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Cast Out

by Garf Collins

A huge explosion. The smash of glass blown out of an upstairs window. Bits of plaster fall from the ceiling. Just one incident in a Luftwaffe night bombing attack in October 1940. The noise of aircraft and the crump of bombs continues for hours. After the wail of the air raid siren, we had huddled together in the stairwell. Two families squeezed into a tiny space. The backyard air raid shelter was yet to come and official advice was to remain under the stairs where there was least masonry to fall on you. Next day we found that a house at the end of the street had a direct hit. We were lucky.

I was less than 2½ at the time, so this was the scene as described to me years later. But I do remember the fear on the faces of the grownups that night. They aren't supposed to feel helpless. But to me at that age, it was more like a new game. I woke up the next morning under the kitchen table. They must have thought that also gave protection from a collapsing house.

My first question was, "Mummy why did we come home?"

"Because we wanted to be with Daddy."

"Why didn't Daddy come to live with us?"

"You'll understand one day. Now sit up and eat your cereal."

In 1939 there was a widespread assumption that the Germans were going to attack London with a huge number of bombers. Many deaths and injuries were expected. The Government organised a mass evacuation of children to safe areas where they stayed with families. My parents and my aunt and uncle upstairs were very reluctant to send me, my sister and my cousin away. Fortunately, some Cornish relations offered to take us with our mums and Grandma who lived with us. They said they would prefer people they knew rather than having strangers billeted on them. The Dads were to stay at home and continue working.

So, we all set off with our suitcases and gas masks to Redruth in Cornwall. It was spring 1940 so I was not yet 2 years old but I think I can remember a long train journey with soldiers sitting on kitbags in the corridor of the train though that might just be imagination. I'm told that it took 14 hours with two changes of train to get there. I must have been asleep a lot of the time, and I was told how thrilled I was by the huge steam engines when I was awake.

We eventually arrived and were shown our accommodation. Two large rooms, one for each family and Grandma in with Auntie. Food was rationed. We gave our ration books to Uncle Jack, so they could get extra food for us.

A few days later our Mum said, "We're going to live at the seaside. We thought it would be nice for you children. A change from London and Redruth."

We all moved into holiday accommodation near Helston - unused because of the war. Photos I saw later showed it to be quite rundown and the beaches were inaccessible owing to some military purpose.

After a couple of months in the flimsy huts, the grownups decided that it would be better at home as the predicted bombing hadn't started, so in August 1940 we took that lengthy train journey back to London.

It was strange that we should come back to London just in time to suffer the onslaught of September 1940 - nicknamed the Blitzkrieg or Blitz for short. Fortunately, we survived it, but our homecoming remained a puzzle to me. Years later I got an answer to my question about our return. My Mum said,

"We didn't have a chance to settle in with Uncle Jack's family. Overnight, our relations began to look at us differently. It turned out that they had only said they would have us because that prevented them having evacuees billeted on them. They found us the seaside accommodation instead, but we were all miserable there, so we came back here."