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Opening Extract from...

Fifth Column

Written by Mike Hollow

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For Margaret, my wife, friend,
and most faithful editor in art as in life

Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden.

"Burnt Norton" (1937), from T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

Chapter 1

The Anderson shelter had guarded his life for another night, but it felt like a grave. Only the thin sheet of corrugated iron at his side separated him from the cold earth in which he was lying. He drifted in and out of a restless, shallow dream. Now he was in France again, in a dug-out lined with sodden planks of wood, waiting for the day's shelling to begin. Then the picture shifted, and he was twelve years old, a Boy Scout stirring in a canvas tent as a chorus of birds heralded the start of day. Their song began to fill his ears, with one note soaring louder than all. It wailed on and on, and his body jolted. He was awake.

His eyes opened, and he was back in the present. It was Friday morning. He wasn't a Boy Scout and he wasn't a soldier, and the dawn chorus was the monochrome blast of the all-clear siren.

Detective Inspector John Jago was chilly despite being fully clothed, and his joints were stiff. He tugged the worn blanket up under his chin and shifted his aching body carefully on what passed for a bed in this cramped metal box as his mind cleared.

What a way to live, he thought. He'd spent twenty-five shillings – not to mention elevenpence postage – on Selfridges' promise of a purpose-made "shelter bed", but that decision was beginning to feel like a triumph of hope over experience. The wooden frame and webbing ("comfortable even without a mattress") were sturdy enough, but the thing was only five foot nine long and a miserly twenty inches wide. The simple act of turning over was now a delicate manoeuvre that risked pitching himself onto the damp floor, bedding and all. Tonight he would fetch his old eiderdown from the house and lay that on top. At least being warm might

help, although the air raids of late had pretty much put paid to any chance of a decent night's sleep.

A lady in the newspaper, well-meaning no doubt, had advised that the best antidote to a sleepless night in a shelter was to undress and go to bed "properly" as soon as the raids were over. All very well if you didn't have a job to do, he supposed. And as for her other helpful suggestion – having a sleep after lunch – well, that was just another way to make a policeman laugh.

He checked the time on his wrist-watch. Eight minutes past six. Just five minutes or so until the blackout ended, then another half-hour till sunrise, but there was nothing to be gained from staying on this paltry shelf of a bed. He hauled his reluctant body out from under the blanket, tied his shoes, slipped on his coat and clamped his crumpled grey fedora onto his head. One final stretch to get his limbs working and he felt at least half ready to face the world. He unlatched the door he'd cobbled together a year before from salvaged wood – wondering then, as now, why the government had decided to supply the shelters with no means of sealing the entrance – and climbed out.

His house was still there: a good start to the day. At least he should be able to go to work. No signs of fire in the immediate vicinity, but half a mile away the first of the dawn light revealed smoke curling above the rooftops, marking the points where random destruction, and no doubt death, had befallen the unlucky.

He trudged along the few yards of uneven path to the back door of the house. A cup of tea would perk him up if the gas was still working, and if there was power he'd make a bit of toast to keep him going until he could get some proper breakfast in the station canteen – if not, it would be bread and margarine with a scraping of jam again. He opened the door, went in, and closed it behind him. With the blackout curtains still in place it was darker inside the house than it was outside. He searched for the light switch with his

fingers and flicked it down, and was pleased to see the bulb that dangled from the ceiling glow into life – he had electricity.

The brown enamel kettle was already full – he tried to remember to fill it every night in case the Luftwaffe hit the water main. He turned the knob on the stove and heard the hiss of gas, followed by a dull pop as his lighted match ignited it. He placed the kettle over the flames and reached for the teapot – and then the phone rang.

With a sigh and another glance at his watch he put the pot down and walked through to the narrow hall. At this time of the morning there was no mystery about who might be calling. He lifted the receiver.

"Jago."

"Good morning, sir. Tompkins here, at the station. Sorry to disturb you at this time of day, but I've just come on duty on early turn and I've been asked to call you."

"Don't worry, I was already up. And it's always a pleasure to hear your dulcet tones, Frank."

"That's not what my missus calls it."

"Well, far be it from me to intrude on private grief, Frank. So what is it that needs me to turn out at this ungodly hour?"

"A body, sir."

"Lots of bodies around these days, Frank. What's special about this one?"

"Possibility of suspicious circumstances, apparently. That's why they want you."

"Where is it?"

"Down in Canning Town, sir. Tinto Road, near the bottom end of Star Lane. On a bomb-site on the right-hand side as you go down the road. They say you can't miss it."

"I dare say. Have we got anyone down there?"

"Yes, sir, young Stannard. He's waiting for you to arrive. He's got reinforcements, too – one of them War Reserve constables."

Jago noticed the dismissive tone in which the station sergeant referred to PC Stannard's recently enrolled companion. That was Frank's way of signalling his opinion of the government's solution to the wartime shortage of police officers, he thought, but now was not the time to rise to his bait.

"Very well," he said. "Get hold of DC Cradock and tell him I'll pick him up at the station in about twenty minutes. And see if you can get the police surgeon down to the site pretty smartish."

Detective Inspector Jago put the phone down, returned to the kitchen, and turned the kettle off. A cup of cold water would have to do for now.

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His estimate of twenty minutes proved to be optimistic. The Riley started first time, and he was on his way promptly, but the roads were still clogged with fire hoses, and twice he had to find a way round streets that had been cordoned off because of bomb damage.

It was five to seven by the time Jago reached West Ham Lane. He could see the police station ahead of him, its front door screened against blast by a wall of neatly stacked sandbags and the windows to the side of the entrance protected by horizontal wooden slats. On the pavement in front of the station stood Detective Constable Cradock, awaiting his arrival.

Jago pulled up beside him. The young man looked as though he'd dressed quickly, and his hair was dishevelled. He eased himself carefully into the passenger seat with a quick "Morning, guv'nor", and Jago nodded a wordless greeting to him in return. Cradock looked as bleary-eyed as Jago felt.

"You getting enough sleep with these air raids every night, Peter?"

"Not too bad, sir. They wake me up, of course, but I try to get back to sleep when the noise stops. How about you, sir?"

"I seem to have lost the knack. Every time I think I'm going to doze off again Hitler drops another bomb just to spite me, and the anti-aircraft guns make so much noise I wonder whether he's slipping them a fiver just to keep me awake. Last night I don't think I got to sleep until it was nearly time to wake up. I must be getting old."

Cradock raised his eyebrows and opened his mouth as if he'd just realized something important.

"It could be night starvation, sir. Maybe you should try a cup of Horlicks at bedtime."

"Tommy rot," said Jago. "I haven't quite reached that stage, thank you very much. It's morning starvation I'm suffering from – I didn't even have time for a piece of toast before I came out. And in any case, if I need anything to drink before I go to bed, I'll stick to a tot of whisky. Now, if I can stay awake long enough we're going to Canning Town to see a man about a body."

Jago slid his left foot onto the gear change pedal, then with a glance over his right shoulder and a light touch on the accelerator he eased the car back into the sparse early morning traffic.

Chapter 2

"Morning, sir," said PC Ray Stannard as Jago swung his legs out of the car. "Sorry to drag you out first thing in the morning, but I thought you ought to see this."

Jago looked the young constable up and down. So much had changed in the last few weeks. It was no surprise now to see an officer in such a state at the end of a night shift. His tunic and trousers were streaked white with plaster dust, his boots were scuffed, and his hands and face were daubed black with soot. Not so long ago, thought Jago, Stannard would have spent the night quietly patrolling silent streets, rattling the doors of shops to check they were locked and watching out for any evidence of petty crime. But now it could reasonably be assumed that in the last few hours he and his colleague had been scrambling over scorched wreckage, helping to pull the living and the dead out from under ruined buildings, and taking on any and every task that needed doing in the wake of the latest air raid.

The detective turned to the War Reserve PC, who was in a similar state. He knew Stannard, but this other somewhat shorter man he didn't recall. He gave a sideways glance back at Stannard and raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, sorry, sir," said Stannard, "this is PC Price; he's a War Reserve. Volunteered when the war started, but he's been on nights a lot, so you may not have met him." He leaned a little closer to Jago and lowered his voice. "Not as bad as some, sir. Old soldier. Quite resourceful, considering they get thrown out onto the streets without any training."

Jago nodded.

"Right, tell me what we've got here, then."

"A woman, sir, found dead just back there."

Jago followed the direction of Stannard's pointing finger. The neat row of small, late-Victorian terraced houses was punctuated by a gaping space where two, three, perhaps even four dwellings had been reduced to a straggling heap of matchwood and rubble by at least one high-explosive bomb. Those still standing either side of the gap had lost all their windows and most of their roof tiles. At the far end of the wreckage he could see part of a front bedroom that remained attached to the neighbouring house; a wardrobe leaned drunkenly against the wall where what was left of the floor was sagging, the ragged stumps of its joists exposed to the air. Seven untidy-looking men were standing in a huddle on the pavement, smoking. There was no other sign of activity on the site.

"So what's all this about suspicious circumstances?" said Jago.

"Well, it's just that this woman, she wasn't here when she should've been – if she'd been dead, that is – but then she was when she shouldn't have. I've told the men who found her you'll want to talk to them, so they'll explain."

"All a bit quiet here now, isn't it?"

"The ARP warden says everyone's accounted for, sir, and there's no sound of anyone trapped. The people who've been bombed out have been taken to the rest centre in Star Lane. I thought it best to stop the work until you got here, so nothing would get disturbed."

"Good man," said Jago. "Do we know who she is?"

"I'm afraid we don't, sir. There's no identity card on her, no sign of a handbag or purse, and the warden says he doesn't recognize her."

"And you've had a thorough look over the site?"

"Yes, sir. Price and I looked all round for anything that might identify her, and got the rescue squad involved too, but there was nothing." Stannard paused, since Jago seemed to be thinking, then said, "The police surgeon's here too, sir, just on the other side of that pile of wreckage there. That's where the body is – you can't see it from here."

"Very good. DC Cradock and I will go and take a look. You show us the way."

The two detectives followed Stannard and Price, clambering up the unsteady heap of bricks, tiles and timbers littered with the shattered furniture and belongings of the unfortunate people whose homes this had been only hours before. When they reached the top they saw the grey-haired portly figure of Dr Hedges, the police surgeon, crouching beside the body of a young woman. She was a redhead, wearing a green coat that was unbuttoned, revealing a grey suit and green blouse. She had a black shoe on her left foot, and a matching shoe was lying near her right. Hedges hauled himself awkwardly to his feet as they approached.

"Morning, doctor," said Jago. "What have we got?"

"Good morning, Detective Inspector. Young woman, mid to late twenties, I should say. Your constable seems to suspect foul play, but she could easily just have been caught by the blast of a bomb. No obvious signs of interference, but I expect you'll want to get the pathologist to look at her. A proper examination in the mortuary will tell you more than I can from crawling round on my hands and knees in this mess, but I'll leave that decision in your capable hands. In the meantime, I've certified her dead, and if you don't mind I'd rather get back to my breakfast. I'm getting a bit too old and creaky for these early morning calls."

With that he snapped his bag shut, dusted his trousers down with his hand, and made his way cautiously across the sloping debris towards a black Rover saloon parked on the other side of the road.

"Short and sweet," said Cradock.

"Indeed," said Jago. "A man with his mind on his pension, I suspect."

He turned to the pair of police officers. Stannard's expression was attentive, as if he were waiting for his next instruction, but Price looked uncomfortable.

"Are you all right, Constable?" said Jago.

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir," said Price. "Just feeling a little queasy."

"Not your first body, is it?"

"Well… It's just… a young woman like that, sir, lying there dead. It was just a bit of a…" His voice trailed off, uncertainly.

"PC Stannard," said Jago, "I suggest you take your colleague for a cup of tea. I expect you've both had a demanding night. But two things before you go." He turned to Price. "First, you go and find a phone that's working, call the station and tell them to get Dr Anderson the pathologist down here as quickly as he can manage – immediately, if possible."

Price set off, scrambling back down the mound of wreckage towards the road.

"And second, sir?" said Stannard.

"Second, tell me: who are these men who found the body?"

"That lot over there, sir – or two of them, anyway, the ones on the right," said Stannard, gesturing with his thumb in the direction of the group of men standing on the pavement. "They're part of the heavy rescue party that's been working here during the night. They told the ARP warden, and he found me and Price pretty sharpish and brought us down here. Shall I fetch them over?"

"No," said Jago. "Just tell the two who found her to come up here, then go and get your cup of tea when Price comes back. We'll manage."

"Thank you, sir," said Stannard, and headed off in the direction Price had taken. Jago saw him speak to two of the men. The constable pointed back up the heap, and they began to clamber up it. Both of the rescue men were clad in blue dungarees and flat caps, so filthy as to make the departed police constables look relatively respectable. Jago scrutinized them as they approached. He estimated the taller of the two to be almost six feet in height and in his late forties. The second man was shorter and looked a little younger.

It was only when they drew close that the bigger man's face became clearly visible. Jago stepped forward to stand squarely in the man's path, his arms crossed.

"Well, well," he said. "Now look who's turned up like a bad penny. The Good Samaritan himself, eh? Fancy seeing you here." He peered into the man's face. "Just happened to find a body, did you? Simple as that. If anyone else had told me, I'd believe them. But nothing's ever simple with you, is it? Can you think of one good reason why I should believe you?"