# Kisses on a Postcard

## Terence Frisby

**Extract from 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.

* * *

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.'

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



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'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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**Extract from pages 80-85**

When Elsie first met us London vackies we thought she was a local. She vehemently denied this and faced us squarely with her direct stare and burgeoning body. 'Well, you talk like they do,' we said.

'I don't. I talk ever so different. I be from Plymouth.' She pointed vaguely. ''Tis over to there. My dad's in the army and my mum's gone off with a sailor so they sent me yere. I don't like it yere.'

'We do,' someone ventured.

Elsie ignored this and continued on her own tack. 'I've held the hand of a dead person.'



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We just stood and stared at this revelation, imaginations racing.

'Have you really?'

'Yes.'

'Whose?' challenged a disbelieving voice.

'My granny's.'

'Oh.' The unlikely scenario gained credibility.

'I was holding her hand and she died.'

'What did you do?'

'Nothing.'

After a long reflective pause someone said, 'Do you want to play with us?'

She nodded.

'Come on, then.'

We learned later from the Plummer boys that this story was often trotted out, one of several methods Elsie used to make an impression, though it was probably true. 'If she was holding my yand I'd've been glad to die,' said Peter Plummer contemptuously. 'That was our granny too,' complained his brothers, feeling upstaged by Elsie.

But their comments were too late. Elsie was in my head, indelibly. Months later she and I were playing together and went off into the woods to explore. Anxious to impress her I took her to our secret hut and swore her to secrecy. We crawled in through the low doorway; she looked round. 'Cor, 'tis lovely and dark. Smells of resin. No one would ever know we were yere.' She settled herself. 'D'you want to play doctors?'

I was mystified.

She looked at me speculatively. 'How old be you?'

'Nearly eight.'

'I'm nearly thirteen. I'll be doctor first.'

'All right.'

'You got to take all your clothes off.'



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I was flabbergasted. 'All of them?'

'Yes.'

'My pants too?'

'Then you lie down and I examine you. I say, "What seems to be the trouble, Mr Smith?" '

'The school doctor just combed my hair for nits.'

'Do you want to play or not?'

'No.' But I did, desperately.

'You shy?'

'Yes.'

'So be I. Let's undress together.'

Clever Elsie had calmed the fears of both of us. We solemnly started to remove our clothes. Before we had got far, 'You know boys and girls 're different?'

More new territory. 'I think so.' I knew so, thanks to our cousins.

'D'you know why?'

'No.' This seemed like the safest answer. 'Hazily' would have been more truthful.

' 'Tis to make babies. You put your widdler in my twinkle then I have a baby.'

I giggled nervously. She was insane. 'Don't be daft.'

'True.'

'It wouldn't go.'

'No, I thought that. I don't think it works till you're married, I think. Or grown-up. Tiny little babies come out the end of your widdler. All swimming.'

I let out an 'Eeargh' of disgust.

But she was relentless. 'The husband has to lie on top of the wife, then it works. All husbands and wives do it. Your mum and dad did it to get you.'

'Shut up,' I muttered sullenly, not wanting to imagine such an event.

'The baby grows for nine months in yere, then comes out.'



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'Babies are too big.' I had caught her on a practical level.

But even that was no good. She just agreed. 'I know. I don't get it. The woman screams, so it mustn't half hurt. I don't think I want babies.'

We were both out of our depth. 'You made it all up.'

'The animals do it, too. You watch. I have. Nobody saw me. Crago's bull. Blige me. His widdler. You should see. They all laughed.'

I was shocked into protest. 'We're not animals,' and searched for an argument to refute her. Sunday school came to mind. 'We got souls. The vicar said we've got souls and animals haven't.'

'What does he know? Be you going to play doctor, then?'

'No. I don't like you.'

'Yes, you do.'

And she was right. I did. I, sort of, loved her. She spoke with a calm authority that was thrilling and disturbing. Like every other child learning the facts of life unofficially as we did I thought of my parents doing it: no. It was all too grotesque. I went home, stared at Auntie Rose and Uncle Jack and tried to imagine them engaged in something so rude and unlikely. No, not possible. I cornered Uncle Jack in the garden where we wouldn't be overheard. 'Uncle Jack, have we got souls?'

He was always glad to hold forth on this subject. 'Nobody knows, boy, though they say they do.'

'Nobody in the whole world?'

'No. But if you ask me, it's all tripe. All of it. All religion. Rubbish.'

'So we are just like the animals?'

'I wouldn't say that, boy. We got minds.' And he grinned with satisfaction at this opportunity to make his prime, anti-religious, point. How could he know that we'd just been having our first conversation about sex?

Auntie Rose was feeding the hens.

'Auntie Rose, have we got souls?'

'Course we have, my love. What d'you think we are, animals?'

'Uncle Jack says we haven't.'

'What does he know? Heathen.'



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There appeared to be nothing but confusion on the subject in the adult world, so how could Elsie know? But the assurances of her still childish but swelling body against mine, the changes in herself she pointed out so proudly, the persistent rumours of the truth that I encountered among the older children and the overwhelming evidence in the countryside all round us soon undermined my disbelief. So, when the other boys were busy elsewhere, the promise of a breathless, dry session of doctors with Elsie – full of intimacy yet reserve – created a trembling inexplicable excitement that was quite fulfilled by the cool, clinical little scenes we acted out in our pine-scented surgery in the woods.

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**Extract from pages 98-103**

The trips to Liskeard were regular weekly outings. But the great events that filled us with excitement were the much rarer twenty-two-mile train rides to Plymouth. On to the 9.40 a.m. stopping train, over Moorswater Viaduct and some spectacular views, especially down on to the Looe branch line that went right beneath us like a model; out of Liskeard station on another viaduct over another part of the same branch line. We, on the main line, would rattle on to Menheniot and St Germans. At last, Saltash, looking over the Torpoint ferry, and the Royal Albert Bridge, known to us all as Saltash Bridge. 'Built by Isambard Kingdom Brunel', it announced at either end. What a name. It was the crossing point back into England.

There followed the slow rumble over the bridge, with its armed sentry at either end. Local legend said that it moved a foot every time a train crossed. I multiplied the number of trains each week by the number of weeks since the bridge was built in 1859, then wondered why it hadn't either edged itself up the Tamar or sidled miles out to sea.

The sight of the warships, low, grey and stark, indescribably menacing, lying in the Tamar Estuary, and Devonport Docks; then Plymouth and the Hoe; the statue of Drake with his bowls, a stylish reminder of how to reduce the enemy to size; pasties that tasted of potato and pepper but had never seen meat. Jack and I saved pocket money for these trips for yet more Dinky Toys and Army cap badges, ones too rare to be found in rural Liskeard.

Over these expeditions presided Auntie Rose with two shopping bags that became loaded and we all struggled with as she led us first from queue to queue then, when the serious business was done, from shop window to shop window. A cameo brooch was pinned to her best blouse and a silver-and-blue enamel butterfly brooch to her lapel. She wore a shapeless hat that required hatpins to hold it crammed onto her long, thick brown hair, done up in a bun.

We were waiting one evening in Plymouth North Road station buffet for a train that was very late. 'Bombing up the line' was the dark rumour. Jack had bought a miniature sheath knife in its leather sheath, something he had been coveting and saving for for ages. He kept taking it from the shopping bag, unclipping the press-stud fastening round the handle and half withdrawing the glistening blade. Our



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heads bent over it as we experimented: should he hang it from his belt at the side or secretly at the back like a hunter's knife? It was a formidable purchase. The date was 20 March 1941. It was a Thursday, the first of the two nights on which the Luftwaffe wiped the centre of Plymouth from the face of the earth.

'Come on, boys,' said Auntie Rose. 'Put that knife away till the proper time. When you get home you play with that, not in yere. You'll lose it.'

She was interrupted by the sound of a distant siren. The whole buffet went silent. 'Oh Duw, what was that?' she breathed.

'An air-raid siren,' said Jack superfluously.

'They're a long way—'

She drew in her breath as the heart-stopping, low-pitched whirr and whine that develops into the shattering wail of a siren started up close by. The voices broke out again into a hubbub and a Devon accent rose above them all to say, 'All passengers in the subway, please. At once. Come along now, my lovelies. Let's be 'avin' you.'

We all hurried out on to the platform and headed down the ramps into the subways under the tracks. The sound of gunfire was clearly audible some way off. Auntie Rose gathered us on either side of her on a bench, shopping bags on the floor before us.

'Are they bombs?' I asked Jack.

'No, they're our guns, shooting the Jerries down. Bombs whistle.' He was rooting about in the shopping bags. Suddenly there was panic in his voice. 'My knife. Where's my knife? My new sheath knife is gone.'

Auntie Rose grabbed a bag. 'Perhaps it's in this one. Yere, let's see.'

But Jack was gone, racing down the subway out of sight. 'I left it in the buffet. I left it in the buffet.'

Auntie Rose was distraught. 'Come back, come back, boy, you can't . . .' Her voice faded into disbelief. 'He's gone.'

I had been searching in the first bag. 'Here's the knife, Auntie Rose. It's in this bag. I've got it here. Jack, I got it. Come back. Come back.' And I set off after Jack, ignoring Auntie Rose's agonised voice as the tumult outside grew louder. I flew between the huddled groups of people, turned a corner and stared up the slope towards platform-level. No Jack; he had already gone. As I started to run up the slope there was an even louder bang than before and bits of glass and debris flew about at platform-level. I stopped, terrified, and stood bawling near the bottom of the slope, afraid to move, when hands grabbed me and pulled me back round the corner.

''Ere, boy, come yere. I got you. You can't stand out there.'



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I sobbed, 'Let me go. My brother. My brother's up there.'

'What? Your brother?'

'He lost his knife. We've got it.'

'What you talking about?'

Before I could say more I heard Auntie Rose's voice. 'Here, Terry. Here he is. With me. He came back.'

And there stood Jack. His courage, like mine, had failed at the sight and sound of the real war. Auntie Rose led us back to our bench, sat down and enfolded us both. 'Oh boys, come yere. You give me heart failure, you did. Both of you.'

God knows what hell we had put her through in those few moments. How do you explain to their parents that your two charges ran up into the bombing and were blown to bits looking for a sheath knife that was in your shopping bag all the time?

'I was going to go,' Jack assured me. 'It was only that you stopped me.'

'So was I,' I affirmed, equally inaccurately.

We spent the night sitting on the bench while the inferno raged above us. My principal memory, after the initial knife panic, was that, no matter how I shook with fright, the bench, which sat about ten people, always quaked at a different rhythm, and I couldn't get my bottom synchronised to the common tempo of terror.

The next morning was the first day of spring. We stood among glass and bits on the platform till a train took us across the miraculously unscathed Saltash Bridge. Plymouth was ablaze, smoke hung everywhere; a high proportion of the bombs had been incendiary. The warships still lurked, apparently intact, in Devonport Docks and the Tamar Estuary, out of the way. Or perhaps their fire had been so intense that it was easier for the bombers to unload onto the undefended civilian centre of the city. Apparently the RAF had ready four antiquated Gloster Gladiator biplanes as air defence. I am not sure whether they ever actually took off.

At each station groups of people met the train to ask for news or just to stare at us. And there at the end of the platform at Doublebois stood Uncle Jack looking ridiculously small and vulnerable till he saw the three of us waving wildly from a window. Then his shut face burst open into a grin that threatened to tear it in two. He hurried down the platform, took her shopping bags from her, put them on the ground and hugged Auntie Rose. It was a rare enough event to see them touching, let alone this display. He just said, 'Oh Duw, girl. There you are. There you are.'

'Of course I am. What d'you think? Let me go, you fool. People are watching.' She was flushed and pleased.

'You looked after her, boys, did you, for me?'



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We couldn't wait to tell him about it. 'It was triffic, Uncle Jack.'

'I was ever so scared.'

'I'll bet you were, boy. I thought I'd got rid of you all at last. But there's no peace for the wicked, is there?'



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