

*By the time you read
this, I will be on my
way to Germany, one*



**Over
There**

*way or another. I
hope you're not
unhappy. The more
they talk about this
war, the more I know*

GRANT ELDER

Over There

by

Grant Elder



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Part One

Chapter One

Gran insisted that she thought the family was trying to prepare her for death. She had resisted the move into sheltered housing for so long that she almost believed my mother had sabotaged her slippers to cause the fall that had finally convinced her.

“Look,” she said with a wry smile, pointing out of the window. “That’s a sign.”

Indeed it was. A big, bright, not quite completed sign for the funeral director’s across the road. The sun glinted off the fresh gold paint.

“He does alright out of this place, I bet,” said Gran, without a hint of bitterness.

Whether it was guilt or embarrassment that had made the rest of my family too busy to help Gran with her move this weekend, I couldn’t say, but she seemed happy that I was there. After all, I’d always been the one to say that I thought she was “old enough to look after herself.” Gran had taken me to one side when the decision had been made and told me in a stage whisper, “Make sure you do this to your mum and dad one day.” I think really she knew it was for the best, but didn’t want to be seen to be giving up her freedom and independence without a fight, and without gaining a few concessions from my parents first. She is a clever old bird, my gran. It wouldn’t have surprised me to see the whole block of “Granny Flats” (her expression, I must add) dancing to her tune within a few days.

Although she made a joke of it, I think the proximity of the Funeral Director's - "Does he have to park his Hearse there?" she had complained when we first visited the flat - was a bit of a psychological blow. That's when she had first decided that she was being prepared for death.

"It's God's waiting room, this," she grumbled. "They just hope we won't notice the transition." But she was too strong-willed, always had been, to be doing this truly against her will. If she hadn't known it was the best thing for her, there would have been nothing my parents or I, or "that nice doctor" that I think Gran quite fancied, even though she kept calling him Dr Shipman (his name was Shipton), could have done about it.

"All the old folk here," she started, pointedly not including herself in that description, "get mangy cats or silly little dogs, and treat them like they're human. It's the only company they get," she said, as if she was stating a fact, "and they start to act like silly little animals themselves and then they get put down." I didn't have the strength to protest. "They pipe in 400 channels of satellite television, and give us one of these big screen TVs like it's an essential, and just hope we'll watch so much pap that our brains turn into mush." From a nearby flat the shouting and buzzing of an inane game show seemed to prove her right. I didn't like to tell her that I have friends who consider a widescreen TV with satellite and cable an essential of everyday life. Colleagues whose only independent thought is which channel they should watch this "pap" on. Friends who would flick through all 400 channels, before

deciding that as there is nothing on, just settle for a repeat of EastEnders because otherwise they would have to think, and they'd forgotten how. Of course, I don't consider myself to be one of them. I could live without TV for a whole evening if I really had to. I don't even have a satellite dish. I make do with seventy-odd digital channels.

“They bring us meals-on-wheels because they don't trust us to feed ourselves. They send a cleaner round once a week because they are afraid that if they don't we'll just sit here in our own wee.” I almost laughed when she said wee, but I didn't. I also didn't tell her that that sounded like the epitome of modern life for me and most of my friends. Living off delivery food, having someone come round once a week to take away the empty cartons and clear the sink of dirty mugs. It was living to aspire to, wasn't it? Perhaps they should market these homes to unmarried twenty-something males. They'd pay a fortune. “They deliver all our shopping,” continued Gran, “because they don't trust us to go to the market on our own. They're afraid that we'll forget where we live, or fall and break ourselves, or just cause a scene by wetting ourselves in Tesco's.” That wasn't perhaps my reason, but I had recently discovered the joys of shopping for groceries on the Internet. I never had to risk standing in a queue being talked to by a stranger, never had to suffer the frustrations of being stuck behind someone who didn't have enough money or had forgotten their PIN. Best of all, I never had to miss anything on TV through having to go shopping. I didn't tell Gran.

“Then every Friday they pack us off to bingo, and most of the old folk here are so addled they think they enjoy it.” Replace the ‘-o’ in bingo with ‘-e drinking’ and you pretty much had my life and that of most of my generation. Except we went out and got hammered on Saturdays too. The more addled we got, the more we thought we enjoyed it. The more we enjoyed it, the more addled we got. And so on, until we were all the insensible, incoherent, dribbling wrecks that we all said we didn’t want to be when we got old. Every weekend until the salary or the credit limit ran out.

I had finished unloading the car and wondered how Gran thought she was going to fit all her stuff from her old four-bedroom terraced house into a one-bedroom ground-floor flat. “It’s nice to be surrounded by all my old stuff,” she said, as if reading my mind. “But I’m going to have to get rid of some of it.”

“You can’t do that,” I started to protest, more out of guilt on behalf of my parents, but she cut me off.

“Don’t worry,” she said, patting my arm, an angry look in her eye, “I’ll let you all go through it first and see if there’s anything you want.” I almost protested, but I knew we all would. “I saw a programme on TV, when I went to visit the warden here, she wouldn’t speak to me until it was finished, ‘Tat In The Attic’, it was called, people going through all their grandmother’s belongings, trying to sell it all off to buy a holiday in Disneyland for their fat overprivileged kids. I’ve given so much stuff away over the years I could probably

have bought Disneyland. Or at least a couple of decent meals for those kids.” I couldn’t tell if Gran was ranting at me, the warden, or society in general, so I let her go. “I’ll give it all to the Oxfam shop.” She calmed down and smiled at me, back to the Gran I used to know when I was little, and we would go and visit and she always had a present for each of us kids, and a warm apple pie in the oven. She was magical back then. I still saw a little gleam of that magic dust on her from time to time, but I suppose there’s only so much to go around in a lifetime. She was over 80 now, and the duty for magic was passing to the younger generation. She still had a lot of good years in her yet, she was proving that, but I thought that now I had a responsibility to find a little magic dust of my own to sprinkle over her. “So many memories,” she said, suddenly sad, opening one of the boxes. I thought she was going to cry. “So dusty as well, some of it. Don’t worry about helping me unpack. I’ll do it. It’ll keep me active. Keep me busy until my programme comes on.” After all she had said about TV earlier I was surprised she had a programme. “Buffy,” she said in response to my quizzical look. “They’re repeating it every night. Just have a look for the kettle and the tea-pot, will you. If you’ve got time to stay for a cup of tea.” I nodded that I had. “It’s the least I can offer you.” I thought that after years of presents, pocket money and warm apple pies, the least I could do was help her move into ‘God’s waiting room’. Or perhaps the least I could do as penance was stay for a cup of tea. “You’ll need to find the tea-bags, too,” she said, settling into her chair as I

produced the tea-pot and kettle from the top of a box placed right outside the kitchen. “Then I’ll get on and unpack, and then I’ll just get on with dying quietly and not spending any more of your inheritance.” I pretended I hadn’t heard her. She had been talking like that for as long as I could remember. It was that or “This might be the last time you see me, you know.” I had a feeling, though, that she might be tougher than all of the rest of the family put together, that she might outlive us all.

“Two sugars,” she reminded me. I had been making her tea for years, and I knew, and I knew that she knew I knew. I think she just liked to remind me that she was rebelling against all the instructions to watch what she ate. The only time she didn’t take two sugars was when my dad was making tea and she asked for three sweeteners. “You can taste the difference,” she always said then. “I’ll never get used to it.” No, certainly not by only having them once in a blue moon. To her credit she had at least given up smoking years ago. At least as far as we knew, she had. I wouldn’t put it past her to be keeping that a secret too.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asked me as I sat down with my tea. “You don’t seem to have much to say for yourself today.”

“I can never get a word in edgeways with you, Gran.” It was a stock answer, and one she always laughed off. Not this time, though.

“You seem down in the dumps. Do you want me to make you an apple pie to take home?” Once upon a time that would

have worked. “You can share it with that lovely Hazel.”

“I broke up with Hazel,” I said, matter-of-factly. “A couple of weeks ago.” She had dumped me, in fact, telling me that I had no ambition and was lazy, and was never going to amount to anything. Strangely my slightly drunken, “But Hazel, I love you. Everything I do, I do for you” didn’t change her mind. I got the feeling I was over it, like she had been a bit of a cold that I hadn’t been able to shift for a long time. After nearly two years I had forgotten what it was like to be by myself, and I hadn’t quite got used to it. I expected sympathy from Gran.

“Good,” she said, firmly. “I never liked her. She wasn’t right for you. Too mousy.” She could have said that her eyes were too close together, or too far apart, for all it mattered. Gran had spoken. Hazel wasn’t right for me. Too mousy it was. She had a point. “Whatever happened to Nicky? I liked Nicky.” I couldn’t think of a time that Gran had ever met Nicky. We had only been together for five months or so. It had been little more than a fling.

“We had different plans,” I said, though I don’t think Gran really wanted an answer. “We broke up.” Perhaps after one argument too many that had come about because I was afraid I was keener on her than she was on me. I later learned through some mutual friends that I wasn’t, but by then it was too late. “I liked her,” Gran repeated. “She brought out the best in you.” I wasn’t sure if there was a way to refute that, so I shrugged and nodded. Perhaps she was right. I was still missing Hazel. “How’s work?” asked Gran, thankfully moving on from the

dead-end that was a conversation about my love-life. Work was no better.

“Quiet,” I said, which was the most positive spin I could put on it. “It’s not quite as exciting as I thought it would be.” As I thought it would be when I started, nearly seven years ago. It hadn’t been exciting for at least six and a half years. The occasional promotion, change of roles, change of seat were enough to keep me plodding along in the same company. “They are downsizing,” I said. “So I might be busier soon.” Or out of a job, if I was really lucky.

“Downsizing?” repeated Gran. “You mean they’re laying people off?” I nodded. “So your boss is just protecting his own profits,” she said, succinctly. I couldn’t have put it better myself. “Don’t let them make a mug of you. Don’t let them push you out.”

“I don’t know if that would be such a bad thing. I’m a bit fed up of it. I don’t know what I’d do though. Everyone’s in the same situation.”

“Don’t be daft,” she said, almost angrily. “If they want to get rid of you, take it. Make sure they give you a good package, mind you. How long have you been there? Five years?”

“Nearly seven,” I said, nodding because in the larger scheme she wasn’t far off.

“Seven years? Doesn’t time fly?” She didn’t need a response to that. “Then get a good package out of them, and go off and do something else.”

“What else?” I asked her, half cross at her, half wondering what

piece of inspiration she might come up with. “There’s nothing much else on offer.”

“Don’t be daft,” she said again. “You’ve got more opportunities than any generation has ever had. I wish I was young enough to take advantage of them. They say youth is wasted on the young. It’s true. You’ve never had it so good. Don’t interrupt me.” I had barely opened my mouth. “You’ve got so much. You’ve been given so much. There are so many opportunities, so many things to do. You’re all just too damn lazy to look for them.” This sounded personal. She sounded upset. “You blame everybody else. You blame your parents, your grandparents. In fact it’s you. You’re lazy, and you don’t want to take responsibility.” I sipped my tea. “Don’t get upset,” she told me, her voice soft now, a smile coming back. She reached out to pat my arm. “I’m old. I’m allowed to say whatever I want.”

She had a point. We’ve always had a tendency to ignore what people over a certain age have to say. It makes it easier to overlook it if they get a bit cantankerous, or a bit politically incorrect. We can dismiss it as bitterness, the onset of senility, being out of touch. I’m sure Gran had been playing on this for years. She has always been very critical of my brother-in-law, family friends, even my mum’s side of the family. To their faces. She speaks her mind, which in a way is reassuring, even if it comes as a bit of a surprise. At Christmas when everyone else is cooing over the presents they really didn’t want, she will ask if she can have the receipt for the jumper so she can take

it back and exchange it for a nice one. When she comes for dinner and everyone around the table is saying how nice it is, she will point out that the sprouts are overcooked or the gravy is cold and “Did you put salt in the potatoes?”

And she gets away with it because she is old. Partly because she has spent long enough on the Earth to earn the right to say whatever she likes, and partly because the offended party can just dismiss it as Gran being old and grouchy. But usually she gets away with it because she’s speaking the truth, and that’s the problem. We dismiss so much of what these old folk say as slightly mad, bitter and tinged with senility, that when they do actually make a lot of sense, we ignore that too. And I’m as guilty as anyone. So this time, when Gran said she was allowed to say whatever she wanted, I decided to listen, even if it meant taking offence, that was just her way of imparting the benefits of her experience. “When I’m gone,” she said, “you might realise that I’m talking a lot of sense. But it’ll be too late then.” She smiled, and I nodded. She was never going to die. And if she did, her gravestone wouldn’t have limited itself to “I told you so.” The mason would have to earn his pay by carving in every word of advice she had ever given. “Make the most of what you’ve got, lad. Make hay while the sun shines.” Of course, it would be easier to take her seriously if she didn’t feel the need to descend constantly into cliché.

“Take your granddad. He knew how to enjoy life.” This came as something of a surprise. It was a statement that could have been put down equally to senility or to sarcasm, but

Gran sounded like she really meant it. I had never known my granddad. Not the one on my dad's side. The man I had been told about was a joyless soul, who had worked all day every day except Sunday to support his family until he had worked himself into an early grave instead of the early retirement Gran had always begged him to take. Gran had told me once that she never trusted God since he had deceived my granddad so much. "He told me that God provided for us all, and so I asked him why he had to work so hard. He told me God helps them that helps themselves. And finally God took him from me just when I think he was realising that he had helped himself about as much as he could."

"No, your other granddad," said Gran when I asked. I knew even less about my mum's dad. I'm not even sure my mum knew much about him, and I'm sure Gran never knew him (though that didn't stop her having nothing good to say about him). I was prepared to give her the benefit of the doubt, assume she was telling a white lie to make a point, when she said "The one you would have had, the person that would have been your granddad, if it hadn't been for that Hitler." I coughed in surprise, but I think Gran thought I was protesting. "Oh, I know things would have been so different. You wouldn't have been born, really, would you?" Well, I suppose if I have Hitler to thank for my existence then that's either the one single reason to be grateful to him, or one more reason to invent a time machine and take a pop at him, depending on the mood I wake up in. "But I like to think about how things could have

been different, what I could change. If I think about it enough, it really happened. That's one of the beauties of old age," she smiled and tapped her finger against her temple, "if everyone thinks you're doolally you can get away with anything. I can pretend your granddad was someone else, and pretend that my life was so different. All my old friends. They're all dead and gone, just like I will be one day, but I can pretend they're here, and it's like they really are. Even though I know they're not really here, it's nice that they are." She smiled. There was madness in her method, no doubt about it, but she knew what she was saying well enough. "So I'm allowed a bit of retrospective fantasy, aren't I? At my age?"

"At your age, Gran, you're allowed anything," I reassured her. Except on certain rides at the funfair, on flights with most budget airlines, or to cook and clean and shop for yourself. "Anything you want."

"Good," said Gran. "Can I have another cup of tea?" She had set me up again. "Of course you can," I said, taking her mug and going through to the kitchen.

"And then I'll tell you all about him. If you have got time to listen to an old woman's stories."

"Of course I have, Gran." She deserved some sort of reward for all those grazed knees she had plastered, all those jumpers she had knitted, and she still had favours in the bank from all those apple pies.

"His name was Billy Smith," she started, once I had set her up with another cup of tea and a chocolate digestive. "Such a

common name. They're everywhere. Billy Smith, Bill Smith, William Smith. There's that Will Smith off the TV. That's not him. And there's a Bill Smith upstairs. That's not him either. I've checked. He's too young and too decrepit. But whenever I see the name it gives me a little flutter. Of course, he might be dead by now." She sipped her tea and looked at me to see if I wanted her to go on. I blew on my tea and looked at her. "He was one of the boys in the village," she continued eventually. "He was ever so handsome, always smiling. He was a real charmer. Everyone knew he was a bit of a scamp, too, but all the boys were really. I think it was all a bit of an act. He was always top of the class too. He was very clever. I don't ever remember meeting him for the first time. It was like he was always there. They all were. We were both the same age, but he was older than me. We were fifteen when war broke out. He was nearly sixteen, though, and I was just past fourteen. That was the summer that I really met him. We were just kids then. Real kids. Innocent. When we were fifteen it was like you were when you were ten. I remember thinking how quickly you grew up. And your sister. We were so happy. All of us." She wasn't looking at me. Her eyes were twinkling, and she was smiling. Her gaze was far away. "We were so much in love. He told me the first time we kissed. We used to hold hands in front of everyone. That was so brazen. We would take our bikes off and play in the fields, up where they've built that new estate past the old school." The new estate had been there for at least twenty years. "We'd go swimming, take picnics out.

We shouldn't really have been seeing each other, but it was exhilarating. I think our parents, my mum and dad anyway, were too worried about other things. Billy's dad was too busy with his job. So we were left to get on with it. All that talk about war seemed so distant, so silly. Why were we worrying about all that stuff in Germany? It was so much fun being with Billy. I didn't think of him as my boyfriend, not until that day he kissed me. Some of the girls asked me what we did together. They asked if I was going to marry him. I hadn't thought about it. It was all just so much fun. I would have done, though. If he'd asked me."

Gran was a great story-teller. She always had been. I remembered so many times that we visited and she told me and my sister stories that were supposed to send us to sleep, but we were so excited, so engrossed, we never wanted to sleep. Her voice had aged, and she faltered from time to time, but she had me engrossed again.

"But all that talk of war, of Hitler and Germany and so on got stronger and stronger. We knew it was coming, and I just tried not to think about it. We were scared. We were fifteen. Who had heard of a war then? Our parents knew about World War One. The Great War. The war to end all wars. But all we had heard were stories. Now if someone talks about going to war, we imagine professional soldiers blowing each other up in a foreign country for a fortnight. We had no idea. When they talked about getting into a war, we had visions of German soldiers marching through the streets of the village. It could

have happened.

“It got so we couldn’t pretend it wasn’t going to happen, that it wasn’t going to affect us. We knew it would, one way or another. There was a lot of debate about what we should do. We knew all about Mr Hitler, or we thought we did. Some people in the village said we should support him, encourage him. I like to think they didn’t really know what they were talking about.” She paused for a moment and seemed to remember I was there. “But I think perhaps they did. Billy used to get so cross when he heard that. He used to say that he’d like to go over to Berlin and give Hitler a jolly good hiding. He was the gentlest of boys, really, deep down, but he liked to act the ruffian. And his dad had brought him up to stand up for what he believed in. We could do with a few more like that nowadays.” She paused. “I think we could do with people believing in something worth standing up for.” She frowned, looked at me, and smiled again. “So when war was declared I knew he would go. He used to say ‘I can’t, I’m not old enough’. I remember him saying ‘They will have stopped Mr Hitler before I’m old enough to join in’. He was always so optimistic. But disappointed too. ‘We’ll never have a chance to get involved’. But of course, it wasn’t all over by Christmas.

“We had a lovely Christmas, all things considered. We bought each other presents. I bought him a diary and a pen, because he always said he wanted to keep the thoughts he had when he was with me. He gave me a letter opener that he had made in his dad’s workshop. It was beautiful. I’ve still got it. I

just don't use it because all I ever get is bills. It was a beautiful snowy Christmas. Just like they should be. And he came round on Boxing Day and sat at the dinner table with me and your great grandma and granddad. And he talked about how he wanted to go and join in the war, and Jim, your great uncle Jim, who was about eight then, was so excited for him, and even though your great granddad, my dad, who had been in the Great War, he said that Billy should wait until he was needed, and not to be so impatient to sacrifice himself. But I knew Billy was going to go. He was sixteen in January, and knew there was nothing I could do to stop him." She paused. When the pause grew longer, I wondered if she would ever start again.

"What happened?" I asked, my voice breaking slightly as I tried to stay quiet so as not to break the spell.

"Make us a fresh pot of tea," she said, "and I'll tell you."

When I came back with the fresh pot Gran was balancing an ornate wooden box on the arm of her chair. I had never seen the box before, or where she had produced it from. I wondered what other secrets she had stashed away in the crates and cardboard boxes I had helped her move. "Beautiful, isn't it?" She caressed the box. "It will be part of your inheritance, but I thought I might as well let you know what's in it now, while I'm still alive and alert enough to tell you about these." The box opened with a click and she lifted the lid. Dust shimmered in the shaft of sunlight that illuminated the scene. Perhaps this was where Gran kept the last of her magic dust. She unfolded a piece of thick, rough-edged paper and handed it to me. "This

was his first letter,” she said. “I hope you can read it.” Some handwriting is described as spidery. This was more like a daddy long-legs. But that erratic scrawl, if not always in the same blotchy black ink, was soon going to be so familiar to me that I would see it dancing in front of my eyes as I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Two

Dear Lizzie,

By the time you read this, I will be on my way to Germany, one way or another. I hope you're not unhappy. The more they talk about this war, the more I know I have to be part of the fight. I want to be involved. I don't want to listen to this on the radio while I am at home learning how to mend furniture, and miss my chance to help the cause.

When I come back we'll all be heroes, and me and you can do what we want, and it'll be a better world for us to do it in - that's what they keep saying, isn't it? This is the time to stand up to evil once and for all.

Please don't be cross, even though I know you will be a bit. You said I should wait, but I'm sixteen now, and this will all be over if I wait too long. I will be back soon, and I will write when I can.

Cheerio!

Billy

Gran told me she had got up that morning, and her dad was standing in the kitchen in his policeman's uniform, holding the note, with a stern face. "I was so worried. I knew something bad must have happened. Dad just said 'Billy's gone to war'. I was so upset." Her hand trembled as she sipped her tea. "But I knew he had to go. Nothing could have stopped him. He'd have been so angry with me if I'd even

tried to stop him.” She fixed me with her eyes, back in focus, back in the present. “I’ve never once wished I had.”

The next letter Gran handed me was written on thin, delicate, white paper. It was like the blue airmail paper that my aunt in New Zealand used to send us, before she and my mother discovered the joys of e-mail. The paper felt brittle, and had already started to tear at the creases. I was afraid that just reading it would make it disintegrate into dust. Prompted by Gran I took it in my fingertips and started to read.

Dear Lizzie,

I am writing to you from somewhere in France. I think! It's quite hard to tell. It has been a long journey to get here, and I am tired, but I am too excited to sleep. All the boys are the same, and we are all writing letters. Most to their mums and dads, some to our girlfriends. One boy from Leeds is writing to his wife and he is the same age as me!

Like I say, it has been a long journey to get here. Me and Johnny left home at five o'clock this morning. He said I was soft for sending you the note. I hope you got it. Were you really cross? We took our bikes into town, and found the recruiting office. It was easy to find. There was such a big crowd. I think it is really good that so many people want to join in. I think some of them were a bit nervous, and some of them just wanted to escape from their jobs or their wives, but everyone wants to go and give Hitler a bloody nose. There will be ever such a big queue when we get to Berlin! I told the people at the army office I am 17. They believed me. We had to do some medical tests, but as you know I am as

strong and fit as anybody, so they were very happy to take me. We got our kit and gathered up in a big truck. Me and Johnny were together all the time. I am glad they took him too. He is a bit skinny, but they don't mind. A few good army meals and it'll fatten him up!

They couldn't send us to France right away. They took us all to a barracks in Bradford. That's no good. Hitler's not in Bradford is he? We had to stay overnight, but it was so frustrating. Me and a couple of the lads sneaked out and went to the pub down the road. We weren't in uniform so nobody could recognise us. Johnny was nervous, saying we shouldn't be going to the pub, and we would get caught. I don't know what he'll be like when the enemy start shooting at him! We managed to get back in afterwards, but two of the lads got caught and got into so much trouble. I got through the gate without being spotted. You know I'm good at that. Like when we have to cut through the churchyard when we should be at school. But I did get caught the next morning. Captain Carter, he's our captain, saw me in the morning and he recognised me from the pub the night before. He wasn't in uniform either, so we didn't know he was there. I got called into his office and I thought I was done for. I thought my war was already over! I thought, I'm bound to get a good hiding here. But Captain Carter was really very kind. He gave me a telling off, of course, and told me not to do it again. But then, guess what he said! He said, well done, lad, for getting out of barracks and back in without getting caught! He said that's just the sort of skills the army needs, and the sort of thing that will have Gerry beaten by Christmas.

I think he means next Christmas! He said he was very proud of me. He said I will go a long way! I had to try very hard not to smile when I came out, because all the other lads had got such a tongue-lashing.

Later that day we were all herded onto trains, and sent off down south. I've only been on one train before, but it was nothing like this. This was packed with men and their kitbags, there was nowhere to sit down, and it was hot and uncomfortable. We seemed to be going for hours without stopping. I didn't feel like a hero then, I can tell you! I almost wished I hadn't gone. But then I saw we had arrived in Dover, we were just a short boat ride from Europe, and I was excited again.

I must tell you about the boat across the English Channel. I used to think I was good on water. We've had a few days out on the lake, and I'm a pretty good sailor, I think. It was nothing like that! I must have been so green! I felt so sick. I saw Johnny on deck, he was swaying from side to side. Then he rushed off and was sick over the side of the boat. It was awful. I won't be sorry if I never see another boat as long as I live! I don't know how long we were on the boat, but it felt like it would never end! I know all this will be worth it in the end, and we all have to suffer when there's a war, but I really didn't enjoy the journey to France. I suppose that's just one more reason to give Mr Hitler a bashing!

It was night time before we arrived in France, and I didn't even know we were in France. I just wanted to sleep, but we were moving on. I tried to sleep in the back of the lorries, but they are not very comfortable. I woke up at one moment and I saw a sign to Paris. We were going the other way. Can you imagine? Paris! How wonderful it would be to go to somewhere as exotic as Paris! We would eat snails and watch the can-

can dancers! When this is over, we should visit Paris. I will try to get my sea legs by then, and I will learn to speak French and order you the best food in the best restaurants!

It took ages to get here on the lorry. One of the lads said he thought we must be lost. We had a good laugh about that. There's a really good atmosphere among the lads. We're all best friends, even though we hardly know each other. Some of them don't stop talking. I was surprised, even Johnny is joining in, and you know he's usually so quiet. One lad, called Georgie, but we call him Geordie, because he's from up in Newcastle, was telling jokes that would have made you blush! He taught us a song that nearly made me blush! But I joined in in the end!

We have to make our own entertainment here, until we get to the war. Apart from writing letters and telling jokes, we have played football and cricket. I scored fifteen runs and took two wickets! Some of the lads think I'm pretty good. But there's one lad, 'Ding-Dong' they call him, because his name's Bell, he is really good. He was his village captain and wants to play for England. Everyone thinks he is good enough. He scored 37 not out and bowled me out too! Someone said that some Australian soldiers will join up with us, and maybe even some West Indians. Then we can play cricket with them too. Maybe, when I come home, I will be captain of the village cricket team. I don't think I can play for England, though! Only in the war!

Don't you think it's funny that there are Australians and West

Indians here? They are a long way from home. I think it is strange. But it is good that so many countries are joining together to beat Germany. Nobody really talks about the war, or what will happen when we get there. Somebody asked why are we in France when the enemy is in Germany. I don't know. They have not told us anything about their plans for us, or where we are going. I will let you know as soon as I find out. But somebody said we must keep everything a secret in case the German spies find our letters. So maybe I can't tell you.

I am tired now, so I will finish this letter while I can.

I hope you are well. I miss you. Say hello to the village from me. Tell everyone I am a hero! (Well, I will be soon!)

Bye!

Billy

I finished the letter and looked up. Gran had watched me starting to read, but she had fallen asleep. I didn't know when. I had been engrossed. I touched her arm and she woke with a start. "Sorry," I said. I handed her back the letter.

"Do you want the next one?" she asked, reaching into the box.

I thought I should probably leave her to have her afternoon nap, but I didn't like to say so. "You've got a lot of unpacking to do," I said. "Maybe I should leave you to start before the meals on wheels arrive."

She gave a grunt of disapproval, but she didn't disagree. "Would you like to take these with you?" she asked, holding the

box out to me.

“Do you mind?”

“Of course not. They will be yours one day soon anyway.”

“Thanks, Gran,” I said, giving her a kiss on the cheek as I took the box.

“Look after them,” she told me. “They might be the last thing I ever give you.”

“I know.” I nodded, playing her at her own game. “This might be the last time I ever see you.”

“Don’t say that,” she said, sounding cross, but smiling. “It might.”

“I don’t think so. I’ll see you soon.”

I took the letters home and sat on my sofa and started to read. I meant to have just a look at the next one and then get on with doing something else. But I read and read, until it got dark and I got hungry, and I read some more. The letters were fascinating. A real adventure, a remarkable war story, made all the more astonishing because I knew the writer was real. I knew the recipient of the letters, who all these stories were written for. I felt like I knew Billy Smith. I certainly felt like I knew him better than my real grandfather.

The letters came regularly for about a year. Tales of the war, and Billy Smith’s own unique role in it. And then there was nothing until much later, when around a dozen long letters arrived together, bundled up, tied together with a ribbon, all inside an anonymous brown envelope addressed in a different hand. I read them all, and could imagine Gran doing the same.

I was sad for her loss, but lifted and transfixed by the stories the letters told. And a thought struck me. Gran said she still looked out for Billy Smiths. Was that hope? Or just part of her aged fantasy?

As I placed the letters back in the box, I found something else wedged in right at the bottom. Not a letter this time, but a postcard, from a French town called Cahors. The card was addressed in that same, instantly recognisable handwriting, and all it said was, 'To Lizzie, from Billy'. Once I had loosened the postcard, I found underneath it an exquisite wooden letter-opener, and a black-and-white photograph of two happy teenagers. I could see in one of them the young girl that had become my gran. The other, I had to assume, was Billy Smith.