

J.G. KELLY

The White Lie

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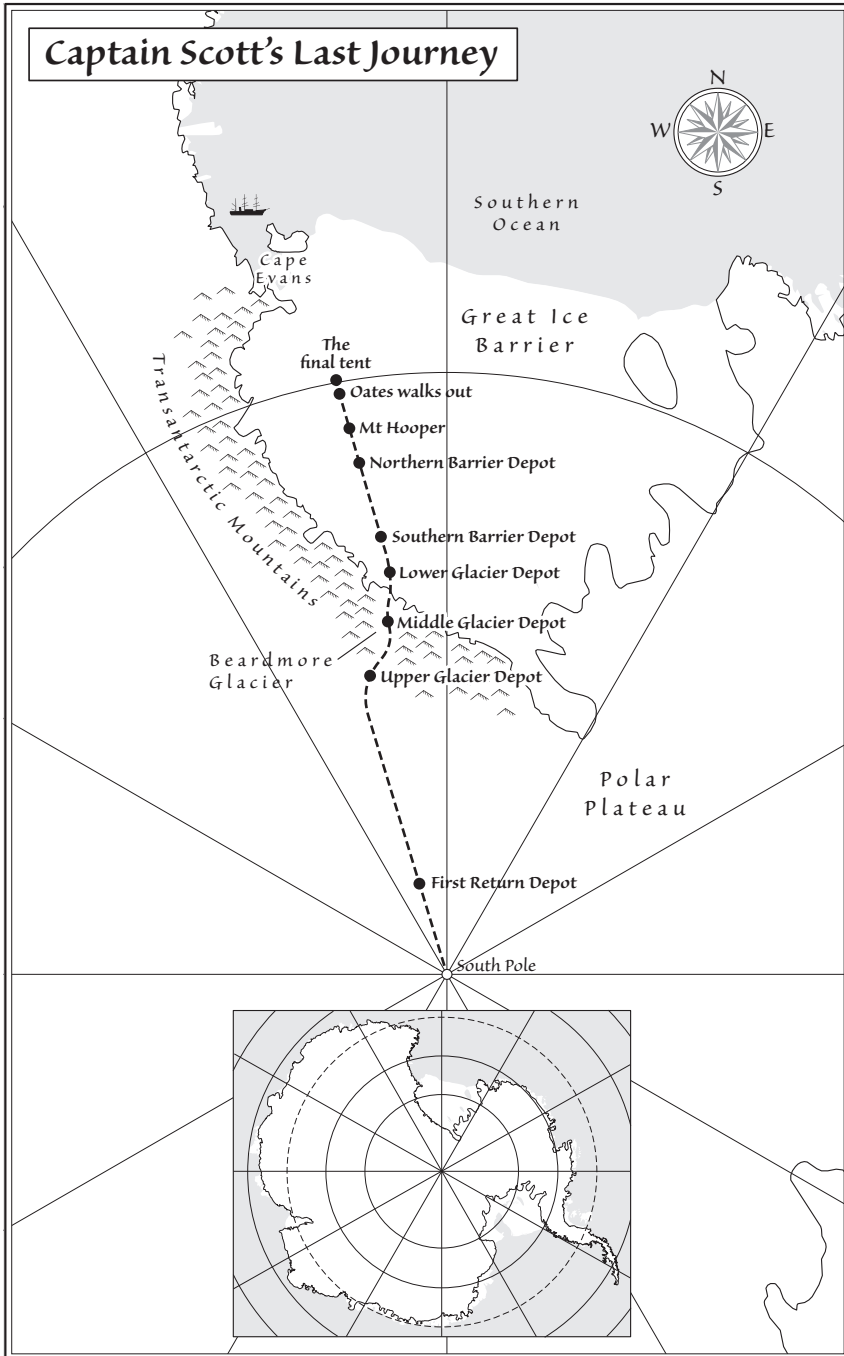
Author's Note

This book is fiction, but its roots lie in these two great journeys into desolate worlds. The story I wanted to tell – about a child orphaned by war and inspired by heroes – is founded in history, but I have altered, or invented, elements of the past freely in terms of place, time, and character, but always in the interests of drama, clarity and pace. The overriding consideration is to allow the reader *to be there* – at the moment of defeat, and the moment of triumph. For those of us who have not been to the moon, or the South Pole, I hope the book provides two, unforgettable, journeys of the mind.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE
1912

THE FINAL PARTY FOR THE POLE

Robert Falcon Scott – *The Owner* – captain, RN
Edward Wilson – *Uncle Bill* – chief scientist, doctor
Lawrence Oates – *Soldier, Titus* – captain, Inniskilling Guards
Edgar Evans – *Taffy* – petty officer, RN
Henry Bowers – *Birdie* – lieutenant, RIMS



Prologue

November 10, 1912, ten miles south of One Ton Depot on the Great Ice Barrier, Antarctica.

Twelve men had set out to find the dead, fittingly, as they were all in some way apostles.

Under their feet was the sea ice, which shuddered and groaned, as if the bones of a giant were flexing with the arrival of spring. Each crash and boom of shearing ice became the plaything of echo, the thunder of gunfire.

Apsley Cherry-Garrard – Cherry to all – felt as if they were marching too late to join a lost battle.

With the others he pulled a sledge along the well-trodden path south, an arrow's flight, marked by cairns, and depots, and the makeshift graves of ponies and dogs. Unless a blizzard had blown them off course, or they'd died in the glassy depths of a glacier, Scott and his men lay ahead, in their own tomb.

Since they'd last been seen alive, dragging their sledge away into an infinity of white, six months of polar night had come and gone. The depthless hush of the Barrier's winter had fallen over them. They could not be alive.

Cherry looked at his boots, hauling, the miles passing. He thought about what lay ahead: the five dead men. He didn't think about the life he'd once had: the family estate, tradesmen's bills, lawyers, dinner tables, tea parties, church towers, chalk streams, distant views of the Hertfordshire hills. This white world was simpler, a reduction, a blank page on which stories could be written.

The only thing that mattered was character. Which made him fear all the more what might lie ahead for him: if they

found what he suspected they'd find he'd be revealed as a coward, damned, disgraced.

Then, just ten and three-quarter miles beyond One Ton, according to the sledgometer, Silas Wright, one of the scientists, said the four words that stopped Cherry's heart for a beat.

'It is the tent.'

It was a hundred yards east of the path. A mound of snow, a shadow lengthening as the day died.

Atkinson – who was their leader now – approached. Then Gran – the ski expert – brushed aside the snow at the summit and revealed the green fabric.

Cherry, immobile, felt the ice rising, seeking his heart.

He'd been sent out to meet Scott and his men at One Ton Depot eight months earlier. There had been no sign of them, but he hadn't waited long, hadn't risked another twenty miles. Bowed by the first storm of winter, he'd turned for home.

If they'd died here while he'd stood peering – short-sighted – into that tumbling blizzard the world would know he might have saved their lives. That would be his place in history: the man who'd let Scott die.

It wasn't by design, but the others stood back, Cherry apart – the accused before a jury of his equals.

Atkinson began to move snow from the entrance – a short tunnel that provided an airlock of sorts to retain heat and repel ice.

As he worked, a silence deepened. The sun was about 20 degrees above the horizon, edging west, accompanied by a pair of parhelion – 'mock suns' – which shone to left and right, each a smudge of light, refracted through ice crystals, scraps of rainbow. But the men looking on saw, for the first and last time on that continent, a third parhelion, above the sun, so that a cross shimmered in the sky, driven into the ice.

Cherry looked away, his poor weak eyes glazed with tears, hidden behind his snow goggles.

Atkinson called for help. There was only one shovel. Gwynne, the stoic Cornishman, stepped forward with the rolling gait of the fisherman, made the sign of the cross, then began to dig.

Metal cut through ice, jarring and visceral.

Atkinson got down on his knees and disappeared inside the tent.

They all bowed their heads.

When he came out they knew the truth. His shoulders slumped and a hand rose to remove his cap.

‘It’s them,’ he said, his words set against a perfect stillness. ‘Three – The Owner and two others. I can’t see their faces.’

Scott was always The Owner to his men.

Atkinson beckoned. ‘Cherry. I need you here.’

He walked to the tent, took off his goggles and, kneeling down, followed Atkinson along the short tunnel.

It was the moment he felt that his whole life might be a failure.

It was a grave, but it did not smell of the grave. It was a metallic empty void, full of the iron of rock and the salt of the air and the thin, lifeless reek of dead ice.

‘There’s no hint of decay,’ said Atkinson, half standing in the green gloom.

The low tent was touching their heads, and they had to clutch each other to keep upright.

As their eyes got used to the light, Atkinson crossed himself.

Cherry looked down: three bodies, but only one face visible, that of Scott in the middle.

Edging forward Atkinson undid the sleeping-bags to reveal Bowers to the left, and Wilson to the right.

‘God, the skin,’ said Cherry.

The bodies were yellow, and slightly desiccated, but the flesh looked pliable and not at all mummified. Their eyes were milky and had – a little – fallen away.

In one hand Scott held a slim blood-red notebook, while with the other he'd pulled open his jacket to expose the shirt beneath, the hand coming to rest on Wilson's arm.

'What's he doing?' asked Atkinson.

'He's daring death to take him,' said Cherry. 'I think he was alone, Atch. At the end. And death didn't come – he hastened it, and it took him. He knew we'd find him. It's a message for us. That he led to the end.'

Atkinson, kneeling, pointed at the notebook.

The cover carried a message: 'For Cherry's eyes only'.

Atkinson tried to prise the notebook from Scott's grip. There was a crack – like a pistol shot – and the hand was free. The arm, brittle with ice, had shattered at the bone.

Cherry was sickened by the noise, an audible glimpse of the hell into which he felt he was about to fall.

'I'll get the men to pitch camp. Take as long as you want,' said Atkinson, bending forward to retrieve from under Scott's shoulder the document bag, which would hold the dead men's diaries.

'Atch – wait. Please.'

They stood, eyes meeting.

'Can you check the last date in the diary, Atch? When did they get here? When did they die?'

Atkinson's fingers were stiff from the cold and it took a tumbling minute for him to open the satchel and retrieve Scott's diary, which he held as if it was a holy book. He turned the pages, searching for the last entry. 'They got here on March the twenty-first. Last entry March the twenty-ninth.' Atkinson managed a thin smile: 'They didn't get this far until eleven days after you left One Ton for home, Cherry – you couldn't have helped.'

He flicked back to 10 March, the day Cherry had turned away, back towards the ship at Cape Evans. 'They were

sixty miles south,' he said, putting a hand on Cherry's shoulder, then slipping out of the tent on hands and knees.

Alone, Cherry wept, because it was not the worst. But if he'd gone further, he could have laid stores. Perhaps they would have lived longer. No blame – no public blame – would fall on him. He'd done the right thing, but he knew he hadn't done the glorious thing. And even now this small grain of guilt was growing, blooming, taking shape.

In the green light he opened the notebook. The first page held only a message.

Cherry,

There's no time for sentimentality, but I hope you'll understand me when I say I wished you'd been with us on the final push. This notebook is for you. I trust you. We all trust you. Read it, keep it secret. If the truth is known now it could bring war. Hand a copy – in person – to Sir Edward Whyte at the Foreign Office. The diaries in the bag tell the truth, but not the whole truth. The world will clamour for our story. Give them the diaries.

I was warned before we sailed, Cherry. We've been hunted down. Murdered, in the coldest of blood.

Vengeance – we lived for it, until we could live no more.

Keep the original safe.

For God's sake find the truth.

Robert Falcon Scott

ONE
NORTH

I

February 1947: Lamer House, Hertfordshire

Blossom, the grey pony, delivered her foal at dusk on the night of the great party.

Mr Potts, the groom, ran with the news from the stables to the house through a thickening blizzard, thudding against the kitchen door, bursting into the fug of heat and firelight, a cloud of steam rising from the range. Candles stood on every surface. The cook kept her wide back turned, attending to pans, while two girls – brought in from the village for the night – sat peeling vegetables.

‘It’s a colt,’ he announced, breathless, taking off his cap. All ponies, and all dogs, were named by order of the lord of the manor, so that each animal was – at least to him – a living reminder of former companions, who now lay in shallow icy graves in the Antarctic wastes, despatched by a gunshot wound to the skull. A typed list of designated names, in order, was nailed to the post of the foaling stall.

‘Mr Cherry will want the news,’ he said, to a boy standing by the fire in short trousers and stockinged feet. ‘Go and find Barton, Falcon. Tell him Blossom is well and the colt’s name is Bones.’

Falcon was afraid of Barton, largely because it was said the master now insisted the butler slept with a gun under his pillow, his appointed night-time role being watchman at Lamer House.

Falcon looked down at the holes in his socks. Mr Potts walked over and ruffled his hair. ‘Jump to it – there might be

sixpence in it. You'll probably find Barton in the dining room - he'll tell the master.'

Six steps took Falcon up to the corridor, which led past the brewhouse, through the green baize door, and into the hallway, where the Christmas tree had stood only a few weeks before. There was a large chandelier, with electric bulbs, that now hung useless, its intricate branches deep in shadow.

He moved silently over the black-and-white tiles to the open doors of the dining room, where light flickered.

He had not been heard, so he took off his cap, and Barton caught the slight noise in the quiet room.

'I'm busy. It'll have to wait,' he said, ping-ponging a crystal glass with his index finger.

He'd fought in the Great War, and at church parade wore a line of medals. Falcon always imagined him on sentry duty, trudging along a trench, untroubled by bullets overhead. 'Blossom's had her foal,' he said. 'Mr Potts said the master wanted to know when the time came.'

Barton had moved on to examine his reflection in a fish knife.

'It's a colt called Bones,' said Falcon, doggedly.

A sudden squall of icy snow rattled the sash windows and all the candles fidgeted. Barton froze, the knife an inch above the linen, as if waiting for another sound. The electric lights came on, and they heard a muffled cheer from the kitchen. Then they flickered out again.

'Mr Attlee's government has decreed that light must be rationed, like everything else,' added Barton. 'It's put us all behind the clock tonight. If we don't get electricity I fear we'll struggle to keep up appearances. We've got ten for dinner - eleven if *he* makes an appearance, which he won't. The first car's gone down to the station.'

It was the third week of what the wireless called the Great Freeze, and power cuts had left them with no electricity for

hours and gas lights that guttered and failed. Falcon often listened to adult conversations, and they had begun to follow a predictable path: this was, they all agreed, ‘worse than the war’.

‘Ten years ago half the village was in service at Lamer. Now look at us,’ Barton said. He surveyed the room as if he could see the glittering past.

Falcon had heard the stories of Lamer’s glorious years many times.

The master was an explorer, who’d gone with Captain Scott to conquer the South Pole. He’d come home to write a book about his adventures, and famous people came to see him: politicians, and writers, and other explorers.

Barton gave the boy a candle in a pewter dish.

‘You can run an errand – even in your socks. Off you go. Through the drawing room, third door on the left. He doesn’t bite.’

Falcon crossed the hallway and gently pushed open the drawing-room door. The flickering candle caught several mirrors, which reflected the flame, and his own half-lit image: a six-year-old boy, with unruly hair and pale hands, clutching pewter and cap. Clocks, poorly wound (lack of staff again), fell into line behind their master in the hallway, striking seven.

Beyond the far door was a panelled corridor, which reeked of wet dog. The master kept Labradors. The current pair were Deek and Hohol. Falcon was fascinated by the way in which the master commanded their loyalty but never seemed to show them affection. They simply dogged his heels, always in his wake, edging closer if he sat on a stile, or a wicker chair on the lawn.

The interior of the house – beyond the servants’ wing and the cellars – was a hidden place, only glimpsed through French windows, or beyond a slowly closing door. There was just one occasion when the kitchen and stable staff were

allowed above stairs. On Christmas Eve all the servants gathered in the hallway under the chandelier as presents were, by tradition, given out by the master, although this year Mr Cherry was 'under the weather' – Falcon noted that this news was received with sly looks.

He put his ear to the third door along the corridor and listened.

Mr Cherry-Garrard had been ill since late autumn. The true nature of this 'illness' was never openly discussed, certainly not in the stables, although Falcon had witnessed several whispered conversations peter out at his arrival. A police constable had been called on one occasion when it was reported the master had seen German parachutists in the park – a startling concept several months after the village party that had celebrated VE Day. There had been other, frenzied, periods in which the house was searched from attic to wine cellar, while the young mistress – always *Lady* Angela – took herself out for long walks. Mr Cherry abandoned his usual pursuits: foxhunting, shooting and the church. Sudden journeys were undertaken to their new flat in London. The servants' hall was full of whispers about a place called Harley Street. And then the master returned, looking older, startled by familiar faces. Doctors from London called, and lawyers, and even one man in a top hat.

Then, one day before Christmas, Mr and Mrs George Bernard Shaw arrived from Ayot, walking up the path of poplar trees. (Falcon always wondered why a woman would be called George, let alone Bernard.) Mr Shaw was famous, and Falcon had seen his picture in the paper one day because Mr Potts had torn out the page and left it for his wife to read. Mr Shaw had written a play called *Pygmalion* and it was to be 'revived' in the West End – whatever that meant. He asked Mr Potts what the play was about and was simply told it illustrated the virtues of speaking properly.

For a while the Shaws visited almost every day. The master was never seen, but a Bath chair arrived from Harrods (a detail provided by Cook), and a bed was moved downstairs into the library.

The intervention of the Shaws, or possibly the retreat of the men in suits from London, seemed to coincide with the passing of some kind of crisis in the master's mind. Nevertheless, Barton told everyone that peace and quiet had been prescribed and must be maintained.

So, Falcon didn't knock, but edged open the door.

The room was warm, foetid and medicinal. There was a fire in the grate but no other light. Dimly, Falcon could see that the walls were covered with books. There was a camp bed, the counterpane taut, unruffled. There was a draught, but not from the door. It seemed to be slipping in through a large bay window, obscured by heavy curtains. Beside the fire was a wing-backed chair, and Falcon could just see a foot in a slipper on the edge of the hearth. And then a hand appeared, holding a cigarette, and rested on the arm, and a plume of smoke filled the air above, like a ghost.

‘Sir,’ said Falcon, as he’d been taught.

The dogs padded out of the shadows and nuzzled his knees.

‘What is it?’

The boy had seen the master often, usually at a distance, but he’d heard him many times, because he called to the dogs, and the gardeners, and if they had guests in summer everyone else kept quiet so that he could speak. His voice was familiar, a voice of authority certainly, but kind, and intermittently uncertain, and even youthful – at least to Falcon’s ear.

This was the same voice, but it seemed to come from a different place.

He walked up to the fire and turned to deliver the news. The shock of seeing Mr Cherry’s face made him take a step back because for a few tumbling heartbeats he thought it was an impostor. His skin was puffy and blotched. His eyes were still pale blue, but the whites were rheumy and pink. His jaw had slumped, revealing his teeth, which had often signalled a white, sudden smile when he waved to his wife. But now

they were yellow, and cracked, and Falcon could see that wires had been inserted to hold them together.

There was a glass of whisky on a small table and Mr Cherry's unseen hand emerged, moving towards it, then retreated quickly.

'It's Falcon, isn't it?' he asked.

It occurred to the boy then that when he'd been born in the stable cottage there'd been a list of names on hand for the doctor, as there had been for the vet.

'Yes, sir.'

The invalid closed his eyes then, and Falcon sensed this was because of the effort expended in asking the question and processing the answer. Mr Cherry was wrapped in a soft blanket, but it was clear his posture was rigid, as if he'd been bound to the chair with iron rings.

'Blossom had her foal, sir. It's called Bones.'

Mr Cherry's eyes opened, and he let out a gasp, as if suddenly coming up for air.

'Shall I get the mistress?' said Falcon, turning on his heels.

Cherry shook his head: 'No. I was asleep. Stay, please.'

This time his hand encircled the glass and he sipped the whisky, resting the tumbler on his chest. The 'please' had confused Falcon, who was used to doing as he was told.

'It's a colt, then?'

'Yes. Sir.'

'Have they found you a bed yet, young Falcon Grey?' asked Cherry.

'In the cottage, sir. The box.'

'I bet the tack room was more fun.'

Falcon was lost for words. It had never occurred to him that Mr Cherry knew anything about him. The master closed his eyes again, so Falcon simply sat down on the hearthrug by the dogs. He felt certain that, as he had not been dismissed, he should stay, in case there was a message to take.

Mr Cherry was right, of course. The tackle room *had* been fun. Falcon's mother, heavily pregnant, had been evacuated to Lamer in the first weeks of the war. The estate had taken several families and space was scarce, so they'd been given the old tackle room below the hayloft at Home Farm. Falcon had been born in October, at dusk, just in time to greet the first winter snow. At night they'd stood silently with the rest of the staff watching the red sky flicker over the East End of London. His mother helped in the kitchen (her London specialities were a regular source of wonder – especially bubble and squeak), and his father picked up work as a farm hand. Later, looking back, the simple word 'Lamer' was always the cue for reminiscence and anecdotes. He remembered two scenes at first-hand – remarkably both from his second birthday: he was sitting on one of Mr Cherry's ponies, and remembered seeing the world between the small, furry ears of Snippets. Later there'd been a cake and he remembered sitting, possibly for the first time, at the long servants' table. The cake was Simnel, with marzipan balls.

The idyll couldn't last. His father was a clerk at one of the breweries off The Cut at Waterloo, and farm labouring on the Lamer estate was poorly paid. The German air raids had subsided, so they'd returned to the house in New Cross. His sister, Edie, was born a year later. The family had a one-bedroom flat in a tall Victorian house on Pepys Road, which ran down to the busy thoroughfare of the London to Dover highway, or up to the green fields of Nunhead and Telegraph Hill. At the foot of the hill a bookshop was run by Uncle Pat, who wasn't an uncle at all but one of his father's 'comrades'.

Their entire flat would have fitted into Lamer's dining room. His parents slept with Edie, while he had a bed set up each night in the kitchen by the fire. His mother was a cleaner at the posh school on Telegraph Hill. Edie and Falcon were looked after by a neighbour called Aunty May, who wasn't

an aunty either. The war was exciting, memories of Lamer faded, and when the rocket attacks began he plotted them on a Tube map of London pinned up in the kitchen. He even heard one – a doodle-bug – flying over the river. That was the trick of it: if you could hear the engine you were safe. When it cut out you had to run for your life. The rocket was called a V1, and their teacher said that the V stood for Victory, but Falcon's father – a great reader of newspapers – said that was nonsense: the V was for Vengeance.

Then the V2s started. These travelled faster than the sound they made, so they struck in silence, the only warning being the rush of wind they pushed ahead of the nose cone. Then came the shock-wave – which was what really did the damage, because the rocket was as tall as a house and crashed at thousands of miles an hour. In the playground the boys never stopped talking about the rockets. They said that when doctors opened up the victims – who were untouched on the outside – they found their insides destroyed, like butcher's offal. Falcon tried not to think about the reality of this, that something could kill you and you'd be gone before you knew the end of your life was approaching. It seemed unfair, cruel, as if the rocket could steal your life. His father had the right word: 'underhand'.

The Germans couldn't really aim the rockets – the target was London, and they even missed that. Then one came down on the other side of Lewisham – half a mile away – and the shock left cracks in the ceiling of the bedroom. The woman across the road, who was deaf, screamed for an hour. And the cat, Midnight, disappeared but came back after a week. The picture in the paper showed the crater, full of water from a burst main. It was like the Blitz, and people wanted to go back to the countryside where it was safe. At school there were more and more empty desks. One evening his father sat down at the table and wrote a letter to Mr Potts

asking him to enquire on the family's behalf if they could return to Lamer for what they all now called the Duration. This time his father would stay behind. He'd send money, keep an eye on the flat, and feed the cat. At weekends he'd get the train to Hertford, and then the bus. That was the plan.

The next morning was a Saturday and Falcon remembered his mother singing at the sink. His father, who was on shift work, came home at eleven, had his lunch of toast and dripping, and went to bed for a nap. His mother went too, taking the baby, and Falcon was sent out to post the letter to Lamer. His mother gave him a threepenny bit for a stamp – and said he could spend the ha'penny change on sweets. He was told not to dawdle, because his father didn't want to sleep too long. Falcon promised: in return his mother said that they'd all go to the park for a treat. As he left the house Falcon could smell a bread pudding baking in the oven – which must have used a month's worth of their coupons from their ration book – so they might take that to the park and eat it from the warm tin on a blanket. As he took his cap from the peg on the door he looked at the clock on the mantelpiece: it was eleven twenty-five. If he ran they'd be in the park by just after noon, and the tea hut would be open.

Looking back, that day was a jigsaw puzzle with pieces missing. The last thing he remembered before the first blank was running down the stairs, jumping half the last flight and landing with a crash on the bare boards. This was forbidden, and he regretted it immediately, because his family were all in bed trying to have a nap. He sat on the floor listening to the silence, expecting to hear his father call him back for a reprimand. His father never hit him, but the dressing-downs were relentless and often made him cry. But nobody called out that last Saturday morning. He'd sat there, clutching his knees, hoping he wouldn't hear their voices.

He'd wanted silence – he'd wished for it.

He didn't recall going down Pepys Road at all, which was odd. Then, without any memories in between, he was in the post office at New Cross at the back of a short queue for a stamp. He posted the letter in one of the copper letterboxes in the wall outside, briefly checking the name and address in his father's neat copperplate hand:

Mr William Potts
C/o Lamer House,
Wheathampstead,
Hertfordshire.

The High Road was busy, so he ran in the gutter, because the pavements were full. He passed the New Cross Tavern and saw through the etched window a bar full of Millwall fans, decked out in scarves. It had begun to rain, which made the pavements smell like Lamer, fresh and green. He remembered his shoes slapping on the ground as he ran across the road, jumping the tram lines.

The sweet shop was called Tapton's. It had a bell attached to the door and it always took the shop assistant, the owner's grown-up daughter, a minute to appear. She came through the hanging bead curtain and he was going to ask for a Milky Way but his ears popped and he saw the girl saying something he didn't hear: pocket money then? He often wondered, later, how far above his head the V2 rocket was at that moment. It was falling, a deadweight, so perhaps a hundred feet. He thought if he'd been out in the street he might have looked up and seen it – they said they were blue and white, with fins and a silver nose.

Instead, he saw the window flex, the street scene outside – a bus passing, two delivery boys on bicycles, a line of cars – shifting slightly left to right. There was a dray horse on the

far side of the road and he remembered it was spooked, its head madly shaking, its front hoofs off the ground. The shop was opposite Woolworth's and the next thing was the impact, which he heard through his bones, and which threw him against the back wall.

The normal laws of nature stopped working: he was dazed, but conscious, and pinned against the wall, but his feet weren't on the ground, which was impossible. The soundtrack caught up: he heard the scream of the rocket accelerating towards the ground, then the explosion, and then the visceral rumble of the shock-wave. Over the road the four-storey façade of Woolworth's was collapsing in slow motion, the blast travelling out, destroying the Co-op next door and buckling the surface of the road. He actually saw this, just for a moment, the road turning itself into a twisting ribbon of tar, like a skipping-rope. The smell of gas was very bad, and there was water in the air too – gushing out of the road, flying out of a wall opposite – a stream, full of silver light. Bells were ringing, and rubble falling, but with each passing second a silence was gathering itself up to cover everything.

Two cars, trundling, crashed head-on in the middle of the High Road, and both drivers fled, but in opposite directions. Fires were burning in the ruins of Woolworth's. One blazed with a livid blue light and a hiss. What sounds there were seemed to be fading away, as if his head had been plunged below the waterline in the tin bath at home. The pressure on his ears was painful, and he could feel something warm trickling out of his nose and into his mouth. He was on his feet now, but his legs gave way and he knelt down in the broken glass.

The air in the shop had been blown away, and replaced with a soupy mist laden with debris, flowing very slowly, murky and studded with brick dust and glass and splintered wood, all of it drifting out into the street through the shattered windows. It was taking him with the current, as if he'd

been embedded, a piece of flotsam. He felt calm, detached, and even recalled being relieved that he'd posted the letter before the rocket struck.

Then there was another gap in his memory, because he was suddenly outside the town hall, a hundred yards up the road, standing by a lamppost that had been bent backwards, like a slingshot ready to be fired. He remembered looking up at the town-hall clock and seeing that the hands were twisted but had stopped at twelve twenty-five. Which couldn't be right. He'd lost nearly an hour of his life. Where had he been? What had he done?

His five-year-old body had begun to betray him: his knees shook, and his shorts were wet. Out on the pavement an ARP warden looked at him, then turned and jogged away, each stride leaving him airborne for longer than possible. In the shop everything had been muddy – all the colours muted – but in the street everything was vivid, and he saw now that his hands were red with blood, but he wasn't sure it was his blood. He remembered thinking he should go back to the shop, go behind the counter and help Miss Tapton, but it was too late.

A few people were dead, lying in the rubble, their arms and legs set at impossible angles. He wove a path through them, keeping his distance. He saw pieces of meat on the pavement and knew what they really were but he didn't let the words form in his head. Some people weren't dead or alive at all – they'd just come to a full stop. A bus – the number 12 to London Bridge – had hit a drinking fountain on the pavement. It was full of Saturday shoppers and they were still all in their seats, with their hats on, sitting up nicely. Falcon walked up to the side of the bus and a man was looking out of the window, a cigarette in his mouth, the smoke trickling over his face, which was perfectly composed – even amused – but his eyes were open with a fixed

stare. The woman who sat beside him was crying into her hands, but he didn't move, or even turn to her.

Everything was happening too quickly, but in slow motion. Sound came back in a rush, and the air was full of sirens and bells, and the fall of masonry, which prompted clouds of dust that billowed out suddenly, obscuring the view east towards Greenwich. He could see for nearly half a mile along the road. All the traffic had stopped, and people were standing around, or looking up into the sky. A nurse wrapped a bandage around Falcon's head and asked where he lived, which seemed to unlock something inside him, and he started to run home, although there were shouts for him to come back. A man in overalls tried to catch hold of him, but he skipped past, nearly out of breath, ran up the High Road and then into Pepys Road. All he wanted to do was tell his father what had happened. He'd demand details, facts, observations. He might be a brewery worker, but he had what he called 'an interest in the wider world'. Twice a week he attended the Workers' Educational Settlement – an old house beyond the cemetery where he took classes in politics and literature. He told Falcon that it was his duty – even aged five – to understand 'the times we live in', not to let them slip past. The thought that he could recount the rocket attack to the family partly offset the guilt he felt at being late.

He could see that the first few houses in Pepys Road were gone, just the basements left, the bricks and windows and roof tiles blown across the street. As he looked up the road he saw the façade of one house slump into its small front garden, then break, like a wave, over the wall and spill across the street. When he got to number 14 the damage didn't seem too bad, although the front door was missing, and Edie's pram was out in the street, blown there from the front step, yellow flames gently playing within it. There were small fires everywhere, and ash was falling, pieces of paper alight

and twisting. A woman opposite, who took in washing, was standing at her gate crying into a dishcloth. A man in an old suit carrying a milk can was wandering along the pavement on the far side whistling, but Falcon could see his trouser was torn, and his leg bloody.

He pushed open the front door and ran up the stairs – noting that while the carpet was unmarked the brass runners, which kept each step in place, had been pulled out, the nails scattered. There was a big crack in the wall and somewhere water was running freely. He fell over on the landing and when he got up he realised the house was on a tilt, leaning downhill. His parents' bedroom was at the front and he'd seen from the street that the window was still in place, but because it was a rule of the house he knocked three times, and then he used his voice for the first time since the blast.

'Mum?'

He heard the word inside his head but had no idea if it had come out of his mouth.

He opened the door and there they were, his mother on her side, always the right, by the alarm clock, his father on the left, and Edie between them, lying on a pillow. His mother was staring at the clock, his father the ceiling. Edie had such small eyes he couldn't tell what had caught her attention in that last second – but it was probably the sunlight, jittering, when the plane tree outside blew in the wind of the blast. He didn't feel a lot. The emotion he remembered was a stubborn sadness, which he knew would never go away – sadness at being left behind. It was as if they'd all simply gone out – the promised outing to the park perhaps – and forgotten to take him along.

He heard his own voice, and knew what he was going to say, even though he knew it was a mistake.

'I'm sorry I'm late.'

There was no echo in the room, but something about the ring of his voice made him go cold.

'I lost the time.' This was a phrase his mother often used, which reminded him he'd broken his promise.

He just wanted to lie down, to curl up at the foot of the bed. He didn't think about what had happened, but about a school outing, to Greenwich, where they'd had a picnic on the grass slope below the Observatory. They'd walked along the Meridian, which is where time begins. Falcon was pretty sure he couldn't make time go backwards, except in memories, but he finally fell asleep hoping that when he woke up his mother would be making up the coke fire.

Some neighbours and a fireman found him at dusk. He couldn't speak, and even now, more than a year later, he still felt left behind.