

Wounded

When every journey ends, so do the signposts. Just now Ted Lewis needed a signpost, to tell him what to do next. Leaning heavily on his stick and pushing his dentures back into place with his tongue, he stared at the cottage door while the November fog soaked into his cheeks. The paper poppy rubbed against his stubble; his hand stole to his pocket and felt the old folding-knife. He'd bought this knife long ago, to use when he caught up with them. But nowadays his strength was failing.

Fifty years, it had taken. Fifty! They'd vanished from London before he was demobbed, so at first he didn't realise what had happened. Then he'd found out, and he'd raged and cursed. He'd gone after them. But always, they'd moved on before he could track them down. From town to town, year to year: Rugby, in the seventies when the lights were going out; Barnsley, when the Falklands were overrun and the miners were subjugated; never staying, always moving. Now at the last, as he stood hesitating at their door, another century had arrived and too many years were behind him. Wanting to be angry, he made himself think of Aggie's beautiful face all those years ago. How she loved to dance; what she whispered to him in the dark picture-houses, and how her lips felt. He wanted still to hate her, and to hate the man who'd stolen her.

He knocked, and for fifteen seconds the hours dragged by. Then the door was opened, and it was Aggie. But she was much younger than he'd expected, and he fell back, raising an arm as if to ward off the blow. How could it be?

'Aggie?' he gasped at last, steadying himself against the door frame.

The woman looked at him with concern. 'Oh, dear,' she said. 'I'm afraid you're too late. Mum's funeral was last Thursday. I'm Jackie, Aggie's daughter,' she added, offering a hand.

He shook his head. For a moment he couldn't speak. Then he croaked, 'Ted. Ted Lewis...'

She frowned. 'Ted Lewis? Have we met before? No? Well never mind, you'd better come in. You look frozen.'

Reluctantly he allowed himself to be led indoors. He followed her into the parlour, watching her hips swaying just like Aggie's had done. A lump came to his throat.

'No,' she said, her voice just the same too, like autumn bells, 'Mum didn't last long after dad died. That's often that way, isn't it?'

He lowered himself into a chair, wondering if this one had been Aggie's. 'John - John's gone, too, then?'

She looked at him. 'I'd better make you some tea. Milk and sugar?'

He answered, he wasn't sure how. When she'd gone he found he was gripping the head of his stick tightly, his knuckles shining red and white through baking-paper skin, linked to one another by frail arthritic sticks. He watched them. And as he watched, the sticks filled out and became fingers again. The knuckles were firm and smooth, and the hands lost their blue colour as the veins sank back into the skin. He no longer held a stick; instead, his fingers curled around the cold metal of a rifle, which he held high before him. His heart was pounding more regularly now, but he couldn't hear it; instead there were crackles, loud in his virgin ears; explosions bursting like overhead lightning, like demon's tails drilling into his skull. Smoke and the smell of vomit were all around; men were sobbing, wailing and praying as the boat surged over the

breakers, tipping like a playground see-saw: up, down, down, up. A whistle blew and the prayers fell silent under the din. Clanging, the forward gate fell open into the waves, and puddles formed around their boots. For a long moment they stared at the bar of white sand and the shapes that crawled upon it. Then a fighter flew a hundred feet overhead, engine thundering, cannons rattling. Someone shouted, and they surged forward. The boy in front wiped sick from his mouth, put his head down and plunged into the waves. This is Gold, we are the Golden Boys.

Now it was his own turn. Rifle held high over head, step off, splash in – the waves rose to his waist, the water squelched chill between socks and boots. He waded forward, the cold ocean resisting until his thighs ached. Noises like mosquitoes in his ears; chop-chop-chop in the grey water; a line of little splashes. Something struck his helmet and made him stagger, and the boy in front gave a sigh and sagged at the knees. As the boy sank, he fell over him and drank brine, drank sand, drank blood. The boy's body tried to hold him down, but he dragged himself free. He stood, sodden clothes clinging in every crevice, and waded once more, spitting, spitting. The last few yards came, and he threw himself panting on the sand, trying to keep low. He recalled the training-ground (days ago? weeks?), where he'd crawled through mud while the sergeant shouted: "Now, lads! Work your way up the sand, draw with your elbows. Keep your head down. Draw with your elbows, drag yourself! Draw, draw! Come on, my lad, that's it!" So now he sucked in air, dug in his elbows, and drew. And drew, foot by foot. Sand clung to his sodden clothes, sand was in his mouth; and all around him the noises of hell slashed the air. His elbows worked, he wriggled further; he found himself alongside a corpse, its fingers dug deep into the sand as if desperate to hold on to the earth. Fascinated, he rolled away the helmet and found himself looking into his sergeant's face, a puzzled frown frozen there. Draw yourself up, lad. Then he cried out, recoiling, rolling away – kneeling, then crouching, then running headlong – got to get away from the boy in the sea, the sergeant in the sand. Run. Run! Got to make those dunes, their hairy heads tossing in the June breeze. This is Gold, we are the Golden Boys . . .

An insect landed on his midriff, just above the belt. He felt it stop. Then, as he looked down, it began to burrow through his tunic, the cloth tearing behind it; now it was eating his flesh, churning it up, spitting it out. A ring of blood oozed out in its wake and parts of his insides began to fall out. They felt cold and he wanted to push them back in, but he couldn't bear to touch, and his gesture was half-hearted, like a man warding off a dangerous dog. He found he was on his knees; now he felt faint. And somewhere – yes, somewhere, there was – what else? Ah, there it was: pain. Waves of pain, great rolling breakers of agony, oceans of heaving, tearing, burning barbs . . . And yet he didn't cry; he only whimpered.

He was staring at the unhurried clouds moving in the blue, when a head appeared.

'Who are you?' he rasped.

He had to get the head to repeat the answer, for the world was turning quiet. 'John,' it said. 'Soon have you out of here.'

The head had a shoulder, with a red cross on it. He clutched at its owner. 'I'm a goner, ain't I?'

'Nah, mate –'

'Tell me!' The pain made him bite the words off like shards of glass.

John looked him in the eye. 'You got a chance, mate. You ain't dead yet.'

He sucked in air and spittle. 'I am, I am –'

'I tell you, you ain't –'

He clutched John harder, his panted words scrabbling through clamped teeth. 'Listen. My pocket - ' he gestured at his own chest - 'photograph - my girl. Aggie. Tell her - tell her - ' The other nodded, and took the photo. 'I know mate. I will. I promise.'

He looked into John's face, saw the smile, and trusted it.

The knuckles shrank once more; there again was his stick, here the parlour. Yes, he'd trusted that smile. But now, that smile of a betrayer leered at him from photographs all around the parlour. John with Aggie on their wedding day; Aggie and John on holiday; the smiling parents with their children. *His* treachery was one thing, but Aggie's was another. She hadn't waited for him to get back to London before chucking him. She hadn't even written. Ted had been forgotten, the wounded soldier left to rot...

Jackie brought in the tea. He sipped gratefully, letting it warm the void inside him. That was it, then, he thought. All these long years chasing them; and now they'd gone and died before he could take his revenge. He thought he'd be crying by now, sobbing; but no. He just felt numb.

'Thanks for the tea,' he said quietly. 'I'll finish this and I'll be off. I'm sorry to have missed the funeral.'

Jackie had been staring at him. Then she gasped. 'Oh! Wait a minute! I know...' She jumped up and began rummaging in a sideboard drawer.

'What?' said Ted.

'Ted Lewis... Ted Lewis...' she'd fished out an ancient shoe-box whose sides bulged and sagged. From it she produced a bundle of browned photographs, a patchwork of sizes and shapes, some creased, some faint. 'Must be here somewhere... Ah!' She pulled one out, a few inches square, one corner folded up.

'What is it?' said Ted, trying to sound interested. He wondered what she could have to show him, now that it was too late.

She was studying the photograph, glancing up at him. 'Oh, my!' she said, tears standing in her eyes. 'It's you!' She handed it to him.

He peered through thumb-grimed glasses at the browned image. It was Aggie, with a man - but the man wasn't John, it was him. Ted's younger self stood erect, proud in his khakis, grinning confidently at the camera. And next to him, her arm through his, was young Agnes, lovely Agnes: the sheen of her hair unconcealed by the age of the picture. And Agnes was looking at her young man with the eyes and the expression that you only see once or twice in your lifetime.

As he fought back the tears, Jackie came and sat next to him, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. 'Last week,' she whispered, 'Mum asked to look at the old photos again. She went a bit like that before the end - nostalgic, you know. Pictures of her as a girl, Grandad and Grandma and that. And, Ted - she showed me this one. She said of course she'd been happy with Dad, but *here* was her first young man. And she looked so proud, Ted. But she thought you'd died, you see. She thought you'd died.'

'She - she thought I'd died...'

'*This* is where I'd seen you before. In the photo. Turn it over.'

He did so, and read: *Agnes with Ted Lewis. March 1944.*

'Brighton,' he said. 'We went to Brighton. I was on weekend leave. I never saw her again...'

Half an hour later, he turned on the doorstep and raised his hat. John had got away, but Ted wasn't worried – by the feel of his heart, he'd soon be following after. The fog hadn't gone but the birds were singing and the world was brighter because Aggie had not known. John must have told her he'd died, and she'd believed him. Why shouldn't she? And then John had stolen her, and taken her far away, and kept running. She hadn't known her Ted was still alive. But he was. He was.

Jackie shook his hand, gave him a peck on the cheek.

'You take after your mother, you know,' said Ted.

Then he walked off down the road to the station, his step lighter than it had been for a while.