, “Faith Dingle's grandson”

“Hello Mrs Cook” the young man replied, forcing a smile.

“Their Dennis will be back by five. Say hello to your Nan for me” said Mrs Cook before heading to her own back door.

“We'll have to come back later” said Aaron as he headed back to the car, the disappointment clear in his voice.

“Well” said Robert looking at his watch, “It won't be too long a wait. We can go home and have something to eat. Then we can make sure Patrick's room is all ready. We're nearly there, aren't we Aaron?”

Aaron smiled and gave a nod in reply.

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Blackpool – St.Mark's Church Hall – 12:15pm

The Vicar put his hand into the small bag and drew out another ball, “Seventy two” he said primly before putting in down onto a small wooden grid on the table in front of him. Beryl shook her head in annoyance.

“Come on, come on” said Faith quietly as she tapped the end of her pencil on her card. One solitary number stared back at her, uncrossed.

“Forty eight” said the Vicar.
“House!” said Faith at the top of her voice. Beryl lurched away from her in shock. “Sorry love” she added, patting her hand.

Renee Culshaw was sat a few tables away from Faith and her friend. “Well that's no great surprise is it?” she said sourly to the woman sitting next to her, “You know what they say. Money goes to money”

A few minutes later, the vicar had checked Faith's card against his grid and she had collected a small parcel.

“Now ladies, we'll take a small break for refreshment” said the vicar, “And remember we still have one prize left. A leg of lamb, courtesy of Masons Family Butchers”

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Beryl sat down at the table and handed her friend a cup of tea.

“I used to think that the day I liked bingo would be the day they screwed the lid down” said Faith as she unwrapped her parcel, “But I’m enjoying this” she added with a smile.

“A real friend would share her good fortune” said Beryl with a huff.

“It's three china ducks Beryl” Faith replied, showing her friend her prize, “What do you want me to do? Break one of them in half?”

“That's down to the Vicar” said Beryl, “It never is money here”

“I know. You come round tonight. I'll treat us to a fish supper” said Faith.

“They won't look too bad up in your front room I suppose” said Beryl as she looked down at the ducks. She sounded a little mollified.

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Blackpool – Chapel Road, The Culshaw’s home – 5:30pm

“That you Dennis?” Mrs Culshaw shouted from the living room.

Dennis sighed as he hung his cap and jacket up in the hall. “Who else you expecting?” he answered as he walked into the room. His mother was sat on the sofa, while the radio hummed quietly in the corner.

“Anything for tea?” he asked.

“Oh. I've not got anything in. I've been that busy this afternoon. I've only just sat down!” his mother replied

“I'll go down the chippie then” said Dennis as he looked around the untidy room, taking in the pile of ironing waiting to be done.

He was interrupted by the sound of someone knocking on the back door.

“Who's that now?” demanded Mrs Culshaw, “Can't someone get five minutes peace?” she added, while making no sign of moving from the sofa.
“It's alright” said Dennis sarcastically, “I'll go” he added as he headed out into the hall and to the kitchen.

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“Hello Aaron” said Dennis brightly as he opened the back door, “Not seen you for a bit”

“Alright Dennis” said Aaron, “You got a minute?”

“Course, come in” said Dennis. As he stood back from the doorway a loud screech echoed from the living room, “Who is it then?” Mrs Culshaw shouted.

Dennis rolled his eyes. “Hang on a minute” he said as he walked out of the room.

As Aaron sat down at the kitchen table he heard Dennis speaking in the front of the house, “It's Aaron mam. Aaron Dingle” the young man said.

“What's that grumpy little devil want?” his mother asked. Aaron smiled to himself. Some people didn't change it seemed.

“He hasn't come to see you” Dennis snapped back. He loudly pulled the living room door closed behind him as he headed back to the kitchen.

“Ignore her” said Dennis as he sat down, “I usually do. Anyway.....”

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Dennis was standing at the back door to the kitchen now.

“...so try and get him to go back to your Nan's if you can Aaron” he said, “It's not a nice house. Well, you'll see that for yourself. He'll make himself ill if he's not careful”

“That's the plan” Aaron replied as he stood in the yard.

Dennis paused. He looked sad for a moment. “He's a nice feller” he said eventually, “Reminds me a lot of our Mark. Not that he looks like him. It's more..... how he is with people. You know what I mean, don't ya?”

“Yeah, I know” said Aaron with a small smile, “He was a good bloke Mark” he added, giving the other young man a pat on the upper arm.

“No wonder there's a flaming draught in here” said Mrs Culshaw as she walked into the kitchen and headed to the stove.

“Hello Mrs Culshaw” said Aaron with a small sigh.

“Well you're doing well for yourself these days by all accounts” she replied, “Driver for some Duke up in a big house in Derby isn't it?”

“Something like that” Aaron replied.

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“You took your time” said Robert as Aaron climbed into the driving seat in his car, “Five more minutes and I was going to come looking for ya”. Rob had decided that, this time, he'd stay inside the car.

“I'm here now” said Aaron, “Your majesty” he added with a grin.

“Where'd that come from?” Rob asked, smiling back.

“Tell ya later” said Aaron

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Blackpool – outside No.13 – Crimea Street 5:45pm

“It would be 'your Grace' anyway” said Robert

“What?” replied Aaron as he locked the car.

“If I was a duke. You'd call me 'your Grace'. Not 'your majesty' “ said Rob

“What's it matter.? You're not a duke are ya” said Aaron

“You never know. I could have been left on the door step or something” said Robert with a smile as he walked around the car and stood next to his partner.

“ I'll leave you on a door step if you don't stop going on” said Aaron

“Long as it's not one around here” said Rob, looking around the dark street in distaste.

Aaron frowned as he looked at the gate to number thirteen. It was hanging off one hinge and leaning up against the wall.

“Always was rough round here” he said, “I only used it as a short cut when I had my paper round. Just look at this place” he said looking up at the front of the shabby building.

“Well, now you've found him. Let's get Patrick home” said Robert

“We wouldn't have known he was still in town if wasn't for you” Aaron replied.

“Team effort then” said Rob with a smile. He gently put a hand on the back of Aaron's jacket and steered him to the front door.

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Patch jumped off the edge of the bed and darted the short distance to the door to the flat. He stood in front of it, his tail wagging. Patrick put his book down and looked over to the small dog with a frown. He could hear voices and the sound of someone coming up the stairs, but he wasn't expecting anyone.

“Perhaps your Uncle Dennis has come to give you another walk” he said. A moment later there was a short rap on the door.

Relieved, Patrick got up and walked over. At least it wasn't his downstairs neighbours. They would have been far more noisy and far less polite.
“Patrick? It's Robert” said Rob.

“And Aaron” said Aaron quickly, annoyed at not getting a mention.

“I won't be a minute” said Patrick. He slipped the dressing gown off from the top of his shirt and put it on the edge of the bed. He looked quickly around the small flat. It looked tidy. But then, it always did.

“Don't let Patch run past” said Patrick as he reached up to turn the lock, “He knows it's you” he added as he opened the door a little.

Aaron crouched down to stop the small dog from getting onto the stairs.

“Hello boy!” he said, a broad smile on his face.

Patrick said nothing.

“Well, someone's pleased to see us at least” said Rob, hoping it would break the ice. Patrick's face was hard to read, “Can we come in?” he added.

“Oh. Sorry. Yes, come in” said Patrick, taking a step back.

Aaron picked up Patch and carried him to the centre of the room.

“Couldn't be much higher up could ya?” said Robert, his voice still light. He took off his hat and ran his fingers through his blonde hair a moment.

“Yes, the stairs are a bit much. But you get used to things” said Patrick as he sat down on his bed. “You have to sometimes” he added quietly.

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As Patrick and Rob talked, Aaron looked around the room. He was crouched down on the rug with his legs crossed and Patch flopped across his lap. There was a bed along one wall, not far from a small fire. There was a small table jammed against another wall and a solitary chair, where Robert was sitting. There was an old dark wardrobe in a corner and a pokey looking kitchen area with a sink and a hotplate. Everything may have been neat, but you couldn't hide the peeling paper on the walls. Or the cold.

“........and how do you know Frank won't come back?” said Patrick, “They were out dancing on Thursday night, I know that for a start”

“Nan, kicked him out last week” said Aaron, “She's not seen him since”

“But Mrs Culshaw saw them. She was at the dance in the Masonic Hall with this smooth talking charmer she said” said Patrick.

Robert smiled for a moment and then composed his features more seriously, “Actually, I think she might have been talking about me. I took Mrs Dingle out on Thursday”

Patrick frowned.

“It was only to cheer Nan up a bit. She's not been happy since you left” said Aaron quickly.

Patrick said nothing.
“Tell him Robert” said Aaron, looking over at his partner.

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A little later.....

Aaron couldn't understand why things seemed to be taking so long. He thought they'd be boxing Patrick's stuff up by now. Robert had stopped talking as the sound of a muffled argument was coming through the floor.

“That's downstairs” said Patrick, “It's something else you get used to”

“I don't you think you should have to” said Rob

“Whatever it's like here, I can't get kicked out. Just as long as I pay my rent. The landlord doesn't care about anything else”

“Well that's obvious” said Robert, glancing around the room, “Listen...” he started.

“Patrick. You can't stay here. You just.....can't” Aaron blurted out, cutting his partner off mid sentence.

“Aaron....” said Rob.

“But look at it Robert” said Aaron, “It's....it's rotten”

Rob looked across at Patrick. He was silently staring down at the thin carpet.

“Aaron. I don't think that's helpful, right now” Robert said quietly

Aaron shot him a glare.

“I'll take this one for a walk then. Leave you to do the talking!” he said, marching over to the door and out of the flat, carrying Patch as he did so.

Rob looked around the room and spotted Patch's basket in front of the wardrobe.

“I'll just catch him up” said Rob, “He's forgotten this” he said, bending down and picking up a lead.

“Won't be a minute” he said to Patrick as he walked out of the flat.

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Patrick could hear Robert and Aaron talking on the stairs, but they weren't close enough to make out what they saying with the door closed. He picked up his dressing gown and awkwardly maneuvered it back around his shoulders. There didn't seem any need to pretend the flat was any warmer that it actually was now.

It wasn't long before Rob walked confidently back in.

“Right “ he said, spotting the kettle on the hotplate, “Let's have a cuppa” he said as he walked over to the tiny kitchen space.

Patrick just nodded.
Robert had shifted the chair a little nearer to the bed and was leaning forward, a mug of tea in his hands.

“.........and the thing is Patrick” he started, “I know I can tell you this now Aaron's out for a bit. Cause I know you'll keep it to yourself”

“Course I will” said Patrick

“I know Aaron feels guilty about his Nan” said Rob

“Why?” the other young man asked.

“Cause he's the only family she's got. And now's he's halfway across the country, thanks to yours truly” said Robert

“It's only Derbyshire” Patrick cut in

“Well, it's far enough” Rob replied

“And she has got that son of hers” Patrick added

“Who turns up once in a blue moon by all accounts” said Robert, “And he's off enjoying himself at sea the rest of the time. You know what.......”

Patrick looked pained.

“Sorry” Rob mumbled, “I didn't mean....... well, anyway, Aaron really supports me. All the time. I couldn't have done half the stuff I've done if I didn't have him at home with me. And I know he couldn't be there if he was worried about his Nan all the time. And, well, knowing you're back at home keeping an eye out for her, he doesn't worry so much. Because he relies on you so much. Cause he knows he can.”

Patrick thought for a moment. “He didn't seem too concerned about that Frank. And I did tell you. I wrote to you and rang you ages ago” he replied quietly.

Robert nodded. There had been no crowing in Patrick's voice. No hint of 'I told you so'. He sounded more disappointed than anything.

“That wasn't Aaron's fault. Things got bad at work with this Manor House I was working on” said Rob, “Well, never mind about that, I'll tell you another time”

“But as soon as we could we came straight up here. And all we've doing since we got back. Looking for ya” said Robert.

“Except for dancing” said Patrick dryly

“One night only!” said Rob, flashing one of his winning smiles, “And some time off for Aaron to meet his ex girlfriend” he added.

“Oh” said Patrick, “You mean Wendy”

“You don't know her do ya?” asked Robert, surprised.

Patrick shook his head. “No. But I know of her” he replied. He leaned forward, smiling for the first
time since the lads had arrived, “I wouldn't worry if I were you though. That's all in the past”

Rob smiled back.

“Well here’s a thought for you” he said, “Why don't you come home and we'll put all this business in the past?”

Crimea Street- 6:30pm

Aaron turned the corner and started to head back to Patrick's flat, Patch walking happily ahead on his lead. As he neared the house, he saw a dark figure leaning down and staring through one of the rear passenger windows of Rob's car. Then the figure tried to open the locked door.

“Oy!” Aaron shouted, “What do you think you're playing at?” he added as he rushed up towards the building.

The figure looked up for a moment before starting to run down the street. By the time Aaron had reached the car, they were round the next corner and out of sight.

Aaron shook his head angrily, muttering 'flaming Crimea Street' to himself. He decided, that was the last straw. If Robert hadn't persuaded Patrick to come home, they'd just have to kidnap him.

As Aaron walked up the last flight of stairs, Robert stepped out onto the landing, closing the door behind him.

“So?” said Aaron as he neared his partner, “How'd you get on?”

“Well” said Rob, drawing out the word, “I think you need to fetch those boxes from the car. We've got some packing to do”

Aaron's face broke out into a huge smile. He looked over his shoulder for a moment, just to be absolutely sure no-one was coming up the stairs behind him.

“Knew you could do it” he said proudly. He arched his head up a little and pressed his lips softly against Robert's.

A little later.....

“Are these enough for your stuff?” asked Aaron as he put an empty wooden crate down on the table with 'Made In Uruguay' stenciled on the outside.

“I remember when my uncle brought this back” he said rapidly, “Took us ages to finish. I've never liked corn beef ever since”

Robert smiled as he neatly folded Patrick's clothes into one side of a suitcase. He knew Aaron was talking just a little too much because he was happy.

“Yes, it's fine” said Patrick, “There's not that much. Well, it all fitted on the back of Dennis's cart
alright anyway”

“Right” said Rob, sounding businesslike, “What about your rent and everything? I'm assuming you don't have anything fancy like a lease”

“It's paid by the week” said Patrick, “You have to drop it off at Mr Moore's in Sutton Terrace every Monday. He owns nearly all the flats round here”

“No rent collector?” asked Robert, “Still, they'd cost money I suppose. Do you want us to drive that way and drop your keys off?” he added

“It can wait till Monday” said Patrick, “Right now I just want to go home” he went on as he put a towel and a wash-bag into his case.

Aaron smiled as he packed a ledger and a small pile of books into a wooden crate. It was that small word that had done it. Home.

He knew Rob would sort out this family rift. Because that's what it was, really.

And talking of family.................

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Leeds - The Dog and Duck Public House - Saturday 7th October 1950 - 6:00pm

“Hello Cain. Not seen you a while. You just got in? Pint is it?”, the middle-aged man behind the bar asked.

Cain just gave a curt nod as he put his kit-bag down on the floor. He looked around the crowded bar while the landlord pulled his pint.

“Cheers Stan” said Cain as he lifted the drink to his lips, “Is Charity not in tonight?” he asked

“Charity?” Stanley replied, “No. She packed in it three months back”

“Ah well” said Cain with a shrug, “I'll just head to Bewley Street when I've had this”

“I think she's moved. Got a better flat somewhere. Hang on a minute, I'll ask Millie” said Stanley

“Millie!” the landlord bellowed around the corner of the bar. Moments later a young, attractive blonde woman walked in.

“Where did Charity move to?” Stanley asked

“Who wants to know?” Millie replied as she idly polished an empty pint glass.

“Her feller's in” said Ron

“Her feller ?” Millie asked, looking up in surprise

“Yes. Her feller” said Ron, “He's just back from sea”

“Oh” said Millie, looking over towards Cain, “She's in Balaclava Terrace now. Number seventeen. You can't miss it. It's the basement flat”
“Thanks lo...” Cain started to say. But the young barmaid had already darted back around the corner of the bar.

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Leeds – No.17 Balaclava Terrace – 6:30pm

Cain knocked on the door to the basement flat for a third time. He finally decided that he couldn't scowl someone into answering and concluded that Charity must be out. Or, to be more accurate, he hoped she was out. After all, this flat was an improvement on her last place. You could tell that just from looking at the outside. And as she had packed in her job in the pub, she must be getting the money for it from somewhere. Or from someone! He decided to park that thought for now and, leaving his kit bag by the door, walked up to the top of the steps and sat down on one of the cornerstones. He fumbled in a pocket in his long black jacket, took out his tobacco tin and flipped open the lid. He had just put the open tin down on the opposite cornerstone when the ground floor window next door opened and a red-haired, middle-aged woman leaned out.

“You looking for Charity love?” she asked

Cain’s instinct was to reply, ‘what's it to you you nosy cow?’, but instead he said, “That's right” and fumbled in his other jacket pocket for his cigarette papers.

“Someone will be back soon. Her or her flatmate” said the lady

Cain looked up sharply. He was about to ask ‘what flatmate?’ but the woman had vanished back into her home. Instead Cain looked up to the end of the road. There was no sign of Charity. He was jolted out of his thoughts by the screech of the cat that has just darted out of the open window as if it had been scalded. It landed on the cornerstone, knocking Cain's tobacco tin onto the floor and then vanished up the street.

Cain swore to himself and bent down, trying to recover the scrambled contents of his tin. “It'll start raining in a flaming minute!” he muttered.

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Charity walked briskly to the end of Gladstone Road, her hand hooked through the arm of the dark haired man walking with her.

“The thing is” the man continued talking, “My wife doesn't understand me”

“I've never met a felller who's wife did” replied Charity with a smile.

That smile faded the moment they turned the corner and she spotted the dark figure scrambling about at the top of the steps down to her flat.

“You know Gerald” she said quickly, ‘I've just remembered. I promised I'd see my mother tonight. She's not been well” she added as she gently steered the man around and back into Gladstone Road.

“Your mother?” Gerald asked with a frown, “I thought she was dead”

“Fraid not” lied Charity, “Only the good die young! Look, I'll see you next week. We can have
some fun then”

“When?” asked Gerald

Charity did some rapid calculations in her head before replying, “Friday. Yes, Friday evening should be alright”

“Shall I come round?” asked Gerald

“Best not” said Charity, “I'll see you in the Red Lion” she added before giving him a quick peck on the cheek.

Gerald looked despondent as he trudged away. Charity, took a deep breath, turned around and walked into Balaclava Terrace.

Cain has just salvaged enough tobacco for a cigarette. He looked up at the sound of high heels walking on the pavement towards him.

“Hello stranger!” said Charity, smiling just a little too enthusiastically as she said it

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A bit later......

Charity pulled her silk dressing gown around her shoulders and headed into the small kitchen. She has just started to fill the kettle when Cain walked in behind her, in his vest and a pair of rough trousers.

“So, you going to tell me who he is?” he asked as he leaned against the side of the door-frame.

“Who’s this love?” Charity replied as she lit the gas under the kettle

“Your flatmate” said Cain, “Her next door said you had one”

Charity said nothing.

“Only, I can't help but notice there's only one bed here”

“Yes and Millie from the pub has stayed over and couple of times and she's slept in that bed with me” said Charity, “I mean. No-one could sleep on that lumpy sofa could they?”

“Ah, well” said Cain, sounding satisfied, “You should have said” he added as he walked into the living room and plonked himself down in a comfy armchair, “Another girl? That's different isn't it”

In the kitchen, Charity smiled slyly to herself.

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“There you go” said Charity, handing Cain a cup of tea before she sat down on the sofa, “So, how long you home this time?” she asked as she lifted a cushion and took some knitting out from under it.

“Give us a chance!” said Cain, “I've only just got here. You trying to get rid of me or something?”
“Course not” said Charity, as she started to knit.

Cain sipped at his tea and stared around the living room for a moment. “Thought you said you'd started the dressmaking again” he said.

“That's right” said Charity, “Got to pay for this place somehow. What you give me doesn't go far”

“Only, I don't see any dresses about” said Cain.

“Dropped them of this morning” Charity said quickly

“Or a sewing machine” Cain went on.

“I use next door's” said Charity as she stood up and headed over to the mantelpiece, “Just remembered, couple of letters for you” she added, keen to change the subject.

Cain looked at the handwritten envelopes as she handed them over.

“That looks like it's from me Mam” he said, putting the first one down on the arm of the sofa. He flipped over the second one. There was an address scribbled on the back which he didn't recognise.

“Must be from our kid” he said as he tore it open, “Yeah. It's from me sister” he added as started to read.

“They came to my old place. So probably old news by now.” said Charity, “Not something bad is it love?” she asked, seeing the scowl on Cain's face.

“Listen” said Cain, “I've got to go to Bristol tomorrow. Sort something out”

“Aw” said Charity as she leaned on the arm of the chair and curled her arm around Cain's shoulders, “You've only just got here”

“I wouldn't go if it weren't important” said Cain, “Anyway, I'll be back straight after. Well, pretty much straight after”

“You make sure you are” said Charity with a smile as she leaned in.............

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Chapter End Notes

Robert and Aaron's arrival into No.13 Crimea Street and their chat on the stairs when they realised things were not going to plan was in a flash-forward at the start of Chapter 42.
“Do you ever hear from anyone from the old days?”

Before we move on, we have to step back a little......

A hospital in Bristol – end of August 1950

“Bloody hell! Look at the state of you!” said a familiar voice.

“Thank you Nerys” replied Chas, as she pushed herself into a sitting position on her hospital bed with some difficulty, “That makes me feel a lot better” she added, massaging the bandage around her left wrist with her right hand.

“Well, I mean” the young blonde woman replied as she sat down on a chair next to the bed, “This is my first look isn't it?”

Nerys glanced around quickly at the rest of the hospital ward. A handful of visitors were scattered around, chatting to the patients.

“What did you tell them? About what happened?” said Nerys, leaning close a little and keeping her voice low.

“Said I fell down a flight of stairs” said Chas, “Well, it's nearly true isn't it?” she added quietly.

Nerys nodded sympathetically. “Oh”, she said suddenly, reaching down to the shopping basket she'd put on the floor, “I better give you your things”

“I couldn't get into your flat” Nerys went on, “She said you can have your bits and pieces when you've paid the rent you owe her”

“That's no surprise” said Chas

“Well, she always was a hard faced cow that one” replied Nerys, “So I've brought you one of my nighties and some things to have a wash. And your handbag. That was still in the pub” she added as she handed it over.

“Thanks love” said Chas as she opened the bag and started to rummage inside.

“He's gone you know? I've asked at his Mam's. Did a moonlight flit that night. Said she was glad to see the back of him. Always thought he was nothing but trouble” said Nerys

“I wish she'd told me!” said Chas bitterly, “Good, this is what I'm after” she added as she took a dark brown envelope from her handbag and turned it over, “It's my brother's address in Leeds. You know, for when he's ashore”

“You're not planning a flit yourself are you?” asked Nerys

“No love. Course not” replied Chas, not looking her friend in the eye, “I just need to write to him, that's all”

Nerys frowned. Chastity had not sounded completely convincing.
Precisely one minute before the end of visiting time a stern faced sister had walked into the ward. The moment the clock moved onto the hour she said “seven o'clock!” and walked straight back out.

As soon as the visitors had left, the middle-aged woman in the bed opposite to Chas got up and walked over to her.

“You're lucky” the woman said.

“I don't feel lucky” replied Chas, wincing a little.

“Getting this bed I mean” the other women continued, “Right by the window and everything” she added as she sat down on the edge of the mattress, uninvited.

“I'm Ethel” she said

“Chastity” Chas replied

“What about it?” Ethel asked.

“It's my name love. Chastity” said Chas, rolling her eyes.

“What happened to you then?” Ethel asked, “You look like a house fell on you!” she added as she looked the other woman up and down, taking in her bruises.

“What?” said Chas, “No. I fell down a flight of stairs. What are you in for?” she asked quickly, keen to change the subject.

“Your guess is as good as mine” said Ethel, “They're doing tests. All I know is I can barely keep anything down”

“Anyway, We'll both be home soon I'm sure” she added, “I'll let you get a bit of rest” she said as she stood up, knocking Chas's handbag onto the floor and spilling some of the contents, “Oh sorry dear” she said as she picked it up and put it on the bed.

Ethel bent over to pick up a handful of photographs that had fallen out of a brown envelope. She peered nosily at the top picture.

“This your lad?” she asked, looking at the picture of a dark haired boy of about sixteen, sitting on the steps leading up to a tall house with a sign next to the door.

“That's my lad” said Chas as she took the photos from the other woman, “Course, not a lad anymore. He's a driver now. For a retired RAF bloke”

“Ooh. Very nice” said Ethel, “Is that on holiday? The hotel I mean”

“No, that's my mother's place in Blackpool” said Chas

Ethel was silent for a moment, thinking.

“Never had any myself” she said, “Must be nice to have a son in your life” she added before heading back to her own bed.

Chas looked through the handful of pictures. There was one of a much younger Aaron on the beach at Blackpool and another of him sitting around the table in her mother's front room with some young friends. A birthday cake was in the centre with a number ten iced on the edge.
“Yes” said Chas quietly to herself, “Must be”.

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And talking of Blackpool..........

The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Saturday 7th October 1950 – 6:00pm

“I'd almost given up on you” said Faith, looking up from the stove as the door to the kitchen opened.

“Madge from next door caught me as I was leaving” said Beryl as she walked into the room, “She was in a right state again”

“The usual?” said Faith, as she stirred a saucepan of stew.

“The usual” replied Beryl, “What's this?” she added as she looked over to her friend, “I thought we were having fish and chips?”

“This is for Horace” said Faith

“Horace?” asked Beryl

“Yes. You know, Mr Fosdyke. One of my commercial travelers. Bumped into him on the way back from bingo. Practically bit my arm off when I told him I had a room free. Put the kettle on will you love? I've not had five minutes since I got back” said Faith

“Did I just see that Carol leaving your yard with another girl?” asked Beryl as she started to fill the kettle from the tap.

“That'll be Peggy her new room-mate. She's just started in the show. Seems like a nice young girl” replied Faith

“Don't they all? At first” said Beryl with a frown.

“Oh, I don't think we'll have any trouble” said Faith, “Not with Horace anyway”

“He's still a feller isn't he?” said Beryl as she sat down at the table.

“True but there's fellers and fellers” said Faith, “I mean. Look at your Lester” she added, turning back to stir the stew and smiling to herself.

7:30pm

“When's your Aaron back from this errand?” asked Beryl, “My stomach thinks my throat's been cut”

Faith looked up from her knitting at her friend who was sitting next to her on the front room sofa and took in her ample frame.
“I think you'll survive a bit longer love” she replied, “He'll be back soon. Besides, I'm sure Mr Sugden will let him drive round the chippie. He's very obliging”

Beryl nodded. “What's that you're knitting again?” she asked

“It's a cardigan for Patrick. For Christmas” said Faith

“You've not got much wool” said Beryl, looking down at the small bag on the floor.

“We'll he's not that big is he?” said Faith

“You sure he'll be coming back then?” asked Beryl

“Course I'm sure Beryl” Faith said with a smile. “What's Madge told the neighbours round your way?” she asked as she continued to knit, “About her husband”

“Said he's working down South for six months” said Beryl, “Course, we know where he is really, don't we? Prison” she added, silently mouthing the last word.

“Lead roof off churches again is it?” asked Faith. Beryl answered with a nod.

“Surprised he has the strength really. Little feller like him” said Faith

“You'd think she'd be glad of the break from him. They're always at each others throats” said Beryl

Faith nodded and paused knitting, “Don't think I'd have stayed with Mr Dingle so long if he hadn't had to go inside those few times” she said. Her voice sounded wistful as she stared into space for a moment.

“You doing both sleeves?” asked Beryl

“Oh. I think I should” said Faith, “If only for the shape. I'll stitch the left one to the shoulder when he's tried it on and...”

The landlady paused at the sound of the front door opening and voices drifting in from the hall. A moment later Patch scampered into the front room and darted towards her.

“It's alright, I'll do the heavy stuff” muttered Aaron, as a put a small wooden crate down at the bottom of the stairs.

Robert just smiled at him.

Patrick had hung his cap on the stand and was checking his floppy fringe in the mirror.

“Oh love, you've come back!” said Faith, walking over and wrapping the young man in a hug before he had a chance to answer.

Faith leaned back, her arms still on Patrick, “I knew they'd find you. I knew my boys wouldn't let me down” she said, smiling towards Robert and Aaron.

“This calls for a celebration” said Faith, happily, “You don't mind driving round the chippie do you love?” she asked her grandson, “I promised your Auntie Beryl”

Robert was about to speak, but his partner replied quickly, “Course I'll go Nan” he said, “We've nearly emptied the car”
“Welcome home love” said Faith, hugging Patrick again

Aaron was about to start the car when there was a light knock on the window. He looked up to see Robert peering through the glass.

“You coming for the ride are ya?” Aaron asked as he wound the window down.

Robert shook his head, “No. I said I'd get some bottles in from the pub, make it more of a party”

“You after a lift then?” asked Aaron, “It's only over the road”

“No. It's just...can you keep the window down? When you're driving back” said Rob

Aaron frowned.

“I'm thinking of the upholstery” Robert explained, “You know, with the chips”

“Yes, boss” Aaron replied, a huge grin on his face.

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Later than night.....

“Here we go” said Aaron with a smile as he walked into Patrick's room, a mug of cocoa in each hand. He handed one to Patrick who was kneeling on the floor in front of Patch's basket.

“Settled in has he?” asked Aaron as he sat down on the carpet next to his friend. He reached forward to give the small dog a quick smooth.

“He keeps looking for his Dad” said Patrick, “He's never the same when he's away”

Aaron frowned for a moment. “Daniel will be back soon. I know six months is a long time. I was saying to Rob...” he started to say but stopped. Patrick didn't seem to be listening.

“It was different before” said Patrick, not looking directly at the other young man.

“Before?” Aaron asked

“Before I was in that sanatorium” replied Patrick, “I always used to keep myself busy then. Now Doctor McGann says I have to save my strength. Not overdo things”

Aaron thought for a moment.

“They'll be other stuff you can do. Doesn't have to be all rushing about does it? Did you see the books we sent you last month? And there's that radio Rob got ya” he asked, looking over towards the desk in the corner.

“Yes. It's great thanks” said Patrick, following Aaron's gaze.

“He got one for our room too” Aaron explained, “For when we're staying So, we'll be coming here more than we have done. Well, hopefully we will. There's Rob's work to think about and, you know...” he tailed off.
Patrick said nothing.

“Nan’s really pleased you’re home” said Aaron to break the silence.

“Me too” he added, reaching over and squeezing his friend on his left shoulder.

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A little later......

Robert looked up from his book as Aaron walked into their room.

“Patrick settled in alright?” he asked.

“Yeah. He liked the radio” said Aaron as he slipped Rob's dressing gown off his shoulders and hung it on the back of the door.

“Aaron...” Robert started as he put his book to one side, “Now he's back we'll have to think about heading home”

“Do we have to?” asked Aaron as he pulled back the blankets and climbed into his side of the bed.

“Things will get backed up otherwise” Rob explained, “And we'll have to go to my Dad's on the way back. Well. I’ll have to go”

Aaron lay on his back and stared at the ceiling.

“You understand don't you?” Robert asked, rolling onto his side and looking down at his partner.

“Yeah” said Aaron,”I knew we'd have to. It's just...” he started

“Just what?” Rob prodded gently

“Did you see how quiet Patrick was tonight? I thought he'd be happier about coming home” said Aaron

“Be fair Aaron. It's hard to get a word in when your Nan and Mrs Axelby get going” said Robert with a smile

“I don't like leaving him straight away” said Aaron

“Your Nan will look after him” said Rob

“She's got a couple more guests now It just seems....wrong” said Aaron

Robert thought carefully for a moment

“Allright” he said, “What I was thinking was we'd drive to Emmerdale on Monday and see Victoria. I'll stay at my Dad's then we'll head home on Tuesday. How does that sound?”

“Like you've got everything planned out. As usual” said Aaron

“Well” said Rob, “Why don't we ask Patrick if he wants to come with us? He can stay at ours for a few days”

“Yeah. He could, couldn't he?” said Aaron with a smile, as he rolled onto his side and looked at Robert.
“I’m sure he’d like to see Adam again” said Rob, smiling back, “He’s very fond of all you Bevin boys” he added.

“For some strange reason” he went on, leaning down and pressing his lips softly against Aaron's...

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Blackpool, The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Sunday 8th October 1950 – 9:30am

Robert frowned as he stared through the bay window in the front room. “Chucking it down again I see” he said, thrusting his hands into the pockets of his slacks.

Aaron looked up from the table.

“Well it's Blackpool isn't it?” he said, “Not the...I dunno, South of France” he added, reaching for another slice of toast.

“No. It's not” said Rob quietly to himself.

“Look at you, you're soaked” said Faith as she walked into the room, bundling Patrick ahead of her. Patch darted behind the pair before heading for the rug in front of the fire.

“I wanted to get these” said Patrick as he took a box of chocolates out from the inside of his jacket and put them onto the sofa, “They're for my neighbour in Crimea Street” he added as Faith helped him out of his wet coat.

“Only Mr Roberts is open on a Sunday” the young man went on as he sat down, “Anyway. It wasn't raining when I left”

“Well get by that fire” said Faith, “Couldn't it have waited till tomorrow?”

“We're off tomorrow Nan” said Aaron, “Patrick's staying with us for a few days”

“You've not been back five minutes” said Faith, surprised

“It's just for a visit Nan” said Aaron, “You'll be alright to look after this one won't you?” he added, nodding towards Patch.

“Course I'll be alright” said Faith “If it's chocolates you're after then there's that box in the sideboard. The one's Frank gave ....the one's I got given” she added

“Didn't Mrs Axelby sit on them?” asked Patrick, stretching his hand in front of the fire.

“Only along the one side love” replied Faith

“I've got to drop my keys off today too, get it out the way” said Patrick

“You're not going out again in this rain” Faith insisted

“It's alright” said Robert, walking over from the window, “Me and Aaron will do that. We'll drive over” he added, putting his hand on his partner's shoulder and giving it a rub.
10:30am

Aaron idly tapped his fingers on the edge of the steering wheel and stared up at the front door of the guesthouse. A moment later, Robert emerged and opened up a large umbrella.

“It's only a few steps Robert” Aaron muttered to himself. But then Carol emerged from the building in her Sunday best and Rob walked her down to the car.

“You don't want to be walking, not in this weather” said Robert with a smile as he opened the near-side passenger door for the young woman.

“Morning Aaron” said Carol as she sat in the back of the car.

“I said we'd give Carol a lift to Church” said Robert as he climbed in the back of the car from the far side.

“It's very kind of you” said Carol

“Nonsense” replied Rob, “I've got some errands to do. It's no problem, is it Aaron?”

“Course not. Mr Sugden” said Aaron as he started the car.

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Blackpool- Sutton Terrace - 11:00am

Robert rang the doorbell and waited in the porch of the large house. As he stood there, he took in the neat garden. It was a far cry from Patrick's dingy flat in Crimea Street. The door opened and a middle-aged woman in a black maid's uniform stood there, a superior look on her face.

“Yes?” she said icily

“Mr Sugden to see Mr Moore” Rob replied briskly. He then looked away and pretended to study the garden some more.

“One moment please” said the maid.

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“I won't keep you” said Robert as he strode into what was obviously a study, “I'm only returning a key for Mr Seaton”

A thin, grey-haired man was sitting at a desk in a smart dark suit.

“Mr Seaton?” he asked

“Number thirteen Crimea Street” said Rob, “I'm sure you know it. It's like this place...” he said, looking around the room at the neat furniture and the well-stocked bookcases, “…only different” he added

Mr Moore said nothing and opened a dark ledger on his desk.
“Number thirteen” he said, peering over his spectacles, “Ah...it appears two week's rent is owing” he added, a sly smile on his face.

Robert had walked over to the mantelpiece and was looking at a pair of expensive vases.

“Oh. I'm sure you're wrong” he said, without looking around, “Not Mr Seaton. You must be looking at the wrong line in your book”

Mr Moore frowned, “Ah yes. He is paid up” he conceded

“There we are then” said Rob walking over to the desk and putting the keys down in front of the other man.

“Well, as I said” he went on, “I won't keep you” he added as he headed to the door.

Mr Moore turned around in his chair as Robert walked away, “Of course. There's been no notice given” he said dryly.

Rob paused in the doorway and turned around.

“You won't have any trouble getting a new tenant” said Rob, “Not with the luxury accommodation you're providing”

“It is usual” Mr Moore sniffed.

“You're right. But well, that's life isn't it?” Robert said with a shrug, “Full of disappointments” he added.

“Still. You must be used to that” he added with a smile, taking one last look around the room and at its expensive contents, “I'll see myself out”

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“He only tried to get two weeks rent off me!” said Robert angrily as he climbed into the front passenger seat of the car, “He didn't get anywhere mind” he added

“Course not” Aaron agreed as he started the car

“Flaming cheek!” said Rob, “You should see his house too. Huge garden”

“I've seen his garden” said Aaron as he drove, “Walked up that path often enough didn't I?”

“Did ya?” asked Robert

“Yeah” answered Aaron, “Daily Telegraph and Sunday Telegraph. And he had the News Of The World. Course, that wasn't for him. They got it for their domestic”

“Well we know what they're like don't we?” said Rob, flashing Aaron a smile, “They love all that scandal. And sex. Fortunately”

“Shurrup” said Aaron with a grin.

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Blackpool – No.13 Crimea Street – a little later.......
“Right” said Robert as Aaron stopped the car outside the house, “Just the chocolates for Veronica and we're done” he said as he opened the glove compartment.

“I'll do that” said his partner quickly, reaching over and taking the box out, “Is there a card or anything?”

“Uh, no” said Rob, “He just wanted to say thanks. He said she was the only one to give him the time of day round here. Look, I can go. It's no trouble, really”

“Nah. You've been charming enough for one morning” Aaron replied as he headed out of the car.

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“All done” said Aaron as he climbed back into the driver's seat.

“Thought we'd go to the cinema tonight. Take your Nan and Patrick” said Robert

“What's on?” said Aaron as he started the car.

“Jezebel’s on at the Globe” said Rob, “Bette Davis and Henry Fonda. They'll both like that”

“Yeah. Good idea” said Aaron as he turned the corner out of Crimea Street.

Robert stared at Aaron for a minute as he drove along.

“Did she like the chocolates then. Veronica?” he asked

“Yeah. She did” Aaron he replied.

Rob kept staring.

“Aaron” he said

“What?” his partner replied.

“You've got lipstick on your cheek” Rob said with a grin

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The Nightingale Sanatorium – Lancashire – Sunday 8th October 1950 – late afternoon

Sam Dingle had just reached the bottom of the stairs into the hall when he heard a voice calling him from the landing.

“You've not seen Mr Whitaker have you?” said the other male orderly, “He's not in his room and his family's here” he added

“He's not in the day room” said Sam, “Try Charlie in number fourteen. He goes in there to play cards with him”

“Thanks Sam” said Eddie, before disappearing.

Sam was about to carry on up the stairs when he heard a familiar male voice
“Good grief! I don't believe it. It's Sam isn't it?” it said, “Sam Dingle!”

Sam turned around and looked at the man. The hair and moustache were white now, not grey but it was definitely him.

“Hello Mr Pollard” he replied

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“....so I came to see my cousin. Mr Sutherland. He's not been here very long”

“He came here after Easter” Sam replied

“Really?” said Eric, “As long ago as that? Doesn't time fly? Do you ever hear from anyone from the old days?”

“Oh aye” said Sam, “The Sarge was here for a while. You know, Mr Seaton. Gone now though”

“Oh” said Eric, his face falling, “Did he...?”

“No” said Sam with a smile, “He didn't die. He went to Blackpool”

“Is there a difference?” Eric asked, chuckling to himself. “Never mind” he added as Sam looked at him blankly.

“Always sends us a card at Christmas” said Sam, “Lives in this guesthouse. His landlady came to visit him, when he was sick like. She was lovely”

“A guesthouse, really?” said Eric, “Never the same when he left the centre” he added wistfully, “The Ministry was no help. No help at all. I always said I'd never have been able to run the place without him”

Sam thought for a moment and tried to remember a time when Mr Pollard had ever said that.

“Wonderful chap. So willing. Especially when you consider, well, you know” said Eric

Sam was still trying to remember.

“Well, I must be getting on” said Eric, “I'm glad to see you've done so well”

Mr Pollard turned around smartly and headed for the door.

“Who's your friend?” asked Eddie as he walked to the bottom of the stairs carrying a tray.

“That's my old boss. When I working with those Bevin boys in the War” said Sam, “He was being really nice. He never used to be..”

Eddie nudged Sam with the tray as he had spotted Mr Pollard walking back in.

“Actually Sam” said Eric, “I don't suppose you could let me have Mr Seaton's address? It was just I was thinking. A bit of sea-air might do me some good”
"Better off without me"

Let's take a big step back before we go forward....

Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – mid-1930s – Aaron's Tenth Birthday

“Not a bad spread. Considering” said Mrs Fairfax as she surveyed the table in the front room, “When are we starting?” the red-haired woman added.

Beryl exchanged a glance with Faith, who was sitting next to her on the sofa. “Well, we have to wait for the birthday boy, don't we?” she said.

“Is he going to be long?” said Mrs Fairfax as she walked over to the bay window and pulled back the net curtain a little.

“He'll be back any minute. They've only gone to get the ice-cream” said Faith.

“Wendy!” Mrs Fairfax shouted through the window, “Keep out of that road!!”

“She'll ruin that dress” she went on, turning back to face the room, “She's only had it five minutes”

“They're only playing love” said Faith

“It's that Shirley. She's a bad influence if you ask me” said Mrs Fairfax, clearly annoyed.

“Why don't I make us some fresh tea” said Faith, standing up quickly.

Mrs Fairfax waited until she had left the room and walked over to the mantelpiece.

“I don't think much of her bits and pieces, do you?” she asked, picking up a china figure and looking at it with distaste.

“You'd think she won all this lot on the pier” she added as she put it down again.

Beryl let out a sigh and stood up, “I'll just....help with the tea” she said as she walked out the room

What did you go and invite that miserable article for?” Beryl asked her friend as she walked into the kitchen.

“I didn't!” replied Faith as she turned around from the stove, “She just turned up with her Wendy. I thought she'd go home soon as she dropped her off”

“It'll be alright when the boys come back from the shop” she added, “She won't stick out so much in a crowd”

“What did you get your Aaron?” Beryl asked as she sat down at the kitchen table.

“A meccano set” replied Faith, “From that toy-shop opposite Hardings. He had his nose pressed up against the glass last time we were there. And his Uncle Cain left him a ship in a bottle last time he was here”
“That's nice” said Beryl. She paused for a moment before carrying on, “Nothing from her?” I suppose

“What? His mother?” said Faith, “She's not bothered for the last five years, why should she bother now?”

Beryl shook her head. “I don't understand it myself. What sort of woman abandons her own son?” she asked

“Charity has had only one thing on her mind since she was sixteen Beryl, and that's fellers” said Faith as she sat down at the table, “And she's gone from one disastrous bloke to another”

“I don't know where she gets it from” she added, patting in her hair at the side.

Beryl was about to reply, but stopped herself.

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“Faith won't be a moment” said Beryl as she sat back down on the sofa. Mrs Fairfax was now in the armchair and was eyeing the arm-rests critically.

“Where'd she get this museum piece?” she asked

“That'll be Mr Lesley's” Beryl replied, “You remember, he was that solicitor she was housekeeper for”

”His mother got all this furniture” Beryl went on, looking around the room as she spoke, “She wouldn't have bought any rubbish. That was Mrs Lesley all over. She had real class” she added pointedly.

“Oh, you can see the quality” said Mrs Fairfax, “I'm sure it was very nice. In its day”

Beryl sighed again

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“Have you never thought of getting married again?” Mrs Fairfax asked as she sipped at her cup of tea, “I mean, there's plenty of eligible widowers around.....”

“I'm still married thank you love” replied Faith, “Well, on paper anyway” she said in an aside to Beryl as she handed her a cup.

“I just think it's good for a growing lad. To have a man about the house”

“There's no shortage of men in my house” replied Faith with a smile. Mrs Fairfax opened her mouth to reply but was cut off by the sound of a group of children bustling into the hallway outside the room.

“That'll be the boys” said Faith with a smile as she got up from the sofa, “And not a moment too soon” she said under her breath to Beryl as she headed for the hall.

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But then, Mrs Fairfax wasn't the only unexpected arrival that day. But she was the only one who got to the party. There was someone else, someone who knew full well that it was Aaron's birthday. And she had arrived just a couple of minutes before the children had walked into the
She'd had a drink in the waiting room at the station. Just to steady her nerves. She could tell the woman behind the counter obviously didn't approve. The frosty-faced cow. Then, she took a deep breath, picked up her suitcase and headed on her way.

And she nearly managed it. She nearly got there. It was so close in the end. She'd just got as far as Sea View and put her case down to rest her arm a little. And then she saw him. Perhaps if she hadn't she wouldn't have lost her nerve. But there he was, walking down the street with two other boys. They were dressed almost identically, in short grey trousers and sweaters but she could tell it was him. They were opposite her now, but hadn't spotted her standing there across the road.

“I should carry it, it is my birthday” said Aaron, a huge grin on his face.

“Your Nan gave me the money” Mark replied, “Don't worry. I'm not going to steal your ice-cream” he added, nodding down to the block wrapped in thick paper which he was carrying.

“Aw. Why did you invite girls?” said Harry with a frown, running his hand through his blonde hair. He had just spotted two young girls bouncing a ball on the pavement outside the Golden Palmtree.

“My Nan did” said Aaron as he walked along “Anyway. It's only Wendy and Shirley. They're alright”

And then, the door opened and the five of them walked into the house. He'd looked so happy. Maybe if he hadn't it would have turned out differently.

“Can I help you love?” said Lettie Chorley.

Chas turned around. The middle-aged woman had appeared from nowhere and was wiping down the sign outside the Hotel. It was already spotless.

“What?” said Chas, trying to focus her thoughts, “No. It's alright” she replied. Then she picked up her suitcase, turned around and walked away.

A few weeks later........

“Then Enid said, 'I don't care, she promised me that silver tea-pot and you know it’, so I told her!” said Beryl, pausing as Faith put her hand on her arm.

“Is your Lester alright under there?” Faith asked, looking over towards the armchair in the centre of the front room.

Beryl leaned a little forward on the sofa and glanced briefly at her husband, who was slumped in the seat with a copy of the local paper draped over his face.

“He'll be fine” said Beryl, “He's always the same after a big dinner. Anyway, so I said to Enid...”

“As you're here for a bit, let's have a sherry” said Faith, interrupting quickly. Her interest in the tale of the funeral of Beryl's Aunty Cissie had long since waned.

“Those photos of our Aaron's birthday have come back” she added as she poured out two drinks
from the decanter on the side-board, “I'll show you later”

One sherry soon became two..........

Beryl put her glass down on the table in front of the sofa and began looking through a small pile of photographs.

“Come out well haven't they?” said Faith, “That nice young lad in Hardings did them. Thought I’d send one to our Cain” she added.

“Have you heard from him then?” asked Beryl

“Well, no” said Faith, “But that's nothing new. He'll still be at sea likely as not. I've got the address of that land-lady of his in Liverpool. I'll send it there”

“That's a nice one of Aaron” said Beryl with a smile

“He takes after our side of the family. Fortunately” said Faith, taking a swig of sherry

Beryl looked over to her husband for a moment then shifted on the sofa to look at her friend.

“Have you never heard from his father?” asked Beryl

“No I have not” said Faith firmly as she put her glass down, “And I don't want to either thank you. The little toad” she went on, sitting back in the sofa and folding her arms.

“Did you two not get on?” asked Beryl

“He didn't get on with anyone Beryl” Faith replied, “He was rowing with Chasity all the time. They only got hitched because they had to. Shadrach practically dragged that lad up that aisle. And that turned out to be a false alarm in the end”

“Talk about flaming history repeating itself” said Faith, “You know. Sometimes I think I never should have been a mother. What have I got to show for it? A son I see once in a blue moon and a daughter who might as well be a stranger”

“Come on love” said Beryl sympathetically, “You wouldn't have missed out on your Aaron would you? He thinks the World of you”

Faith smiled, “No. You're right there. I've always got my Aaron”

“Course he'll be off one day no doubt” said Faith leaning forward for her glass, “With some lass or other”

“Well, whoever he ends up with, I'm sure they'll be nice” said Beryl

Faith nodded.

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Liverpool – a phone-box in a side street, three month's later.

Cain Dingle leaned back against the side of the telephone box and squinted at the letter in his right hand.
“Hang on, where is the flaming thing?” he said into the phone, “Right. Plymouth 8687. Ta love”

“Dog and duck, landlord speaking” said a middle-aged male voice moments later

“Hello. Is Chastity Dingle there? This is her brother” said Cain

“Hang on” said the landlord

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“Is that him then?” asked Cain, “Your latest feller?”

“Yes, that was Derek” Chas replied

“I thought it was all over after he kicked you out” her brother went on

Chas sighed, “Well he changed his mind didn't he?”

“What, 'come back, all is forgiven?' “ said Cain sarcastically

“If you like” said Chas.

Cain paused for a moment and looked at the letter in his hand. “And what about your Aaron? I know you didn't see him after. Mam would have let me know” he asked

“Listen. I tried Cain” said Chas, “I did. I got there and I saw him and I couldn't do it. I just couldn't. He looked so happy. A damn sight happier then we were when we were his age”

“Come on sis, it wasn't all bad” said Cain

“Says the man who ran off to sea first chance he got” Chas shot back

“You can talk” her brother replied, “You only married that long streak of nothing so you could get out”

“I thought I was in the family way!” said Chas, “It was your Dad who said I was dragging the family name through the mud”

“He's your Dad too” said Cain

“I'll believe ya. Thousands wouldn't” said Chas, “Any way, he'd been carrying with that barmaid for ages by then. The old hypocrite”

“He's out again. Dad I mean” said Cain

“You've not seen him have ya?” asked Chas

“No” said Cain, “Shipmate of mine from Leeds did, end of last year. He can't be doing prison again. Not at his time of life”

“Best place for him if you ask me” said Chas unsympathetically.

There was a pause in the conversation.

“And your Aaron?” said Cain, “Is he in the best place for him?”
“Yes Cain he is!” Chas insisted, “Come on, you've seen that place Mam's got now. She's landed on her feet there. Aaron's got a proper roof over his head. He wont have to pack up and scarp every time the rent money runs out . And he won't be hungry cause the housekeeping money's all gone on beer”

“And he won't have his Mam either” said Cain, his voice level

“He's better off without me” said Chas

“You don't mean that sis” said Cain

“I do” said Chas, “I'm a chip of the old block and you know it. Derek's the first feller I've been with for ages I've not been rowing with all the time”

“Fine. So you're sorted.” said Cain, “What's the matter? Doesn't this Derek like kids?”

“He's done all that!” said Chas, “His daughter's got one on the way. I'm closer to her age than his. He's looking forward to being a Grandad. He won't want a stepson suddenly turning up. Besides, there's the pub to run and.....” she added weakly

Cain was silent.

“It's not that I don't care” said Chas, “I'll always care. But Aaron's better off where he is right now”, she paused and there was a shout in the background.

“Look Cain, I've got to go, we'll be opening up soon”

Cain sighed, and ran his free hand through his dark hair.

“Oh” he said, “Look, Mam sent me some new pictures of him. I'll send them in the post to you”

“Thanks love” said Chas, “Listen. If you're in Plymouth you will come and see us wont you?”

“I'll try. Could be a while though. It's a long haul next-time. Australia and New Zealand” said Cain

“Well that beats being stuck in our old house in Leeds” said Chas, “Or a tatty pub in Plymouth” she added, her voice quieter.

“You take care of yourself” she went on

“You too sis” said Cain.

But that was then........................

A hospital in Bristol – end of August 1950

Chas sat upright on her bed and looked at the picture in her hands. A smiling, dark haired young boy was sitting at a table with his friends, a birthday cake in the centre of the photograph. Chas looked. And she thought.
Blackpool, The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Sunday 8th October 1950 – 2:45pm

“Couldn't you have done that in the yard Aaron?” said Faith, who was sat knitting at the kitchen table.

Aaron paused from wiping clean Patch's paws with a towel, “It's raining again” he said.

Faith turned to Patrick who sitting next to her and reading a movie magazine.

“That lad's spent half of his life making my kitchen floor mucky” she said.

Aaron stood up, “It's alright Nan” he said with a grin, “Robert does the same to mine back at home”

“I think I've gone wrong somewhere” said Faith, squinting at the wool in front of her, “Stand up a minute love”, she said to Patrick, “Let me measure this cardigan across your shoulders”

Aaron headed for the kitchen door.

“I'm usually good at sizing fellers up” said Faith as she held her knitting up across Patrick's back, “Not so good lately though, eh love?” she added

Patrick looked over his shoulder at the land-lady, “You deserve much better than him Mrs Dingle” he said.

Faith gave the young man an affectionate squeezed on the shoulder. Aaron smiled as he walked into the hall. He drew himself back quickly as Mr Fosdyke walked out of the front room.

“Afternoon son” he said as headed towards the stairs. Aaron nodded in reply and walked into the living room to be greeted by the site of Robert stretched full out on the sofa while quiet music emitted from the radio set in the corner. Aaron closed the door firmly behind him and crouched down at the end of the sofa so he was near his partner's head.

“You know we've got a radio. In our room? “ he said, “The one you bought”

“Excuse me, I've earned this” said Robert, pushing his head down into the cushion on the arm-rest, “I've spent the last hour hearing about Horace and his rumbling appendix”

“I'm a martyr to it son, a martyr” said Rob, in an impression of Mr Fosdyke's voice.

“Besides” said Robert, “This sofa is very comfy” he added as he shifted his body on it a little

“It's an antique” said Aaron with a grin, “It's at least....older than you”

Aaron fell back on the floor, easily evading Rob's attempt to reach round and prod him in the ribs. Still smiling he got up and walked over to the arm-chair, picking up the Radio Times from the table as he passed.

“You're getting slow” he said, still smiling
“And you're getting cheeky Dingle” said Robert, smiling back. “What's on next?” he asked, as he stretched out on the sofa again.

Aaron looked up at the clock on the mantelpiece. “Educating Archie” he read out loud from the magazine on his lap.

“What's that?” asked Rob

“It's a comedy. With a ventriloquist” replied Aaron

Robert lifted his head from the cushion in surprise.

“A ventriloquist?” he asked

“Yeah” said Aaron

“On the radio?” asked Rob

“Yeah” said Aaron, as his partner lay down again.

“Are you sure you've read that right?” Robert asked, lifting his head up again.

Aaron just grinned.

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A country lane, half-way between Blackpool and Emmerdale - Monday 9th October 1950 - 2pm

“Anyway” said Robert, leaning back into the passenger seat of the car, “I knew they weren't going to open the place, not after the fire. Deep down I mean. I could tell that bloke from the Trust was just stringing me along....”

“You took your time” he said, changing the subject as Aaron climbed into the front of the car.

“That pub is miles away” Aaron replied, “Go yourself next time” he added as he handed his partner a brown paper bag, “They didn't have any cheese rolls. The landlady did those for ya specially”

“Pass us the sandwiches Nan made us this morning then” he went on, nodding towards the glove compartment, “Why didn't you tell her you didn't like meat paste?” he asked

“I didn't want to sound ungrateful did I?” Rob replied.

“Don't know why you can't wait till we get to your sister's” said Aaron, “There's bound to be plenty of food. You know. On the farm”

“I'm hungry now” replied Robert

“You want a sandwich Patrick?” Aaron asked, looking over his shoulder into the back of his car. His friend was fast asleep and lying against the back of the rear seat, “He's nodded off” he added, lowering his voice.

“Thought he'd gone quiet” said Robert

“Suppose you were talking to him about work. Again” said Aaron
“Aaron. He was interested” replied Rob

“Yeah. Looks like it” said his partner

“He's just tired, that's all “ said Robert, “He said he hadn't been sleeping well in that pokey bed-sit” he added as he looked over his shoulder.

“Shall I wake him up?” asked Aaron

“No, leave him” said Rob, “He looks a bit sweet like that, doesn't he?” he added with a cheeky grin.

“He's coming for a visit Robert” said Aaron rolling his eyes, “We can't keep him!”

“I don't know” said Robert, looking at Aaron and grinning, “Might be nice. Bit of intelligent conversation of an evening”

Aaron frowned and stared at the other young man.

“You should see your face” said Rob. Aaron kept frowning.

Robert looking around carefully, checking that the lane was empty.

“Course” he said, leaning in closer towards his partner, “There's more to life than just conversation” he added as he planted a soft kiss of the side of Aaron's cheek.

“Eat your roll!” said Aaron, a big smile on his face as Robert sat back in his seat, beaming back at him

- - - - -
One big happy family

Let's take another step back...

Plymouth – a cheap cafe - one wet weekend, not so very long before the War

“Another cuppa love?” the voice said. Chas looked up suddenly, jolted out of her day-dreaming. The cafe owner was standing over her, a dirty plate in one hand and a half-smoked cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth.

“Not right now thanks Vera” said Chas, “I'll wait till my brother's here. He won't be long”

“Please yourself” said Vera in a gloomy voice, before shuffling away to the counter.

Chas stared through the window as the rain poured down.

A little later.....

“You took your time” said Chas as Cain put her suitcase down on the cafe floor, “Thought they'd been trouble there for a minute”

“Don't be daft” her brother replied as he took off his wet cap and put it on the table

“What took you so long then?” asked Chas

Cain undid his long, black jacket. “Derek offered me a pint. Could hardly say no, could I?” he said as he sat down.

“He wasn't angry or anything then?” asked Chas, the confusion plain on her face.

Cain was about to answer when Vera put two tin mugs down in front of them.

“No” said Cain, “He just kept saying it was bound to happen someday”, he added, fixing his eyes on his sister. Chas turned her head to look out through the window.

“Still chucking it down” she said.

“I take it it's the usual then?” asked Cain

“Don't know what you mean” Chas replied, turning back round and picking up her mug of tea.

“Come on sis” said Cain, “You've been carrying on with another bloke haven't ya?”

“Why do you always assume the worst of me?” Chas hissed, leaning forward across the table.

Cain just smiled. “I'm right thought, aren't I?” he said leaning forward a little too.

“Yes. As a matter of fact. This time you are right. It is another feller” said Chas, sitting back in her chair.

“What was wrong with Derek?” asked Cain, “Always seemed a nice bloke to me. Even if he is old
enough to be your Dad"

“Derek's not that old” said Chas, “And you're right he is a nice bloke. That's half the problem isn't it? It never works out for me. Not with the nice ones”

Cain shook his head.

“It is not my fault” Chas insisted, “It's our Mam's if anything. Look at the parade of fellers we had to put up with every time Dad was ins...” she paused to look over to the counter to see if Vera was listening, “...every time Dad went away” she added, lowering her voice slightly.

Cain thought for a moment before replying. “They weren't all bad” he said, “There was that bloke with the market stall wasn't there. You remember? He used to take Mam to the Traders Arms and we'd have to sit outside on the step. He used to bring out a bottle of pop for us each”

Chas frowned in concentration,”With a market stall ?” she asked, “Oh, you must mean Matty”

“No, it was Monty” said Cain

“That's it! Monty!” said Chas with a smile, “Yes, he was alright I'll give you that. He was about the only one that was mind”

“So what's this new one like?” said Cain, “Is he alright ?”

“No need to be sarky” said Chas, “Eddie's alright. He's got his own pub. Well, it's the brewery's but you know what I mean. That's how I met him, at some do Derek took me too and, well, you know, one thing led to another. Like they do”

“Like they do with you you mean” said Cain, “You going to be working for him I take it?”

Chas nodded

“What if this all goes wrong?” asked Cain

“Then it goes wrong” said Chas with a shrug, “Worse comes to the worst, I can always go to Bristol. Nerys has always said her Dad would give me a job. You remember Nerys who I used to work with”

Cain looked confused.

“She remembers you” said Chas with a sly smile.

A bit later............

“An apprenticeship? Oh, that's great” said Chas with a smile

“Yeah. He'll make something of himself for sure. He's a bright lad” said Cain

“You see. That would have never happened if he was with me. Not if he was moving from pillar to post all the time” said Chas.

Cain did not reply at first.
“I don't know who he gets it from. It's not from our side. And definitely not from that useless husband of yours” he said.

Chas looked thoughtful. She leaned over towards her brother.

“We got a divorce. Not long after I moved in with Derek” she said quietly.

“You never said” said Cain.

“It's not something you boast about is it” said Chas.

“Since when have you been worried about what people think?” said Cain.

“It's not that” said Chas, “Look, if Derek knew I was single he’d have probably proposed. And then where would I be right now? It's suited me since I got separated from Aaron's Dad. Being unavailable but still........”

“Available” said Cain with a nod, “So why get divorced?”

“It was his idea. He wanted to get married again. Well, had to get hitched really. Even hired someone to track me down. I didn't have to do much in the end, just go to court in Leeds a couple of times. He said he was the guilty party”

“And Derek never knew?” said Cain.

“He thought I'd gone up to Blackpool to look after our Mam” said Chas.

“And your new bloke?” said Cain.

Chas lifted her left hand from the cafe table and pointed to her wedding ring, “As far as he's concerned I'm still officially Mrs Livsey. The last thing I want is to be tied to some bloke. I can't rely on them.”

“Sis.....” Cain started, shaking his head.

“I can only rely on you” said Chas, leaning across and giving her brother's hand a squeeze.

Cain smiled. ‘Come on then”, he said, “Let's get you round your new home. Where is it anyhow?” he added as he stood up.

“It's the Admiral” replied Chas.

“Not that place off the docks road?” said Cain. Chas nodded. “That's a right dive” he added as he picked up her suitcase.

“A pub's a pub” said Chas in reply.

“With any luck you won't be there long” said Cain.

“Come on Cain” said Chas, “I could have landed on my feet this time. You never know” she added, forcing a bright note into her voice.

Cain, however, looked unconvinced.
Bristol – a run-down house in the back-streets – Sunday 8th October 1950 - 10pm

“Let’s have a proper look at you then!” Nerys said brightly to the man now standing at the bottom of the stairs, “All this time at sea has done you good, I’ll say that” she added.

Cain looked confused for a moment as he took his cap off. “Have we met before?” he asked.

“It’s me, Nerys!” the blonde woman replied with a smile, “Course, I was a lot younger last time we got together. It must be at least ten years. More if I’m honest because it was definitely before the War”

“Oh, right, Nerys” said Cain as a hazy memory started to rearrange itself in his mind.

“I’ve never forgotten you” the young woman said as she took a small step forward and put her hand on the front of Cain's thick jacket, “Well, a girl doesn't, does she?” she added, lowering her voice.

“Anyway” said Nerys as she stood back and started on the stairs, “Lets get you in the warm. My flat is on the top floor”

“It's your place is it?” asked Cain as he lifted his knapsack from the hall floor and followed her up, “They only gave me an address at the pub”

“Chas did have her own” said Nerys, “Her old landlady's still got some of her stuff actually”, she added as she stopped on the stairwell and turned around, “You might be able to help with that. Now you're here. Finally”.

“I only got the letter this weekend” replied Cain as the pair resumed climbing the stairs, “It got held up cause my girl.....well, it got help up anyways. The way sis was carrying on, I thought she'd still be in hospital”

“She's only been out a fortnight” said Nerys as they reached the top of the stairs.

“How bad an accident was it then?” asked Cain, surprised.

“Oh, it wasn't an accident....” said Nerys, stopping as the door to the flat opened to reveal a smiling Chas.

“I thought I heard a familiar voice” she said stepping forward, a little awkwardly, “Come here” she added wrapping her arms around her brother in a hug.

“I knew you'd come” said Chas.

Emmerdale – the Sugden farm Monday 9th October 1950 – late afternoon
“Mum!” said Sarah as she bounded into the farmhouse kitchen

“What now sweetheart?” said Victoria with a small sigh as she turned around from the deep stone sink.

“Uncle Aaron’s here!” said Sarah, “I saw him getting out of Uncle Robert's car from upstairs!” she added, pleased with apparent detective work.

As Victoria wiped her hands dry on a towel, the door into the farmhouse opened and the kitchen was soon full with Adam's loud, enthusiastic voice.

“Hey, Vicky!” said Adam as he walked in, a young man with dark floppy hair in tow, “Look who the boys have brought to see us. It's Sarge!”

“It's just Patrick now really”, said Patrick, “I haven't been in the Army for ages”

“Well it's lovely to see you again” said Victoria with a smile, “And typical of Robert to turn up in time for food” she added, raising her voice as Rob and Aaron walked in.

“Begrudge your own brother would you?” said Robert as he headed to the kitchen table, “I'm starving. I only had a cheese roll earlier. And that was tiny!”

“No it wasn't” said Aaron with a sulky frown.

“I knew the boys would find Sarge. Didn't I say so love?” said Adam

“I know who you are!” said Sarah. Patrick looked down at the small child that had suddenly appeared in front of him.

“You're Daddy's friend with one arm!” she said

“Sarah!” said Victoria. But Patrick didn't seem disconcerted.

“Daddy says you live at the seaside with Uncle Aaron's Nan. Is it nice?” asked Sarah.

“Yes it is” replied Patrick with a smile


A little later..........

Robert took a wet plate out of the sink and put it on the draining board, a hard-done-by expression on his face. “How come I ended up doing the washing up?” he asked.

Victoria was wiping down the top of the now-bare kitchen table with a wet cloth, “Excuse me” she said, pausing for a moment, “Who ate most of the food?”

“I'm a guest” Rob complained as he turned around, “Why can't Adam shift himself?” he added nodding towards the open door to the living room where his brother-in-law was sat with Aaron and Patrick.

“He's got the animals to see to yet. He'll be still working when you're over at Dad's” said Victoria
“Don’t remind me!” said Robert

“You’ve got to go round really” his sister said patiently, “You’ll know what he’ll be like if he hears you came to the farm and didn’t visit. Twice “

“I don’t know why I bother” said Rob, thrusting his hands into his trouser pockets, “He’s only got two moods. Silent or complaining”

Victoria walked over and stood next to her brother, “Well” she said thinking for a moment, “Patrick will be with ya. That might help”

Robert looked at his sister and frowned, unconvinced.

“You on strike are ya?” said Aaron cheekily as he walked into the kitchen carrying three empty mugs.

“Aww. Leave him alone. He’s resting” said Victoria, “Robert’s not used to hard work” she added with a grin as she looked up at her brother.

“I don’t do the washing up at home” said Rob, a broad smile spreading over his face, “I’ve got people to do that”

Aaron grinned as he headed back into the living room.

“That’s my Dad again” said Adam as he leaned forward in his chair and turned over the page of the photo-album on the table, “When he was younger”. Patrick looked at the picture of a dark haired man standing in a stiff pose and looking very uncomfortable.

“He looks a bit severe there” said Patrick

“He weren’t” said Adam, “That’s just how they had to stand then. For the camera”

“Don’t start” said Aaron as he plonked himself on the end of the sofa next to Patrick, “You’ll set Robert off. He can talk photography for ages. And I mean, ages”

“I heard that!” Robert called in from the kitchen. But Aaron just looked over to his partner and grinned.

“Well I know those faces anyway” said Patrick as he turned the page over to reveal a picture of Adam and the other Bevin boys in the kitchen at Hadleigh Manor.

“Do you ever hear from any of the lads from back then?” asked Adam

“Only the ones sat in this room” Patrick replied, “And from Sam of course. My orderly. He works at the sanatorium where I had to stay”

“You’d never know you’d been ill” said Adam brightly, “He looks fine now doesn’t he Vicky?” he added as his wife walked in with two mugs of tea.

“Course he does” said Victoria quickly. But she shared a silent glance with Aaron while Adam and Patrick were not looking.

“Oh, I saw a picture of Leo a few months back” said Patrick, “I meant to show you but what, with everything” he added, turning to Aaron

“Leo?” said Adam with a smile, “You remember him don’t you?” he added, “We couldn't believe
he was going to be a miner. He was that posh”

“Course I remember Leo” said Victoria, “He had lovely manners” she added pointedly as she walked back into the kitchen.

“She's only joking. She wouldn't change me one bit” said Adam with a laugh.

At the kitchen sink Robert leaned towards his sister, “Ignorance is bliss” he said quietly.

“Shh you!” hissed Victoria, giving her brother a playful slap on his arm.

“He was at this fancy wedding” said Patrick, “It was in some society magazine Mrs Dingle brought back from the hairdressers”

“Tattler” Robert called from the sink.

“You what?” Aaron called back.

“It'll be Tattler. I bet ya” said Rob, as he walked to the doorway, wiping his hands on a tea-towel as he did so.

“It will be” said Aaron as he folded his arms, “Rob should know. He is Lord of the Manor after all”

“That right?” said Robert, “Well his Lordship wants his driver doesn't he?” he added with a smile as he threw the tea-towel at Aaron, who caught it easily.

Later that evening....... 

“You were a bit sarky with Robert earlier” said Adam as he bolted the stable door and turned to his friend in the yard, “You two aren't arguing are ya?”

“Course not” Aaron replied, thrusting his hands into his jacket pockets to keep them from the cold.

“Good” said Adam as he started to head back to the farmhouse, “There's enough of that in this family”

“It's just......” said Aaron as he walked alongside the other young man, “I don't know. It's all been a bit much lately. Rob had his problems with work And then Patrick went off cause of Nan's feller. But it feels like we've turned a corner now”

“Is your Nan alright? Must have hit her a bit. That bloke just being after her money”

Aaron paused as they reached the door, “Nan'll bounce back. She always does. She's happier now Patrick's home. And she's got some guests to look after”

“I'll tell you one thing though” said Aaron as his friend opened the door, “She'll be steering clear of blokes for a while!”

“Wipe your feet!” Victoria called from the living room as the two young men walked into the kitchen.
Blackpool – The Golden Palmtree Guesthouse – Monday 9th October 1950 – late evening

“I've only got the one single” said Faith cheerfully as she opened to the door to the bedroom, “And Horace has got that at the moment” she added as she walked over to the window and drew the curtains closed, “That's Mr Fosdyke, one of my commercial travelers” she went on as she turned around with a smile.

“You get use of the radio with this room mind” she said, nodding towards the small set on a shelf, “My grandson usually stays here”

“I had hoped for a single room” said Mr Pollard, the disappointment in his voice clear

“Well” said Faith as she folded her arms across the front of her blouse and took a step forward, “I'm sure I can charge you a special rate”

Mr Pollard's face immediately brightened and he put his smart looking suitcase down on the end of the bed.

“I mean” said Faith, “What with you being an old friend of Patrick's. You know, it's such a shame. He only went away this morning. He's visiting my grandson Aaron. You'll probably remember him, he was one of your Bevin boys” she added as she leaned forward and put a hand on Eric's arm, “Definitely takes after me in the looks department”

“Well, uh, there was a lot of young men at the training camp” said Eric, clearing his throat and taking a step back, “Hard to remember sometimes”

“I'll just get you some towels” said Faith as she headed towards the door.

“Thank you Mrs Dingle” said Eric

“Please. Call me Faith” said Faith turning around, “That's the thing here. We're one big happy family”

Emmerdale – The backroom of the Woolpack - Monday 9th October 1950 – late evening

“You could have given us a bit of notice you were coming Robert” said Diane as she laid out the best tea-cups on the table in the back-room.

Rob was about to answer when his father interrupted.
“He never does, does he?” Jack said grumpily from behind his newspaper.

“It’s lucky you came tonight” Diane went on, “There’s a dance in the village hall so we’re not that busy”

“Not going to the dance then Dad?” Rob asked with a grin. His father ignored him and turned the pages of his paper over.

Diane looked up towards the ceiling for a moment. “Will your friend be alright in that spare room? On his own I mean” she asked, lowering her voice to just above a whisper.

“He can’t hear you” said Robert, shaking his head in annoyance, “He’ll be fine. He does sleep in a bed you know. Just like an ordinary person”

“You mother was only asking” snapped Jack, stopping abruptly as as Patrick walked into the room.

An uncomfortable silence hung over group. “I’ll put the kettle on” said Diane briskly, just to break it.

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“We've not been to Robert's” said Diane, turning to Patrick who was sitting next to her at the table.

“We've never been asked” muttered Jack from his arm-chair

“We've seen pictures of course” said Diane, “It looks very nice. Especially the porch”

“I've been once before” said Patrick, “When the Manor House was opened up for the public”

“Mr Sugden's not one for traveling” said Diane, “It would take a lot to shift him away from his home comforts”

“Dynamite should do it” muttered Rob.

Jack put his paper down and glared over towards the table, “I've been around thank you. I saw plenty of France when I was in the Army”

“Patrick was in the Army” said Robert, “He was a Sergeant in the medical core”

“Were you?” asked Jack, his mood changing suddenly, “I didn't think you'd have been called up, what with your uh......” he added, gesturing vaguely towards Patrick's missing arm and not wanting to mention it out loud.

“Which regiment were you with?” Jack asked instead, leaning forward in his chair

“The Glosters” said Patrick, “I went straight in when I left the boys home. That was before War broke out”

“Oh, were you in a home pet?” asked Diane sympathetically, “Do you not have any family then?”

“No” said Patrick, “I've got some good friends though” he added.

Robert smiled from his seat on the other side of the table.
“This’ll interest you” said Jack, getting up from his chair and heading to the sideboard, “Where’s my army stuff love?” he asked.

A little later....

Patrick was kneeling in front of a small table in front of Jack's armchair, while the older man was rummaging enthusiastically through a cardboard box full of War memorabilia. In the kitchen, Rob was helping his step-mother clear up.

“Someone's made a friend” said Robert in a low voice as he wiped a plate with a tea-towel.

“I know!” Diane replied quietly, “You can bring him again”

“What happened to your arm? If you don't mind me asking” said Jack

“A shell at Dunkirk” replied Patrick, “I was lucky though, At least I got home”

“I know what you mean son” said Jack, “Were you invalided out after that?”

“No” said Patrick, “I could have been. I got sent into admin and then to the miners training camp in Derbyshire. I had to make a nuisance of myself to get that mind. That's where I met the lads. Aaron. And your son-in-law of course”

“He's a good lad Adam” said Jack after a moment, “Always works hard at the farm. And it's not an easy life I know”

At the sink, Diane and Robert shared a surprised look.

“That's what I learned in the Army” said Jack, “Not giving in, whatever gets thrown at you. You know what I mean don't you? You're the same. And our Robert. I remember Ned Glover telling me in the pub what a pity it was that he'd been in that crash and couldn't take over the farm....”

“I wouldn't have wanted to anyway” Rob said quietly to Diane.

“So I told him. Ned I said. He's running estates now. Well, it's the same thing isn't it? These big houses” Jack continued.

“Is that the time?” said Jack standing up suddenly, “I didn't realise it was that late. I best say goodnight. I've enjoyed our chat” he said to Patrick with a smile.

“I'll do the front door and see you up there love” said Jack as he headed out of the room, “Night son” he added with a nod in Robert's direction as he left.

“Night Dad” said Rob.

Diane walked towards Patrick. “You can definitely come again pet” she said with a smile as she followed her husband from the room.

"Thanks for talking to my Dad all night. Well, thanks for listening anyhow” said Robert

"No, it was alright” Patrick insisted
"We'll have a better time when we get home tomorrow" said Rob, "I mean to my proper home. Mine and Aaron's"
WHERE WE ARE SO FAR........

As there has been a gap since the last update, here is a brief re-cap .

“Cain is in Bristol to help Chas, now out of hospital after her violent partner pushed her down a flight of stairs before going on the run. Rob & Aaron head home to Derbyshire, taking Patrick with them to cheer him up during Daniel's continued absence at sea. On the way, they visit Victoria and Adam in Emmerdale. Later, Patrick stays at the Woolpack with Robert, bringing out the best in Jack who reminisces about his Army days. In Blackpool, Eric Pollard (Patrick’s War-time boss) unexpectedly arrives at Faith's Guesthouse, having just missed him.”

And now.......

Bristol Railway station– Tuesday 10th October 1950 - mid-day

Cain put his knapsack down on the seat in the third-class carriage and turned to lower the window on the door.

“Are you leaving that there?” said a small, middle-aged man who was sitting in the corner on the opposite side of the carriage. Cain gave him a hard glare. “Just asking” the man added after a moment, quickly lifting up his newspaper.

Chas passed a small yellow box to her brother through the window. “They only had apple” she said, “Should keep you going till you change anyhow”.

Cain leaned forward onto the open window frame, “Now listen sis”, he said seriously, “If that feller shows his face...”

“He won’t” his sister replied

“But, if he does...” Cain persisted

“I've told you” said Chas, “There are too many people after his blood. Believe me, the Police are the last of his worries”

“Any trouble, you can always go that address in Leeds” said Cain

“Might be worth going. Just to see what this lady friend of yours is like” said Chas

“I don't know about that” muttered Cain. As he spoke a whistle blew nearby, soon followed by the sound of the engine starting up.

“You think about what I said. About our Aaron” he said, “One step at a time eh?”

Chas sighed, “Course I will”, she replied, “Thanks for coming again” she added, leaning forward and giving her brother a quick peck on the cheek.

“You take care” she went on as she stepped back from the now slowly moving train.

“And you sis” said Cain as the train moved further away. He gave his sister a final wave then sat
down. He looked over at the man in the corner of the carriage, but he was now well hidden behind his newspaper.

Chas watched the train as it pulled out of the station. She felt a sudden pain in her left arm and rubbed it for a moment with her right hand. Once the train was out of view, she turned around and headed for the exit, a thoughtful expression on her face.

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Hadleigh Village Shop, Derbyshire – Tuesday 10th October 1950 – mid-day

“I bet you” said Aaron as he closed the car door, “He'll be complaining they can't manage without him. But he'd be angry if they did”

Patrick nodded as he followed his friend towards the village shop.

“And we've only been away a week” Aaron added as the two young men walked inside.

“Morning Mr Dingle” said the middle-aged woman behind the counter.

“Morning Mrs Radcliffe” Aaron replied. He walked up to the her as Patrick headed for the Post Office counter at the far end of the shop.

“It's just our...Mr Sugden's usual order. I'll pick it up later” he said as he offered her a small piece of paper.

“All ready for you my dear” said Mrs Radcliffe as she reached under the counter for a small cardboard box, “Thought you'd be in today. Old Tom said he saw Mr Sugden's car at the petrol station by the Dog and Duck first thing”

Aaron paused for a moment. “We...I mean, he wants a few more things thing week. For...”

“..... for your visitor, yes” Mrs Radcliffe interrupted before Aaron had time to finish, “Miss Phipps said she saw a young gentleman going into the lodge when she was out on her bicycle. That'll be him there I suppose” she added, nodding towards Patrick at the other end of the shop, “I'll just serve him while you check your order” she went on as she walked from behind the counter.

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“What can I get you my dear?” said Mrs Radcliffe as she peered through the metal grille.

“Do you have any picture postcards?” asked Patrick.

“I think we've got a couple. Somewhere” said Mrs Radcliffe as she looked down at the low shelves in front of her legs. “There's not much call for that sort of thing round here” she added as she put a small cardboard box onto the counter, “We don't get many visitors. Except up at the big house in the Summer” she went on as she rummaged through a stack of postcards, “And that lot don't come in here...ah, here we are..” she said, putting a card with a black and white picture down, “Parish church and graveyard, East view” she read out.

Patrick looked at the grim picture. “Have you got anything else?” he asked

Mrs Radcliffe rummaged through the box for a moment and produced another card, “Parish church and graveyard, West view” she read, putting it down next to the first.
“I'll have one of each I think” said Patrick, “You know. For variety”.

“Right you are my dear” said Mrs Radcliffe

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“Will you be wanting anything else?” Mrs Radcliffe asked Aaron

“No thanks. We got some bits at the farm...” Aaron replied

“Oh, that'll be from young Victoria that married one of the other young miners” said Mrs Radcliffe, “Lovely girl”

“This'll be on.....” Aaron started as he picked up the box from the counter

“Mr Sugden's account. All taken care of my dear” said Mrs Radcliffe

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“That's small villages” said Aaron as he sat back in the driver's seat of the car, “It's worse than back at Nan's. Everyone knows everything about you”

“Well. Not everything” said Patrick pointedly.

Aaron looked over to his friend with a smile, “No. Not everything”

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**Blackpool- Golden Palmtree Guesthouse– Tuesday 10th October 1950 – mid-day**

“You timed that well” said Faith as she filled the china tea-pot on the kitchen table from the kettle.

“I was just passing” said Beryl as she started to unbuttoned her heavy coat, “Is he in then?” she asked, looking around the kitchen as she did so

“Is who in?” Faith replied as she headed to the larder.

“Your new gentleman guest” said Beryl

“How do you know I've got a new guest?” said Faith as she walked back in carrying a pint of milk, “He's only been here five minutes”

“Lettie Chorley was in the Royal last night” said Beryl, “Said she saw a man coming in. Well, what she actually said was 'that didn't take her long'”

Faith sighed as she filled up the milk jug on the tray, “You'd think she'd have her own guests to bother about” she said

“Well, she's got staff hasn't she” said Beryl

“Staff? A couple of daft young girls in aprons more like. Anyway, as you're obviously dying to know, he's called Eric Pollard and he's Patrick's old boss. You know from that training place where our Aaron went during the War” said Faith

“What's he like?” asked Beryl
“You can come and see for yourself. He's a bit on the fussy side, but he's quite nice really.” said Faith as she picked up the tray, “Not like the boys described him at all....” she stopped as her friend put her hand on her arm.

“You'll be careful this time won't you?” Beryl asked

“What do you mean, 'careful'?” asked Faith

“After that Frank Clayton” said Beryl, “You know what they say, 'fools rush in' “

“Thank you for that supportive comment Beryl!” said Faith.

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“I see you've got a couple of young ladies staying on my floor” Eric said stiffly as he sat at the table in the front room

“That's right. They're from one of the shows on the pier” said Faith as she poured out the tea.

“Do you think that's, you know, entirely wise?” asked Eric, folding his arms.

“How do you mean?” asked Faith as she handed Beryl a cup

“Young women. In close quarters” said Eric. “With your males guests” he persisted

“Do you mean Mr Fosdyke?” asked Beryl

“I don't think I need to be concerned about Horace. Not with his appendix” said Faith as she passed Mr Pollard a cup.

“Actually. I was thinking of the younger men” said Eric, “I was always very careful at the training centre” he went on, turning to Beryl, “I thought it best to only have ladies like Mrs Dingle and yourself in the canteen. Older....I mean, more mature women” he added.

The puzzlement was clear on Faith's face.

“Do you see my point? You've got showgirls staying here. And, well. Mr Seaton is a young man after all....” said Eric

“Oh, we've never had any trouble of that sort with Patrick” said Faith, “Isn't that right Beryl?”

“No. Never” her friend agreed.

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“More tea?” asked Faith, reaching for the pot as Eric gave a short nod in reply.

“So, are you retired now Mr Pollard?” asked Beryl

“Hah! Redundant would be a better word” Eric replied as he put down his cup, “Do you know, it's not even a training centre any more. It's an equipment store for the Coal Board and that doesn't take a lot of managing. Apparently”

“It was fortunate Mr Seaton found a job for Sam” Eric went on, turning to Beryl, “I kept him on as
a sort of handyman, but there'd be no room for him now”

“Actually, I was wondering” he went on, looking over to Faith, “Is Sam a relative of yours Mrs Dingle?”

Faith thought for a moment.

“I can't remember a Sam” she replied, “My late husband was from a big family mind. He had something like six surviving brothers. But they were always falling out and disowning each other over something or other. I have to say though, they threw some smashing get togethers. Even if they did always end up with a fight. There were usually half a dozen kids running around the place at those. But I've not seen any of his family. Not since I moved here”

“Did your husband help you run this place?” asked Eric, looking around the room

“Uh, no” replied Faith, “Shadrach had other interests, in Leeds”

“Oh really? What did he do?” asked Eric

“Church roofs mainly wasn't it Faith?” asked Beryl.

Faith gave her friend a sharp look, “That's right Beryl. He did do a bit of building work, now and then. But it's like you were saying Mr Pollard. He wasn't what you call skilled. More of a jack of all trades”

“Help yourself to some cake Mr Pollard”, Faith added, “You too Beryl. Or are you starting one of your diets? Again”

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Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse, Derbyshire – Tuesday 10th October 1950 – mid-afternoon

Aaron looked over from the sink as Patrick walked into the kitchen at sat down at the table. His friend put a pot of ink down and took a pen out of his top pocket.

“Robert still on the telephone?” Aaron asked as he peeled a potato

“Yes” said Patrick

“Who are the cards for?” asked Aaron, nodding towards the table.

“I thought I'd send one to Sam. Just to keep in touch” said Patrick, “He'd be interested to know I'd seen Adam. And I thought I'd send one to Dennis, let him know I'm back at your Nan's. He probably knows I am though, you know what people are like round there”

“Yeah, just like they are round here” said Aaron.

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A little later.....

Robert walked into the kitchen, an exasperated expression on his face.

“Thought I'd never get off that thing” he said, “How long were we away? Just over a week. It's like
they can't manage without me!”

Aaron looked over at Patrick and shared a quiet grin.

“We'll have to go over to Garston tomorrow. Some row between the Fosters and the site manager” said Rob.

“Thought you were moving them here” said Aaron, peeling another spud.

“I am. I mean, I will be. That's the row, they're trying to get them out of their cottage early. You'll be alright here won't you Patrick?” asked Robert, “We'll be back mid-day. Hopefully”

Patrick nodded. “Is there a post box nearby?” he asked, “Or do you have to go into the village?”

“No, there's one five minutes up the road. If you head towards the church there's one in the boundary wall. For some reason” said Rob.

“I'll just go and post these” said Patrick, getting up from the table and picking up his postcards.

Robert waited until Patrick had left the room before sidling up behind Aaron and curling his arms around the young man's waist. Aaron just kept peeling a potato.

Rob leaned in a planted a kiss on the right side of Aaron's neck.

“Gerroff!” said Aaron, “I'm working here” he added, but making no attempt to move.

“Come on” said Robert, “I missed ya last night, being stuck at my Dad's”

Aaron put his knife down, “Patrick might come in” he said, turning around and disentangling himself from his partner's embrace. In this distance, the sound of the outer door closing echoed through the Gatehouse's long porch.

Robert smiled and moved forward again, putting his arms back around Aaron and pulling him forward.

“We've got ten minutes by my reckoning” said Rob, leaning forward and planting a soft kiss on Aaron's lips. Aaron curled his own arms around the other young man's waist.

“Besides” said Robert with a grin as he leaned back a little, “Patrick wouldn't mind. I've heard a rumour he's kissed lads himself”

Aaron arched his head up and pressed his lips against Rob's.

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Blackpool- South Pier– Tuesday 10th October 1950 – late afternoon

“What do you reckon then Mr Pollard?” said Faith, pointing to the chalked sign in front of the small tent on the pier.

“Madame Zanzibar?” said Eric in disbelief, “A fortune teller?”
“Oh, it's just a bit of fun. Isn't that right Beryl?” Faith said to her friend who was standing next to the couple.

Eric laughed to himself for a moment, “If you ladies want to waste your money on this nonsense then that is your affair. Now if you'll excuse me, I think I'll take a brief constitutional and see you back at the Guesthouse” he said, before tipping the edge of his hat and heading off down the pier.

“Just when I was beginning to warm to him too” said Faith, once Mr Pollard was out of earshot

“Well he did treat us to tea in the cafe” said Beryl

“What there was of it” replied Faith, “Did you see the look on his face when I mentioned the cake trolley?”

“He is retired love” said Beryl, “He probably has to watch what he spends”

“Oh” said Faith, “You can tell he's got a bit of brass. You should see the labels on his shirts. Real quality they were. Anyway, never mind him. Let's go in” she added, hooking her arm through her friends and walking into the booth.

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Madame Zanzibar moved her heavy-ringed fingers back and forth around her crystal ball, silently rocking backwards and forwards in her chair.

“She's got it nice in here hasn't she?” said Beryl as she looked around the dimly lit tent.

“Quiet Beryl” said Faith, leaning forward eagerly, “She's concentrating”

“I can see your future....” Madame Zanzibar said, looking directly at Faith. Her accent sounded Eastern European to the other ladies ears.

“I see a figure” she added, “It is a visitor. A visitor from your past”

“Is he good looking?” Faith asked quickly

“The picture is fading” the other lady replied turning to look directly towards Beryl, “You will be going on a journey....”

“Hey. Never mind her. What about my feller?” asked Faith

“Who said it was a feller?” asked Beryl, annoyed. “She only said a visitor. That's you all over Faith. Man mad! What about my journey?”

“It'll be off the end of the pier if you don't keep quiet for a minute” Faith shot back.

Beryl stood up angrily.

“Look, do you mind?” said Madame Zanzibar, in her own Lancashire accent this time, “I won't be able to see anything with you pair carrying on”

“I've lost interest now” said Beryl, as she marched to the exit from the tent, “I think I'll have a constitutional”

Faith watched her friend leave and turned back to the fortune teller.
“Sorry about that Enid” she said, “Anyway, how are you keeping? We don't see you in the Royal much these days”

“I'm stuck in with me mother most of the time”, Madame Zanzibar said glumly, “She can't go anywhere these days. Not with her feet”

Faith nodded sympathetically.

Hadleigh Manor Gatehouse, Derbyshire – Wednesday 11th October 1950 – 2:00am in the morning

Aaron padded across the living room to the kitchen, unconcerned that the light was on at this hour. After all, intruders didn't usually break in in the middle of the night to use your stove. Patrick was standing in front of the table in his pyjamas, emptying a saucepan of hot milk into a mug.

“I didn't wake you did I?” the young man asked, looking over at his friend.

“No. We were just...I mean, Robert wanted a drink of water “ replied Aaron.

“I couldn't sleep” said Patrick

“Enough there for another cup?” Aaron asked, pushing his hands down into the pockets of Rob's dressing gown which he had pulled on minutes earlier.

“Do you think about the future?” Patrick asked

Aaron put his cup down and the table in front of him and breathed out for a moment, “I try not to. I sort of got into the habit during the War. Hard to shake off really. I think Robert does enough thinking for the pair us of anyway”

“It's been on my mind a lot lately” said Patrick, “Too much. It was being in that flat on my own I suppose”

“Yeah, but you're happy you're back at Nan's aren't you?” asked Aaron

Patrick nodded. “Nothing goes on forever though does it?” he asked, “Not even Mrs Dingle”

“Ay, don't tell her that” said Aaron with a smile, “She's determined to get a telegram from the King”

Patrick smiled back but said nothing.

“Talking of families” said Aaron, just to break the silence, “Rob said you got on well with his Dad the other night”

“Oh, it was the Army connection I think” said Patrick, “He enjoyed having someone there who hadn't heard his Great War stories before. Robert's step-mother was very nice. You can tell she thinks a lot of him”

“Least someone in that house does” said Aaron with a frown, “His Dad's never happy with him. Whatever Rob does it's the wrong thing. You know, cause he wouldn't take over the farm like he wanted. Then he went into the RAF instead of the Army. And then there's, you know, the divorce” Aaron added, quickly skirting over his last few words.
“I don't know if that's just the way Dad's are” said Patrick, “I can't remember mine”

“I don't want to remember mine” said Aaron, “All I do remember is bad. Just shouting”

“They can't all be bad” said Patrick, “I know Daniel thought the World of his....”, he added before falling quiet again.

Aaron reached over and gave his friend a squeeze on the shoulder, “He'll be back soon mate. I'm sure of it”

A little later....

Robert put his detective novel down on the bedside table as Aaron walked into their bedroom.

“It was just Patrick I take it then?” he asked

“No. It was a burglar” said Aaron as he hung the dressing gown on the back of the bedroom door, “I've been chatting to him all this time”

Rob just shook his head and grinned, “Alright sarky, just get back into bed”

Aaron smiled back as he slid into his side of the bed and rolled over onto his side. Robert snuggled up against him and curled his arms around his partner's middle.

“Rob?” Aaron asked after a moment.

“Uh-huh” said Robert in reply, not bothering to open his eyes

“You know how you said next time we saw Daniel we wouldn't say anything?” Aaron asked

“What about?” said Rob, moving a little to make himself more comfortable

“About him going away all the time. Cause it would be interfering” said Aaron

“I remember” mumbled Robert

“I've changed me mind” said Aaron

A Railway station somewhere in the West Midlands – Wednesday 11th October 1950 – mid-day

The third-class carriage had been quiet. At least, it had until now. For most of the journey, Chas had just been sat opposite a thin old-lady who had not said a word. True, she had on occasion looked over the top of her paper to the other side of the carriage, a look of disapproval firmly fixed on her features. But it had been quiet.

That was before he had opened the door and walked in from the platform. Or, to be more accurate, before he had stumbled chaotically in. It was bad enough that he put a small suitcase down on the old lady's foot. But surely he could have managed not to knock her hat off as he put his second case up on the rack while apologising?
In the end, the old woman grabbed her hat and stormed out of the carriage, glaring as she did so. The middle-aged man lowered his ample frame down onto the seat and said a final “sorry” as she slid the carriage door closed behind her.

The man took off his cap, revealing a completely bald head and then removed his glasses. He reached into the side pocket of his coat for a handkerchief and pulled it out, swiftly followed by a pipe and a tobacco tin which fell open and split out onto the floor of the carriage before landing with a clatter.

“What do you do for an encore love?” asked Chas

The man flashed her a warm smile as he nervously wiped his glasses before putting them back on, “I don't think I made a good first impression there” he replied

The man kneeled down on the floor and tried to scoop up the tobacco, now between Chas's shoes, “Sorry, I'm all thumbs today” he said

“Look, I'll get out of your way, shall I?” said Chas standing up. She grabbed the paper the old lady had left behind in her haste and sat down in the far corner of the carriage while the man re-filled his tin. Once he had finished, he sat down again, his hands clasped tightly together as if he were trying not to cause any more mishaps.

Chas looked over as the train pulled away from the station. The man was looking towards her, with an eager to please look on his face.

“Are you going far?” he asked

“End of the line” said Chas

“So am I! That's a coincidence” he said

“Amazing” Chas agreed

“I'd better introduce myself then” he said, “I'm Paddy” he added, thrusting a pudgy hand towards her

“Chastity” Chas replied, shaking his hand and offering a thin smile

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It didn't seem to matter how limited Chas kept her replies. Paddy seemed determined to fill the silence of the journey. Even now as he was slowly peeling an orange he kept talking.

“......so I'm visiting a lady friend. Well, not a lady friend exactly. A lady....... who's a friend. She's a vet like me. I'm a vet. Well, I've already said that haven't I....”

“Sorry love, what was that?” said Chas. Her attention had drifted and she realised Paddy had asked something and appeared to be waiting for an answer.

“Why are you off to Blackpool? If you don't mind me asking” said Paddy

“Family visit” said Chas, “I'm off to see my Mother”.

TO BE CONTINUED
I'm posting this a thank you to the readers who supported the first story in this series, Love On The Home Front. There were some ideas I hadn't explored in that story such as Robert's long term reaction to the plane crash that got him invalided out of the RAF.

Hope people enjoy this (now not so) little extra slice of my 1940s Robron (plus Patrick, Daniel and Faith)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!