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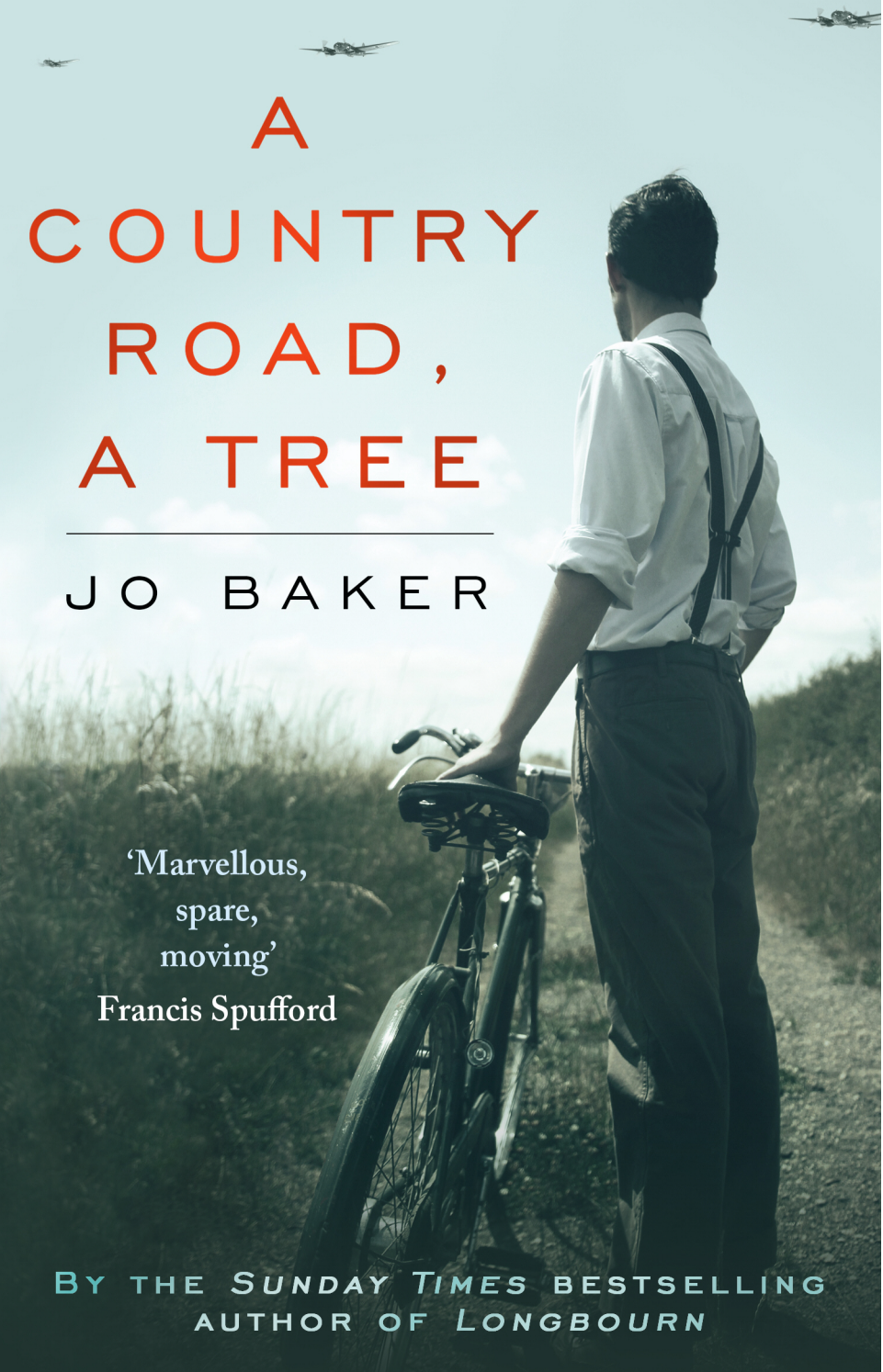
A Country Road, A Tree

Written by Jo Baker

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A COUNTRY ROAD, A TREE
JO BAKER
'Marvellous, spare, moving'
Francis Spufford
BY THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF LONGBOURN

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1

Greystones, County Wicklow
September 1939

His stomach is oily and heaving. His hand shakes and there's a mean little headache between his eyes. The sun, slanting in through the harbour window, catches in the cut glass and kicks off the silverware. It makes him wince. Everyone else has already breakfasted, and what's left has gone quite cold.

'Shall I ring for more bacon?'

He shakes his head; it hurts.

The drink always seems necessary; it seems like the solution. That certainty fades with the actual drinking; he drinks himself into disgust, and now, a few parched and sleepless hours later, he's prickling with it, sweating whiskey, scraping butter across cold toast and swallowing sour spit while she watches every movement, notes every flicker. She seems to scent it off him, the whiskey and the misery. It makes her scratch at him and scrabble round for solutions.

'Eggs? Would you take some eggs?' Half-getting up: 'I'll have Lily fry some for you.'

He speaks too quickly, over the heave of nausea. 'No. Thank you.'

She sits back down. 'Well, you have to eat something.'

He bites the corner off his toast, sets the remainder back down. He chews and swallows. He *is* eating.

'I mean something substantial. Something with some nourishment in it. Not just toast.'

'I like toast.'

'You eat like a bird. Are you ill? You're not ill.'

Eating like a heron or a puffin or a gannet: all that stabbing, scooping, struggling and gulping; eating like an eagle or a hawk that smashes its prey into the ground and tears it into messes. Owls swallow their dinners whole and cough up boluses of bones and fur. He picks apart his toast and eats a fragment: is he eating like a penguin, perhaps?

Something lands hard overhead: a hairbrush or a shoe hitting the floor above. He flinches but doesn't look up, while she, distracted for a moment, peers at the cracks in the ceiling, and her face softens. There are voices, a clattering of footsteps. A door slams.

'They'll bring the whole place down around our ears.'

It is precarious, this little rented house by the harbour, with its rattling windows and fireplaces that smoke. So she stuffs the rooms with guests, to keep the walls from buckling in, to stop the roof from collapsing down on top of her. Sheila and Mollie, his cousins; Sheila's girls, Jill and Diana: all the daughters that his mother didn't have. And she won't

hear of them leaving, however old the season grows. The cold winds do not blow. The summer will not end. There are no clouds.

'Those girls.' She smiles and shakes her head.

He swallows down another bit of toast; she pours herself a cup of milky coffee. A slick drip gathers on the lip of the pot and they both watch it fall. He is just about to push away his chair when she looks up and says, 'Oh, I saw a friend of yours the other day in town. Lovely boy. Medical man. Can't for the life of me remember his name, now. He would have been a couple of years below you at Portora.'

He knows who she means. 'That would be Alan Thompson, I'd imagine.'

'Ah yes. Doctor Thompson, that was it. He's doing very well.'

'So I believe.'

And had been a pale frog in the peat waters of the Erne; in whispering huddles in the library, cricket whites, a naughty caught-red-handed smile. Later, in the middle of the medic crowd at Trinity, crossing the quad in a gaggle with wine bottles and a whiff of cigars. Always seemed to be at the centre of things, to simply know how to *be*. Encountered since and drunk with; helpful, when help had been needed. A good man.

He lifts the skin off his coffee, a greasy caul, and drapes it into his saucer. He shouldn't do it to her, but: 'Unless it was his brother Geoffrey,' he says.

She folds her lips. Geoffrey is a psychiatrist. 'I'm not sure that I would consider that medicine.'

But it is a palliative. I do sleep sometimes now, he thinks of saying. I can breathe: air comes in and out of me as required. You might consider that a good. You might think it money well spent. Is that not medicine, after all?

'Well,' he says. 'Good for their old mam; she must be very proud.'

He lifts the little silver lid on the marmalade and picks the spoon out of the jar.

'Were you getting anything . . . written, in Paris?' she asks.

He watches the marmalade drip. It is thin and slides off the spoon like spittle. He feels her discomfort and her desire. Could he not, for once, write something respectable, something that she could leave out for her visitors to admire? He sets the spoon back in the pot, fits the little silver lid back into place around it.

'No,' he says. 'Nothing much.'

'Well then, you may as well stay here.'

He looks up at her strong-boned face, its feathering lines. 'Is that right?'

'You'll get so much more done here, with us to look after you. You can write those articles for the paper. I know Paris is cheap, but that's no real help at all if it just encourages you to be spendthrift; if your allowance—'

He goes still. She has become accomplished at this. The incision is precise, as is the pause.

'—if you can't live reasonably well on your allowance there, and there are too many distractions from your writing, then there is nothing for it but to stay here. For your own good.'

And be begrudged. As if he were not keenly enough aware that the food he eats, and the air he breathes, and the water – and the whiskey – that he drinks, that the space he takes up in the world is most dreadfully squandered.

'If nothing else, you could help your brother in the business.'

'He wouldn't thank me for it.'

'He could do with the assistance.'

'The last time I got involved, I made a right hames of things. Frank can do without that kind of trouble.'

This makes her wince, as if it tastes sour.

'I know that if you would just make the effort, if you would exert yourself, if you would . . .' She trails off. 'You did so well at the College. Everybody said.'

Having arrived at that, she must be almost done.

'I'm sorry, Mother.' His long, lean frame unfolds, the chair shunting backwards.

'Where are you going?' she asks.

'Fresh air.'

'Sure, you haven't finished your breakfast.'

'I've had enough, thank you.'

He is followed from the room by the sound of her long, deflating breath; his shoulders rise at it.

But quietly, alone, surrounded by the meal's debris, with the sound of young voices from the upstairs rooms, she presses at her eyes. It is just all so sketchy, so insubstantial, the way that he is living; it's all hand-to-mouth and day-to-day. That crowd in Paris: she doesn't know the half of it, she suspects, and, really, she doesn't want to know. But the sight

of him in that hospital bed, his chest in bandages, the nurses jabbering away in French: she blinks, her eyes wet. When she thinks what he could have been. Her brilliant, beautiful boy. Throwing it away, just throwing it away. Until he has the heart turned sideways in her.

Because it doesn't even make him happy, does it? If he could just be happy.

The girls thunder down the stairs into the hallway to greet their almost-uncle; his voice is warm and cheery in reply. A glimpse of him at a distance. Of why he must always be leaving.

All shiny buckled shoes and neat cardigans, Jill and Diana are to take themselves out for the morning. He feels seedy and liverish and guilty; the two of them are so glossy and clear-skinned and lovely, and full of skittish energy, like ponies.

'Oh, hang on two ticks,' he says.

He fishes out coins, drops a clutch into cupped palms. 'Get yourselves some toffees.'

'Gosh, thanks!'

He follows as they clip down the front steps into the street. They are chattering, gleeful, sounding so English; they will stride along the seaside pavements, heads together, past the folded papers in racks, the honesty boxes and the crates of apples and plums and tomatoes; in the sweetshop the shelves are cheerful with jars of pastel bonbons, chalky mints, glossy toffees, boiled sweets like stained-glass windows. They'll slaver and suck and crunch on the quayside, watch the boats lean in the wind, the waves jostle, hear the

rigging slap. He feels solicitous for these moments, their accretion. That they be strung together like beads on a thread, to be counted through in later times.

He leaves them to it, turns the other way along the beach, the stones shifting and sliding underfoot, his narrow Italian boots useless for this, for anything more challenging than urban flags and cobbles. He follows a belt of rotting seaweed for the slippery comfort of it, stalking along like a wading bird, ungainly and in a hurry. Striding up through seakale now and bleached-out thrift, all its little heads tossing in the wind. He follows a worn bare line in the salt-grass that takes him up towards the road and the last houses of the town. The sun is low. The shadows are long. The wind comes bundling down from the mountains.

Ahead lies the little graveyard. The gate draws him over and he pauses at it. You can see this spot from his mother's window. She could be watching him right now: like a figure in a Seghers landscape, rendered insect by the bulk of the mountainside.

They lined the grave with turf and moss. He and his mother, working together. As though they were making a garden. As though they were planting a seed.

His father had always been his companion in this, striding out from the old house, Cooldrinagh, the two of them marching along the suburban streets, and then country lanes, and then scrambling up through the heath, till they reached a point, only so far away and no further, the limits of the wound-out thread. They would sit, and scuff up stones, and pluck at cotton-grass and stare.

And then his father would say, 'She'll be wondering where we are.'

And they'd heave to their feet and begin the long trudge that would bring them down and round and back and all the way to the grey box of home. Not Ariadne's thread. Nothing so gossamer as that. Sinewy, this pull she has, and tough.

And now he is alone, and his father planted in a trough of moss, and nothing grew from it at all except the ache of missing him. He turns away from the gate and walks on. The lane climbs between fields, shaded by high hedges that drip with fuchsia like blood, and every bit of gravel is felt through his boot soles as he goes, and sheep call and gulls weave and hang overhead.

He swings over a gate and out into the open ground beyond: gorse rattles its seed pods in the wind and his own breath rattles in his chest, and with exertion now the scar pulls. But he carries on and up through the grey scabs of limestone, and as he reaches the crest the ground falls away to reveal the sweep of the coastline beyond, the fungal growth of suburbs crawling up towards the rust-grey city. To the left, the mountains swell, and the wind pummels down from there and snatches at his jacket and makes his eyes water. He turns his back on it and blinks out towards the wrinkled slate-grey sea, and the old world that lies beyond it.

. . . You hear the grating roar
of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling . . .

But you don't, do you? Not from here: there's just the wind, and his own blood pulsing and the rasp of his own breath. The sea far below mouths silently; a sly lick towards the town, the graveyard, the roots of this dark hill. And over there, out over the horizon, beyond that wedge of Britain and deep into the expanse of Europe, a tidal wave is gathering, and any moment now will come the tipping point, the collapse and rush, the race towards destruction.

He turns to pick out the rooftop, the particular skirl of smoke, where his mother waits by the fire and looks at seed catalogues and can't bear to have the radio on.

He knows he cannot stay. He can't help Frank. He can't write articles to order for the *Irish Times*. Sleep would fail him; he would drink to calm the shake in his hands, to soften the thud of his heart. Soon it would be a conscious effort to breathe at all. There had been nights, and even days, before he went to Paris, when he would have unwrapped a new razorblade and neatly opened his wrists and had done with it all, if it were not for the mess that he'd leave behind him. The bloodstains on the floor. Her outraged grief.

He will have to tell her that he's going, though he cannot tell her this.

He tugs his cuffs down straight. He pushes the glasses back up to the bridge of his nose. He begins the inevitable lope back down towards the precarious little town, to all the things that can't be said.

*

'Will you be joining us, May?' Sheila asks.

His mother's reply from the dining room is a deal more soft than it would have been, had it been he that asked.

'I am fine here, thank you.'

Bent into the smell of hot dust and electricals, he twists the dial through squeals and fuzz until he catches and settles on the signal from the BBC in London. He goes to lean against the sideboard, arms folded.

Sheila sits herself down; Mollie perches on the arm of her chair.

'Where are the girls?' he asks.

'Still out,' Sheila says.

The three of them gathered here know what's coming, more or less; they know how the pieces stand on the board. The broadcast begins, and the British Prime Minister speaks, in his precise, quavering way, from London. They each stare at the carpet, each lost in the darkness of the transmission.

This morning the British ambassador in Berlin handed the German Government a final note . . .

There is movement outside the open door. His mother stands there, in profile. Behind her Lily holds the dishes, halted by the gravity of the moment: the moment that has been drawing everything towards it now for years.

. . . by eleven o'clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us.

His mother raises a hand to her mouth.

I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently this country is at war with Germany.

Sheila sits back at this; Mollie rubs her arms. His mother reaches for the door frame. Chamberlain's voice continues to spool out from the wireless and tangle on the floor.

'Well, there we are now,' Mollie says.

Sheila reaches for her sister and their hands clasp. His mother still stands in the doorway, hand to the jamb. Her face has gone grey. He pushes himself upright, crosses the room to her. He takes her hand and slips it through his arm.

'Here,' he says. He brings her over to her armchair. She is trembling.

He switches the radio set off. Then there is just the little parlour, and the morning sunshine through the window, and the sea wind blustering, and you could tell yourself that nothing had changed, but these words have changed the world.

The girls, though, their cardigans ballooning, their hair blown into tats. They'll be huddled on a bench to finish up their lemon bonbons, coltsfoot rock, liquorice; they are still free from it. They're a gorgeous empty spell of wind and hair and sweetness.

'Can I get you something?' he asks.

His mother shakes her head.

He glances over at Sheila – pink cheeks, pink nose, a smile forced over a dimpling chin – and even as he watches, her smile thins, her lips pressed tight and trembling, and she turns to her sister and crumples into her.

'Buck up now, darling,' Mollie says, rubbing her arm. 'Don't spoil your face.'

After a moment, Sheila sniffs and nods and leans away, and dabs at her eyes with the flank of a hand. Because the girls must not see that she's upset.

'I'll have to see about an earlier crossing,' she says.

His mother blinks up now. 'Whatever for?'

'We must get back, May.'

'No, indeed you must not. You heard what he said – there's to be another war. You'll be much safer here.'

Sheila straightens her shoulders, touches her hair back into place. 'You are so kind, May, dear, but you know, the children will want their father. Donald has to join his regiment, and we shall want to see him first.'

'Well, Mollie,' May now says. 'You'll stay.'

Mollie makes an apologetic moue. 'A little while, May, but then I'm afraid I shall have to go too.'

'Whatever for?'

'Work. They're expecting me.'

May is left with nothing now but to turn her face away and be silent. She must swallow it down in one hard lump, this unpalatable truth that everyone has been chewing on for months. They may not like it either, but at least they have grown accustomed to the taste.

He lays a hand on her shoulder. He feels the bones of her. She turns her sharp blue eyes on him.

'I'm sorry,' he says.

'This is hardly *your* fault.'

From that frozen moment, the household stillness breaks into a cascade. Voices bounce and spin around the place like

spilled ball bearings. Stairs are hammered up and down. Telephone calls are placed, timetables consulted, sketched-out plans become solid and concrete.

Lily turns out the hot press for the girls' balled-up socks and folded vests and blouses; Sheila and Mollie discuss – at varying distances and volumes – the need for this item or that, the possible location of the other. Where are the girls' good shoes? (They're wearing them – which becomes evident on their return, all tangled hair and stickiness, dustily shod.) What about these books? Have you seen the hairbrush? Whose hairbrush? My hairbrush, the tortoiseshell hairbrush. Is this the one you mean? Feet clomp back and forth across the landing and up and down the stairs, then the voices become softer, closer, as the work begins to come together and be set in order.

He stays out of their way; he can't be of any help. His head still hurts; he's liverish; he's wary of questions, doesn't want to share his plans. He hides behind his book.

When they are done and the taxi is ordered, he carries the luggage downstairs and lines it up in the hall, the girls' neat little cases and their mother's larger one. Everybody waits, since that is all there is left to do now, the girls sitting side by side on the upright hall chairs, one set of white socks and buckle-shoes dangling and swinging slightly, the other set neatly instep-to-instep on the parquet, their owner made grown up by the gravity of the day.

Time stretches and slows; the clock ticks. Mollie expresses concern about the taxi. May is worried about the weather: they'll have a rough crossing ahead of them, she dares say.

They cannot say anything worth saying, but that does not stop them talking, and the soft words accumulate, like sand trickling through an hourglass. They are up to their knees in it and yet still they can't stop.

Then there's the sound of a car bumbling along the harbour road, which makes conversation break and scatter.

'Is that—'

'Ah, that must be—'

'Have you got—'

The motor idles in front of the house. Sheila has the front door open; the driver gets out of the cab and comes to help with the luggage.

The girls smell of wool and boiled milk and soap, when they are kissed; they are solemn and excited, knowing this is all so very serious now; their cheeks are hot against his cheek, and they smell no doubt his guilty adult reek of cigarettes and sweat and last night's whiskey.

Sheila hugs him sudden and hard. Words fail him.

'God bless you, dear boy.'

He manages, 'God bless.'

And then Sheila slides in beside the girls, who shunt themselves across to make room, and the door slams on them, and the driver gets in the front seat, and the car turns and moves away, grinding alongside the slate-blue harbour water.

He goes indoors. He lights a cigarette. 'Boy' is right. Child. Bear-cub that the dam didn't bother licking into shape.

The house feels dim and cold. A limestone pebble has been left on the hall console. It's greyish, skin-smooth and

about the size of a peppermint. It had sat in the girl's creased and grubby palm, revealed to him like a secret that she knew he would keep, then tucked away again with a little gappy smile. Abandoned now, forgotten, its meaning shed. He lifts the stone. It's cool to the touch. He cups it in his palm a moment, and then he slips his hand into his pocket and drops the stone in there.

He lopes along like a broken-down hound at Mollie's side. Mollie has taken his arm to tether him to her pace. Her body is compact and soft in her Irish tweeds. It is a glorious afternoon, breezy and blue, a mockery, the low sun making them squint.

'So are you going to tell me?' she asks him.

He peers down at her. 'Tell you what?'

'Ach, come on now. Sheila and I could see it straight off.'

'See what?'

'Who's the girl?'

Her arm hooked through his, they stumble on together. He says nothing. Seagulls wheel overhead; waves suck and spit.

'Come on, spill the beans.' She tugs his arm.

'What makes you think there are beans to spill?'

'You know what you're like. Left to yourself, you're a liability. You get ill; you get thin; you even got *stabbed*, for goodness' sake! You can't take care of yourself, can you? But look at you.' She stops and drags him round to face her. 'Just *look* at you.' Rosy-cheeked in the wind, she studies him. 'You're clearly being taken care of.' She peers in closer,

frowns. She flicks the back of her hand against his chest. '*Somebody* has fixed a tear in that shirt.'

He peers down. His lips twitch. Then he offers Mollie his arm again; she takes it and they walk on.

'There's a girl,' he says.

'I know.'

He doesn't offer anything more, holds a smile at bay.

'And . . . ?'

He shrugs.

'Ach, come on!'

He smiles. He says, 'Years ago, we used to play tennis, mixed doubles, when I was at the École Normale. But I didn't see her again until last year, after the attack. She read a report in the newspaper and remembered me. She came to the hospital and, well, that's when.'

'That's when you fell in love.'

It is to be supposed so. He does not confirm, correct or contradict.

'She made curtains for my flat.'

Mollie laughs.

'They're actually quite fine.'

'Sorry. I'm sure they're beautiful . . .' She waves a hand. 'I didn't mean – I just never thought of you – being the fellow that you are, I didn't think you'd care about things like that.'

'I didn't say I cared. But when it gets dark,' he says, 'one has a need of curtains.'

That's what Suzanne had said, anyway, lying naked on the tangled sheets, looking out through the high window of the sleeping loft, her dark hair tumbled, moonlight on

her skin. He'd agreed, but had determined that on no account would he ever get any; if there were curtains then they would lie together in pitch black, and that would be a shameful waste of her nakedness.

And then, when she had presented him with curtains, he'd thanked her, and had even participated in their hanging.

'I don't know what all the fuss is about.'

'I'm just happy for you. Thrilled. That you've got a nice girl who'll mend your shirts and make you curtains.'

'That's not all she is. She's a musician. She studied at the Conservatoire. She is a writer, too. She writes.'

'God help you then, the pair of you.'

The curtains are drawn that evening in the little house, even though it's not yet dark. The radio crackles and shrieks as he hunts out the BBC again. When it's tuned in, he goes to stand beside his mother, a hand resting on the back of her armchair. She has steeled herself to listen now.

At the back of her head, grey hair frizzes out from its pins. Her old hands clutch the armrests. Mollie is huddled in the seat opposite, her legs drawn up underneath her, chewing on a nail. Lily stands by the sideboard, included but separate, eyes downcast.

At five o'clock today, France declared war on Germany.

His mother fumbles a hand upwards. He takes it. It is cold. They listen to the continuing bulletin, but little of it sinks in. Because the pieces are all in play now, are moving out across the board. He strokes the back of her hand with

his thumb. One traces the possibilities out from here and ends up – where? Wire and trenches, is that what is coming all over again? He could volunteer for the ambulance corps, grind an old taxi over mud . . . Back in France, could he enlist? It is all so grim. His head buzzes as though the lid has been taken off a jar of flies. His mother twists round in her seat and looks up at him. Her hand grips tight and she pulls him down a little closer.

'Well, that's that,' she says.

He nods. That is indeed, as she says, that.

'You can't go back now.'

He looks down at her face, the sharp angles, the lines of it. But he can't stay. 'I've told everyone I will be back.'

'Everyone?'

'All my friends.'

'Your friends.'

He nods.

She looks at him for a long moment, her throat in an uncomfortable twist. Those shady, disreputable people with their unimaginable lives, they are drawing him away from her. From security and comfort and a decent life.

'And what possible use,' she asks, 'do you imagine you would be?'