

The Paperboy extract from Chapter 3

The Paperboy Extract – *Chapter Three*

Col would go round once knocking on doors on a Friday and then, if it wasn't too late, he'd go round once more to catch up with anyone who hadn't been in earlier. He'd even call round early on a Saturday to try and get as complete a total as possible: Mr Barber could be quite unpleasant about letting customers go too long without paying. It hadn't happened yet but, were someone to disappear without paying, Col felt sure the money would come out of his seventeen and sixpence.

It was mid October and just beginning to get dark quite early. He'd been round the estate once and only had two houses to return to, one of them right opposite where he lived, which he saved until last. He was keen to go there because the woman, Margaret she was called, was definitely one of the nice ones. She wouldn't talk for too long but was smiley and funny – and she always gave Col a decent tip. He rang the bell, which was more like a buzzer. Every house on the estate had an identical bell but none of them ever quite sounded the same: it depended how tightly the cup of metal had been screwed into place as to whether it gave a buzzing vibration or a clear, resonant ring. Some had stopped working altogether, in which case he would knock firmly. This bell rasped like an expiring bluebottle.

It wasn't Margaret who answered though Col could see that she was in the house, in the front room behind the obligatory net curtains. Her husband came to the door, the first time Margaret's husband had answered the door on a Friday night. Col knew he was an army chef, cooking up meals for the new recruits who were undergoing basic training – Margaret had told him that much on the doorstep in amongst a series of brief conversations each Friday. Col had seen him before, he felt sure – but not on this doorstep. Perhaps, Col thought, he'd seen him serving out food at the children's event in the Sergeants' Mess last Christmas. But this was certainly the first time he'd seen this man's face close up.

"Yeah, Sunshine?"

"It's Col, the paper boy. He's here for the paper money." Margaret's voice sounded a little unhappy tonight, and quiet. She didn't appear from the front room but her voice just about carried.

"Right. The paper boy. How much is it, lad?" He hadn't shaved and was in his vest but he had a face Col quite liked – mischievous and young. Col was surprised to see a soldier look like this when his dad was always so smart, even in a vest. There was a black and white film he'd seen once – something about a streetcar – and Margaret's man reminded him of it.

"It's three and tenpence."

"Y'what?" the man said. "We pay three and ten for summat to light the fire with. You must be jokin' or 'alfway to your first million!" Col thought he must be angry but when he looked up at the man he could see that there was an amused twinkle in his eyes. Col relaxed, realising he had been holding his breath for a few seconds.

“Just pay the lad, can’t you?” Col just about heard Margaret say. Why wasn’t Margaret here at the doorstep, he wondered.

“I’ll pay him, I’ll pay him – but, er, do I have to go to the shop if I wanted to stop them for a bit, or...?”

“No, I can do that for you,” Col began to reply when he heard a muffled sound, or what sounded like a muffled sob.

“D’you have to?” he thought he heard Margaret say, hidden from view, but the words were indistinct. She appeared briefly at the end of the corridor, moving towards the kitchen, but casting a brief backwards glance towards Col. It was a momentary glimpse, but Col could see she had been crying. “I like to read the paper.”

“No, we’ll not be needing them for a bit,” said Margaret’s husband.

“It’s supposed to be a week’s notice, sir,” Col whispered, though he meant to say it more loudly.

“No, well, your boss won’t mind, will he?” he smiled. He thrust two half crowns at Col, who hesitated for a moment. They were supposed to give notice if they were stopping the papers. And anyone who did cancel normally gave a reason – as well as a healthy tip. Was the man expecting some change? Col rummaged in his money pouch and drew out some coins.

“One and tuppence change,” said Col, disguising his disappointment at the moment the coins were taken from his outstretched palms. “Going somewhere nice?”

“You what?” said the man.

“Are you taking your wife somewhere nice... on holiday?”

“That’d be right,” said Margaret’s husband, but smiling as he said it. The door was closed a fraction before Col could turn away. He remained rooted to the spot for a few seconds in a confusion of thoughts.

Why did Margaret seem to be so unhappy? Why was her husband so smiley when she seemed so sad? Why would he just cancel the papers? What was he going to say to Mr Barber in the morning? A lost customer, and no notice – Mr Barber was not going to be any happier than Margaret seemed.

And no tip.