

This story was written on WhatsApp as a fun activity, so please forgive the errors. It's all down to the technology! Six writers contributed 2 sections each, completing 2 rounds in the same order, as indicated by the numbers.

Jimmy

1. Jimmy slammed the front door shut and bounded up the stairs shouting, 'What's for tea, Mam?' Why doesn't he come into the living room and have a civilised conversation like other people's sons do, she thought. It wasn't as if he was in a hurry to have a meal before going out. He hardly ever went out. She wished he would. She wished he'd go out, get a girlfriend and move out. What could possibly be keeping him from having a life of his own? She looked over at the pile of freshly ironed clothes and thought of the toad-in-the-hole cooking in the oven and wondered whether she'd been wrong to look after him so well. But with him now in his thirties it would be a bit strange for her to suddenly put her foot down and demand he pulled his weight and paid towards the bills.

2. But unbeknown to Jimmy's flustered mother, he led two entirely different lives. The one, a drab and dreary existence in featureless West Ruislip, the other- well that's to be revealed as our story unfolds.

Since leaving the army, his mother thought, despairingly, that he had let his life slide. Aimless and seemingly without any drive or focus.

Jimmy had completed three tours in his military service- one in Bosnia and two in Afghanistan. And she was convinced he was suffering from PTSD. But he would stubbornly never seek counselling or help.

Had she been sufficiently motivated to follow her son when he left the house at exactly seven minutes past eleven every second Thursday morning of the month, she would have been astonished. A very different Jimmy would have taken the stage.

3. Jimmy's Mam had shared some of her worries with his twin sister, Jacqui. She'd done the right thing, according to Mam, getting married at 21, having two kids in rapid succession and, now they were both in school, she'd gone back to retrain as an infant teacher. Her life was full and happy so she was able to think constructively about her brother and what had changed his life.

Jimmy had learned punctuality in the army, along with drills, target practice and unquestioning obedience. She knew he must have seen dreadful things but had chosen not to share these experiences with his family. She knew better than to pry, waiting for the right moment that never seemed to come.

On Thursday mornings Mam went out early to shop and clean for her elderly parents so Jacqui thought it a good time to pop over to spend time with Jimmy. She arrived just in time to see him walking briskly up the road in the direction of the Tube Station. He was smartly dressed and his shoes gleamed. His normally untidy fair hair was neat and he had trimmed his beard, grown in the months since he had been at home. She checked her watch. It was eight minutes past eleven.

4. He had to be going for the 11:20. Should she give up again and go home, catch him up or even follow him? Sighing for the close relationship they seemed to have lost, she set off after him along the route they had so often taken together on their way to school. Happy days, when they had been ever together. Turning the corner she was surprised to see that he had passed the bus stop and was studying the small ads in the newsagent's window. As she paused in indecision Jimmy made a note on his phone, checked his watch and quickly disappeared into the tube station. Resisting the temptation to read the notices and now consumed with curiosity, Jacqui just managed to reach the platform in time to jump into the last carriage of the Central Line train her brother was boarding. She could hardly approach him on the train so, beginning to feel like a character in one of the thrillers she read so avidly, she manoeuvred herself into a position where she could see if Jimmy got off. Still uneasy about what she was doing, half of her wanted to get off the train herself and abandon the chase

5. but as the train drew in at East Acton she saw Jimmy get ready to move, so managed to join with people behind him. She carried on following him really very curious by now, thankful that although she was quite petite he was almost 6 foot so she could watch him through the crowds. Then he turned a corner and she did not see him enter Hammersmith Hospital. She looked all round and realised there was no point in going further, it was after lunchtime and she needed to hand in an essay and meet the girls from school. On the train back her mind wandered back to their childhood, back to the time before their Dad disappeared. They were 11

and had just started secondary school. Dad had gone to work as usual but never returned and they'd not seen him again. Jimmy had been fantastic helping her and Mum. As she thought back to how distraught her Mum had been tears began to flow silently down her cheeks. Jimmy had become man of the house overnight and had taken on paper rounds and odd jobs for neighbours and she had helped with housework whilst Mum started full time work in the Co-op. They had pulled through and Jimmy joined the army at 16 sending money to help with bills.

The lady opposite leaned over, "are you alright, Love?"

Jacqui hastily wiped her eyes, coming back down to earth, smiled and said, "Oh this is my stop," and alighted onto the platform.

6. Jimmy walked quickly through the busy reception area of the hospital. Entered the lift and ascended several floors coming out in a quiet corridor. After checking himself in at reception. He sat in his usual seat in the waiting room. When Dr Rajib called him in he smiled as he walked through the door. Dr and patient sat opposite each other.

"How are you Jimmy?"

"I'm ok, yeah feeling good, thanks" Jimmy thought back to three months ago, his first meeting with the Dr. Then he had hardly been able to talk to him but gradually trust had been established and on this, the last appoint of his "talking cure", he acknowledged his debt to Dr Rajib.

"I don't think I would be alive if it weren't for you. Thank you"

"No need for thanks. I'm just doing my job, just as you had to do yours. Now, future plans. Have you applied for a place at University?" Jimmy smiled "all done". After all the carnage and destruction he had seen he wanted to do some healing in the world and was waiting to hear whether he had been accepted to do a nursing degree.

"That's marvellous and have you had that other conversation with your mum?" Jimmy blushed a little.

"No not yet. Still building myself up to that".

1.ii Jimmy left the hospital for, what he hoped, was the last time, head held high, feeling optimistic about the future. He didn't want to mention the nursing degree to his mother until he was sure he'd been accepted onto the course but he was hopeful and he was looking forward to telling her. She'll be so proud that both her twins are going to be in highly respected jobs in the community, he thought. He could picture her itching to tell the neighbours. She deserved to have the opportunity to show off. She'd had the role of single parent thrust upon her so unexpectedly and life had been a struggle. It's about time she reaped the rewards for holding it together. In the meantime he felt it was time for a heart to heart with Jacqui. It was time he told her about the messages in the newsagent's window. Perhaps between them they could piece things together. Perhaps they'd even have some news of their father to share with Mam.

2.ii But Jimmy's reverie was about to unravel in a way he could never have anticipated.

As he passed through the out-patients department he had been observed by a certain Eric Peters.

A fluke sighting. Although now retired, Eric had been a war correspondent for a large national newspaper and had spent a great deal of time in various theatres of war. He had a photographic memory, still functioning, and instantly recognised Jimmy, or Lucky Jim as his comrades called him.

Eric had been embedded for 3 months with Jimmy's regiment & had witnessed at first hand the atrocities & destruction. But one particular event was still lodged in Eric's brain. He & Jimmy's regiment were stationed in Tuzla, by Bosnian standards a large city.

But despite the obvious turmoil & fighting, when two local girls disappeared without trace, the authorities, military & police, became very active. It was not uncommon for liaisons to occur between troops & local women. Eric remembered the name of one of the girls-Milica, but couldn't remember the other one.

Jimmy had developed a strong relationship with Milica & was interviewed by his own MP's & the local SIPA officers. But he had supposedly perfect alibis & his mates backed him up. Case closed for Jimmy.

But now, suddenly, the case was no longer closed for Eric. He had listened to the subsequent whispers & firmly believed Jimmy was not called Lucky Jim without good reason.

3.ii Jimmy set off for the tube station, head high, spirits soaring. Eric jog trotted to keep him in sight and boarded the same coach, following him on his journey home and noting the address of the house he entered. All unseen.

'What's for tea Mam,' he shouted in greeting from the top of the stairs.

'Come down here at once, Jimmy Stephens. We've got visitors.' Seated in the garden with tea and cake were Jacqui and her two girls. 'and there's a letter for you with a French stamp on it. Must be your past catching up with you.' Mam was in high spirits. Jimmy greeted his sister warmly, hugged his nieces and looked at the envelope. Corporal James Stephens it read. There was an army H.Q. address crossed out with his home address added. Curiosity, fear and hope overcame him and he ripped open the envelope. A hand written sheet was covered in neat small script. He turned away as tears began to fill his eyes. 'I am well. Thank you for saving my life. I owe you so much, Petra too. Our journey was long and hard but we are safe. We hope you did not find trouble for helping us escape.' There was an address somewhere north of Nice.

'Oh just one of my old army mates, wanting to catch up,' Jimmy said, stuffing the letter into his pocket.

'Just what we've come to do too' smiled his twin,

'you'll never guess who I met today!'

4.ii 'Go on.' 'Uncle George. Remember? One of Dad's colleagues, no uncle at all.' 'Yes, I remember. He was really nice to us. Gave us pencil cases to take to secondary school. I've still got mine.' So had Jacqui, and suddenly the constraints had gone and the twins and their mother were talking enthusiastically about old times as the bored children disappeared into the garden. It seemed that Uncle George, like the family, had never been satisfied by the official verdict that his friend had simply cleared off. Once retired he had started an investigation of his own, and was going to call on them at the weekend to discuss what he had discovered. Jimmy was really excited but decided to conceal his own enquiries until they were all together, though it did cross his mind that George, a former

detective, might know a journalist who could help with his plans. In any case, in the end there was no time to disclose any of his secrets before it was time for Jacqui to gather up her children and go home, the old relationships renewed. Even so, as the door closed, he excused himself and disappeared upstairs, ostensibly to change, but really because he could not wait any longer to look again at his letter.

5.ii Overwhelmed with emotion he raced back downstairs. It was time to share some of his news with Mum, who had just settled with a joyous smile on her face to watch Coronation Street. Jimmy rushed in, ran over, hugged her and showed her a photograph of Milica, “meet the future Mrs Stephens, well I hope so, isn’t she beautiful?”

She sat back on the sofa in shock while Jimmy explained his story.

Eric had been right, he had fallen in love with Milica, just as Tommy Watkins his childhood friend from the logistic corps had fallen for Petra. Villagers had begun to suspect and had informed the local police. As Tommy was due Leave he had opted to help the girls walk over the mountain Pass to escape through to safety. To delay matters in the night Tommy had run a tank into the nearby forest and left tyre marks and 2 items of clothing from both girls one with blood marks by the scene. He and the girls then set off. Jimmy had stayed in camp to make sure of his alibi and Tommy was never investigated as he had already supposedly gone back home.

His Mum realised how serious this was and couldn’t wait to meet the girl who had stolen her Jimmy’s heart. Now she could look forward to more grandchildren, maybe a boy this time. Both crying openly they hugged each other.

He then told her about seeing Dr Rajib and his application to train as a nurse. Her cup was overflowing with happiness.

He didn’t tell her yet though about Tommy Watkins Dad being the Trade Union Leader who had helped cover up the fight his Dad had been involved in at work the day he disappeared and whom he’d been trying to contact as he’d left Tommy’s Mum soon after the fighting and changed his address. He also didn’t tell her about his asking Dr Rajib if someone could suffer longterm amnesia after a brain injury but he would tell Uncle George when he came at the weekend.

6.ii For the rest of the week Jimmy began to pick his way through the vast and almost impenetrable pages of information on various government websites. Milica was one of millions of displaced people. Refugees fleeing war and persecution who had landed on the inhospitable and indifferent shores of Europe. To Jimmy she was the love of his life to so many others she was at best a nuisance and at worst a threat. He quickly realised that bringing her to England legally could be an impossibility. When Saturday came he had to turn his attention to uncle George. The family gathered in the garden to pool everything they knew about his dad's disappearance and Jimmy told them about the strange card in the newsagents window. A photo of a man in his mid fifties and an appeal by his daughter for information about her father who may have worked as a mechanic in the area. Jimmy showed them the photo on his phone. They were stunned. His mum was in shock. "That's him", she managed to whisper. While everyone was trying to make sense of this the doorbell rang. When Jimmy answered it there was Eric. He put his foot in the door.

"I'd like your comment sir on the disappearance of two young Bosnian girls during your tour of duty".

"You can have them" said Jimmy. "Come in. I'll tell you the full story but I want something in return" Jimmy recounted all the events concerning Milica and Petra's flight from persecution and possible death and brought the tale up to date with the dead end he had hit trying to get the girls into the country. Eric's eyes glistened. He knew a scoop when he heard one. This one had everything. Brave heroes, a daring escape, beautiful women, thwarted love.

"Leave it to me. I'm going to suggest to my boss that we run this as a big human interest story. If we can get the public on board your young lady may stand a chance" Jimmy thought there may be a chance and at least Eric didn't work for the Daily Mail. There were still very important family matters to sort out. Was it possible that dad had started a new family? Well it was up to his mum to lead them forward on this. It was a decision that couldn't be rushed. So much was happening. But as Jimmy, his sister and mum sat talking late into the night he knew that together they could face whatever life threw at them.