

## **To Basra**

*By ZOE LAMBERT*

It was pissing it down when I got off at the top of Langworthy. I walked down the road with my collar turned up and my hat over my ears. I was hoping mam had set the table and they'd be there, like at Christmas: Mam sulking over the washing up and calling 'Dinner, our Wendy!' But Wendy would be smoking out back, whilst dad tinkered with his model ships and ate off his lap.

Hicks, a private from our unit had a welcome home party, even though he'd only done the training. His family decked the house with banners and picnic tables, like an old war film. We never heard the end of it.

I hitched up my rucksack and turned down our road. It was dead quiet. No kids playing or alarms going or anything. You'd think the houses were empty. A few had been boarded up with metal windows like they were armoured. But our house was like Kew fucking Gardens, the way main had been stuffing roses and hydrangeas into our two-foot yard.

I'd only been away eight months for training and then it was straight on tour. It felt like years. I didn't want to go home, not after what went on. But I'm no wuss, so I dodged the flowers and opened the door. Mam, dad and Wendy were on the sofa, watching the telly. Their faces were a picture. 'Philip. Look at you!' mam said, her face beaming. 'Hasn't he lost weight, Wendy?' Our kid grunted from her phone. I knew what was coming, so I said, 'I'll put my bag away,' and made for the stairs.

'Are you on leave then? Why didn't you tell us?' Mam called. I flopped on my bed. I didn't have much to unpack because I'd left the uniform at the base. Anyway, wearing the camouflage felt like fancy dress. I still hated wearing the boots; they were like little armoured vehicles on my feet. I stretched out on the bed and my boots knocked the end, so I yanked them off and threw them on the floor. 'Philip?' mam called. 'What you doing up there?' I leaned over the bed and picked up an old Marvel comic, then dropped it. My room was like a kid's bedroom now. I grinned at my Adidas boxes. I'd bought three pairs in different colours with my first wage. I got out the blue pair and held them up. They still smelt new.

I heard mam say,

'Something's not right. I know it. Malcolm, are you listening?'

'Susan. Calm down. Jesus.'

'He's not even in his uniform!'

I put on my trainers and trekked downstairs. 'I'm going out,' I said, slinging on my jacket. In the kitchen, our kid was rustling in the fridge. Mam paused at the living room door. 'Philip, have some tea.'

`Leave it, Susan,' Dad said from the couch.

`I'm on leave.' `He's just a fecking liar,' Dad said, like I wasn't there. He always spoke like I wasn't there, or I was dead and buried. `Fecking useless liar.'

I was out of there, striding down the road. I wasn't mithered. It was like that time I'd skived the exams in year eleven and got caught nicking models from the model shop (I sold them to nerdy kids). My mam was called to the station and cried like I'd killed someone. So I didn't do the exams.

*The army will be the making of you, they'd all said. You'll learn some skills (mam). Make him learn some discipline. It'll get his arse out of bed, that's what it'll do (dad). You don't even need any GCSE's to get in. They'll take anyone (our kid).*