SCENE FOUR

The Front Line, Northern France, January 1915

The troops are on the front line. Andy is on sniper watch, Wilf and Young Alan wait for their turn on watch at the bottom of the ladder.

Y Alan: It's so cold.
Andy: Don't worry mate, it'll be morning soon. Sun will warm you up.
Wilf: It's probably not helping that those boots have got a hole in.
Andy: I was speaking to a bloke from 7th Battalion yesterday, they're further down the line, up towards the town – he said that you'll be alright after tomorrow's big push.
Y Alan: They getting new stock sent over?
Andy: No, they'll have some spare from the lads who don't make it.
Wilf: And that's a lot of new stock…
Y Alan: I'll be wearing a dead bloke's boots?!?
Andy: No, you'll be wearing the boots a dead bloke USED to have.
Y Alan: Why can't I just have some new ones?

The soldiers laugh at Alan's naiveté.

Wilf: Mostly because this war is costing a bloody fortune my boy! All that home by Christmas stuff was complete tosh – we're going to be out here years. Well, some of us.
Y Alan: Yeah, and in god awful kit by the sounds of it.
Andy: Look, just stop the moaning.
Wilf: You wait till he finds out about the rest of his uniform…
Andy: Wilf, why did you…
Y Alan: What about my uniform?

Wilf laughs

Andy: You idiot!
Wilf: Just don't expect to be staying in it that's all.
Andy: Wilf, I'm going give you a fat lip in a minute, will you shut your mouth?
Y Alan: What's he saying about my uniform? What's he saying?
Andy: You'll be in uniform. You just might not stay in that one too long.
Y Alan: Eh?
Wilf: Listen my old friend, what can you hear?

They listen.

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Y Alan: Artillery shells.
Wilf: Spot on, not bad for a new boy. And how often do you think that noise stops for?
Andy: Stop winding him the lad up Wilf…
Wilf: No, hold on, hear me out. Come on boy, how long?
Y Alan: Well… I don't know. Couple of hours?

Wilf and Andy both snigger.

Andy: Hours?
Wilf: More like minutes mate. This war hasn't stopped for more than twenty minutes in about six months now. It's relentless, day and night. Endless, endless, banging and crashing. Bombs firing down on us from all sides. Dawn raids. Snipers. Mud, rain, horrible winds.
Y Alan: Right, you're trying to frighten me. I'm the new boy. I get it.
Wilf: Nothing of the sort. You come over like a fairly feisty young lad, I doubt anything the hun throws at you is going to shock you.
Y Alan: Look, what's all this got to do with my uniform?
Wilf: What I'm saying is things round here have to be done quick. You like a good long bath do you?
Y Alan: What's that got to do with anything?
Wilf: Do you like to bathe young man?
Y Alan: I keep clean. What's he trying to say?
Wilf: So you like to stay clean. I reckon you wash your hair at home yes? And round the back of your ears like your Mam tells you to…?
Y Alan: I don't see what this has to do with…
Wilf: Look, this is how the wash drill goes. Usually you'll get half a cup of water a day for doing your face and behind your ears but on a wash day its manic. We get one big tub between us. First in and you get clean water, last in and you get lice stew. So it gets a bit hectic right?
Y Alan: You paint a charming picture.
Wilf: In the three times I've had a bath, I've never once got the same shirt back after. Ended up with some other fella's trousers last time. Bloody chaos it is.
Y Alan: Sounds wonderful.
Andy: Heads up - captain's coming – look alert.

The Captain enters. Wilf, Y Alan and the other troops stand to attention.

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Captain: At ease gentleman.
Wilf: Thank you sir.
Captain: New boy?
Y Alan: Yes sir.
Wilf: Private Dickinson sir. Manchester lad.
Captain: Manchester eh? From Preston myself. Been down to Lancashire a few times for the cricket. Saw us giving the Australians a good going over a couple of years back. You ever go down there lad?
Y Alan: I'm not really keen on sports sir.
Captain: Shame. Would have been good to share a few stories. Anything going on up there Private?
Andy: Not much different sir. German positions holding still tonight. Seem to be regrouping.
Captain: Good stuff. You showing this young lad the ropes boys?
Wilf: Yes sir.
Captain: Excellent. Not long till dawn now. Keep your chins up lads.

The Captain salutes and leaves.

Wilf: Well, you're a prize plum aren't you!
Y Alan: What have I done now?
Wilf: You're given a carte blanche invitation for hot cocoa and ginger cake in the captain's quarters and you turn him down flat!
Y Alan: I wasn't going to lie to him. I don't know a thing about cricket.
Wilf: Well that's very noble of you. And bloody stupid.
Y Alan: I don't see how being honest is stupid.
Wilf: Perhaps. But as you've now turned down an invite to the warmest place in five square miles, you don't get to moan about your toes.
Andy: Come on, your turn on watch.

Andy and Alan switch places.

Wilf: I bloody like ginger cake as well. You could have nabbed me a bit…