

SILVERTOWN

The Car

Jenny Page lives in Altmore Avenue in East Ham. She is married to Len Page and they have two children. Len Page has started a café called the Cosy Corner on Silvertown Way by the docks. The year is 1946.

One hazy Sunday morning Len rises early. He tells Jenny to get the children looking nice and to make some sandwiches. He has 'a surprise' in store, he says. Jenny does as she's told and half an hour later Len tells the family to wait for him on the pavement while he fetches 'the surprise'. So there they stand feeling awkward, when turning into the top of the road comes a glossy black motor car and at the wheel, looking mighty pleased with himself, is Len.

'Blimey,' says Jenny.

A real motor car it is. All the way up the street, the neighbours begin to creep from their houses to stand on their steps and stare.

'Well get in then,' says Len 'I brung Harry. You remember Harry. His missus June gets terrible travel sick so she'll go in the front with me.'

Jenny leans down and peeps in the back window. The woman in the front catches her eye, smiles and, holding up the hand of a baby in her lap makes it wave.

'Ah,' says Len 'That's their little girl.'

For the first ten miles or so, Harry holds a paper bag to his mouth and makes retching sounds. They look at the view.

The route to Southend takes them through Barking, Ilford and Dagenham. Fields begin to emerge from behind the rows of housing.

'Funny smell,' says June in the front gazing out of the window.

'Good enough to fill yer lungs, ain't it?' laughs Len. They slow at a junction, turn right then continue along a road running between fields. Just as they are picking up speed along the straight, a big bang detonates from the back of the car. For an instant Jenny looks at Harry and Harry looks back. Then they grab the children and crash to the floor, clutching their heads and thinking of bombs.

'Daft buggers!' shouts Len 'It's only a backfire!'

The sun pours in at the windows and the outskirts of Southend begin to appear, neat bungalows scattered between ordered parades of shops and the odd pub. Driving along the seafront they pass theatres and picture houses and coconut shies, bathing huts and eel and pie stalls. The beaches are still covered in sandbags and tank traps but the sea is radiant in the sunshine and everything feels happy.

They make their way towards the pier. Harry forks out sixpence for a cardboard hat with Kiss Me Quick written on the front.

'If you've come to have fun,' he says 'You might as well bleedn have it.'

They eat their sandwiches and wash them down with a strong sweet tea then they walk along the end of the pier to look at the sea.

On the way back they fork out sixpence to see a bearded lady sitting in a dark tent who is not very convincing. It starts to rain and they shelter in the arcade with the other daytrippers. Then the rain clears.

'Where's Harry,' asks Len looking at June. She looks at him wearily and sighs.

'Can't have gone far, the bugger,' says Len 'Want me to check the pubs June?' 'S'pose you'll have to.'

Len goes off to look for Harry and a thought drifts into Jenny's head. It is a

thought about June and Len. Jenny noticed that Len asked June what *she* wanted.