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A Bolt to Boulabee

by Dan Judd

It had taken Jeanie a year to learn to tell the time. A long time, you'd be forgiven for thinking, but the task at hand had been made all the more complicated by the fact the only working timepiece at Northerwood was the moondial, she had found half-buried at the end of the garden.

She never needed to know how to tell the time in the 'Ham. Her life had been mapped out. A packed schedule of leaving school as soon as possible, work in the factory, hopefully marrying a 'nice boy'. Kids, death, taxes and other certainties, marking her time.

30 seconds, that was all it took for her life to change. She had been taught that much. 'One elephant, two elephant, three elephant' she shouted as she ran to their make-do bomb shelter. Twenty-nine elephants then mum was no more.

24 hours she kept away and cried. The image of her mum's lifeless body being carried out on a stretcher, in her mind's eye until exhaustion blacked it out.

Two weeks she lived in dad's half-buried shed as if nothing much had happened, even though their house was just a front door leading to nowhere. Her best friend Phyllis bringing her scraps of food wrapped up in the latest gossip. Sneaking in and out underwear so she could remain half-decent.

15 that's when she fell. Giggling 'I've only gone and bloody done it!' to Phyllis, after that one fumble with Jay on the Rec. The laughter soon stopped.

Five months later there was no going back. It wasn't a conscious decision to keep her new best friend a secret, she just didn't want to tell the truth. Mum didn't have a mean right hook, but she did have a vicious tongue.

One day she made the decision that would change their lives. It took longer to persuade Phyll that she should aid and abet her, bring her a small case, a sarnie and bits of her siblings' school uniforms. Tom's jumper useful for hiding where it started to show.

12.39; the first train to Southampton. Smuggling herself on-board, easy amongst a sea of kids. A mix of those experiencing the second most excruciating pain in the world and those seeing evacuation as a big adventure or an escape route. She felt a mixture of all three. In turn. Sometimes at once.

Three minutes and lots of elephants she hid in the toilet. Waiting for her fellow travellers to be dealt out their hand. Their future foretold by which new guardians they were given. Ten days. That's how long it felt, walking the long walk up to Emery Down. Momentarily distracted by the beauty of the opening forest ahead of her, until a new born pony reminded her of her plight.

5, 4, 3, she counted down the numbers until she found herself at Boulton Cottage. No time for elephant, she knocked determinedly on the stable-like door.

Time stopped. The door eventually opened by a small, friendly mole of a woman.

"Hello, you don't know me but I'm Jean Gately. Hopefully, your Jay Veal's gran."

And in that one second, Jeanie's lifetime started again.