

Home Front.

The key opening the corned beef can jammed. It left a thin ploughed strip of meat that ran two-thirds the way around and a thin spring of razor-sharp metal.

Betty cursed and sucked her thumb.

'Careful Mum, don't get any blood in the hash.'

'It's alright Peter. Might make it go a bit further. One tin to last the week and all me ration coupons gone.'

'Can I stop mashing now?'

'Certainly darling. I tell you what, nip down to the allotment and get grandad to pull some of his blessed carrots. They'll go well with this.'

Peter shot out of the back door, nipped through the gap where the railings, now part of a hurricane once stood and raced the hundred yards to the allotment.

Peter banged on the shed door. 'Grandad, Mum wants you to pull some carrots for tea. Can I help?'

'Of course. Fetch me my fork.'

Peter led the way, down past the apple tree. He dodged in and out of the neat furrows, the tines of the fork grazing the fennel fonds, their rousing aroma, igniting recollections of the newsagents on the corner and it's once bursting sweet shelves. When was the last time he'd sucked an aniseed ball down to the pip?

'That's me Boy, stick it in nice and deep, then wiggle like a worm. Shake those carrots free. There you go, four, five, the full half dozen.'

Peter held the greens and shook the bunch. Rich dark earthiness rained down onto his sandals, leaving a bright orange swathe of taproots swinging in the wind.

'Careful, your Mother will kill us both if you get mud on your socks.'

They both laughed as Peter kicked the earth back into the newly vacated plot.

Their laughter died as the pulse and growl of an engine grew from the South.

'Grandad, a doodlebug.'

'I know Son. Let's hope it keeps going. Falls on some other unlucky sod.'

'Keep going.' Peter repeated, one hand shielding the sun as he squinted to see the rocket, the other flapping it away.

Peter reached for his Granddad's hand and squeezed time still. The high summer drone of bees harvesting nectar froze.

Peter counted. He'd argued with his friends at school only the day before that it took a count of five from when the engine stopped to the explosion. They insisted on six.

Dust filled his nose. Ringing his ears. Five. He was right and with carrots still in one hand, raced home holding on tight to Granddad.

The newsagents had received a direct hit. Definitely no more sweets. Peter looked at his own house. The front door was hanging on its hinges and all the windows were crazed but held in place by crisscross tape.

'Mum?'

A man in RAF Blue staggered down the garden path, Mum in his arms.

No, it couldn't be?

'It's OK, your Mum's just got a few cuts and bruises.'

Peter gawked.

His Granddad soothed. 'It's alright Son. Your Dad's home.'