The Road to Nab End

Chapter Two

My name is Billy. I spent my childhood in Blackburn, which in the 1920s was a very different place.

My brother Dan and I shared a bedroom with our parents. There were two metal beds with straw mattresses on thin metal slats. Dan and I slept in the same bed. We slept so close to our parents that we could touch them. The nearness of our bodies made us feel safe. My sisters Jenny and Brenda slept in the other bedroom, behind a paper-thin wall. No one noticed the lack of privacy. Living in such a confined space meant everybody shared everybody else's joys and sorrows.
Our clothing, what little we had, hung on the whitewashed walls. As the walls were sometimes damp, sheets of brown paper were slipped between the clothes and the plaster. The pegmat at my bedside protected my feet from the freezing floor. In our house there was one by every bed as well as before the two fireplaces downstairs. They were made from old clothing and could be of all colours. They were not only solid and warm; they meant that no garment, however old, was wasted. The women made them at night, pulling strips of cloth with a rughook through a stiff piece of fabric. Several women would work together, chattering, singing and laughing into the night. The mats were kept clean by beating them against the outside wall.
The kitchen was the centre of family activities. As it was three paces one-way and two-and-a-half the other, children didn't sit at table, we stood for meals. In front of the fire was a top-bar on which the kettle sang. The range was kept clean with black-lead ammonia. I don't know how much lead we consumed. Coal was dumped in the kitchen under the stairs, a sack at a time. The cloud of dust that flew up when Mr Morgan poured it, took time to settle. The worst thing that could happen was for Mr Morgan to arrive while we were eating. With a sack of coal being shaken out almost against the dining table, it was impossible not to eat coal dust. No one grumbled. Even a child knew that we couldn't possibly manage without coal.
We had a single metal gas ring for cooking. For the gas there was a penny meter under the stairs. If the light gave out and we didn't have a penny, we used a candle; if we didn't have a candle we sat by the fire and told tales or went to bed.
I'd always believed that I had been born in our cottage in Griffin Street. 'Ah, no, Billy,' mother said one day, 'that's where tha wrang; tha was born in t' mill.'
Mother cleaned cotton at Hornby's cotton mill. 'It was the telegrams.'
'What telegrams?'
'From t' War Office. Dad was in France fighting the war. The first telegram they brought to t' mill. The foreman, Patrick Murphy read it to me. It said that your dad was killed and that the War Office regretted it. Just a line to change your life. Everybody was real nice. Told me to go home and rest, and to come back when I was ready.'
'Did you?'
'Well, when you don't have any money and your husband is dead and you've got four

mouths to feed, including your own and your unborn child, you'd better be ready all the time or you'll starve.'
'But Dadda wasn't dead.'
'No, that's right, he wasn't. A week later another telegram came saying that the first telegram had been mistake. Two hours after that you arrived. Patrick Murphy delivered you on a heap of cotton against a wall in a corner of the shed. There was the din of the carding machines and cotton dust falling on us, but no bother, all went well. Mr Murphy shouted "It's a boy, and a sturdy one at that; worth a drink o' rum and tay, he is. It's not every day it happens in t' shed. Tha can be reet proud of thiself, Maggie, tha can." Two days after you were born, I was back at work, slubbing in the mill; cooking, washing and cleaning at home.'