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## Kisses on a Postcard

Terence Frisby

### Chapter 2

We were all up early that morning, June 13th 1940. Two cheap little brown cases were already packed, sandwiches and pop at the top for easy access. Dad was first to leave, off to work. I don't remember him hugging or kissing us; men didn't go in for that in those days. He may have shaken our hands. What he did do, to demonstrate his authority and reassure us, was to tell us that he knew where we were going, but he could not tell us because it was a war secret - a heavy wink accompanied this - and we would like it there. It would be in the country, fun; perhaps even - dare we hope it? - the seaside. No, he wasn't going to tell, wait and see. We were to be sure to look out on the left just after Wandsworth Road station as our train would go over his office, which was in the arches under the railway there, and he would wave. We knew then that we would be on a train that would leave Welling and cross South London, onto the Western Section, not a scheduled route of our Eastern Section suburban services to Waterloo, Charing Cross and Cannon Street. We knew our train would be special. We were railway children and proud of it and of our privileged knowledge. And if Dad knew we were taking that route he must be privy to the whole secret evacuation plan.

'It'll be a steam engine, not an electric,' said Dad, another clue that we were going well out of our electrified world, an impressively long journey. We knew the exact stations where electrification terminated in all directions.

'Cor, what? A namer? What?' we asked, excited, 'Schools class?'

'Don't think it'll be a Schools class,' he said. 'Not big enough for your journey: only a 4-4-0.' He dismissed an engine which pulled the Dover boat trains and we loved, a compact modern design sitting on its four driving wheels and four bogies. We often saw them on trips up to Charing Cross on our Eastern Section of the railway, cosier than the bigger Western Section locomotives used for the longest routes out of Waterloo. 'Could be a King Arthur' This was a 4-6-0 express with three drivers a side. 'Maybe even a Lord Nelson.' Another 4-6-0, the biggest engine on the Southern Railway, only used for the West of England runs. We digested this with a sense of importance as Dad went off to work.

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Mum had a tie-on label in her hand with my name and address on it in block capitals. 'Here, let me put this on you,' she said.

'Ah, no. I know who I am.' I protested.

'That's in case the Germans capture you,' said my older, wiser brother.

'Honest?' I was fascinated.

'Don't be silly, Jack. Come here.' Mum was sharp. She had another label for him.

'I haven't got to wear one too, have I?' said Jack, disgusted.

'Yes, both of you.'

The two labels also had our school, class and teacher on the reverse side. I was being evacuated with Jack's school, Westwood, a large secondary school over a mile away although I was still at Eastcote Road Primary, right opposite our house. Whoever had devised the evacuation scheme had the good sense to try to keep younger brothers and sisters with their older siblings.

While we objected, Mum tied them through the buttonholes in the lapels of our jackets. As I look now at all those old photos and films of vackies boarding trains and buses in their thousands in 1940, it leaves a hole in my stomach to consider how our mothers felt, tying labels on the most precious things in their lives and sending them off like parcels to God-knows-where, with the threat of annihilation from the air or sea hanging over us all. But Mum showed no sign of worry. She had two serious points to remind us of.

The previous night at bedtime she had drilled them into us.

'Terry, you've got to do as Jack says. Do you hear me?'

'Oh, no.'

'Oh, yes. And you stay with him all the time. Got it? He's older than you.'

'Four years, four months older,' put in Jack. That was the precise difference, to the day, that we always pointed out.

'I'm cleverest.'

She snapped at me. 'Cleverer, Smart Alec, and you're not. You do as he says. Always.'

Mum was on delicate ground and she knew it. Although I was so much younger, I was a far better reader, coming top of my class regularly in most subjects and regarded as a very bright child, especially by myself. Jack, on the other hand, although no fool, was a very slow starter. He not only had the nuisance of a

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younger brother to deal with, he also had the humiliation of constantly being bettered by me in lessons and hearing me held up as an example to all. I, as a consequence, was pretty cocky. Getting me safely under Jack's wing could be tricky for Mum.

'He's your big brother. You stay with him and do as he says. And you, Jack, you see that he does. All the time.'

Jack agreed, but the prospect of the pair of us being together the whole time, his albatross-little-brother round his neck, must have dismayed him as much as it did me. 'Can I bash him?'

Mum silenced my protests. 'There's no need for that but don't you stand any nonsense from him, Jack. And don't you dare leave him.'

I was indignant. 'I can look after myself.'

'All right, all right. You look after each other. How's that? You both look after each other.'

For Jack, the idea of being looked after by me, even partially, held no charm, but as he started to protest Mum threw in her final compromise. 'Just until you get to where you're going. Until you get there. Really there.'

'Where?'

There was no answer to that so Mum introduced her second point, her game. 'Now listen, both of you. Look what I've got here. It's a postcard. And it's in code. A secret code. Like the Secret Service. Only this is our code. Our own secret code. Read it, Jack.'

The postcard was stamped and addressed to Mum and Dad. Jack started to stumble through it. 'Dear Mum and Dad, Arr - arr - arrived safe and well. Ev - ev -every -

I snatched the postcard from him and rattled off, 'Everything fine. Love, Jack and Terry'

Mum was furious with me. 'Give that back at once,' she barked. 'I told Jack to read it. He's the older one, you do as he says. Always'

'I don't see why - '

'Always.' The word was flung across the room at me, cutting through my disobedience, telling us both on a deeper level just how serious all this was. Jack completed the reading of the card, uninterrupted. There was a pause. Mum was getting hold of herself.

'But - what's the code?' Jack ventured, nervously.

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'When you get there,' Mum continued, 'you find out the address of the place where they take you. And you write it on the card there.' She looked at us both. She had left a space. This was the really tricky bit. 'Here, Jack. Here's the pencil to write it with. You look after it. I'll put it in your case. And when you know the address...'

Jack cut across her. 'I'll give the pencil to Terry and he can write it in there.'

Mum was momentarily taken aback. She wasn't expecting such help. 'That's right, Jack. Good boy.' I didn't understand then why she gave him a hug that nearly stifled him when all he had done was to suggest the, to me, obvious solution. She continued to both of us, 'Then you post it at once. All right? Now listen, I've only got one card so you've got to stay together or I won't know where one of you is.' It was her final shot on the other subject that was eating her.

'But that's not a proper code.' We were disappointed.

'No. Now this is the code. Our secret. You know how to write kisses, don't you? We agreed with 'eargh', 'yuck' noises to brandish our distaste for such things. She waited for the ritual to subside. 'You put one kiss if it's horrible and I'll come straight there and bring you back home. D'you see? You put two kisses if it's all right. And three kisses if it's nice. Really nice. Then I'll know.'

In the anxiety and horror of this major crisis in her life - our lives - Mum had come up with something for her and us to cling to in the chaos. That night we slept soundly, perhaps dreaming of our code and the adventure to come.

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She walked us under a canopy of barrage balloons to the 89 bus-stop by the We Anchor In Hope pub at the foot of Shooters Hill. They were digging up the golf course to put in more anti-aircraft guns and searchlights. Welling, with the Thames and the docks a mile or two to the north, was on a direct route for bombers from the continent heading for London. The water tower at the top of Shooters Hill was an outstanding landmark.

The narrow up-line platform of Welling station was packed with hundreds of excited, chattering, rampant, labelled children with their cases and their teachers and mothers. Four or five travellers on the down-line platform stood staring at the extraordinary sight opposite them. Teachers were ticking registers, two men were removing the station nameplates.

'Why're you doing that?' asked a pushy bigger boy.

The man who answered him fancied himself as a comedian. 'It's so the Germans won't know where they are when they get here.'

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Our special train puffed round the bend into the station and the decibel level rose sharply.

'It's an N-class,' Jack and I saw with intense disappointment. 'A manky-old N. It hasn't even got a name.' We were clearly not as important as we thought, even though the N-class was a powerful 4-6-0, used for long-distance freight and passenger work. Suddenly we saw it was a corridor train and excitement again took over. Plenty of scope for fun; we could run from end to end of it, from compartment to compartment; lavatories to lock ourselves in; a guard's van to explore.

I don't remember seeing any tears on that platform but there must have been plenty. Jack and I stood at a window, waving and shouting at Mum who stood in a crowd of waving, smiling mums. She mouthed, 'Don't forget the code,' as though we could have. She told me years later that she went home and sobbed. Like all the other mums, I expect. I still cannot think of her inventiveness and bravery, even now nearly seventy years later, without my eyes filling. Mum and Dad, with her (their?) secret code and his man-to-man confidences about our route and locomotives, ensured that Jack and I left home without a qualm. Perhaps even her success, seeing us shrug them off with such ease, gave another twist to the knife. We have all heard the stories of frightened, unhappy vackies being torn from their parents and shipped off to the unknown, but not Jack and me. As far as either of us can recall we just thought it was an adventure with his classmates and teachers and friends, although I had no difficulty in obeying Mum's instruction to stay close to my big brother. Perhaps I was more anxious than I realised. As one of the youngest ones I knew practically nobody there; I was the only representative of Eastcote Road Primary; my infant-schoolmates had been sent elsewhere, many of them with their mothers because they were too young to be separated. But Westwood Secondary School, situated too far from my home for me to know any of those children, was kept together, a gigantic school outing. In any case they were all, except the younger siblings like me, eleven or over - Jack had only just started there - so they were distant, godlike figures to a seven-year-old. None of that made any difference to my feelings; they were a seething, familiar-to-each-other crowd and I had Jack and was caught up in it all.

That manky-old N-class puffed us off to our new lives and to my other-childhood.

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Our train left the usual route to Charing Cross at the Lewisham flyover, as Dad had forecast, and rumbled over the arched workshops, engine sheds (such excitement) and railway offices of South London. Jack and I disagreed about which side Dad had told us to look out of at Wandsworth Road. I looked left and he right. It seems that all South London was out there waving. Jack said he saw Dad in one place, I saw

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him in another. Dad later said he saw both of us, but all any bystander could see of that train was that it sprouted yelling, juvenile heads and waving arms from every aperture.

We passed from Victorian, industrial, inner suburbs, via Clapham Junction, to Surbiton's twentieth-century semis with gardens, very like where we had come from but posher. Gathering pace we sped by the huge flower gardens of Sutton's seed factory near Woking. 'A Blaze Of Colour' their seed packets used to proclaim, and it certainly was that day in high-summer June. Then past Brookwood Cemetery, the London Necropolis, the largest cemetery in the country. It always overwhelmed my imagination as so many graves sped past; all full, my morbid mind muttered to me. Jack and I knew that we were on the main West of England line; out beyond the far reaches of electrification; on through Andover Junction, Basingstoke, Salisbury; through a level crossing at Wilton I think, over streams, under bridges; a wait or two on sidings while more important war traffic roared past (what could be more important to a country than its future?). And everywhere there were people waving, always waving. The whole country knew of the evacuation.

A group of us gathered in a compartment to celebrate the birthday of June Burford, a girl of my age who I didn't know, another younger sibling. We sang 'Happy Birthday' and watched her unwrap presents brought by her sister, Pat, and two brothers, Derek and Peter. Then a cake was produced and we were all given a minute piece.

An age further on we pulled up at a major station with an unusually wide gap between the platforms: Exeter Central, it said. The station-nameboard-remover hadn't got there yet. There were some moments of excitement when a King Arthur class engine pulled up opposite us across that gap, far enough away for us to have a good, full-length look at it: Sir Bors, the nearest we came to a named Southern Railway engine that day. What we did know was that the stop was only to change engines and pick up a little tank engine that would act as extra brakes as our train dived down the steep incline to Exeter St David's station and the main Great Western Railway line where we reversed direction. 'We're going home,' shouted some hopefuls. But no. The Southern Railway took the northern route round Dartmoor and the Great Western the southern; they arrive, bizarrely, in Plymouth from opposite directions having come from the same starting point. The S.R. line (now gone) wandered through hilly Devon countryside, the G.W.R. ran (still runs) dramatically along the seashore at Dawlish. 'The sea,' yelled hundreds of excited voices in unison and our train heaved with excitement. It is a wonder it didn't tip over sideways as every child and teacher in it strained to get as close as possible to the waves breaking a few feet from us as we clanked along. Then Plymouth, the naval base at Devonport packed with grey, menacing warships, a slow rumble over Saltash Bridge which had an armed sentry at each end and we were told we were in Cornwall. Cornwall, it sounded all right: a wall of corn. But the first station we passed through was St. Germans. Saints? Germans? Here? The next was Menheniot, which was incomprehensible. We crossed a viaduct, one of several, but this one was high over a deep, little valley with a single track railway way beneath us, and had a station at the end of it. We stopped there, the front of the train in a cutting so steep

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were the contours. Liskeard, said the boards. We didn't even know how to say it. Was this a foreign country?

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The afternoon sun shone down the length of the cutting making bars of gold through the smoke and steam of our new engine, given to us at Exeter. A Great Western, a stranger, a Hall class, but I forgot which one as we were led away and walked up the road in long crocodiles of twos, past curious local people, to an assembly room where we were given a bun and squash. We were soon packed into buses which fanned out of Liskeard in all directions, breaking up Westwood Secondary School for good - well, anyway, for the duration.

Still going further west towards the sun, our bus followed another down a long winding hill past a vast railway viaduct, the biggest yet, with a mysterious, derelict one beside it: Moorswater. On, through strange folded countryside with a line of moors in the distance, to a school - granite and slate, small and bleak and Victorian - nothing like the brick-and-tile, airy, modern Westwood Secondary or Eastcote Road Primary in our modern, pebble-dash estates. This one sat just outside the village, squat and solitary on a country road. All the buildings we had seen looked so old. Even the people gathered, waiting in the inadequate playground, seemed older than our parents - the youngish marrieds who made up the adult population at home.

The sixty-or-so of us were herded into the centre of the main schoolroom and the villagers crowded in after us and stood round the walls. What a scene, this auction of children with no money involved, almost medieval. The villagers slowly circled us and picked the most likely looking. They used phrases strange to us in thick accents we could barely understand.

'Hallo, my beauty.'

'There y're, me 'andsome. Wha' be your name then?'

'Don' you worry none,'

'Us'll 'ave 'ee,'

'Er can come wi' I,'

'This one yere'll do we.'

Inhuman as it all could be judged now, I don't know if the other children felt fear or anxiety. Some must have. I remember only curiosity, and I can think of no quicker, better way of dispersing us. At least our new guardians were given some sort of choice in who was going to share their homes if the children were not. Not that



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anyone in authority in those days would have thought of consulting children about their welfare. One thing would seem to be sure: whoever was running things locally did a good job, because no brothers and sisters were split up that day. Some people took three or four children to keep families together. We knew this was so when we re-assembled for school.

A female voice said to me, 'What about you, my pretty, D'you want to come wi' I?'

'I'm with my brother' I said.

'Two of you, eh?'

'Yes, he's with me. We're staying together,' said Jack.

'Two boys is a bit much for we.' And the owner of the voice moved on.

A hand grabbed my hair, an action I always hated. There was quite a lot of it and it was fair.

'Yere. I'll have this one yere, little blondie' said a female voice.

'Ow, that's my hair.'

'I know, boy. Could do with a cut, too.'

I cannot be quite sure about my first reaction to this person, older than my mother, who laid claim to me in such a way. Although the hand that had ruffled my hair had been less than gentle, she herself, looking down at me, did not look intimidating. Her accent was different again, much easier to follow than much of what we were listening to.

'You've got to have my brother, too.'

'Got to?' Her eyebrows went up a little in surprise.

'Mum said we've got to stay together. She said so.'

'Did she now.'

'Yes, we're staying together,' said Jack, more firmly than he could possibly have felt.

'Are you, now? And you're his brother, are you?'

'Yes. We're together.'

'Both of us,' I added, to clear up any possible misunderstanding.

She regarded us reflectively, 'That's right, then. If your Mam said. How old are you boys?'



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We spoke eagerly and simultaneously. 'Eleven, nearly twelve.' 'Seven and a half.'

'And what are your names?'

Again we tumbled over one another. 'Jack.' 'Terry.'

'Well, you're a pair, aren't you,' she said and it sounded complimentary. 'I like boys, less trouble than girls. Girls, oh, Dew. Nimby-pimby, all tears and temper. Can you top 'n' tail?'

'We did that at our cousins', last year,' said Jack.

'Well, that's all right, then. You may be down in the front passage for a bit. We got two soldiers, see. Just for now. From Dunkirk. They'll soon be gone. Come on. Both of you. I like little blondies. Our family's dark, especially my son, Gwyn. He's in the army, training in Wales.'

We left the vacky market. Outside she called out to someone. 'Here, Jack, over yere. We got two.'

'Oh Duw, girl 'Can we fit 'em in?'

'We'll think of something. Come on, boys, quick, 'fore he changes his mind.'

The man, Jack, tiny, bald, tanned, rotund, like a hard rubber ball, had booked the solitary village taxi. He was much shorter than his wife, who was no great height. 'Here, boys, in you get, quick, 'fore someone else gets him. Ever ridden in a taxi?' He didn't wait for any possible reply. 'I hadn't when I was your age.'

And we were in the taxi with this odd couple, heading back up the lane, left onto the main road through the village, Dobwalls, where we - privileged in our vehicle - passed villagers walking home with their new vacky acquisitions.

Out into open country again, still towards the setting sun. The man sat in front with the driver, Jack and I behind with the woman. The man turned round. 'Now then, what's your names, boys?'

Once more neither of us waited for the other. 'Terry.' 'Jack.'

'And how old are you?'

'I'm nearly twelve,' said Jack as I said, 'I'm seven and a half.'

The man pretended to be confused. 'Have you thought of electing one of you to be chairman?'

This, in turn, confused us.

'Leave 'em alone, Jack,' said the woman, already protective.

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He pointed at me. 'So, you're Jack.' He pointed at Jack, 'And you're Terry.' His finger stabbed at me again, 'And you're nearly twelve.' Back to Jack, 'And you're seven.'

We giggled. 'Don't be silly.'

He did it all again but correctly this time.

'That's right.'

'Well, thank God we got that straight.' His grin included us in his joke.

'Only seven, are you?' said the woman to me as though it were a wonder.

'Yes.' I was confident by now, too confident, and decided to identify myself. 'I'm the clever one,'

'Are you now,' said the man, his grin fading. He turned to Jack, 'And what are you?'

'I'm the older one,'

There was a silent moment during which he glanced at the woman, then looked from one to the other of us. 'Hm,' was all he said.

She came in quickly. 'Well, that's funny, my husband is Jack too.'

Jack was amazed. 'Is your name really Jack?'

The man grinned again, instantly responding. 'Course it is. What d'you think? We're telling fibs?'

'Isn't that funny?' said Jack, pleased.

'We'll have to make sure we don't muddle you up, then, won't we?' said the woman.

'D'you think you can manage to tell the difference?' The man looked very concerned as we both laughed. 'Well, what's funny?' He asked. 'We look just the same, don't we?'

'He's younger 'n you,' I said.

'No, not much,' he replied.

'I've got hair,' said Jack, and this got a good laugh.

'Oh, cheeky, are we?' was the response.

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'And you're redder than him and fatter. And you talk funny.' As always I went too far for Jack, though everyone else laughed.

'Please, I'm sorry. He didn't mean anything.'

The woman was again all reassurance. 'That's all right, boy. He's only saying what he sees and hears. So. You call him Uncle Jack. And I'm Auntie Rose.'

The driver said something incomprehensible to the man, Jack. 'Hear that, boys? What he says about the vackies?'

'No,' we answered, mystified.

The driver half-turned his head so that we could hear better and repeated whatever it was. We stared in silence.

'Is he speaking English?' I asked at last and earned a roar of laughter.

'Oh, ar, tis English all right,' he said. 'Tis Cornish. Tis proper English. We'll soon 'ave you talking it, don't you fret, my beauty.' Beauty, as he said it came out as budy.

'Not living with a Welshman, they won't,' said the man Jack. 'I'll tan it out of them.'

'Hark at them both,' chimed in the woman, defending us from the threatened assault. 'Double Dutch is all either of 'em can talk. You take no notice, boys.'

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We swept past a farm with a huddle of outbuildings which grimly showed their backs to the weather and the outside world; they looked into shelter and pungent smells. We topped the brow of a hill with a lone oak tree growing from the hedge, not very tall but stark, only thinly veiled in June leaf, with all the branches blown one way like the fingers in a skinny hand pleading to the north-east for relief. We would soon learn to know intimately those prevalent (permanent so it sometimes seemed) south-westerlies that blew across Cornwall.

The man spoke. 'There we are. See? Doublebois. That's where we live. On the end there.' He pronounced it double-boys as you might expect. He continued, 'Doublebois is French.' Now he tried a French pronunciation on it. 'Doobler-bwa. That's French. It means two woods. Not two boys, two woods. Only we can say two boys, now, isn't it?' And he laughed at his welcoming wit. We stared across a field at a terrace of Victorian cottages - more slate and granite - especially at the end one. They looked tiny and grim. Seven of them, as it turned out. How could seven families live in so little space?

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The taxi pulled up and we went through a little wrought-iron gate between a warehouse on the right and the row of seven cottages on our left. This area, we learned, was called The Court and all the back doors opened onto it. The Court was the common ground, the thoroughfare. We walked past a pump on the wall of the first cottage, down a narrow courtyard, past a large, concrete rainwater tank, halfway down on the right, joined to the back of the warehouse. A tap, set over a drain, jutted from this tank. All our washing water came from that, our drinking water from the pump. We walked past a small whitewashed bungalow on the right, to the end house of the terrace, which had a wooden washhouse beyond it and some hens in a wire-enclosed run on the right.

Neighbours looked out of doors at us. A woman said, 'Thought you was only getting one.'

'They was on special offer,' said our man.

'They looked too good to leave behind,' said his wife.

He grabbed my hair. 'This yere's Terry, the uppity one and,' he patted Jack on the back, 'Jack, my namesake, is the nice one.'

She was in quickly again. 'Leave them alone, Jack. They must be tired and hungry.' And she ushered us in.

We entered and stared in wonder at a shining black range with a cat curled beside it; at a canary in a cage; at a green velvet table cloth; at a sideboard on which sat a little brass dustpan and crumbs brush; at a shapeless sofa; at two First-World-War shells in their cases, over six inches tall standing on either side of the clock on the mantelpiece. They took our excited attention, beating even the cat and the canary, with their soldered-on army badges that had three feathers and 'Ich Dien' on a scroll; and at oil lamps - no electricity here. The evening sun lit the room in nearly horizontal shafts full of dust, the room seemed packed with things and smelled of coal smoke and cooking.

But the glory came last: outside, past the hens in their run, right behind the washhouse, tucked down in a cutting and breathtakingly revealed, was the main London to Penzance railway line with Doublebois station practically below us, its goods yard and sidings a couple of hundred yards downline, under a road bridge at the far end the station. In the short time before we went to bed - and even after - the rural silence of Doublebois was occasionally shattered as an express train roared by a few yards below us, steam and smoke belching over the cottages. Local trains chuffed. In the mornings goods engines shunted and banged and clattered, shouts echoed, the arms of signals clanked from danger, to caution, to go, and bells announced the up train to Plymouth and the down to Truro and Falmouth. We two railway children couldn't have invented, couldn't have dreamed of arriving in such a place. Even our address, cumbersome but utterly satisfying, was: 7 Railway Cottages, Doublebois, Dobwalls, Near Liskeard, Cornwall.