

# Jacob

"Jacob," Celia called, "its time for your reading and writing session with your mother and straight after, you have your Latin session with your father." She escorted me down the hallway. On one side, we passed window after window each one with elegant designs painted onto them. On the other, we passed doors, beautiful, painted white doors. A door to the guest room. A door to the other guest room. A door to the lounge. A door to the my parents room . A door to my play room. And a door to the water closet. We then went up the stairs. My hand slid up the the polished banisters as I climbed the steps which were as white as snow. Eventually we reached my study room. I sat down on my leather chair in front of my desk of which my mother was at the other end of.

"Good morning mother," I greeted. My reading and writing sessions were one of the very few times I got to spend with my mother, so I tried to be on best behaviour throughout them.

"Good morning, Jacob. Let's begin, shall we?" she replied in a gentle but firm tone, "Write out the full date, and the title of the novel you have been reading in your pleasure time, underlined." There was a sheet of cartage paper, a quill and a pot of ink laid out in front of me, I began to write. 'Friday 1<sup>st</sup> of September 1939 – Mary Poppins'. Time flew by. The lesson was over before I knew it. The same happened with my Latin session. In the time of what felt like ten minutes, three hours had passed and it was time for lunch.

I crossed my fingers in hope I would be able to sit at the dining table with Mother and Father and to my luck I did! I am ever so lucky to be able to sit with the adults only at the age of nine years. It's much better than eating with Celia, my nanny, in my play room. I mean, she is lovely, however I feel so childish with her having to babysit me. Also, the food is different. At the dining table we get delicious food like steaks and ribs and chicken. But in the play room I only get sausages with mash. Trying hard to keep my bubbling excitement from bursting out, I maturely sat at the table and listened to the wireless like everyone else whilst we waited for our food. The man who spoke on the wireless sounded like Neville Chamberlain, our prime minister, but I wasn't too sure. He said,

"I do not propose to say many words tonight. The time has come when action rather than speech is required. Eighteen months ago in this House I prayed that the responsibility might not fall upon me to ask this country to accept the awful arbitrament of war. I fear that I may not be able to avoid that responsibility." Gasps echoed around the room. Honestly, I didn't understand what the man was talking about but everyone else seemed to be flabbergasted by this announcement so I went along with it and gasped with them. I must've made a mistake. I must've gasped too late or maybe they thought I was mocking them, because straight after, father sent me out and demanded I sat with Celia in the playroom, not stating the reason why. I ate my dull dinner of sausages with mash and went out for a walk soon after, still trying to deduce the mistake I had made.

I walked down the cobbled path around my house, and I pondered. I thought. I let my mind wander. I thought of evolution, Darwin's crazy theory. I thought of the afterlife, how wonderful heaven must be. I thought of God, of how powerful he is, and I thought and I thought and I thought. But then my chain was broken. Something distracted me. I saw father walking out of the house with his emergency weaponry bag. I saw mother at the door, her face all swollen and red. She looked as if she had been crying. I ran up to her and asked what was happening. Where father was going, why he had his emergency weaponry bag and why she was all red and puffy. She replied only saying to have faith in God. She's so silly. I didn't ask her anything to do with God.

Still baffled by what was happening, I went to my bedroom to rest. I was walking for quite a while and I was getting quite tired. But to my surprise, Celia was in there holding a list in one hand and clothes in the other. My room was

in a mess and for once I wasn't the one who made it. Clothes and shoes were scattered everywhere and a huge suitcase sat on the middle of my bed.

"What are you doing, Celia?" I asked.

"I uh, I – never mind, it's not important but can you help me, Jacob, you see, whatever item I say, could you find it and put it in that suitcase on your bed."

I didn't rebel. I didn't demand she answer my question. I listened. I did what she asked. She called out items and I put it in the suitcase, still unsure why. Eventually, we had packed everything: a change of underwear, night clothes, slippers, socks, a toothbrush, a comb, towels, soaps, a face cloth, handkerchiefs, a coat and an odd box. I tried to ask Celia what it was but she just scolded me for asking too many questions so I decided to investigate after she left. The box was made of cardboard and had the words 'gas mask' printed onto it. It was also attached to a long piece of string, probably to put the box around your shoulder. Inside, was a grey mask. It looked really strange. It had two see-through circles for your eyes and where your mouth would go, there was a black circle with lots of little holes inside. I put it on and it fit perfectly. I looked a little scary, though. I put it back in the luggage inside its box and went to play with my ball in the garden. That was when it hit me. I finally realised why we had been packing. I ran back into the house to find Celia.

"Celia, Celia, Celia, I figured out why we were packing my suitcase," I shrieked as layer of terror washed over Celia's face.

"It's because we're going on holiday!" Celia relaxed. It seemed as if she was expecting something else.

"Umm, you figured it out!" She replied, but I knew something wasn't right. There was uncertainty in her voice. "It was meant to be a surprise but you, clever clogs, figured it out. We, you are going on holiday." Despite how excited I was, I knew that something didn't add up. What did she mean by 'you' and not 'we'. Celia always comes with me if I go out. Oh well, it didn't matter too much. I was about to go on holiday!

It was later on in the afternoon when we left the house. I carried my large suitcase and along with mother and Celia, I went to Waterloo Station with a taxi. The station was bombarded with children and mothers. We were just about to enter when I realised something.

"Mother, you have left your suitcase behind, we must return and get it!" I exclaimed. I had figured that maybe Celia wasn't coming with me because mother would come and look after me. I like it better that way, even if I have to put my toys away myself.

"It's fine, my dear," she replied. 'My dear'. She hadn't called me that in years. Something definitely wasn't right. Finally the train arrived. Mother hugged me and, through her sobs, she told me something that I would never forget as she walked away in tears, "Be a good boy, Jacob. The good boy you always have been, and no matter how long it takes for me to see you again, please, Jacob, don't forget that I love you." That was when I'd had my third but most important realisation of the day. I wasn't going on holiday. I was being sent away. Away from mother. Away from father. Away from Celia. Away from home. Why, I did not know. I thought to myself of the last time I misbehaved. I had got my brand new tailored outfit all muddy in the dell. It could've been because of that. I didn't know. I wished someone would've told me. I looked around for a friendly face, but I couldn't find one. Despite the hundreds of other children on the train with me, I felt all alone.

I tried to make sense of everything that had happened on that day throughout the train journey but I still was confused. It was when I overheard two of the local authority officials talking, things started to make sense, "You know, these children are so ungrateful. All they do is cry or laugh or scream or shout while we work our backs off trying to get them to safety. Hitler could bomb any moment now and the safest place we could put them is in the countryside. All we can do at the moment is have faith in God that this war won't be as brutal as we expect it to be." It made sense now. I was an evacuee escaping the brutal-ness of war.

War. I'd read stories about it. I'd had lessons about it. In fact, not too long ago, I was learning about the Great War in my tutoring lessons with Mr Williams every Tuesday and Thursday. He had told me how around 17 million people had died and how it had changed everyone's lives. I knew how real and serious war was but I never in a million years

would've thought I was going to experience one. I fell asleep in my cramped train seat in the hope that when I woke up again, I would be back in my bed and that this was all one big dream.

It wasn't a dream. I woke up with a start to the muffled sounds of officers bawling, children laughing and the chugging of the train's mechanism dying out. The train had stopped. We had arrived at our destination. Brent Railway Station, the countryside. Moments later, crowds of people surged out of the train doors and oozed onto the platform. Everyone on the platform split into two groups: one with all of the evacuees and officers and the other with folks who live in the country coming to welcome their visitors.

The first thing I noticed was how easy it was to breathe compared to back in London where you could only smell gas and fumes. Whereas here, it was so fresh and there were so many trees and the floor was full of grass. It was beautiful. The country folk handed out refreshments of homemade bread and lemonade. The moment was so joyful and light, it made me think that maybe, just maybe, this trip wouldn't be too bad. We eventually began to distribute ourselves to different people. Some children had arrangements to stay with specific people who were relatives or close friends. Others, like myself, were completely oblivious to who with or where we were going to stay. The country folk had the chance to choose out of a selection of children who they would like to stay with. In only one hour from getting off of the train, one hundred children were given a temporary home. In two hours, almost three hundred children were given a home. In three hours, everyone from my train was given a temporary home, except for me.

I began to worry. I started to think that no one would take me and I would become vulnerable, left to the streets or sent to an orphanage. But to my luck, there was one more person waiting for an evacuee. Her name was Greta. She looked quite old and had thin grey hair, glasses, and was wearing a faded purple dress which reached her ankles. She was disappointed at the fact she couldn't pick which evacuee she wanted but she didn't complain too much. She grabbed my hand very tightly as we walked down the path to her house. Once we reached there, I was taken back by the old woman's house. It was tiny. I couldn't believe it. Inside the house, there were only three rooms: a sitting room which had a small sofa, coffee table and a fireplace with an open top so it could be used for cooking with and keeping the room warm; Greta's bedroom, the largest room in the house; and finally my to-be bedroom. It was smaller than a shed and had nothing in it but a bed and a candleholder. The walls were damp causing the entire room to smell funny. There wasn't even a water closet in the house! When I asked she became really mad at me.

"Greta, where is the water closet?" I asked.

"A water closet! Who do you think I am? Queen Victoria? I can't afford a blooming water closet!" She declared as if I had asked the most ridiculous question in the world.

"So where should I wash and... do my business?" I asked in absolute seriousness.

"My lord! How are you so stupid Jacob? Outside in the privy obviously!" She replied with annoyance running through her tone. I was disgusted at the idea of peeing and washing outside, but I had no choice. I was desperate. I did my business in the hole in the ground outside as discreetly as possible in hope nobody saw me.

It was time for me to go to bed. I walked into my room and almost like it was an instinct, my hand shot out to cover my nose. The smell was vile. If I was going to stay in that room for the next, however long I needed to, I had to do something to eliminate that odour. I climbed onto my bed and went towards the window at the headboard. The window was covered in dust. It looked as if it hadn't been cleaned in years. I unlatched it and pushed it as far as it would go in hope that the clean fresh air would get rid of the damp odour.

"Excuse me! What do you think your doing?" shrieked Greta in absolute distraught after seeing me open the window.

"I was just opening the window. It sort of smells in here." I explained right before Greta hurried out with no response to my explanation. I assumed she simply understood what I had said. She stormed back into the room with a broom in her hand. *That's so nice of her, I thought, she's going to clean the room to get rid of the smell. How wrong was I!*

"It smells, does it? Maybe it won't smell so much after I break your blooming nose!" She screamed as she bashed my face with the broom. "Didn't your mother ever teach you to be grateful! I'm letting you live in my house for no cost and you complain about how it smells!" She continued to lash me. The pain was dreadful. Some parts of me were stinging. Others were completely numb. But by the end of it, I was covered in bruises and sores from head to toe. I soon got dressed into my night gown and went to bed. I wasn't tired, but my body was too sore for me to be able to do anything else. So I lay there in bed and tried to imagine the nightmares I was going to face. I imagined dreadful things. But those dreadful things were nowhere as near as dreadful to what I did have to face during my time with Greta.

Time dragged on, minutes felt like hours, days felt like months and overall, I wasn't enjoying myself. My days were spent on hard labour, beatings and starvation. I ate one meal a day. Usually it was a small bowl of gruel. At first, I hated it. It tasted bland and had an odd texture, but soon later, I was grateful for the fact that I had food in front of me, regardless of what it was. When Greta was really mad, she wouldn't let me sleep inside and wouldn't give me any food. She would make sure I stayed outside on the floor, hungry. She was illiterate so she couldn't teach me my subjects but she didn't allow me to go to the local village school either. Everyday was the same for me. I was to wake up 5:00 am sharp, remove the black-outs from the window, prepare breakfast for Greta and then complete any tasks she had aligned for me whilst she put her legs up. The smallest mistakes sent her berserk. I had tried so hard to please her, to show her my gratitude but always to no avail. I had lost all hope. I wanted to give up. I wanted to end my life. But I didn't. I kept trying. Every bruise, every day I went hungry, everything that once would've brought me down, I turned into a reason to try harder. I slaved away, granting Greta her wishes, putting up with the beatings and starvation and I didn't rebel. I didn't fight back. Why, because the last thing my mother told me was to be a good boy. So I was. I was the best of what I could be. I worked as hard as I could. I hoped God would bless me enough to reunite me with my family once more. However, there was one day every week when I was able to relax, be excused from my torturous life. Sunday. I would go to church on Sunday. Greta made sure I looked presentable on these days. She would put me in a fresh, clean set of clothes before we went to the church but back into my same old, scruffy shorts and top the second we were back. I loved going to church. It was the only time I was allowed out of Greta's tiny premises and out in the open. It was the only time I could wear nice clothes. It was the only time I could think without being interrupted. I enjoyed thinking. Can you tell? Anyways, at church I used to think about mother. I used to think that she was a like a superhero, fighting the Nazis with her bare hands. But in reality, I didn't even know if she was alive. I also used to think of father. For a long time, I didn't know where he had disappeared off to when he left with his weaponry bag. It upset me that he didn't even say good bye. He must've had a good reason, though. Father was the most caring man in the world to me. Whenever he had to go abroad for his work, he would always say good bye to me before he left and then bring me something back once he had returned. It was only until a long time later I learned of fathers whereabouts. And it was devastating.

I had suffered over nine months of misery with Greta. Over nine months of torture, hard labour, starvation. I could go on and on. But those nine months were nothing compared to the news I received on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September 1940. It started off as a regular day. Me completing my chores tired and hungry, but at around 2:00 pm on that day, we had a visitor. This was very unusual as Greta didn't have any family in the area and she didn't talk much to the people in the neighbourhood. Greta answered the door while I continued to clean the chimney. That was my most hated job. I could barely breathe while I was up there and when I was finished, I would be covered in ash. I had just began climbing up the chimney when Greta called me. Something seemed odd. There wasn't a hint of hatred or annoyance in her voice. I ran over to the front door. There was a car parked in front of the house on the street with someone in it. At the door, there were three men. One I assumed was a medic, he was dressed in a long, white jacket with a red cross on his back. Another I assumed was a clergy. He wore a long dress shirt with a clergy collar and chain with a cross around his neck. I was unsure of who the third person could be, but he did all of the talking,

"I have been asked to inform you, Jacob Jones, that your father, Robert Jones, has been reported dead in South Hallsville School, Agate Street, Canning Town, London, at 03:00 am on September 10<sup>th</sup> 1940." My heart was racing. I felt dizzy. I

had so many questions. *Why? How?* I didn't believe it. I thought this was all a bad dream. I thought I could pinch myself awake. I pinched my arm over and over. I wasn't waking up. It wasn't a dream. It was real. As real as could be. The man continued to explain, "He was on patrol and had a mission to evacuate the mothers and children from the area. Unfortunately, while he was at the school where everyone had gathered, the building was bombed by the Nazis. So far, seventy-seven bodies have been found and your father is one of them. On the behalf of the Secretary of Defence, I extend to you and your family my deepest sympathy." My head was spinning. My vision and hearing became blurry. Everything went black.

I woke up on the sofa breathing really fast as someone was leaning over me checking my heart rate. I eventually recognised the person being the medic who was at the door earlier on. That was when I remembered. Father was dead. I tried to hold back my tears but I felt too tired to fight with myself. So I lay there, silently crying. The medic stepped away and the clergy came forward.

"My son, I understand your pain," he began to explain. His voice was gentle and soothing, "when I was a little boy, slightly younger than you, my mother had passed away. I was in bits, devastated. But my father told me something very important. Something that helped me. It didn't take away the pain, but it helped. He said that it's okay to be upset but you should remember that he will always be with you. If not physically, then he will be with you from heaven, watching over you and he wouldn't want to see you upset." A small smile covered my frown. I stopped crying.

"Sir, thank you for your advice," I said before turning to the medic, "thank you for looking after me after I passed out," I then turned to the third person, I realised he was a death notifier, "and thank you for informing me of this."

"It's okay, Jacob. Anyways are you feeling better now?" asked the medic. I told him I was okay.

As soon as they had left, Greta was back to her old monstrous self. I was convinced she had no soul. She told me to return to cleaning the chimney. And for the first time in my life, I refused to do as she said.

"No."

"I'm sorry, what did you just say?!" She bellowed, anger bubbling through her.

"No, I said. I am done with you and your ridiculous commands! I just found out my father's dead and you don't care one bit" I said, getting more and more confident. I just hoped that mother would forgive me, but I had hope she would understand why I was doing this.

"That's it! Come here you little-"

I ran. I ran as fast as I could. First to the kitchen to quickly grab some oats and money and then straight out of the door. It wasn't too long until I had lost her. She was old so she got tired very quickly. I ran to the train station where I had come on the day I was evacuated. 'Brent Railway Station' I gave the man at the counter all the money I had with me in hope it was enough. It was! I bought my ticket and caught the first train back to London. It was once I had gotten off the train at Waterloo Station when I realised, I didn't have a plan. I knew I was going to go home but I didn't know how. When I was evacuated, mother had called a taxi but this time I didn't have any money. So I walked. I walked for hours through London and with the help of strangers, I found my way to the end of the street of which I once lived on. I gasped and took a step back. One of the houses was completely obliterated. The roof was nowhere to be seen and half of the house had no walls. I started to think that the same had happened to our house and that everyone was dead. Mother, Celia. But I didn't give up. I continued to walk down the street and began to feel more positive about the situation. I couldn't see any other houses that were destroyed like the first one. Eventually I had reached my house. Home. To my luck, it was still in one piece and wasn't in one way damaged. From the outside, at least. I took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

No one was answering the door. Butterflies began to fly in my stomach. I became anxious and the dreadful feeling that they were all dead returned. Then someone opened the door. I exhaled. I hadn't realised I was holding my breath. It was Celia. After seeing my face, she stood there in shock. I couldn't tell if she was happy or not. Her face was neutral.

"J... J... Jacob!" She spat out, her expression still neutral. "C... c... come in. What are you doing here? Never mind. S... s... sit down. I'll go get your mother."

*Thank you God, thank you so much for keeping mother alive. And Celia.* I thought to myself as I sat down in the lounge. I hadn't realised how badly I missed home. Mother soon came running down the stairs and the second I saw her I ran too. We hugged each other in silence. We hugged for a very long time. I didn't want to let go. I breathed in her lavender scent. It felt so good to see her again.

"Jacob, Jacob, my love it's so good to see you again. Wait. Why are you back? How did you get back? Are you alright? What happened?" She exclaimed all in one go. So I gave her answers I told her how I lived for the last nine months. I told her how I was mistreated. I told her about father. I told her everything and just like I thought, she understood, she wasn't angry at me in the slightest bit, in fact she was happy I decided to return. She already knew about father and we talked about him for a long time. Not about his death, but about all of the good things he had achieved in his life. And yes I knew that a brutal war was still going on, I knew that my father was dead, and I knew I would probably end up having to be evacuated again but that moment was one of the happiest moments of my life.

*The End*