There's a Land of Begin Again

by chamekke

Summary

Sam jumps in 2006 — and wakes up as a 12-year-old boy in a 1950 hospital bed.

Notes

Warning/s: Secondary character deaths, some violence, but nothing very graphic in either case. Mild medical detail.

Disclaimer: Life on Mars is copyrighted by the BBC and Kudos Film & Television. No infringement is intended by this fanfic and no money is being made.

Notes: Sam & Gene, gen/friendship, AR but not AU. Written for the 2011 Life on Mars Big Bang over at the lom_bigbang comm on LiveJournal.

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Title and theme are inspired by Vera Lynn’s evocative 1942 classic There’s a Land of Begin Again (click to listen to it on Youtube).

And for those who enjoy reading writer’s notes... the DVD commentary is over on my LJ.
September 5, 2006

Sam jumps.

He thinks there's only one point in time where his journey in the sky can take him.
He's certain he knows where and when he'll land. Who he'll be when he gets there.
He's wrong.

* * * * *

A jumble of voices, familiar and strange.
"What have they done to my beautiful boy?"
"First prize! I'm proud of you. So proud."
"Why doesn't he answer? Look, he blinks. I think he can hear me, the little blighter—Oi!"
"Can he hear me? Can he hear what I'm saying?"
"Stay with us, Sam."
"Specifically, a fracture of the lateral condyle. There'll be some pain, and he'll need a cast for a few weeks, but all in all..."
"I've let you down. I know you can't hear me, but it doesn't make this any easier."
"Doctor! He moved!"
"Poor lad. Such a tragedy."
"I'll always be here for you, Sam."
"...Sitting bolt upright in your hospital bed."
"All right, Sam, we're holding up our hands. We've made a slight error..."
"Come on, Sam! Come on!"
"You need to keep fighting, Sam."
"You're so close. You can do it, Sam."
"Back with us now?"
"Sam!"
Then the voices stop.


Wait. A ward? Not a private room?

Into the silence comes a new voice, quavering and harsh: "You all right, lad?"

Sam's head swivels. A thin old man, with wispy hair and strangely fearful eyes, is staring at him from the bed to his right. Sam glances down at himself: his lower body is covered by a white counterpane, but he is sitting upright. Confused, he looks over at the man again.

"All right then?"

Sam opens his mouth, but what comes out is close to a squeak. He clears his throat and coughs.

"I'll summon the sister," his neighbour says, and roots about on the side of his bed.

In the meantime, Sam blinks at the wall clock opposite. It looks ancient: an analogue-style clock with art nouveau numbers and long, spidery hands. The time reads twenty to seven, and judging from the watery golden sunshine spilling across the empty bed to Sam's left, it's evening. The floor is polished wood, gleaming in the light. Sam takes in the rows of antique-looking hospital cots with their white metal frames, the cracks in the wall plaster, and inhales deeply. His nostrils are filled with the smell of carbolic, with a warm base note of boiled cabbage.

There's no sign of Ruth anywhere.

He begins to tremble.

A woman in a lace cap and navy-blue uniform hastily pulls a curtain round the bed, then comes to his side and bends over him, her eyes wide and troubled. Her mouth moves, but the words seem unconnected with the sound.

"Sam! Sam. How do you feel?"

Sam shakes his head, unable to speak.

"Do you know where you are?"

Sam shakes his head again.
"You're in St. James's Hospital. I'm Matron. Do you remember the accident?"

He hesitates, deeply confused. Could anyone have believed his leap from the police station to be an accident? When he doesn't respond, the woman sighs.

"If only Mr. Wallace were here to explain properly...Well. You were on the coach—a family outing, I believe? And there was an accident, a collision with two other vehicles. You weren't too badly hurt; concussion, a fractured shinbone, a few cuts and bruises. But your parents, my dear..."

She reaches out and takes his hands. "They weren't so lucky."

Sam frowns at the concern in her eyes. She's making no sense whatsoever.

"You must brace yourself, Sam. Will you try to be brave?"

He looks down and sees how small his hands look in hers. Tiny. Childlike. He nods mutely. In his head, a small voice is reciting a terrifying calculation. I was born in 1969, and the coach crash happened in 1981 when I was twelve, so does that mean...

"Your mum and dad...they didn't survive."

Shocked, he finds his voice at last, and croaks a single faint word. "No."

"Sam?"

He raises his voice, hears it pitching unnaturally high. "My dad wasn't there."

Matron seems to be taken aback at this. She lets go for a moment and Sam watches as she withdraws to study something on the locker next to his bed; a binder, apparently. Then she looks over at him, her expression kind and pitying.

"I'm sorry, Sam. It says here very clearly that both your parents were present, and perished, in the crash." She pauses. "We know it must have been extremely distressing for you to have witnessed—"

"Wait," Sam croaks. "That's not what happened. You've got it all wrong. My arm..." Bewildered, he indicates his left arm, expecting to see it encased in a cast. But there is none. He looks up at her, uncertainly, and meets a pair of grey-green eyes that seemed equally startled.

Tinnily, down the other end of the ward, a radio begins playing. There's a land of begin again, a velvety soprano sings against lush strings. On the other side of the hill...

"Sam?" she asks. "What is it? Tell me."

He stammers, dreading the answer. "What day is today? What's the date?"

Where we learn to love and live again...when the world is quiet and still...

Her voice is gentle. "It's April 9th. Easter Sunday. You've been in hospital for close to two months. You've been—unconscious—for most of it."

The blood in Sam's veins turns to ice as he remembers DCI Morgan's baffling words. You closed down. Week in, week out. Sitting bolt upright on your hospital bed, silent, still.

Sam finds himself fighting for breath. "What...year?" he manages to add.

There's a land of begin again...and there's not a cloud in the sky...
Matron's eyes widen. "It's 1950. Don't you remember that?"

"Wh-what," he stammers. "What's my name?"

Where we'll never have to grieve again...and we'll never say goodbye...

Her gaze drops and she takes his hands again, holding them more tightly than before. "Oh, my dear boy," she says gently. "You don't remember your own name? Do you remember anything? Your mum and dad?" And as he turns his face away, not answering, she adds, "You're Sam. Sam Williams."

Sam feels as though someone is squeezing his heart. From the other side of the universe, through the sudden roaring in his ears, he hears a voice speaking with increasing anxiety. "Sam? Sam, can you hear me?" And then: "Sister Barnes, ring Mr. Wallace. I'll need to speak to him tonight."

And the hands leave his, and move around him, and the world is rocked to wordless murmurs as Sam shudders his sobs into the woman's arms.

* * * * *

April 10, 1950

The consultant isn't able to come until the following morning. By then, Sam has moved from anguish to a dulled acceptance. The doctor stares down at him now as though Sam's apparent composure is tantamount to a professional insult.

"You said to Matron that you didn't remember your name, your parents, even the year. Now, tell me the truth. You weren't fibbing, were you?"

Sam stares back. "I'm not 'fibbing'. I don't remember the people Matron says were my family. I have no memory of the accident she described—or anything leading up to it. And the name 'Sam Williams' means nothing to me."

"And yet you cried."

"I was scared," Sam answers, truthfully enough.

The consultant smiles slightly. "I expect it's very scary indeed to lose your memory," he concedes, and sits on the chair next to the bed. Sam watches, not commenting, as the man leans forwards in a confiding manner.

"I wish I could tell you that there's an auntie or uncle prepared to care for you, but the truth is, we were unable to locate any of your parents' relations at all. Obviously, in terms of jogging your memory, this presents a whole new challenge. I don't suppose there's any use in asking you if you know of anyone else who might help."

When Sam shakes his head, the consultant continues: "We'll see if we can find neighbours who can fill in the gaps for us. Perhaps a clergyman, if your parents were active in a church. And your school may be able to help, once we identify which one you went to. You attended grammar school, I suppose?"
There seems to be no useful answer to this. Sam sighs.

"We don't entirely know what's caused your amnesia—I mean to say, your memory loss. You did have a cranial injury when you were brought in, but it was minor. Doesn't seem to account for this." He clears his throat. "It's probable the cause is psychological. That is, it's not due to physical injuries, but to your emotional reaction to being in the accident, and whatever...you may have seen at the time.

"At any rate, you've been in a hospital bed for the past few weeks. Before you go anywhere, you need to build up your strength again. We'll do what we can to get you off that catheter and back on your feet." The consultant pats Sam's knees through the thin hospital blanket, his tone suddenly confident. "And we'll try and find someone who can tell you about your life. Photographs, now, that would be splendid. Don't you think?"

* * * * *

"You'll feel just a pinch," the dresser says briskly, "and then it's done."

Sam keeps his eyes fixed on the cracks in the ceiling as the catheter is removed. There's a minute explosion of intense discomfort, a sharp little twinge in a sensitive area, but not as bad as he'd expected. But then again, the body whose pains he's experiencing isn't really his, is it? It seems smaller, lighter, as though it might float away. Fewer nerve endings than the one he's used to. That's probably why he feels a certain amount of disconnection from the pokings and pullings, Sam decides. He turns his face away, overcome by a squeamishness he doesn't care to examine, as the medical student drops the catheter tubing into his tray with a metallic clatter.

"Now," the dresser adds, leaning disconcertingly close. His brown eyes are tiny behind his thick spectacles. "There's a bottle round after every meal—that's a urinal bottle, of course—but in the event you're caught short, just let someone know. And when you're feeling strong enough to trot off to the loo, same thing, the nursing staff'll help you. But only when you're ready. All right?"

"Yeah," Sam mutters ungraciously. Annoyingly, the man twinkles at him.

"I mean it, now. I know you're a big strapping lad, but you may be a bit wobbly on those legs until you've had a spot of practice. Best to be safe!"

The dresser doesn't wait for a response, but pulls back the curtain around Sam's bed and moves off in a little cloud of cheerfulness. Sam watches him go, then moves his legs back and forth experimentally. He's gratified to find that they're more responsive than he expected. Then his thoughts curdle again.

He was here because he'd made the wrong choices, there was no denying it. Not just once, but repeatedly. And he'd had so many chances to get it right. He'd had Gene and Annie and the others around him, in a place he'd come to care about. As much as Sam had hated to admit it at the time, 1973 had become his home and the people of CID his family, after a fashion. So what if the home was shabby and the family almost embarrassingly dysfunctional? They'd forgiven him his mistakes, time and again, and taken him back.

And he'd let them down. In their most vulnerable moment, with death bearing down in the form of a thug with a sawn-off shotgun, and no one else left to save them—Sam had abandoned them. In the face of Gene's disbelieving shouts, Annie's imploring screams.
But the white light had drawn him so strongly, there'd been no arguing with it. He'd been hauled upwards, to loud noises and strange sensations and cold air, as helpless as a baby being pulled from the womb.

Sam shakes his head. And then he'd fucked up his second chance, hadn't he? So much for all those hours spent yearning for his mother, for his aunt. He'd had both women at his bedside: Ruth and Heather, both of them holding his hand throughout his recovery, caressing his face, murmuring their support. But the world of 2006 had begun to dim almost as soon as he was born, and in no time at all it had become a place of twilight and shadows, drained of life and meaning.

He remembers with clarity how it had been to stand on the roof of the police station, contemplating the jump. This time there was no Annie entreating him to stay. The only thing that had tugged at Sam was the wind. He'd seen the whole of Manchester spread before him, the colour of gunmetal, smart and modern and bloodless. The sun had shone down on his face, warming him for the first time since coming back to 2006. It was a sign, he'd felt.

Not once, on that roof, Sam now realises, had he thought about Ruth. What she might feel, after all she'd gone through. She'd receded into the greyness along with everything else.

But then again, Sam had never felt so certain that what he was about to do was right. And when he jumped, his body thrumming with life, he felt himself moving in an arc so high, so exhilarating, it seemed he would leap over the clouds.

Sam frowns. Strangely, he has no memory of the fall to earth. None at all.

But if his perceptions can be trusted now, DCI Sam Tyler of 2006 and DI Sam Tyler of 1973 are both ghosts of the future. Or, to be more precise: they haven't even come into existence yet.

He doesn't exist yet.

Sam shudders, wondering about this new role he's supposed to play—the helpless orphan—and whether the world of 1950 will end up dissolving beneath him as surely as the other two have done.

"Lights out," the night sister says cheerily from her station in the centre of the ward. A couple of patients groan in token protest as the lights go out. Sam stares into the blackness, watches as his pupils adjust to the faint glow of the night lights. The hospital cots around the ward emerge from the darkness as dim grey blobs. He hears the squeak of bedsprings as two or three other patients shift in their cots.

His mind works furiously. So had Morgan—DCI Morgan, that is—been right? Is he actually Sam Williams—a boy waking up from a prolonged coma in 1950? If so, then how can his memories of the future be so detailed, so precise? How can Sam possess the knowledge, the maturity of a man in his thirties?

Or is it possible that he's still comatose in 2006, and that all his movements back and forth in time—1973, 2006, 1950—are nothing more than a prolonged hallucination?

No single explanation seems to account for what's happening. The only thing Sam can be sure of is that now, to judge from the evidence of his senses, he's been reborn as a young boy, adrift and homeless in 1950 Manchester. And he's more alone than ever before.
April 11, 1950

In the morning, after breakfast is served and cleared, Sam waves away the obscene-looking glass urinal and insists on trying his luck with the lavatory. The nurse argues briefly with him, then fetches the staff nurse, who is annoyed to find Sam already perched on the side of his bed.

"It's miracle enough if you can stand," she says tartly, but helps him out of the cot and onto his feet. She tuts sympathetically as Sam wobbles, then hoists his left arm over her shoulder and supports his weight.

"Don't be in such a hurry, pet," she says. Her voice has a Northumberland burr, warm and patient. She smiles when he steadies himself and indicates that he's ready to walk. Slowly they make their way down the ward to the bathroom at the end. The staff nurse eases Sam into the room and lowers him onto the toilet, then gives his hospital gown a quick upward tug at the back.

"Now I want you to listen to me. Until your legs are strong enough for you to stand unaided, you've got two choices. You can either do girl-style, or I can support you while you piddle standing up. Which will it be?"

Sam groans. She gives him a cheeky grin and says, "Girl-style it is," bestows an encouraging pat on the back, and stands. As she closes the door, the staff nurse adds, "I'll be outside the lavvy if you need any help."

"Thanks," Sam mumbles. There's a moment of silence. Distantly he hears the rustle of her starched apron, realises she's waiting for him to finish. He half-closes his eyes, takes hold of himself (so wrong so wrong so wrong), and urinates. As he shakes off the last drop, his fingertips graze underneath his penis, and he realises that something else is—different? Glancing down, he feels a sudden wave of nausea. His balls are high against his body, and unbelievably...small.

He turns quickly and vomits into the toilet.

A knock at the door. "Sam? What's going on?"

"I'm all right," Sam croaks. He choke back the impulse to laugh. Perfectly all right for a kid of twelve. He flushes the toilet, then stumbles to the basin and turns on the tap, losing himself for a moment in the sound of the water. He concentrates on washing his hands, carefully, from the palm to the tip of each finger.

He deliberately does not look in the mirror, at the small face that is just as carefully avoiding his.

Everything feels so desperately foreign. Sam closes his eyes, slightly swaying. The weakness can be explained by the time in the coma. But this body he's inhabiting simply does not feel like his, he can't get away from the sheer wrongness of it. He'd jump right out of his skin, if he could. If only he could—

Then he hears Annie's voice, clear as a bell. We all feel like jumping sometimes, Sam. Only we don't. Me and you, because we're not cowards.

Sam leans against the basin to support his weight. Then he forces himself to open his eyes and gaze at the boy in the mirror, who seems to be studying him with equal trepidation.
The lad in the hospital gown isn't very big, perhaps four foot ten or so. But the face, ah, that's recognisably his own—or, rather, it's how Sam remembers himself looking when he was twelve, back in 1981. That was the year Sam had really started fretting about his height, wondering whether he'd have a dramatic growth spurt like his best mate Tim, or if he'd be condemned to being the shortest boy in the room for the rest of his life.

The boy stares back. Sam thinks it doubtful that this face—so pallid and thin and scared-looking—has faced the same turbulent times he did. Because when he, Sam Tyler, was twelve, the world had appeared to be on the brink of falling apart. 1981 had been a year of seemingly endless riots, the capture of Ronnie Biggs and the Yorkshire Ripper, coal mine closings, Irish hunger strikers and IRA bombings, CND and Greenham Common, the wedding of Charles and Diana.

So the Sam Tyler of 1981 had tried to drown his worries in music. He'd believed fervently that the height of musical expression was "Tainted Love" by Soft Cell and "Ghost Town" by the Specials. And where his classmates craved all sorts of toys, he'd wanted only two things: a portable cassette player and a guitar.

(Oh, and he'd wanted his dad. Desperately. But by then Sam was beginning to suspect he wasn't ever going to get that.)

The lad in the mirror is thinner, more frail than the reflection he remembers from 1981...although that could be due to being hospitalised, Sam supposes. But what shocks him most is how unformed his face appears now. It's really disturbing just how characterless he looks without the lines and creases he developed in his twenties, his thirties. He scowls fiercely at the reflection, then thinks better of it when he sees the face pouting childishly in return.

Why has he woken up in 1950 at the age of twelve? He hadn't opened his eyes in 1973 to find himself aged four, for God's sake. None of this makes any bloody sense!

Grimacing, Sam tugs his hospital gown back into place, and opens the door to the waiting nurse.

* * * * *

Sam stares at the opposite wall, images flickering inside his mind. He sees Annie on the roof as she steps over the railing, her hand reaching out to him. He sees again how, when he finally comes away from the edge, she starts to shake uncontrollably.

I'm all right, Sam. Just a bit scared of heights. I'm fine.

He watches as Vic takes the revolver from his hand, looks at it as though calculating its weight, then calmly aims it at his head.

How badly do you want this, DI Tyler?

He hears the blast of a gunshot, sees Gene flailing and falling.

"Sam!"

He looks up, started. Matron is looking down at him, her expression caught between annoyance and worry.

"Sorry?"
"You haven't eaten." She nods at the untouched tray in front of him. "Is there anything wrong with the food?"

Sam stares at the plates on the tray, then up at her. "I'm not hungry," he offers.

"I understand you haven't been eating much at all," Matron says. She pulls up the visitor chair, which creaks faintly beneath her. Her hand reaches out to hover over the plate for a moment, not touching it. The roast beef has congealed in its fat, next to a small pile of diced swedes and a dribble of brown gravy. She presses her lips together, then sighs.

"Not very appetising looking today, is it," she concedes.

"It's all right," Sam says honestly. He doesn't care whether it tastes good or not.

"You don't have an appetite?"

He shakes his head.

"Oh, Sam," she says. "You must try and eat your food. You'll never get your strength back if you don't eat anything."

This was almost exactly what Ruth had said to Sam during his recovery from the brain operation. He'd done his best, then, because he saw how anxious it made his mum when he failed to eat, but —

His mum—

"What's the point," Sam says, half-choking. "There's no one waiting for me. I've got no one to get better for. No one cares."

The woman is silent for a moment. Then she says, very quietly, "I care, Master Williams," and takes his hand. He feels the comforting warmth of her fingers curling around his.

Sam snatches his hand away and savagely wipes at his eyes. "You're paid to," he accuses.

Matron leans forwards, and he's caught by the intensity of her gaze. "Sam," she says, "I know you don't remember, but we've been caring for you for two months now. Never forgetting what you'd been through, knowing what you'd lost. And every single day in those two months, I prayed that you'd come back to us and live again."

Her voice becomes crisp. "Because I know that despite everything that's against you, you have it in you to get better, and even—someday—to be happy. It's what your parents would want. And I want it, too."

Sam stares at her, wondering what part of his comatose brain she sprang from. The part that's not-so-secretly pining for a comforting mother figure? He takes in her earnest grey-green eyes; her remarkable red hair, pinned tightly back; her fair complexion, sprayed with a fine sprinkling of ancient freckles and the slightest trace of smile lines. She looks nothing like Annie, and she's a good decade older; but he sees a similar kindness and resolve, warmth underpinned with rock-solid determination.

"You don't know me, really," he says miserably. "You're only saying that because you think I want to hear it. And I don't."

She looks at him seriously. "You don't want to be happy again?"
"I can't be happy," Sam tells her with emphasis. "Not here. Maybe not ever." He thinks, not for the first time, how inadequate the English language is to convey just how powerfully he knows this to be true.

Matron doesn't answer immediately. Sam senses that she's looking for the right words, the professional response. When she does finally speak, she surprises him.

"You may not be happy for a very long time," she finally admits. "Even when the worst of the grieving is past, you may always feel a knot of pain deep in your heart. You've had a terrible loss, probably the hardest one you'll ever know. I can't begin to imagine how alone and terrified you must feel. But..."

Her voice softens. "There's nothing for it but to keep on going. You must do everything you can to make yourself better physically. It's important to get back on your feet again. Movement—activity—will help. And the first step is for you to eat properly."

She points at his tray. "Do you think you can manage just a little more? If you really haven't the appetite then no one will force you, but one or two more bites..."

Matron's face is so hopeful. She smiles persuasively, and Sam feels himself weakening.

"There's tapioca for pudding later, too," she coaxes. "With jam."

*All right, then.*

He picks up his fork and gives it another go.

* * * * *

Sam falls asleep. He wakes up to a complaining voice. "Oi! Mind where you're putting your hand, Nurse Cheekydrawers. I thought you lot were all about healing people, not feeling 'em up when they're too poorly to defend themselves."

Sam looks over at the bed to his left, which now shows every sign of being occupied. The occupant of the bed stares back at him: a headful of unkempt, brassy hair, a long and truculent face, a spray of acne on both cheeks, and a challenging glint in the eye that Sam would have recognised anywhere.

Sam finds himself smiling through tears as a sudden ray of hope pierces him from head to toe.

"Hello, guv."

* * * * *

The boy looks over at him. Mid-adolescent perhaps, the exact age hard to judge—sixteen possibly? His expression is sceptical and highly annoyed.

"What did you call me?" he demands.
Sam recollects who he is, *when* he is. "Sorry. You...reminded me of someone." He falters, momentarily wrong-footed. "What's your name?"

"Eugene Hunt. Gene to you." The boy's stare hardens. "Hang on—you're that lad who's been playing at Statues, aren't you? Weren't you down the other end of the ward to begin with? Didn't recognise you with you moving and talking and that."

Sam falls silent.

"And what do you call yourself? I heard them talking to you, calling you—"

"Sam Williams. Or so they tell me."

The other boy's face is a mixture of fascination and horror. "You mean you've got that thing where you've forgotten who you are, whether you're City or United, all that lark?"

"Amnesia. Yeah, that's right."

"Then how can I remind you of someone?" the boy asks triumphantly.

Ah. Still sharp as a tack, then. Reluctantly, Sam grins. "Well, that's the tricky bit, isn't it? I kind of half-remember things. Impressions. Not sure what they mean or what they represent, but..."

"'Represent,'" the youth repeats, with a slightly mocking expression. "Big word for a pint-sized little 'un."

"Oh, I'm older than I look," Sam says airily. Gene laughs.

"I reckon you aren't. Twelve, are you?" Off Sam's nod, he adds: "'Bout my brother's age. I'm seventeen. Nearly eighteen."

*Nearly.* Sam recalls when a fraction of a year counted for everything in the age-based caste system of childhood. "Well, I'm *nearly* thirteen," he lies cautiously.

"So what's wrong with you? Was it the traffic accident? I heard your mum and dad got killed."

And there it is, that sudden brutal bluntness of Gene's that always caught him unawares. Sam blinks back sudden tears. Not for his imaginary 1950 parents, but his real ones. In this place and time, he realises, Ruth and Vic must be small children—his father only seven years old, his mother a toddler of three—and further beyond his reach than they've ever been.

When Sam can trust that his voice won't quiver, he says again, as mildly as he can, "That's what they tell me."

"You don't remember them?"

Sam hesitates, not sure how much to reveal. "Not really."

"Well." Gene makes a face. "Might not be such a bad thing. Times I'd like to forget my mum and dad altogether." And before Sam can ask why, Gene adds quickly, "Bump on the head, was it?"

"Yeah. Some scrapes and bruises. Mostly healed now. But I went weeks without moving on my own, so my muscles are atroph—I mean, they need exercising to work again. So I'm still a bit weak."

The evening light shifts on Gene's features, throwing into relief what Sam had not seen earlier: a mottled purple-and-yellow bruise down most of the left side of his face. Sam sucks in his breath.
"Who did that to you?"

Gene's eyes flicker. "Oh, you know. Couple of blokes I knew from school." He turns his face away slightly. "Got in some good licks of my own an' turned the tables on 'em. Left them sorry they ever messed about with Gene Hunt."

"D'you have other injuries?" Sam asks.

Gene laughs evasively, not looking at him. Still addressing the window, he says, "How much time you got? I've got a list as long as my arm." And as Sam winces, he adds, "You should see the state I left them in. They had to be sent to specialists in Harley Street!"

He's obviously lying. Sam says nothing for a moment, then murmurs, "I hope you feel better soon."

"Oh, I'll be all right," the other boy says expansively. "Heal quick, I do. And in the meantime I've got hospital food and pretty nurses to look forward to. I'm having a grand old time."

* * * * *

Sam dreams of Gene Hunt—the adult DCI—beating a suspect in Lost Property. His ears reverberate with the dull thud of fist pounding into flesh, over and over. Sam finds himself moving forwards, swimmingly, in slow motion, to pull his guv off the man. Hunt allows himself to be pulled back, then looks over at him and smiles ferally. This is what I do, Sam, he says, the words echoing around the dusty room. It's who I am...

The pounding sound continues as Sam opens his eyes to the dull white light of the orthopaedic ward. He looks in the sound's direction and sees that someone has pulled the curtain about Gene's bed. Several feet are visible below the edge of the curtain: a woman's scuffed brown court shoes, a smaller boy's patent leather shoes, and a pair of large work boots standing close to the bed.

"You'll bloody shut up and like it, boy!"

A murmur. Another thump, and the bedsprings of the hospital cot squeak violently. Another vicious thud. Sam hears a tiny sob, which resolves into a woman's tearful voice. "Stan, please stop..." A growl in reply, a low-pitched sound of contempt and loathing.

And then, unmistakably, the sound of choking.

Outrage runs through Sam's body like lightning. In no time he's out of his bed and on his feet, heedless of the hospital gown gaping behind him. He limps over to Gene's bed and yanks back the curtain. And there he is, a huge brute of a man looming over Gene, his hands wrapped around the boy's throat, and Gene himself beginning to turn blue-lipped, struggling feebly, no longer making a sound.

Sam is incandescent with rage. He's no longer aware of being small, or young, or powerless. He is DCI Sam Tyler, seven feet tall, commanding, and radiant with fury. "Get away from that boy!" he shouts, and his voice rings with authority.

The man starts, then snarls, his hands still gripped tightly around Gene's neck. "Get back to your bed, you little gobshite. This is none of your business."
Sam tugs at his arm, and the man yelps with surprise. He turns and swings, but Sam deftly swerves out of the way and slips in front of him. As the man stares, Sam brings his foot down hard on the instep with all his might. Gene's father shrieks with rage and swings at him again. This time his fist connects with Sam's cheekbone, and Sam goes flying into the metal frame at the foot of Gene's bed. He lands painfully, his breath knocked out of him. He feels a hot trickle running down his face, feels a sudden throbbing in his skull.

"Stan!" the woman says again. Sam watches, his vision blurring with tears, as Gene's father advances on him again. Gasping, he tries to struggle to his feet, but he's not quick enough to evade the huge fists that pound again and again into his face and chest.

"You little fucking maggot," the man spits. He seizes Sam's left wrist and yanks him to his feet. Sam feels something give in his wrist. The pain is excruciating.

Reflexively, he slams his foot onto Stan's instep again, and as the man gasps in surprise, Sam manages to pull his wrist loose. This time he ducks under the man's arm and moves directly behind him. With two smooth movements, and despite the pain in his own wrist, Sam pulls back the man's left arm so that it's fully extended, then smashes the flat of his right palm against it with full force. Something in the man's arm audibly cracks, and the man howls. He spins, but Sam is already moving in front of him, nimble as a cat. He lifts his right foot and put every ounce of strength he possesses into kicking against the man's knee.

A second loud crack, and the man crumples into a heap, shrieking in pain.

A voice of outrage, like a trumpet, resounds through the room. "What is the meaning of this!" Sam, who is still standing over the man, looks over to see Sister and the consultant staring at him in astonishment. Behind Sister, wavering on uncertain feet, stands old Edgar...wearing an expression of complete triumph.

Sam's vision goes patchy black. He wobbles and collapses.

* * * * *

"You broke his kneecap," Matron says to him.

"I'm sorry," Sam says. He tries to make his expression as sincere as he can. She shakes her head at him.

"He has been hospitalised. And will require extensive medical attention because of the damage you did, you thoughtless boy."

"Sorry," Sam says again, inadequately.

"He injured you—could have hurt you very severely indeed. You should never do anything like this again."

Matron lightly touches his bandaged wrist for a moment, then reaches across and takes his uninjured hand. She says: "It was very badly done. And extremely dangerous. You foolish boy."

Unexpectedly, she strokes his hair. Sam says, past a sudden lump in his throat:

"Gene's my friend. I couldn't let him go on being attacked like that without trying to do
something."

Matron whispers, "I'm sure your parents would be very proud of you, looking after your friend like that," and looks at him with an expression of pure fondness. She leans forwards, apparently on impulse, and presses her lips to his bandaged hand. As Sam blinks, surprised, she stands abruptly and looks down at him with her usual implacable expression.

"I shall speak to the staff. Your punishment will be to forego the usual pudding at mealtimes for the next week."

"Fair enough," Sam says meekly.

He is not entirely surprised when the next meal comes with a serving of homemade jam sponge and custard that is so generous, it's in danger of spilling over the side of the bowl.

* * * * *

Sam keeps glancing over at Gene's bed. The blood spots that had spattered its counterpane are now gone; someone had remade it earlier when Sam was in the lavatory. There's still no sign of Gene himself, though.

When the nurse comes round to take his tray, hurriedly and somewhat distracted, he has to tug at her cuff to get her attention.

"Can you tell me how he's doing?" Sam asks, indicating Gene's empty bed. "And when he's coming back?"

The nurse shakes her head and leaves without speaking. Sam groans with frustration.

But a few minutes later, as Sam's wondering whether he should track down Matron and wheedle the information out of her, a porter pushes a wheelchair into the ward and eases its occupant into the bed.

It's Gene, much bruised about the face and neck, and looking as though he's ready to punch someone out. Despite his youth, he radiates an intimidating level of unspoken fury. The porter is almost deferential in tone as he eases Gene into the bed, asks in a low voice if he's comfortable, then almost rushes out of the ward with the hated wheelchair.

Gene shoots one evil glare in Sam's direction, then rolls over and favours Sam with his back.

"Gene?" Sam says tentatively.

The back doesn't move.

Sam decides to wait it out. He can be stubborn, too.

He reaches out for the second bowl of sponge and custard.

* * * * *
It's been two hours, and Gene still isn't speaking to him. At first Sam had shrugged it off. Now he's becoming alarmed. It's bad enough being stuck in 1950, but at least Gene's presence has the potential to make it marginally bearable. And now, predictably, Sam's pissed him off.

What's really frightening is how alone this makes Sam feel.

"Oi!" Sam snaps, more loudly than he intends. "At least tell me what's wrong!"

The boy in the other bed turns his head and gives him a scornful look, but still says nothing.

"Are you..." Sam presses on. "Are you upset because I stopped him?"

Gene's face is in profile now, lips pressed together haughtily. He's staring at the far wall as though daring it to speak.

"Because if that's it—"

"You couldn't mind your own bleeding business, could you!" Gene shouts hoarsely. He glares at Sam in fury. His hair is sticking up all over, accentuating his agitation. Sam thinks he looks like a teenaged exclamation point.

"Well, I—"

"You just had to interfere, didn't you? Get my dad all angry! Make things even worse!"

"Hang on a minute!" Sam objects. "He was choking the life out of you. How could it get any worse?"

"You broke his leg!" Gene accuses. "And now he can't go to work till it's healed!" He huffs for a moment. "You nearly got him in schtook for attacking me! My mum had to do a proper bit of tap-dancing to get the rozzers to leave him be."

"The police looked into it?" Sam hadn't known this.

"Hospital called them in." He glowers. "Matron Nosey-Parker's doing, I reckon. Interfering old besom."

"It's her job to look after the patients," Sam says as gently as he can.

"Well, it was never your job, was it?"

His tone is still angry, but Sam notices that Gene's breathing has calmed. The boy seems more contemplative now, sadder.

"Gene. Come on, please! Look at me?"

Sam waits until the boy meets his eyes, then says: "I couldn't just let him kill you. I couldn't."

"He wasn't going to kill me."

"He was choking you. You were cyanot—" Sam catches himself. "Your lips were turning blue! You weren't getting any oxygen."

Gene stares at him. "Who died and made you doctor? I was fine."

There's a long pause. Then Gene lowers his head and mumbles, "Anyroad, now my mum has to
get by, somehow, without any money coming in. Her and Stu." There's a pause. "And she says Dad may be in hospital for a few weeks. Manchester Royal Infirmary. That's miles from here."

*Can't be far enough away for me, Sam thinks.*

Gene glares, as though he could hear Sam's thoughts. "Maybe you're used to having bags of money," he accuses, "but my mum has to make every ha'penny count." A shadow of worry crosses his face. "I don't know how she'll manage."

Sam feels a stab of guilt-tinged anger. "You're not seriously saying I should've done nothing, what, to save the household budget?" he demands. "What if it was your mum he'd been choking to death? Or your little brother? That would've been fine, I suppose?"

"Well, I—"

"And I'd just like to point out that if he *had* killed you, they'd have locked him away for good. Or..." Sam pauses for a moment, trying to remember when the last capital punishment took place. He *knows* this, for God's sake; late sixties, wasn't it? "They might've hanged him!"

Gene looks at him sorrowfully. "I know."

There's a silence. Gene's admission hangs in the air between them.

"It's that..." Gene begins, slowly. "I know he's rubbish." He touches a bruise on his face, and winces. "He's drunk as a Dutchman most of the time, and he's got a fearful temper; hits our mum whenever he can get away with it. My brother and I can stop him, sometimes, when he's too pissed to stand up straight, but..." His eyes darken with pain.

*You're ashamed of him, Sam thinks. Ashamed of yourself, too, for not being able to put everything right. For needing to be rescued.*

"Why'd you scrap with him?" Gene bursts out. "He could've torn you to pieces!"

Sam thinks about this for a moment, then decides on the truth. "You're the closest thing to a friend I've got."

Gene is still frowning, still looking bewildered, but he nods. He shoots a sideways glance at Sam's locker, with its single half-empty glass of water. Sam follows his gaze as Gene looks down the ward at the other patients' lockers, covered in cards, books, vases of flowers. Then Gene's gaze locks onto his, and for a moment Sam senses a flicker of connection.

"Well," Gene growls, "Don't you ever do anything that bleeding doolally again, or I'll smack you one myself."

Sam smiles faintly. "You're welcome."

* * * * *

Gene's asleep. He seems to be dozing off quite a lot. Sam assumes, he *hopes*, that it has to do with the healing process. But during those brief periods when Gene isn't available to talk to, Sam has to make his own entertainment.
At the moment, having cadged some paper and a pencil from the ward sister, he's trying to write out a general history of Britain from 1950 onwards.

Sam's disconcerted at how little he can remember about the fifties, actually. Granted, he wasn't alive then, but surely he's seen enough documentaries and films to have a handle on it. From the sixties on, it's a doddle. But the fifties...

He's been at it for half an hour when a hand descends and yanks the pages away.


Sam squirms. "I'm trying to, uh, remember who's in power..."

"Winnie hasn't been PM since the end of the war, you nutter! And why've you got a 'Sir' in front of his name? He's no more a Sir than I am!"

Without waiting for an answer, Gene reads on. "George dies spring 1952. Elizabeth crowned June 1953." He shakes his head dolefully. "You're mad, Sam. The king's not even old yet, and you say he's going to die?"

There's no easy answer to this. Sam bites his lip as Gene scans his way through the rest of the page, then reads the next. He must be working his way through Elvis, the Beatles, the moon walk, personal computers. The Troubles. Iraq. Afghanistan.

Gene puts down the pages and gives Sam one of those narrow-eyed, assessing looks: the type that always leave Sam feeling as transparent as a glass of water.

"This is a joke, right?" he asks. "Sam?"

The temptation to confide is overwhelming. Sam is on the verge of telling Gene just who he is when the other boy's expression suddenly softens and becomes sympathetic. Almost—tender?

"You're still knocked skew-whifff from the accident," he says. His expression turns rueful. "Shouldn't be giving you stick like this. Don't mind me."

He drops the pages onto the foot of Sam's cot, and turns towards his own.

"What if," Sam says carefully, "I told you I actually can see the future? What would you think?"

They stare at each other for a moment.

"I'd think," Gene says, slowly, "that in that case, you would have known to save your parents. And then you wouldn't be here, would you?"

"So, truth is? No. You can't see nowt."

He nods towards the scattered pages. "Best hide those before Matron sees 'em. Wouldn't want them to come and take you away, would you?"

And Gene limps back to his cot without another word.

He doesn't see Sam tucking the pages hastily under the mattress.
Sam wanders down to the other end of the ward and examines the radio set. It's playing a typically syrupy arrangement of "Some Enchanted Evening", heavy with strings. Through the popping and crackling, a smooth baritone voice is clearly audible.

*Come on,* Sam thinks fiercely. *Won't someone please talk to me? Mum? Annie?* He pulls the radio out from its shelf and presses it tight, as if trying to squeeze a familiar voice out of it. *One word. That's all I'm after.*

The singer croons on, impervious. Sam can feel the vibrations of the baritone thrumming against his fingers. It's a relentless Morse code: *this*-is-reality, *this*-is-reality, *this*-is-reality.

*Some enchanted evening, you may see a stranger*  
*You may see a stranger across a crowded room...*  

He frowns, puzzled. It's an old standard, of course it's familiar, but why does it tickle something at the back of his mind?

"Do you like Perry Como?" Sister Barnes chirps, coming up behind him and taking the radio from his hands. "Got a nice voice, hasn't he? Like velvet. I do love his songs. Every one a coconut."

She pushes the radio back into place with care, and moves off singing softly to herself. "'A', you're adorable, 'B', you're be-yoo-tiful, 'C', you're a cutie full of charms..."

Sam stares at the radio despairingly. *Talk to me! Why am I here? Am I here?*

There is no answer.

Ghost-like, Sam floats out the door and into the corridor. He weaves his way through the human traffic and slips into the stairwell. Silently making his way to the foot of the stairs, he squats down and breathes deeply, grateful for the privacy. Above him there's the clatter of shoes against cement, then the slam of a door. The peace is palpable. He leans his head against the wall, feels its answering coolness down his neck and back. He closes his eyes.

*All right, I'm not stupid. I'm supposed to work this out for myself, then?*

*Fine.*

*So why would I come back here, to 1950? And as Sam Williams, of all people?*

Another voice sounds in his head, familiar and sardonic. *Got a good grasp of the obvious, haven't you, Einstein? To save my life, for starters.*

Sam blinks. Well, there is that.

But isn't it just a bit *ironic* to be saving Gene's life in 1950, only to betray him fatally in 1973?

*Well, maybe you're meant to prevent that, too...Sherlock.*

"So," Sam says aloud. "You're saying I was meant to come back to 1950 and slow-forward to 1973. And then do what, exactly? Do things differently the second time around? Try to remember that I'm 'really' Sam Williams? Confess the first time I meet you that I'm really working for Morgan?"

"'Cause the trouble is, guv," he adds softly, "I'm not even sure if *this* is real...much less whether..."
that was."

Silence.

"All right, I'll try, OK? I'll try to remember everything. And if the...accident in 1973 knocks out my memory all over again, what then? How do I get round that? Write myself a note in advance and post it to DI Sam Tyler of 'A' Division, Salford?"

He pauses. Perhaps the idea isn't as insane as it seems.

_I could try something of the sort, Sam thinks._ Write myself an account of who I am, what Morgan's up to, Operation M.A.R.S., all of it. Keep it on myself at all times. Post a backup to myself at 'A' Division just before I leave Hyde. Post a second backup to the new flat.

_Telling myself not to trust Morgan, and to protect Gene at all costs._

And then maybe I can avert what I—did—during the train blag.

* * * * *

**April 13, 1950**

"I've got a visitor for you, Sam."

He looks up to find Matron standing next to his bed, her hands clasped in front of her, nun-like. Her expression is grave.

"Do you feel up to meeting someone this afternoon?" she adds.

Sam looks about. There's no one nearby, and he can't imagine who she's talking about. "Who is it?" he asks finally.

He sees Matron hesitate for a split second, and wonders at it.

"His name's Mr. Longshaw. He's the pastor of your church. At least, I gather that's what he is, after a fashion. He told me quite a lot about ministers and preachers and circuits and so forth."

A trace of amusement crosses her face and is gone.

"The important thing," she adds, "is that he knew you and your parents. Rather well, it seems. He can tell you about your life before the coach accident. If, that is—you're ready?"

Sam shrugs. "I don't mind."

She lays one hand fleetingly on his arm. Sam feels a momentary warmth through the hospital gown. "I'll bring him in. But Sam, dear, if it becomes too much for you...you must say so. All right?"

Sam watches her go, then looks up to meet Gene's intense gaze. There's a beat. Then Sam shrugs, ever-so-slightly, and Gene breaks into a grin. He subsides in his bed and huddles under the bedclothes, but Sam can see the boy's green eyes peeping from under the counterpane.

Matron leads the visitor to Sam's bedside, then moves a short distance away. Sam stares at him,
nonplussed. He's a tall man with greying hair, nondescript except for his harassed expression. He
looks unaccountably nervous.

"So you're the minister?" Sam says, trying to strike a friendly tone.

The man shakes his head. "Our circuit minister isn't available. I'm Alan Longshaw, local preacher
at St. John's." He studies Sam's face and adds, "St. John's Methodist Church, Gorton. Your
parents were members. As are you."

"Reverend Longshaw..." Sam begins. The man holds up a hand.

"Mister Longshaw is enough. I'm a lay preacher, Sam. And I'd like to begin by saying how sorry
we all are about your mum and dad. They were good Christians and caring neighbours, and I
know they were devoted to you." He pauses. "Would you like to say a prayer with me? To ask
God to give you strength in bearing your loss?"

Sam shakes his head emphatically. In the background, Matron's eyes narrow fractionally, and she
moves forwards to intervene.

"Perhaps," she suggests, "you could confine yourself to telling the boy about his family? As we
had agreed?"

Longshaw nods. Sam watches, trying not to smile, as Matron makes a point of drawing up the
hard little visitor chair and almost forcibly seating the preacher on it.

"You really don't remember anything?" the man begins. When Sam shakes his head no, he sighs.
"Well. Your mum's name is Brenda Catherine Williams—that's née Rankin—and your dad is
David Williams. No middle name that I've ever heard of. You lived with them in Gorton. No
brothers or sisters. Your dad worked as a bus conductor for the City of Manchester, and you were
attending the local grammar school when...the accident happened."

"You mentioned some other things," Matron prompts. The preacher nods.

"Your dad was Welsh originally, you know. From Denbighshire if I recall correctly. Friendly,
outgoing chap. Organised the rugby club, very active in the choir. David had a superb singing
voice and an almost uncanny gift for harmonising."

Longshaw blinks for a moment, as though surprised at himself for sharing that detail. He adds,
"You were in the boys' choir for a time, too, although you left after you passed your Eleven Plus.
Soprano, some descant. Bit of a loss to us, frankly. Your mum wanted you to concentrate on your
schoolwork. I understand you're a good student; certainly you're the prize pupil of your Sunday
school class. D'you remember winning the *Illustrated Pilgrim's Progress* last year? You were that
pleased about it."

There's a pause as Sam looks suitably blank. He can't imagine going to Sunday school, much less
reading John Bunyan for enjoyment.

"And his mum?" Matron prodded gently.

"Ah, Brenda," the preacher says warmly. "Local girl. Baked biscuits for the social club. Loved to
read."

There's another pause. It takes Sam a few moments to realise that as far as Longshaw is
concerned, these words are an adequate summary of Brenda Williams's life. Matron looks faintly
appalled.
Sam feels the first stirrings of indignation. These people may not have been his real parents, but surely they deserved to be described more memorably than this?

"Oh!" Longshaw adds. "I found a photograph of them. It was taken late last year at the social club." He holds it out.

Sam takes the photograph and stares at it. It's a black-and-white snapshot—of course—of a young couple standing on the steps of a plain brick building. The man's only an inch or two taller than the woman next to him, but neither of them seems to be minding this. They're both laughing at the camera.

The woman has unruly dark hair, with mischievous dark eyes to match. She's wearing a tidy little hat and a broad-shouldered coat, pinched in at the waist and flared at the hip. The ensemble looks strangely fashionable, but even in the photograph Sam can see that her cuffs are threadbare. She's clasping a pair of gloves in one hand. Her other hand is tucked companionably into the crook of the man's elbow.

The man has what looks like fair hair and a slightly snub nose. His eyes are creased with good humour. He's leaning towards the woman, as though caught in the act of telling her a secret. His other, free hand is thrust casually into his suit pocket. They both look happy, carefree, self-contained.

Sam catches his breath. They're only strangers, nothing more, but still he's oddly moved. They seem so vital in the photograph, so full of life.

"I don't recognise either of them," he says, to the preacher's disappointment.

"Well," Longshaw says, sounding irritated, "You got your looks from Brenda, surely you can see that? Her eyes, her smile?" He puts his large forefinger over Sam's smaller one and points to the face of the woman in the photograph.

"You can't tell from this, of course," the preacher goes on, "but she had the most remarkable hazel eyes. Like dark amber, they were. David used to talk about them; the colour of single-malt whisky, he'd say. Intoxicating. Of course, David didn't drink, it was just his odd way of saying things."

Sam stares down at the picture. He gazes at Brenda's mischievous dark eyes, then at David's rounded nose, lost in thought.

He'd always been aware—sometimes painfully so—that he didn't resemble his parents. Both Vic and Ruth had pale blue eyes and sharp, pointed features. Once an observant schoolmate had actually taken it upon himself to suggest that Ruth had been unfaithful, accusing Sam of being the product of an extramarital affair with a dark-eyed stranger. It had led to a shouting match in the school corridor, and Sam had landed a few furious blows before the teachers intervened, but that had been an end to it. And when his science teacher had removed the last of Sam's fears by revealing that it was not absolutely impossible for two blue-eyed parents to have a dark-eyed child, he had forgotten all about the accusation.

Matron clears her throat and Sam looks up, startled. Longshaw is speaking.

"...Appointed an executor who's holding your parents' estate in trust," the preacher is saying. "I'm certain he won't object to releasing the family photographs in view of your situation. I'll return as soon as I've obtained permission." He smiles at Sam, looking pleased with himself. "It seems the likeliest way to jog your memory, don't you think?"
"Mr Longshaw." Matron's voice cuts in. "What about Sam's other relatives? The authorities attempted to locate them, but we were told that both parents were only children, that his grandparents are dead and that there are no close living relatives. We'd hoped you might—"

The preacher shakes his head. "Our church looked into it, too. We found a couple of distant cousins, but they said—" He looks significantly at Matron. "Their circumstances don't allow them to take in the boy."

Sam frowns, puzzled. He thinks something else must going on, but he can't quite put his finger on it.

"Well then," Matron says very quickly, "Can't be helped." She looks closely at Sam, then adds, "I think Sam's had enough for today. It would be most kind of you, Mr. Longshaw, if you could come back another day with those pictures."

Her gaze drops to the photo. Involuntarily, Sam's grip on the picture tightens. He glances up at Matron, who says without missing a beat, "I trust he can keep this photograph?"

"Of course," Longshaw says. Out of the blue, he gives Sam an incongruously playful pat on the head, then stands. "I'll return as soon as I've got more to share."

Sam watches him leave, then props the photograph on the locker next to his bed and looks at it, absorbed and vaguely frightened. Then he hears Gene's voice from the neighbouring bed.

"Sam?"

The tone is casual, off-hand, but there's a gentleness to it that Sam hasn't heard before.

"Oi. Y'all right, Sammy-boy?"

The gruff concern is so unexpected that Sam's throat constricts.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he says, once he's found his voice.

Gene tilts his head slightly and studies him. "I don't think you are," he says finally. "In fact, half-pint, I think you're bleedin' miserable."

Sam snorts. "Under the circumstances, I believe I'm entitled."

And Gene breaks into a grin.

"Never mind," he says cheerfully. "I've got just the thing to buck you up. We're going to have a party!"

He cocks an eyebrow. "By the way, speaking of half-pint. Have you ever tried alcohol?"

* * * * *

Night of April 13, 1950

"Psst!" Gene whispers. And after another moment: "Sam! You still awake?"

It's sometime after midnight on the ward. It's as quiet as it ever gets—which is to say, not very.
There are at least five residents who are alarmingly loud snorers. Sam's grown sufficiently used to them now that he can sleep easily through the noise, although sometimes he imagines (half-asleep) that he's hearing motorbikes, or jackhammers, or peals of thunder.

He hadn't expected to find himself using their snores as cover for a midnight escape.

"Yeah. I'm awake," Sam replies in a low voice. He knows how far a sibilant carries; it's always best to avoid words with an S-sound in them if you're trying not to be overheard.


As Sam slips silently out of his bed, Gene's already rummaging beneath his. He pulls out a bag, and Sam hears a muffled clanking sound. Gene grins, his teeth a pale flash in the darkness, and gives a thumbs up.

They crouch down low, like soldiers creeping through no-man's-land, but the night sister is preoccupied at her station and doesn't glance their way. They move quickly out of the ward and into the corridor as Gene bundles the bag tightly under his arm.

Sam's heart is hammering. He doesn't think they'll get into real trouble if they're caught, he and Gene are lads after all, but this is the most excitement he's had since arriving in 1950. Breaking the rules with Gene again? It's exhilarating.

Somehow Gene has learnt about a service staircase that Sam didn't even know existed. They have to sneak past the staff tearoom on their hands and knees, though. Fortunately the sole woman on duty has got the radio turned on and seems to be too absorbed in reading her magazine to notice.

Getting up the stairs is slightly harder. Gene tires easily; Sam can hear him wheezing after only a couple of flights. Silently he slips Gene's left arm over his shoulder and supports his weight as best he can. There's nearly a foot's difference in height between them. The other boy doesn't say a word, just nods and holds even more tightly onto the wrapped bundle under his right arm as they make their way together.

When they reach the door at the top, it's locked. Sam feels it from top to bottom, but can't find any sign of a deadbolt or padlock. He kneels and finds a keyhole, sees faint light on the other side.

"Bugger!" Gene swears in the near-darkness.

Sam has anticipated this. "Hang on. I may be able to do something about it." He triumphantly holds up a thin object. Gene squints.

"What's that?"

"Hairpin. Matron sheds 'em all the time. Found it on the floor yesterday, thought it might come in handy some time."

It takes two full minutes of effort, with Gene bobbing impatiently at his side, but Sam's finally able to pick open the lock. The door swings open. Gene thumps him appreciatively on the back as they step through.

Emerging from the stairs, it seems to Sam that the sky is filled with light. It's a clear night, with a thin slice of waning moon in the southeast, and a scattering of stars. He gazes down at the twinkling skyline of Manchester, enchanted. There are no skyscrapers in this part of the city; everything's scaled to human size.

"Oi!" Gene calls. "Get away from there. It's not safe."
Sam realizes with a jolt how close he is to the edge, and steps back quickly. He heads back and finds Gene arranging a thin blanket on the roof's rough surface. The older boy sits down cross-legged and begins unwrapping the bundle.

"Scotch!" he says triumphantly, holding up a bottle. The shape's a bit wrong, though. Sam stares.

"Isn't that a medicine bottle?"

"It's what's inside that counts," Gene says, and unscrews the lid. He takes a long gulp, then holds the bottle out to Sam.

The whisky is cheap, blended and harsh; it burns going down, more painfully than any alcohol Sam can ever remember drinking. He smiles to himself as the burn turns to warmth in his belly, and a familiar lassitude slowly radiates through his limbs. Feels like old times. Gratefully, he takes another swig.

Beside him, Gene produces a twist of cloth and unwraps it. Cigarettes. A small box of safety matches. Gene strikes one, and there's a brief flare, a scent of sulphur that pierces Sam's nostrils. He blinks rapidly as a drift of smoke stings his eyes.

Gene holds out the cigarette. "Want to try it?"

Sam holds out the bottle, and they swap. Sam puts the cigarette into his mouth and draws. The smoke is so acrid that he starts coughing and can't stop. Gene slaps him on the back, which doesn't really help.

"Stop—corrupting—me," Sam gasps at last.

"You're on your lonesome in this world now, Sammy-boy." Gene's voice is surprisingly earnest. "You're old enough to make your own decisions." There's a pause, then: "I won't think less of you if you don't want the fags or the booze."

Sam shakes his head and has another go at the cigarette. This time it's a little easier; he manages not to cough out the smoke, but can't suppress a half-snort. He feels Gene's hand bump against his, and recognises this as a signal to swap again.

Ten minutes later, Gene has opened a second medicine bottle, and they share it as they lie back to stare at the stars.

"I'll be called up for National Service soon," Gene says. He takes another drag of the cigarette with studied casualness. "It's my eighteenth birthday come November. My ticket out of Manchester...eighteen months of paid holidays, far as I'm concerned."

He frowns. "It'd be perfect, except for my mum. And Stu. Not sure how they'll manage on their own. I mean—without me, like."

"Can't you ask to be exempted?" Sam really isn't sure whether this is a possibility, but he feels it's important to ask. "Because you're needed at home?"

"Not likely! My dad's in work, for all he's useless at it; I'm the one not bringing home the bacon. I'm not a schoolboy any more, but I'm still stuck at home. It's rubbish. At least if I'm in the Service, I can make my own life."

Sam counts the months in his head carefully, thinking this over. "What d'you want to do for a living? I mean...once you've been demobbed."
"Dunno," Gene admits. "Thought about being a boxer, maybe. Probably not good enough for it, mind. But I can't imagine anything better." He warms to his theme. "Need something where I can fight, feel the blood moving in my veins. Where I feel I'm alive."

He points his cigarette with sudden vehemence. "Too many jobs, you're in a factory, you're in an office, you're walking dead. My dad, he's like that. Angry because he's pissing his life away in the mill. Doing a job he hates, in an industry that's dying."

Sam realises that this may be his opportunity to do what he's here for: steer Gene in the right direction. He takes a deep breath. "All I've ever wanted was to be a police offi—a policeman. There's plenty of fighting in that, I reckon. Fighting for what's right. Fighting to protect innocent people from being hurt. Fighting for justice."

Gene snorts indignantly, his green eyes flashing. "Huh! Fighting for flat feet and worn-out shoe leather, more like."

Sam can't help but laugh at this, remembering his DCI's taste in footwear. "Nothing wrong with being a copper on the beat. But there's another kind of policeman, you know—police detectives." He can hear his tone becoming earnest—too earnest? "The ones who investigate and solve crimes that've already been committed. Preventing criminals from striking again. That's even better than being in uniform...I think."

"I dunno," Gene says dubiously. "Doesn't sound like me." His gaze slews away from Sam and fixes on the city lights. Sam can almost see Gene's fantasies: himself as a full-grown man, the champion in the ring, the crowd roaring with triumph. And the pride he'd feel, the sense of accomplishment, taking his cut of the purse home to his mum.

Sam hesitates. He licks his lips for a split second. "You'd make a fantastic detective. You've got good instincts. The ability to lead. You're a natural leader."

He sees Gene react slightly to this. It's no more than a twitch, but Sam knows his guv. He's got the fish on the hook now. Good.

"You're observant. You understand what makes people tick. That's rarer than you think. And— and I think I know you well enough to know you care about helping people."

Did Gene just sag slightly? Sam kicks himself mentally. This is still a boy he's talking to. 'Helping'? That sounds wet.

"And...you'd definitely enjoy the excitement. It would be exciting, Gene!"

A thought strikes him. "You said National Service is eighteen months? It's not two years?"

Gene's only answer is a snort.

"Well then, you can enter the police service at nineteen, no problem."

Gene stares. "Police service? What the bleeding heck is that? Some kind of volunteer programme?"


"You do talk a load of tosh sometimes," Gene observes shrewdly. "Need a fool's dictionary just to have a conversation with you. I expect it's that bash on the head you got." He grins. "Well, Mum always told me to be patient with the feeble-minded."
Unexpectedly, he reaches out and ruffles Sam's hair. Sam blinks hard.

* * * * *

Unbelievably, Gene has produced a third small bottle. Sam knows it's time to stop drinking, but he can't quite bring himself to say no when it's his turn. He's missed this, damn it.

He turns in the half-darkness to look at Gene, sprawled out on the blanket in apparent contentment. He feels a sudden, overwhelming urge to tell him—to tell him—

"I had a friend like you," Sam blurts, then stops.

Gene raises his eyebrows. After a moment he says, "Oh, so you are remembering things." A beat. "I thought you might be."

"Well, I am," Sam admits, "but the thing is...the thing is..." Drunk as he is, he finds himself hesitating.

Then he takes the plunge. "My memories aren't to do with being Sam Williams."

"Is that so." Gene's voice is relaxed. Casual. "What are they about, then?"

Sam takes a deep breath. "I remember being a police officer. In 2006. A detective chief inspector."

There's silence for a moment. Then he hears Gene snort. "Pull the other one! It's got bells on."

Sam is slightly hurt. "I'm serious! I was born in 1969, and I'm..." He starts giggling. "...Actually thirty-seven years old."

Suddenly this is the funniest thing in the world. Sam laughs uproariously. "I'm twice your age. Kiddo."

Gene's voice is dry. "Well, you're very small for thirty-seven."

"Ah, but think of the undercover possibilities," Sam shoots back. He's having some difficulty forming the words; they're coming out slurred.

There's a muffled liquid sound. Ah: it's Gene taking another mouthful of the horrible Scotch. "Don't give me nightmares, half-pint. Only undercover you'll be doing is playing with your todger after lights out!"

"All right. I know you don't believe me," Sam says with enormous dignity.

Gene narrows his eyes consideringly and gives him a long, measured look. He's got that expression Sam's seen only rarely: the one that seems to look into Sam's very soul.

"Sam," he says, Sam's heart suddenly chills at the tone. "You're clever enough to know that what you're saying can't be true."

"No, it is true," Sam insists. "I've been twelve years old before...but it was in 1981."
Sam's brain is feeling increasingly foggy as he describes his childhood to Gene. "Everyone was terrified of the nuclear arms race, there was a huge anti-nuclear movement. Scary times."

Gene is listening closely, but whether he's enthralled or simply too drunk to absorb the words, Sam can't tell. He watches as Gene drains the last drops of the whisky, then chucks the bottle away.

"Peter Sutcliffe," Sam mumbles. "The Yorkshire Ripper. I was twelve when the police caught him. He'd been murdering women for years, years. Prostitutes. Convicted of a dozen homicides, probably committed more. 'S horrible, horrible stuff, but I couldn't stop reading about it. That's when I realised that policing means protecting everyone. Not just the upstanding citizens. Everyone."

He leans over and pokes Gene in the chest. "You know that. I mean...you will know that. Eventually."

Gene looks at him, his face expressionless, and says nothing.

"You don' believe me!" Sam says, indignant. "Just 'cause you haven't heard of him yet!" He giggles suddenly. "If you write this down, you can crack the case yourself. You could be Chief Superintendent by the time I meet you in...uh..." He pauses and counts, laboriously, on his fingers. "In twenty-three years."

"Sam," Gene says. "You're mad, you're drunk, and you're talking rot." He stands, swaying slightly, and holds out a hand. "I'm taking you back down to bed."

"Gene!" Sam protests. "You do believe me, don' you?" He reaches up a hand, squinting.

Gene pulls him up. "I believe that you believe it...when you've got too much whisky inside you." This time Gene throws Sam's arm over his shoulder, he's the one helping Sam along. Which is just as well, because Sam is feeling desperately dizzy.

"Where are the stairs?" Sam mumbles as the world starts to whirl around him.

Gene carries Sam downstairs. He's aware of this only in flashes. Gene carefully helping him down the staircase, one step at a time, his breath coming in hoarse gasps. Gene swinging the safety door open and hoisting Sam through it. Gene half-dragging him into the ward, rolling him back onto his bed, pulling off his slippers.

"You stink of Scotch," the older boy whispers. "I'm going to get a face flannel and—"

Sam interrupts him by being violently sick over the side of the cot. There is a silence, then, very quietly, Gene's voice comes out of the darkness.

"Bugger."
April 14, 1950

This is, without doubt, the worst hangover Sam has ever had. Even the smallest movement gives him the feeling he's about to vomit. The light, dim though it may be, is a painful glare. It's as though each photon is drilling through his eyeballs and is boring straight into his skull.

Matron is furious with both of them. She insists on standing there as Sister Barnes sits Sam up and gives him cup after cup of water. Then, as he winces against the light, Matron pulls the curtain around his bed and goes off to scold Gene.

Her voice is pitched lower now, presumably so that no one can overhear, but Sam's hearing is exquisitely sensitive. He listens.

"I'm sure it seemed like a wonderful lark at the time," Matron's saying, "but that boy is seriously ill because of you."

Gene's voice is an answering mutter, the actual words inaudible.

"He's much smaller than you. His body can't absorb as much as yours can. Alcohol poisoning is not a laughing matter; it can be fatal."

There's a rejoinder. Sam can't tell for sure, but the tone is apologetic.

"I will find out who gave it to you, I'll see to that. It won't happen again. You are below drinking age, Gene. I know that doesn't mean anything to you, you're already shouldering more than your share of adult responsibilities. But you of all people should know how dangerous alcohol can be."

There's a very long pause. Then a very faint murmur.

Matron's voice is softer now. "He had his stomach pumped, but fortunately he'll be all right. I daresay he won't be tempted to drink anything alcoholic for a very long time, thanks to you. That's a favour of sorts, I suppose."

Her voice drops lower, and Sam can't hear the rest of her words, nor Gene's answer, but he catches the phrase, "Yes, he needs a friend, but you're..."

The room is tilting dangerously, and Sam has to close his eyes to stop falling.

Soon, he falls asleep.

* * * * *

April 15, 1950

Sam looks at the ward sister's smiling face, then down at the paper in her hands.

_Eagle—the new national strip cartoon weekly_  
EVERY FRIDAY THREEPENCE  
Dan Dare—Pilot of the Future  

"Thank you?" he says uncertainly.
Gene's craning his neck to see. "What is it?" he demands.

"It's called The Eagle," the sister says proudly. "Just come out yesterday, it's fresh off the newsstand. Issue Number One. We reckoned Sam might enjoy it."

Sam leafs through it, increasingly disbelieving. He's read period comics before—he grew up on The Beano—but he's looking at this one through politically correct 21st-century eyes, and he can't quite believe that Sister thinks he'd actually enjoy it.

"What's it about? What's it got in it?" Gene asks again, more urgently this time.

Sam reads aloud the words on the cover. "'Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future!'" He can't suppress a smirk. The first panel shows some kind of space port, apparently, but the men in the other panels are wearing uniforms and haircuts straight out of wartime England. Moustaches! Boxy suits and neckties! God, the artists weren't even trying.

"'The headquarters of the Interplanet Space Fleet, some years in the future... '" He reads aloud mockingly. Then Gene snatches the paper from his hands and begins poring over it.

"'My dear dumb Digby, '" he says in a pseudo-posh voice. "'In case you haven't heard a radio or seen a paper in the last weeks, Kingfisher's trying to reach Venus, not Mars!'" His eyes travel down the page. "Oi, Dan's got something here called a jepeet!'" He reads out the words in parentheses. "'That's a jet-propelled gyroscopic jeep.'"


"They've got two whole pages of Dan Dare! That's brilliant! I love space adventures. And look, Sam: there's 'The Adventures of P.C. 49'. Just like the radio programme! Reckon you'll enjoy that one, eh, Mister I-want-to-be-a-policeman?"

Sam's surprised and touched by Gene's boyish delight. The older boy is grinning, leafing through the paper and reading the choicer bits aloud.

"'Professor Brittain Explains Radar'. That one's for you, clever-clogs. 'Seth and Shorty, Cowboys'; reckon I know which one you are!"

He flips a few pages and guffaws. "'Discovering the Countryside: The Hedgehog'...you'll never guess, Shorty, says here some of 'em drink milk right out of a saucer, just like you. 'Lash Lonergan's Quest'—ooh look, it's another Western tale, terrific."

Sam laughs, only to meet Gene's glare. Oh, right, he was being serious.

"'BOYS!'" Gene declaims at full volume. "'Your chance to GET ON! If you are over 14 and under 16...oh, blast, I'm too old. It's for Army Apprentices' School! Well, you'll qualify in a couple of years, eh?"

"Is that a cartoon or an advert?" Sam asks, genuinely baffled. But Gene doesn't hear him.

"There's a cartoon strip called Tommy Walls—bleeding heck, look at it, it's in colour, just like the cover!"

Gene is clearly dazzled. Then he looks disappointed. "It's an advert for Walls' Ice Cream. What a cheat! Hang on though, the back page is in colour too, an' it's something called 'The Great Adventurer.'" He reads through it, then looks disappointed again. "Religious stuff. Saul of Tarsus."
"That's St. Paul," Sam says automatically, then wonders why he says it. Gene rolls his eyes.

"Trust you to know that! ...Expect you want it back, then."

Gene holds *The Eagle* out, but his expression is wistful. Sam realises how badly the boy wants to keep it. Has this sort of treat been so rare in Gene's young life that he actually craves such awfulness?

"No," Sam says with all sincerity. "I really don't. You can keep it if you like."

The other boy's face lights up. "Thanks!" he says, with far more enthusiasm than Sam thinks is warranted. He goes off with the paper, the very picture of happiness.

Sam's eyes move from Gene to the doorway, where Matron is watching him.

"Did you like *The Eagle*, Sam?"

Now that he's become more familiar with her, Sam sees the hopefulness underlying the calm words. For some reason, his happiness really matters to her. He decides to risk honesty.

"To tell you the truth, I, um, gave it to Gene." He catches the fleeting expression of disappointment on Matron's face, quickly smoothed away.

"Is there any chance I could get something else to read?"

She smiles. "A very good chance. What sort of thing do you like?"

Sam dithers for a moment. "A crime novel? A police procedural?"

Matron frowns slightly, and Sam tries to think which of the popular authors of the day he might ask for. He remembers one long summer in his childhood when, housebound with the mumps, he'd had little but an old box filled with books to amuse himself with. Some of them hadn't been too bad.

"How about Josephine Tey?" he suggests. "*The Daughter of Time*...?"

"I don't know that title," Matron says, lost in thought. "But I do have some other books of hers. In fact..." She beams at him, pleased. "I've thought of just the thing. I'll bring it in after midday."

And as promised, she stops by his bed in mid-afternoon, holding out a blue cloth-bound book. "It's called *Brat Farrar*," she says. "I know the name's not very appealing, but...I think you'll enjoy it."

It doesn't take long for Sam to become absorbed in the story. The writing is a little quaint in places, and the occasional political incorrectness makes him wince, but it's very readable. Despite the day's interruptions, he's halfway through the book by the time Matron stops by after the evening meal. It's only when he feels a sudden presence next to him that he looks up and finds her smiling at him.

"You like it, then?"

"Yeah. I—I do. The main character, an adult who steps into the life of a 13-year-old boy who's gone missing years earlier...It's such an unusual premise."

"It's strange," Matron says. "I found myself rooting for him even though he's a fraud."

Sam feels a faint flush rising in his cheeks. "Well, he's actually surprisingly...moral. For a fraud."
"That's what I like about crime fiction," Matron says cheerily. "Most of the time, goodness is rewarded and evil is punished. Well, after the commission of the original crime, of course." She looks down at the book. "My word, you're a quick reader. You'll be asking for more novels in no time. What else do you like? I can't promise to find exactly what you want, but I can try."

"Anything else by Tey. Or...maybe some Graham Greene?" He struggles to think of the titles he enjoyed as a teenager. "Travels with My Aunt?"

She stares at him. "You're certain that's by Greene? Not someone else?" And then: "Oh, my goodness. You're remembering something you've read before, aren't you?"

Sam has a sinking feeling that the book hasn't been written yet. He falters, "I could have got it wrong..."

"I'll bring in some more reading," Matron says briskly. "You can take what you like, leave what you don't. I'm just—so very pleased to see you exploring things."

She gives his shoulder a light squeeze, then moves off.

* * * * *

April 16, 1950

Alan Longshaw sets his burden down with a thump. A faint cloud of dust issues from the top of the box.

"I've brought more photographs," he says, unnecessarily.

Sam looks at the pile of snapshots being spread in front of him. Photographs of David and Brenda Williams together. David alone, in military uniform—from World War II? Sam squints, sees wings on the uniform. RAF, then.

And one of Brenda, holding a newborn baby.

Sam picks up the photograph and stares at it.

Longshaw looks over his shoulder and nods. "Yes, that's you." He turns it over in Sam's unresisting hands, taps the back. "See the handwriting? That's your dad's. Sam at 2 wks, Feb'y 1938. Doesn't your mum look radiant?"

He drops it, picks up another. It's a picture of David playing football with his son, looking proud and happy. The boy's face is half-turned from the camera, but Sam recognises it immediately.

It's his own.

"Sam?" The preacher has put a hand on Sam's shoulder. "You're recognising these?"

"This picture," Sam says, faltering. "It's familiar..."

Another photograph. Brenda and David standing with their son outside the entrance to a building. The boy's expression is self-conscious and he's wearing a uniform; a new one, evidently. This edition of Sam Williams is older, close to puberty. Sam turns it over and reads the writing on the
Sam enters grammar, Sept 1949. Less than a year ago, he thinks.

He looks at the pride in these parents’ faces, sees the boy's shy pleasure, and feels a small tendril of envy at their happiness. Then he shakes his head.

*Nothing to envy. They're dead and gone now, those two.* Sam corrects himself: *Those three.*

"Ah!" Longshaw says, oblivious to Sam's reaction. He holds up a tattered square. "Here's David in Wales when he was a lad." He turns it over before Sam can see the photograph on the front. "There you go, *Rhuthun.*"

He turns it over again and smiles. "Really looks like you here, doesn't he? Hadn't spotted it before. I always thought you mainly took after your mum."

Sam stares at the smiling young man in the photograph and is shocked to perceive, for the first time, a distinct resemblance. No: a *pronounced* resemblance.

When he picks up the photo, he finds that his hand can't stop shaking. He drops it again, draws in a sharp breath.

There's a time jump. Someone's speaking. Sam blinks and tries to catch up.

"We had to go ahead with the funeral, of course," Longshaw is saying. "Put it off for a time, but when it became apparent you weren't likely to wake up, well, immediately, it had to be done." He clears his throat. "Given the circumstances, we did a whip-round. The congregation were most generous; very generous indeed. They've been given a proper burial in Gorton Cemetery. Thornwood Avenue, off the Hyde Road."

Sam's head jerks up in shock. "*Hyde?*" he says.

"Hyde Road," the preacher corrects him. Then, off Sam's stare, he clarifies: "Not *in* Hyde, of course."

He reaches into his pocket, pulls out a photograph and lays it on the blanket over Sam's knees.

It's a simple headstone, newly cut, the granite still pale and raw-looking. Off to the side there's an inbuilt vase for flowers, complete with a stainless-steel grate for the individual stems. The vase itself is empty. The inscription is simple, bland, with a cross shallowly engraved on the left side. It doesn't say anything about a surviving son.

Sam has seen the gravestone before. He can't help but whimper, a small cry of pain.

Longshaw's arm comes round his shoulder. "They've gone ahead, Sammy, that's all," he says awkwardly. "We didn't want them to, but it was God's will. Remember, He loves you...and them. You'll see them again one day, when Christ returns in glory."

Sam hears the whisper of a young voice, faint, indistinct, as if carried on the wind. *Why did you leave me? Mum? Dad? Where did you go?*

Another time jump. Sam frowns. How long was he out?

"I've brought you something," the preacher is saying. "The police gave it to me after the inquest. Your mum was wearing it when she died." There's a slightly disdainful pause. "Methodism rejects the cult of the saints, as she knew full well when she joined. I gather, however, that this was of some sentimental value to her."
Sam stares at the shiny thing in the man's hand. It's a small disc, the size of a 5p coin. No—Sam corrects himself wryly—the size of a shilling.

He takes the small medal in his hand, feeling its contours with a hesitant forefinger as the fine silver chain slithers across his palm.

Its feel is unnervingly familiar to him; this is, without doubt, the same medal he's seen around his neck in the mirror of his 1973 lavatory, the one he so often found himself grasping tightly upon waking in the morning. Even though it's a quarter-century newer, the face of the saint is already worn almost featureless. Sam turns it over and discovers, to his surprise, that the other side bears a dedication in italics: 'To Brenda from Mum and Dad'.

Now that Sam comes to think of it, he can't remember ever having looked at the reverse side.

He studies the front of the medal again. It's both strange and familiar, and suddenly Sam realises why. He'd never once taken it off in 1973, so, like his own face, he only knows the medal from its reflection in the mirror. Now that he's looking at it in his hand, he's looking at the picture in reverse. Or rather, the way it was meant to be seen.

It's a typical St. Christopher, with its two eternal figures. A man is wading confidently across a river. He's got a staff in his outstretched right hand. His left hand is raised, supporting a young boy on his shoulder. The man's torso is twisted awkwardly to look up at the holy child—not fondly, Sam thinks, but searchingly. It's almost as if the peril of the fast-moving water is forgotten. Or perhaps it's that, as far as the saint is concerned, the only thing that exists is that little boy.

He looks at the image, oddly mesmerised, until the preacher clears his throat. Sam looks up into the man's colourless eyes.

"You're aware, Sam, that there are no close relations in a position to—no family to take you in."

Sam nods, startled.

"It's likely...I'm sorry. I don't know any other way to say this. It's likely that you'll be going to a state orphanage."

Oh. Sam wasn't expecting this. He has a sudden vision of Oliver Twist's workhouse, the cruel orphanage in Jane Eyre. His heart sinks.

"It won't be so bad, Sam. You'll be cared for, and fed, and clothed, and educated. It's only for a few years, until you're out of school."

Questions whirl in Sam's mind. Had David and Brenda never thought of what might happen in the event of their death? Was there really not a single person among family or friends who could take him in?

"When—" Sam croaks, and cannot finish.

Suddenly Gene's at his side, a hand on his shoulder. Sam looks up hopefully.

"You're telling me," Gene demands aggressively, "that you don't have a single parishioner at your church who can help this lad?" He snorts. "Some Christians you lot turned out to be. I'd take him in myself if I had the means."

Gene. Oh, Gene. Sam closes his eyes tightly.

"It's not that easy," Longshaw says. His voice is mild, unoffended. "I did make enquiries. Plenty
of people knew and liked Sam's parents...and Sam too, of course. But it's a huge commitment, and these are difficult times for most people. As you say, not everyone has the means."

They stare at each other. Gene's eyes drop first, but his fingers tighten on Sam's shoulder.

"It's a bleeding shame, is what it is," he mutters.

"I know," the preacher agrees. "I'm not happy about it either."

Gene lets go and retreats to his bed, clambering onto it stiffly. His gaze is fierce, unreadable.

"Sam?" Longshaw says. "You all right?"

Sam looks at the St. Christopher's medal, still clutched in his hand. He holds it up.

"Can I keep this?" he asks.

"Of course you may." The preacher's voice is relieved. "I'll leave it with you, along with the photographs."

When Sam follows the man's line of sight, he's not surprised to see Matron by the door.

Evidently it's Longshaw's cue to leave. He gets up, offers to return for another visit, and moves off. Sam looks at the medal again, lost in thought.

"Oi! Shorty."

Gene's pulling rude faces at the preacher's departing back. Sam can't help but giggle; he's seen these expressions before on Gene, but never so entertainingly. Gene grins back at him.

"Don't worry, Sam. Everything will be all right!"

This is so spectacularly wrong that Sam roars with laughter.

He carefully places the St. Christopher's medal on the locker next to the bed.

He very carefully doesn't put it on.

* * * * *

Sam dreams.

He's leaning into the wind, his cloak billowing and flapping behind him. The river's shallow at this point, but fast-moving and treacherous. He uses the staff in his hand to probe for quicksand or sudden drops in the level of the riverbed.

There's a small noise to his left, almost a whimper. Startled, Sam turns and finds himself gazing into the bright eyes of a young boy.

He's no toddler, but he seems small for his age—no more than four, surely? The lad looks as though he's trying to be brave, but his lower lip is wobbling dangerously. Without warning, he ducks his head and presses it into Sam's shoulder.
"Hey, hey. There's no need to cry," Sam says encouragingly. He can't do much, one arm's taken up with keeping his balance and the other is already supporting the boy, but he tries to give a reassuring squeeze with his forearm. The boy buries his head in Sam's neck and snuffles wetly.

"It's not that bad," Sam insists. The child makes the tiniest murmur in response, and Sam says: "I've got you. You're not going anywhere. You're safe."

At these reassuring words, Sam looks up and into the eyes of the stranger who's carrying him. He's not Daddy, Sammy's never seen him before, but he smells like Daddy. And his eyes are amber brown, just like Mummy's. The man opens his mouth.

"Are you a policeman?" he asks.

Sam staggers under the sudden weight. He's stronger than he looks, a brave lad, everyone always says that, but still he's only twelve. The little boy slips off his shoulder and slides into the water. Before Sam can move, the child sinks below the surface and is gone. Sam spins around, panicking, holding out the staff like a lifeline, like Moses willing the Red Sea to part. But there's no sign of the boy.

Then the banks on both sides of the river disappear, and the only thing around Sam is water, and he's sinking.

Sam wakes up gasping in terror.

* * * * *

April 17, 1950

And then the memories start bubbling up.

The wrong memories.

It begins when the ward sister turns on the radio the next morning, and it's Perry Como again. Sam's taking his exercise, walking up and down the length of the ward, saying hello to the other patients. He hears the voice, feels a shiver of familiarity, and—

His dad is peeping around the doorway as Brenda sets to work on the cabbage. "Some enchanted evening," he bawls, deliberately off-key. Brenda almost jumps out of her skin, she's that surprised. Then she laughs.

"You may meet a strange-er." He seizes Brenda by the waist and swings her around. The cabbage leaves go flying in all directions, to Sam's intense delight.

Brenda looks down at the strewn leaves, then good-naturedly flips the colander into the sink, where it lands with a rattle. "You may see a stranger," she carols back, "Across a crowded room."

They turn to Sammy, who is half-amused, half-horrified at his parents' antics. "And somehow you know," they sing—to him! "You know even then, that somewhere you'll see her, again and—"

At this point they dissolve into giggles, and Sam shakes his head reprovingly, wishing that his parents could behave just a little more...grown up.
"Dafydd bach," Brenda says suddenly, with a catch in her voice. And David turns to her, smiling, looking as happy as a man who's won a million—

"Sam! Can you hear me?"

Sam looks up and sees Gene's eyes, half-amused, half-concerned.

"You looked a little dizzy. Y'all right?"

"Sammy. Slow down."

It's Sam on his first bicycle. David's home on leave, and he's teaching Sam to ride. Counselling patience, mostly, but Sammy doesn't feel like going slowly. He careers down the hill, screeching with delight, and then with terror as the bicycle won't stop. David thunders down after him as Sam hits the kerb, flies over the handlebars and lands in a heap.

"Daddy!" Sammy sobs.

"Sam?"

His eyes widen, and it's Gene in front of him again. There's no bicycle, no Daddy. He looks down shakily at his hands. They're unscratched.

Sam blinks. Wait. That was never...What?

"Sam?"

But it was so real.

"I'm...remembering things," Sam says shakily. "But they're not..." He trails off, scared.

Gene looks at him, looks very closely, and frowns. Then he envelops Sam in a hug.

Sam can feel Gene's heartbeat. The heat of his neck. The older boy's speaking softly, something about it being all right. It's not all right, not really, but it's comforting to be held so tightly.

He can't remember Gene, his Gene, ever showing this much tenderness, but he's grateful for it.

Another memory flickers up from God knows where. A Christmas scene. It's just Sam and Mummy this time, because Daddy's off bombing the Jerries. The gifts are small and cheap, but Sammy understands because it's wartime and everyone has to be brave. So he's not disappointed, really he's not, by the socks and the tin whistle and the little lead soldier with some of its paint missing.

But there's something large and round in Sam's stocking, at the bottom, and when he pulls it out, he's so astonished that he can't stop staring.

It's an orange. An orange. The most amazing, the most fantastic thing in the world. He runs his fingers over it, feeling the waxy nubbled skin, inhaling its scent.

For a split second Sam sees his mother's smile. Pleased. Wistful. She must have planned this for ages.

And then Sam's back with Gene again, and it's 1950. The scent of the orange is still in his nostrils. Gene's looking at him wide-eyed.

"It's all right," Sam says with confidence. "I'm back."
And for now, he is.

* * * * *

Sam looks at the medal. Something is tugging at his memory, something disturbing. He holds it tightly, thinks about putting it round his neck, decides against it. He puts it under his pillow instead, for safekeeping.

Later that day he's walking down the corridor, dutifully taking his exercise the way Sister told him to, when a very small child runs bang into his knees.

He looks down and sees brightly inquisitive blue eyes, porcelain skin, dark curly hair.

The girl's mother calls out from the far end of the hallway: "Margaret Anne Cartwright!"

Sam's breath catches in his throat. He kneels and looks at the child. She's totally unafraid, staring at him curiously, and eventually favours him with a smile. She reaches up to tug on the medal around his neck.

He stares down at it, surprised. Hadn't he left it under his pillow?

Suddenly the girl's mother is standing beside him, snatching her up. "No!" she snaps at the child, then turns to Sam, her face apologetic. "She's a good girl," she explains, "but she can be that grabby at times!"

"It's all right," Sam says wistfully. "How long will you be—"

"Sorry lad," she interrupts. "My husband's waiting."

Sam stares longingly after the two of them, Annie's hand still stretched out towards him, gaily waving, as her mother bears her away.

* * * * *

It's lights out on the ward again. Gene's already asleep, snoring softly. Sam's wide awake, thinking, thinking.

He closes his eyes in desperation and sends his mind forwards to 1973.

He imagines he hears the usual hubbub of voices, clatter, phones out in the squad room. It's a bit muffled, though. He's in Gene's office, then.

Sam opens his eyes and looks straight into Gene's.

*I need a Scotch,* Sam says bluntly.

Gene nods, not saying anything. He brings a familiar bottle out of his drawer—his best single malt, Sam notices—and slams a not-very-clean shot glass onto the desk blotter. The whisky makes
a discreet glugging sound as he pours. Gene hands the glass across, his gaze watchful. His fingers touch Sam's briefly. Then Sam throws back a mouthful, feeling the cold glass against his lips, savouring the peat-flavoured burn as the liquid goes down his throat, the heat spreading through him. He relaxes infinitesimally.

_Guv, I'm stuck in bleeding nineteen-fifty. What do I do?_

Gene laughs harshly. _What you always do, Gladys. Complain about it._

_That's not fair._

_Isn't it? Gene's eyes flash dangerously. You came here, to 1973. And then it was 'Hyde' this, 'Hyde' that, better part of a year's worth of you reminding us all that you couldn't stand being here. Couldn't wait to get home to 2006, could you? And the minute you returned to 2006, you couldn't think of anything but coming back. Bloody big surprise, that._

Gene pours himself a second glass and drinks it off, then points his glass at Sam. _Even you must've noticed that the only way to get you to appreciate a place is to plonk you down someplace else. If you could find a way out of 1950, poof, you'd be crying over Matron's beautiful eyes and lecturing everyone on how much healthier people were in post-war Britain._

_But I do know where I want to be now. I want to be with you. You and the team._

Gene smiles grimly. _Well, you can be, then._

_Just wait twenty-three years._

* * * * *

**April 18, 1950**

The next day, Sam plucks up the courage and says what's on his mind.

"Matron?" he asks. "We get along pretty well...don't we?"

She looks at him, smiling but clearly puzzled at his words. "Yes, of course, Sam. What a question." Her expression adds silently: _Why do you ask?_

"Well, when I'm discharged," Sam says. He stops, then plucks at the counterpane, not looking at her. "I don't have anywhere to go. So I was wondering..." A deep breath. "If I could come and stay with you."

Matron's face contracts slightly. There's an emotion going on under the surface, and she's doing her best to control it.

"I'm sorry, I know I'm being forward. But, you know, we have a rapport, and I think we like each other."

"Sam—"

Sam's startled to realise he can't read Matron any more. When had it become so difficult to judge people's emotions, to gauge a situation and take exactly the right line? He used to be so good at it.
He finds himself floundering. "I won't be a bother, honestly. I'll go to school, come home, look after myself. I know you're a, a career woman with your own life. I'll stay well out of your way."

"Oh, Sam."

Her expression shifts, becomes appalled. Sam stares, alarmed that he's gone too far.

"You're a lovely boy. But you must understand that it's not possible. I'm—" She seems to be struggling for words. "For one thing, I'm unmarried. The adoption authorities are very strict about these things."

"I wouldn't mind," Sam says, "if it was unofficial. I wouldn't need much. To eat, I mean. Or...clothes. I could wash my clothes every day. I'd only need the one set."

She stares at him. "I can't do it, Sam. And you can't—you can't simply disappear from the system. There are reasons for the rules, you know. It would be wrong of me to try and spirit you away. And I can hardly feed you off my ration book. Do be sensible."

She stands and walks off. Sam feels the tears welling up, along with a sense of mounting fury and helplessness.

Why do grown-ups always have to be so difficult?

* * * * *

Sam waits until after the evening meal before calling Gene over. He's been thinking about this all day, how to tell him. He knows it's time. He just isn't sure where to start.

"I know how this will sound," Sam says. His voice cracks on the word sounds. It's been doing that a lot lately; puberty kicking in, he thinks. Then Sam forces himself back to the topic at hand. It seems he's been more and more distracted lately, too.

"I know how this will sound," he repeats. "But bear with me, OK? My name isn't Sam Williams, it's Sam Tyler. I don't normally look like this. I'm from the year 2006, but somehow I got thrown back more than a half-century, and I woke up stuck in the body of a twelve-year-old boy. I'm actually 37 years old, and I'm a policeman."

Gene stares at him, his mouth slightly open. Then he laughs.

"You told me that yarn on the rooftop, or did you forget?" he says. "I've heard it already. It's better than The Eagle."

"It's true," Sam insists. "I know about things that haven't happened yet. I know when King George will die; you saw it yourself, I showed you the paper. I know the coronation date of Princess Elizabeth; it's over a year after that. The queen'll have two children, they're not even born yet, and I know both their names."

Gene snorts. "Dunno what you're talking about, not born yet. There's Prince Charles, and another baby on the way now. That's no secret."

Sam nods smugly. "That'll be Princess Anne. Didn't know that, did you? And I know when the Americans will land a man on the moon. I know who's going to be big in popular music in the
fifties, sixties and on. You haven't heard of Elvis Presley yet, but you will. I can name the next few prime ministers. Macmillan, Heath, Wilson, and—Thatcher."

Here Sam's taking liberties and he knows it, because this information is already fading away. He can put a face to Macmillan and the tired-looking man named Wilson, but he's having trouble remembering what Thatcher looked like. Didn't he wear spectacles, big round ones? And Heath; Heath is just a name for...

Sam sees a sudden flash of moorland, a family trip to the Forest of Bowland. The hair of the woman seated in front of him flashes blonde, then brunette. He shakes his head, confused.

"I've written it all out," he says. "It's under my mattress. Everything that'll happen. Pages and pages of it. So that I can..."

Sam catches himself before the last words, so wildly nonsensical, leave his mouth. *So that I can save you.*

Gene is giving him a grim stare, the one that Sam knows all too well. It's the one DCI Hunt uses when he knows something is badly off but he hasn't worked out what.

Then Gene's expression clears and he gives Sam a very light punch on the arm. "Sam! You don't believe this, really, do you? 'Cause you're clever enough to know that what you're saying can't be true."

Sam frowns. Hasn't Gene said this before? Or was it someone else?

"It is true," he insists. "It is." He sticks out his lower lip, defiant.

"You're addled," Gene says indulgently. "That's all."

"Listen to me!" Sam yells. "For once I am telling you the truth! Why doesn't anyone ever believe me?"

Gene's eyes are round. Behind him, the ward has fallen silent.

"I believe you," he says finally. Sam's eyes fill with tears.

"Thank you," he says.

"Don't mention it." Gene's voice is gentle. "What are friends for?"

Sam gives him a grateful smile.

When Gene leaves the ward a few minutes later, Sam doesn't think anything of it.

* * * * *

The sound of low voices outside the ward. Sam's attention is drawn because of the sibilants. When people whisper, you can tell they're trying to hide something. They sound like snakes; it's the hissing that carries. Daddy told him this years ago. It's why Sam never, ever whispers.

"...Scares me. Disturbing. I think he really believes what he's saying..."
Sam strains to hear more. *Interesting.*

"...Ask the consultant about it. Thank you for telling me. I'm sure it's hard, but you're..."

The voices move off.

A few minutes later, Gene comes in and gives Sam a cheery wave. Sam waves back happily and opens *Brat Farrar* to the first page.

* * * * *

**April 19, 1950**

The doctor speaks to Matron as though Sam isn't even there.

"Confabulation caused by brain damage," he murmurs. "Specifically, a grandiose delusion brought on by the accident."

"Grandiose?" Matron asks.

"He believes himself to be an important person from the future who knows, or can control, what will happen."

"No, I don't," Sam says indignantly.

"*Now* you don't," Gene says from behind the drawn curtain. "But sometimes you do."

The doctor ignores both boys and addresses Matron in a lowered voice. "Confabulation appears mainly when there is cranial trauma," he says. "So when the trauma is healed..."

Matron's face is lit with relief. "It's not psychological, then?"

"No, I don't think so," he says. "There was no evidence of this before the accident, seemingly. There's every reason to hope..."

"That I'll get better?" Sam asks, dazzled by the magical-sounding word *confabulation*. It sounds like something a magician would say, or a wizard.

The doctor smiles.

"Every reason to hope."

* * * * *

Sam is beginning to panic. He is almost fully healed; so is Gene. The doctor has already told Gene he's going to be discharged soon. Sam has not yet received any more word on what is to happen to him, but when Matron tells him that he's doing well, he can't hide his distress.

"Aren't you pleased to be leaving? This hasn't been a happy place for you, surely."
"The only people I care about in the world are here. Gene, and..." he falters. "And you."

She tilts her head and doesn't speak for a moment. Then, very gently: "It's time for you to get on with your life."

"In an orphanage! It'll be six years of prison. No one wants to adopt a twelve-year-old." Sam shakes his head. "This place is the closest thing to home I've got. I don't want to go."

"I'll come and visit you," she promises. Sam brightens.

* * * * *

"God is in the detail," David tells him.

Sammy frowns. David's using his solemn voice, the one he reserves for Bible readings, plus he used the word God, so what he's just said must be terribly important. But the phrase is too baffling to make any sense. What detail?

"What does that mean?" he asks finally, hating to admit he doesn't know.

David looks grave. "That if you pay proper attention to each individual thing, no matter how humble, and use your God-given ability to reason, you'll be able to put together the big picture properly, see your way through your difficulties. And if you don't..."

He taps on Brenda's crossword puzzle with a tobacco-stained finger. "Life doesn't come in a box with a photograph on top. If you don't respect the pieces, pay attention and attend to the small things, you'll never work out the puzzle."

The phrase still sounds wrong to Sammy. "Shouldn't it be, God is in the details, then?" he offers, feeling that he's right without knowing why.

David gives him one of his enigmatic smiles. "Ah, but you can't say that, can you?" he says, his tone amused, his Welsh lilt suddenly pronounced. "The Devil might be hiding in some of them. You have to look at each individual detail on its own merits—" He holds up a single puzzle piece. "Before you can find God in it."

He snaps the piece into position, then grins outright.

Sammy thinks that's one of the daftest things his Dad has ever said, which is saying something, but he doesn't say so because he loves his Dad and doesn't want to hurt his feelings. He nods gravely.

"God is in the detail," he repeats.

* * * * *

Sammy's snuggled up close to his mum on the sofa. Her hand caresses his cheek absently as she reads aloud. Sammy remembers the first Alice book, she read it to him only last month, but this
one is new. He listens to the soothing cadence of his mother's voice and feels his eyelids begin to droop.

"'Well!' thought Alice to herself, 'After such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down stairs! How brave they'll all think me at home! Why, I wouldn't say anything about it, even if I fell off the top of the house!' Which was very likely true."

Brenda suddenly starts laughing so hard that she nearly drops the copy of *Through the Looking Glass*. Sammy can't understand why.

"Mummy. Mummy! What's so funny?"

She wipes her eyes. "What a macabre creature Lewis Carroll was. I don't remember noticing when I was a girl." She tousles Sammy's hair. "Never mind, darling. Just your mother being silly. I'll go on, shall I?"

* * * * *

"You'll visit me, won't you?" Sam is close to tears. "When we're out of hospital? You'll come and see me at the orphanage?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Gene says. "Of course I'll come and visit you."

Sam has a queasy feeling deep in his stomach.

"Are you telling me the truth?"

He sees Gene swallow.

"Gene?"

"Yes, you cheeky divvy. I've given you my word."

*Divvy?*

"Really?"

"Yes, really. We're pals, aren't we?"

"Yes. Yes, we are."

Sam is satisfied. Gene's his best friend, and friends don't lie.

* * * * *

"Able, Affirm, Baker, Charlie, Dog, Easy," Sammy chants to himself. Then he stops. For all he's in the front room with the door nearly closed, his father's voice carries up the stairs surprisingly well.
"It's just a battered old RAF jacket," David is complaining. "I don't like how attached Sam is to it. And I certainly don't care for him getting it into his head that war is romantic."

Sammy listens intently from his hiding place on the landing.

Brenda's voice is soothing. "It's the jacket you wore on leave," she says. "Don't you understand? Sam saw so little of you during the war. He lived for those few days you made it home. So the sight of that jacket, the smell... I expect it reminds him of the feeling of being reunited with his daddy. Makes him feel safe. Loved."

"Well, that's not what it reminds me of. I can't look at it without thinking of all those endless bloody missions. Germany, France. And when I rememb—"

There's a gasp. Sammy can't tell whether it's his mum or his dad. He waits, worried. There's a long pause, then a murmur, the sound of a creaking floorboard, the rustling of fabric. Finally, so quietly that he almost doesn't hear it:

"I want to throw it out. I don't want to see it again. Ever."

"I understand, I understand. But—not yet. It means the world to Sammy. If you just..."

Sammy tiptoes up to his room and thinks very seriously on what he's just heard.

The next morning, just before the weekly rubbish collection, he steals outside and stuffs the jacket into the bin.

But not before giving it one last sniff.

* * * *

"You're on Curzon Road, Moss Side," Sam repeats.

"Right. 2612 Curzon Road."

Sam carefully writes down the number, then the name of Gene's street. He gets Gene to spell it for him twice. Cur-zon.

"But Sam. You won't be able to come visit me at my home. My dad..."

Sam nods. He understands. Gene's dad hasn't forgiven Sam for interrupting the family visit and all. Sam can't even remember now why he did it, or what he said, but he does know from Gene's embarrassed expression that he must have done something really wrong.

"And anyway, I don't know where they'll post me once I'm called up. One thing's certain, it's not likely to be Manchester."

"It's all right," Sam says, vaguely aware that Gene is upset. "I just wanted to know it. In case I need to write to you, yeah? Your mum can forward a letter, can't she?"

Gene thinks this over and nods.

That night Sam puts the paper under his pillow, next to the St. Christopher's medal.
The next morning, the medal is around his neck. The paper is gone. Sam looks under both his pillows, feeling vaguely that something is missing.

Then he forgets about it.

* * * * *

April 20, 1950

There's absolutely no sign of what's about to happen.

One moment, Sam's seated on his bed, listening to Gene talk. Gene's confiding, for the first time, that he's thinking of becoming a policeman.

Sam's thrilled to hear this. Gene would make a fantastic copper, he thinks. He's making a joke about P.C. 49, and Gene's laughing back at him, when there's a sudden, horrific crash on the right side of the coach.

Sam finds himself thrown into an aisle seat. He's in pain, terrible pain, all the way down the right side of his body. Moans and cries come from all around. His parents were seated behind him on the coach, and Sam turns to look.

The side of the coach is caved in and his father's body is pinned underneath the metal, his head crooked at an unnatural angle.

Sammy follows his dad's unblinking stare and, seeing only the featureless ceiling of the coach, wonders idly why his father is so fascinated by it. Then he hears a groan. His mother's torso is hanging into the aisle, and she's moaning as she looks at Sammy.

She moves slightly, seems to be making a feeble attempt to reach out to him and to speak his name, but she is unable to do so. A thick red liquid bubbles from her lips. The right side of her head is covered in blood, and the lower part of her body is pinned under the metal that's confining her husband.

Sammy looks down and sees that his own right arm is gashed, distantly registers the blood spattered over his own legs. He pulls himself up with his left arm and tries to move out of his seat to help his mum, but his legs refuse to obey him properly, and he collapses into a heap in the aisle.

He's looking up at his mother in utter bewilderment when she suddenly haemorrhages and begins choking.

The sound is horrible, and Sam is terrified. He scrabbles ineffectually against the floor, whimpering low in his throat. Within seconds, his mother is gone. Her eyes are still open, looking through him, the blood shiny on her lips. Sam stares back, wondering where she went. And then he notices the glint of silver hanging from her neck, a bright moon against the red of her dress.

"For safe travel," she'd said gaily when she put it on.

* * * * *
"Mummy," Sam whispers now, looking down at the shining silver disc around his own neck. "Mummy."

Tears are streaming down his cheeks.

Gene stares at him for one long beat, then goes flying down the ward.

* * * * *

The tears are still wet on this face when Sam comes to his senses with a gasp. He tells himself desperately that he's imagining things, calls upon his memories of Ruth and Vic. He tries to remember his fourth birthday, the real one, the last one at which Vic was present, and realises that he can't recall anything about it. He struggles to conjure up his father's face and comes up only with a blur, an impression of dark hair and sharp features, a toy whizzing about in the air. And something stronger: a vague feeling of love, longing, disappointment, unease.

Then Sam tries to remember Ruth. This is much easier. Immediately he sees his mother: her neatly combed blonde hair, her blue eyes fond and slightly anxious, the tiny crease between her eyebrows that he always longed to press smooth. He sees her in a party dress, remembers her wearing that dress on the day Daddy went on the road again. How she'd bent down to speak to him, earnestly, as though Sam was much older than his four years. The urgency of her tone, as though willing herself to believe her own words.

Hey, but he loves us. And you'll see him again.

Then Sam sends his mind forward, to recall her as the 59-year-old mother he knew in 2006, and at first he can't see her. He panics. Then suddenly her familiar face, the skin as finely wrinkled as a worn glove, swims into his mind's eye, and he almost shudders with relief. But he still can't see Vic.

"Daddy?" he says.

And it's another man's face that suddenly appears to him: a broader face, tanned, more defined. The face creases into a playful grin. Sam grins back as David kicks the football to him, a nice easy pass. As Sammy deftly chests it down and chips it past his father into an imaginary goal, David laughs and shouts: "And who scored the hat trick? None other than Sammy Williams... England's next centre forward!"

Up into the air Sammy goes, as his daddy scoops him up and hoists him to his shoulders, beaming up at him with love and pride.

But my dad's dead. I saw him. He's dead.

And Mum. They're both dead.

They're gone, gone.

I'm alone.

The reality of it hits Sammy like a wall of water. He's drowning in grief, gasping for air. He can't
breathe for sobbing. Nearby, someone's calling out his name in a terrified voice.

He swims back up, desperately searching for a way to escape.

* * * * *

"I'm Sam Tyler! I know I am! Except I don't...I don't...there are blanks..."

Matron is moving forwards, slowly, as if through molasses. Gene's looking at him with tears coming down his face, odd, he's never seen Gene crying before.

"You've got to help me! Help me get back...help me remember...because I'm coming to pieces."

"Sam," Matron says firmly. "There's no need to scream. Sit down, now. You're alarming the other patients on the ward."

Obediently, Sam sits cross-legged on the bed. Behind Matron, Gene is retreating slowly backwards. He edges all the way back to the wall, his eyes huge, distressed.

Matron's voice is low, urgent. "You must see a psychiatrist. You never recovered from the accident, and I suspected, but I ignored it. And you're suffering so much..."

Are those tears in her eyes? Sam reaches up to wipe one away, but she catches his hand and stops him.

"I'll find someone for you to talk to, I promise. In the meantime, will you stay quiet? Be a good boy, for me? Will you, love?"

Sam nods. He wants so badly to make her happy. He watches her move off. She's walking a little unsteadily, which is strange because she's the most steady person he knows.

He looks up, eyes blurred with tears, and sees that Gene has reappeared. Sam must have imagined his distress, because now Gene is as rock-solid and reassuring as any grown-up.

"Come on! Big man, now. No tears. Hide those bad feelings away, Sam." His voice is gruffly sympathetic. "Don't be such a jessie."

That last phrase is muttered so quietly, Sam thinks for a moment that Gene is talking to himself.

Sam nods. He wants so badly to make Gene happy. Gene's his chum, his best friend. After a moment, he produces a shaky smile.

"Good lad," Gene says, and claps him on the back. "Good Sam."

* * * * *

April 21, 1950

I don't know any more.
Which version of my life is true, I mean.

I haven't heard a single voice since I got here. So maybe this is real. This is actually my life.


I remember Annie's name, and her dark hair, but I can't remember her eyes, or how we met. I think she's in the WAAF. Her uniform reminds me of Daddy's, it's dark blue like his.

I remember another woman with dark hair, and dark sad eyes. I don't know her name. She looks hurt, and disappointed.

And there's another woman, an old one. I call her Mum, but that doesn't make any sense, because my mum died when she was young. Maybe she's my gran.

And there's another lady, a blonde one. She looks cross. I don't understand why.

And the one with dark curly hair, the one who loves me? She's my Mummy, but sometimes she's not.

Sometimes I get confused about which year is which. All the clothes are strange to me. They use funny words. And when I look in the mirror, I can't see myself.

There's a man, too. He looks like Gene, but he's not. Because Gene is kind, and this man isn't. He uses bad language, and he sneers, and sometimes he pushes someone against the wall and bullies him.

But then sometimes all that is real, and this isn't.

And there's a secret under the mattress. Pages of strange handwriting, with all sorts of names and numbers. It doesn't make sense to me, but I know it's important. I have to keep it safe till the right moment comes.

I hope I'll know when that is. There's so much I don't know.

*My name is Sam Williams.* Or...it's on the tip of my tongue, that strange name. Taylor? I can't really remember any more.

The harder I try to remember, now, the more it slips away.

I'm so confused.

* * * * *

**April 22, 1950**

"I'm scared I'll forget you," says Sam to Gene.

"Don't be an idiot. Of course you won't."

The older boy's fully dressed now, in clothes that look a little too tight for him. He's packing his few possessions into a small, worn grip. A woman and a boy are waiting near the door, chatting
"I'm forgetting you now," he adds truthfully.

Gene sighs.

"I have something I need to give to you," the younger boy says. "I don't know how I got it, but it's got your name on it." He fumbles under the mattress, brings out a tightly folded wodge of paper.

Gene takes it, unfolds it, reads through the first page. His eyes flicker to Sam's face, then back to the paper. He flips through the next page, and the next.

"All right," he says, his voice strained. "Thank you. I'll take care of it."

He folds the papers up again, puts them in the pocket of his trousers. Then he reaches out, takes Sam's shoulders, and gives him a little shake.

"Don't worry," he says urgently. "I know everything seems horrible..."

Sam's eyes fill with tears at this. He's been trying so hard not to think of his parents.

"...But it'll get better. Honestly. You'll be free of it some day. When you're bigger. Just keep thinking that, yeah? Some day you'll be—"

The other boy sees his tears, and stops. Then he squares his shoulders. "You'll be a policeman. The way you always wanted. And I'll be one, too. We'll both be coppers together. Won't that be terrific?"

Sam wonders how the boy knew that, about wanting to be a policeman when he grows up. He nods, mystified.

"Good luck, Sam," the other boy says. He takes Sam's hand, and shakes it.

His face is expectant, so Sam shakes back.

The older boy moves away, speaks to the sister, then to the older woman. He glances back at Sam and nods.

As he goes out the door, Sam sees the boy pull a small box out of his pocket and slide it open. He's not sure, but he thinks he sees the boy take out a match.

Then he's gone.

The sister approaches the bed. She's dressed in a darker blue than the other sisters, and she's got deep red hair under her lacy cap. Funny hat, Sam thinks. And why is she looking at me that way?

"How are you doing?" she asks him, taking his hand in a familiar way.

Sam looks down at her hand, then up at her, baffled.

"Sorry," he asks. "Do I know you?"

* * * *
Much later, in the orphanage, Sammy has a dream.

It's a strange vision, right out of *Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future*. Everything is shiny and silver-grey, smart and modern. The people speak to each other through little boxes they cradle in their hands, and exotic music comes out of tiny machines the size of a deck of playing cards. Metallic cars whiz about on the streets like strange, colourful beetles.

Sammy knows it's Manchester, the way one knows these things in a dream, despite all appearances to the contrary. This is a Manchester that looks improbably like one of the Martian colonies from *The Eagle*. It's huge and gleaming and impressive.

Sammy floats in space happily and watches a man who, strangely, is also himself: a tall figure moving with deliberation and a sense of purpose. This older Sam is a policeman, happy and important and successful. In that other skin, Sammy feels instinctively, he has a home, a family, a place in society. In that skin, he knows exactly what to do in every situation, how to get things right.

In this magical place, Sammy isn't lacerated with anguish. The man below him isn't, either. He's not crying for his parents. He's not remembering scenes of blood and pain. He's not weeping for friends he'll never see again.

Everything's clean. Everything’s under control.

Sammy watches as the man walks into a meeting room and sits at a table with other people in suits. Everyone's looking at him for approval. Their faces are serious, respectful.

The place glows with light, with warmth.

Even in the dream, Sammy clasps his hands together and prays for the vision to be real. Because the place in his head is the most heavenly place he's ever seen.

He'll give anything to go there.

Anything.

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