**Green Velvet**

by Rosemary Stride

Gas mask in hand, satchel over her shoulders, Ruth climbs out of the air raid shelter. Emerging into the daylight, she blinks. She and her classmates have been in the bunker under the playground for hours while the bombs dropped. Wave after wave. Muffled by concrete, the explosions sounded distant, but Ruth now sees they were not. The school’s been hit, strewing rubble across the asphalt where she was skipping earlier; dust and smoke rise from nearby streets; ambulance bells clang. She coughs, her lungs struggling in the thick air. Faces furrowed, parents wait for their children to appear. Ruth’s mother is nowhere to be seen, but Ruth isn’t worried — she’ll walk home. As usual. She doesn’t get far.

“Not down there, luv,” the policeman stops her. “Not safe.”

“But that’s where I live. With Mum.”

The policeman bends down. “What number?”

“Eleven.”

“I see. Best wait here with your teacher. I’ll see what we can do.”

Ruth feels Miss Andrews’ hand on her shoulder. Feels the gentle squeeze. She pushes her own hand deep into her tunic pocket. It’s still there — the scrap of soft, green velvet she found under Mum’s sewing table last night.

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