

No one feels well or happy just now. No one in wartime can quite escape the illusion that when the war ends things will snap back to where they were and that one will be the same age one was when it began, and able to go on from where one left off. But the temple of Janus has two doors, and the door for war and door for peace are equally marked in plain lettering, No Way Back. And the dead are not more irrevocably dead than the living are irrevocably alive.

Sylvia Townsend Warner, private correspondence

These days, though lost, will be all your days

Louis MacNeice, 'Selva Oscura'

The Dockside Raid

1.

It's Emma who wakes first.

Emma has spent what there's been of the night so far running, searching – racing through the corridors of her dreams. When she eventually found her supervisor, Sylvia's face was stern under her steel helmet, and when Sylvia stepped out onto Templemore Avenue to talk to her (because, of course, she was where she always is, where Emma should have looked first), she was incandescent with rage, more furious than Emma has ever seen.

How many times, she asked, are you going to do this, and in the dream Emma understood, and when she wakes her mouth is bleeding where she's bitten the inside of her cheek in her sleep, struggling, through her dream, to find the right thing to say.

She has not been sleeping well for weeks. Mother says it's the effect of night shifts, playing havoc with her body's natural rhythms. Mother – not that she would explicitly say anything, of course, because she manages anyway to make it crystal clear, even by something as seemingly innocuous as the angle of her knitting needles – does not approve of Emma volunteering for the First Aid post. The night shifts, three or four each week, the male wardens, who tend, in Mother's opinion, to be

a rough sort – how is Emma ever going to meet anyone suitable there? Then there’s the danger of the dawn walk home, even though they do most of it as a group, or in pairs, and there is more often than not a lift to be had from one of the auxiliary drivers. No, she doesn’t approve of any of it, and only reluctantly the public service side of it, because surely there are other ways that Emma could contribute to the war effort.

What, says Emma, like knitting?

They never actually have these conversations, of course.

For Emma, though, the First Aid duty has been the first thing in her life that has made sense: a natural progression from those years spent as a junior member of the St John Ambulance Brigade. If only she can overcome her body!

On nights she’s not on duty, she goes to bed as soon as the ritual of the blackout blinds is done, taking a strong dose of aspirin to help knock her out; but she wakes, always, around three, and sometimes even earlier, lies there helpless in the suffocating dark, somehow unable to switch on the lamp or sit up and try to read a book, a prisoner of her racing thoughts, in thrall to the house’s creaks and tics and night-noises, listening helplessly to the grandmother clock in the hallway dividing up the quarters of its remorseless hours, until outside she hears the first blackbird, soon joined by the robin’s *cheerily cheer-up, cheerily cheer-up* and the burble of the song thrush, and another wretched day has begun.

There is a strange stark clarity to the thoughts you have at 4 a.m. They fade as the day reasserts itself, but you know they’re still there, patient, cunning, treacherous, lying in wait for the

next time, and the next. You seem to know things, at those times, that you cannot articulate in the day. About who you are, and how you should be living your life.

Emma's hands shake as they feel for the glass of water on her bedside table. Her whole body is shaking. Sylvia's face, so furious. She tastes the blood in her mouth. She needs to get back to Sylvia, she thinks, because there are things that she needs to say, and if she doesn't say them – if she doesn't say them—

She realises that she didn't wake voluntarily from the dream. Not even at the behest of some desperate instinct to protect herself – or flee. It was something else that jolted her awake.

And then she hears it again. The long roaring whine of a plane flying overhead, unmistakable, the crackle of what must be gunfire, then a dreadful, dull, booming thud.

But no sirens, she thinks, have sounded . . . She finds the switch on the lamp and her head swims in the sudden flood of light. Wincing, she makes out on her wristwatch that it is just after midnight. She gets up, goes to her window. Ducks in between the curtains, lifts a corner of the blackout blind. Her bedroom window faces east, in the direction of the shipyard, the docks, and she can see that the whole length of where it should be is ablaze, awash with a leaping red light.

She pushes her tangled damp hair off her forehead with the back of her wrist. She can feel her heart, still not quelled from her dream, thumping anew. As she watches, tries to make sense of what she's seeing, there is another burst of

gunfire, another bright flare, a few seconds later, another great juddering thud.

Mother, she says, and the word is a scratch in her mouth. Mother, she says again, this time louder. Father, Mother, Audrey – Paul! She’s shouting now, stumbling back through her room, bumping her shin on the corner of the bed.

Wake up! Wake up, everybody!

A moment later, as if her cry has woken them too, the sirens sound. Oh, that unearthly wail of them, rising and falling, far and near and far, an ancient keening, which seems to scoop something from the pit of your stomach. Footsteps, voices calling, doors opening, the rest of the family coming out onto the landing. Audrey in her nightgown, hair tumbled round her shoulders, hopping as she tries to pull on socks; Paul bleary-eyed in his flannel pyjamas; Mother in her hairnet, tying the cord of her pale winceyette dressing gown. Father’s normally slicked and parted hair awry, shouting for Mother to help find his spectacles, already shouting out about gas masks too, about getting under the stairs, Now, for heaven’s sake, hurry up, *now!*

It’s happening, Audrey says, her voice thin against the sirens. Is it really? Is it happening?

There have been two dozen red alerts since the war began, all of them drills or false alarms. But this—

How many times do I have to tell you! Gas masks, Father yells. For crying out loud!

Emma hurries back into her bedroom to get the cardboard case from under her bed. She stands, blankly, for a moment. What else? Her helmet. She lifts a cardigan slung over the chair, her shoes. Can’t help going back to her window one

more time. The clatter of guns, the fizz and whine of what must be incendiaries. She cranes to see where they might be coming from, where they might be landing. Cutting through the wail of the sirens, the distinctive drone of another plane, right overhead, another, another. The pane of glass shivers inside its criss-crossed bands of tape. She steps quickly back.

Downstairs, Father is guldering. Now!

Jeepers, yells Paul. The docks – Sydenham Airport!

We should fill up the bathtub, Emma thinks. Her thoughts seem to be coming very slowly, as if there is a lag between her thinking and hearing them. We should fill up the washbasins and the bath. She puts down her armful of things, goes to her washbasin, fits the rubber plug, turns the squeaking handle of the cold tap. The water spurts and gushes.

Emma! someone is calling.

I'm coming, she calls back. But here, should we not be filling the sinks? Should someone not fill up the bathtub?

No one replies.

The sink is filling. She catches the pale moon of her face in the mirror. How preposterous all of this is!

The sink is filled. She turns the tap tight, picks up her things again. One last look at the room. If the house is bombed tonight, if an incendiary crashes through the roof and destroys it all, is there anything I'd want to have saved?

There is nothing, she thinks. There is nothing from this life that I'd save.

And now the five of them in the crawl space under the stairs. They don't have a cellar: the ground here is too claggy,

waterlogged. They don't have an Anderson shelter either, for the same reason; hardly anyone does, despite the leaflet campaign. Under the stairs, Father has said, is the safest place to be. If it's good enough for my best claret, he says, and she thinks he's probably only half joking. The dusty bottles are stacked around them now. The broom with the broken handle. A dustpan. Cobwebs. Someone has taped over the little hinged window with its stained-glass rosette, stacked some tartan picnic blankets in the corner, but that's all.

We haven't thought this through, she thinks, and she feels, irrationally, unconscionably, like laughing. We never thought it would happen. Here we are, like a game of Sardines. Paul bouncing about on his hunkers. Father's knees cracking as he folds them in, like a great big old daddy-long-legs. Mother like some tricoteuse in Dickens, knit one purl one as the heads roll from the guillotine. Audrey, who has brought a compact mirror and a comb to the crawl space under the stairs in the middle of an air raid, for woe betide anyone should see her with tousled hair.

Hell's bells, Paul! Audrey explodes. Would you ever stop fissing and footering and jumping around!

Now now, Mother says, and she starts them up reciting poems, to drown out the noise. They take turns reciting. Scraps of Shakespeare's sonnets, Keats, de la Mare. Father does a version of 'Casabianca':

The boy stood on the burning deck,
The flames 'round him did roar;
He found a bar of Ivory Soap
And washed himself ashore.

It makes Paul crack up with laughter and Audrey, who takes poetry seriously, roll her eyes. When they've run out of poems, Mother starts them singing hymns instead. Mother and her church-going: Audrey and Emma exchange an automatic glance, but for once Emma doesn't entirely mind. They sing through several traditional hymns, and then start on contemporary ones too. 'Be Thou My Vision': Emma likes that – the words are put to an old Irish folksong. *Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart, naught be all else to me, save that Thou art . . .* She concentrates on matching her descant to Mother's and Audrey's and Paul's soprano, blending as close as she can, Father's baritone underneath.

Oh, but it is airless in there, cramped. Every few minutes the sky flares magnesium-white: the entire sky lights up, and the eerie thing is that you feel rather than see it. Under the waves of planes passing back and forth they start to hear the sound of handheld sirens, which is encouraging: it is the fire engines and the auxiliary services. But they haven't, to Paul's consternation, heard a single RAF plane. He can tell the difference, he swears, between the Jerries and ours, and he attempts to explain to them, at great length, why the German planes sound like *w00, w000, w0000*, as opposed to the drone of ours.

Every so often Father unfolds his long limbs and ducks outside, into the hallway, into the front porch, to stretch out, to look at the sky. Paul begging to go with him, Mother absolutely forbidding it. Father crawling back in, thin-lipped, shaking his head. Not good, he says. Not good at-all, at-all.

★

For hours it continues: relentless, remorseless. They must have flattened the entire city. How is our house still standing? How much longer can it go on?

They have run out of poems, run out of hymns, or else lost the heart for them. They sit instead, trying to count the seconds between planes overhead and the sound of falling bombs as you might lightning and thunder.

Just after three o'clock, the telephone rings. Father answers it: he's been called in to the hospital; they need all the additional doctors they can get.

Oh Philip, Mother says, white-faced. Oh Philip.

Father, says Emma, should I come with you?

But he's already running upstairs, taking the steps two and three at a time.

Father! Emma squeezes past Audrey and crawls out, goes stiff-legged after him. I should come with you!

Back you downstairs, Emma, he shouts, as if she's a child. She follows him, defiant, right into his bedroom, right up to his dressing room door, shouts through: I'm coming with you.

You'd be more of a hindrance than a help, he says, and as the shame and indignation surge he's already pushing past her and thundering back down the stairs. She makes it to the banister in time to lean over and see him grab his black leather bag from the hallway, his hat and coat from the hat stand, and he's gone, a great slamming of doors, as she stands there, trying to find the words.

Emma, Mother is calling. For the love of God, back in here now, please.

Emma stands, furious tears in her eyes.

I'm trained for this, she says. When will you and Father take me seriously, Mother? This is exactly what I've been training for.

If they wanted you they would have telephoned for you, says Mother. Now come on, back in.

Come on, Em, says Audrey, poking her head out.

Emma walks down to the half-landing, then stands.

Maybe I should just go, she thinks.

But Father has left now – there's the noise of the Austin turning out of the driveway and accelerating away – and how is she going to get to Templemore Avenue, just dander through the streets?

I should try to telephone the post, she thinks, I should try to speak to Sylvia . . .

But she doesn't. Mother is right: they would telephone if they needed her; they have been through protocols for every eventuality. Sylvia doesn't need or want her. So instead of doing what she should be doing, what she's been training for more than a year to do, she crawls back in and sits there, angrily declining Audrey's offer of a shared blanket, hugging her knees to her chest, shivering not even so much with cold as with wretchedness, uselessness.

Here we are, she thinks, bitterly, the eighth of April 1941, the pinnacle of Western so-called civilisation, hiding in a bloody wee cupboard under the stairs while the world ends around us.

Eventually the agonised skies cease their shrieking. A few minutes later – a few minutes in which no one has dared

speaking, not even Paul – the rising swoop and single, steady, drawn-out note of the All-Clear.

We have survived, then, she thinks, but for what?

2.

The day before: as Audrey hurried across Corn Market, in the direction of Arthur Street, the doors to Woolies swung open, as if they were opening just for her. It meant, of course, that she was already late for work, but on a sudden impulse, because of *the day that was in it*, as Granny might say, she turned and went in. Past the display of *Pastel Ware* and *Willow Blue Ware*, the *Best of British!* enamel saucepans, past the stationery stand she usually lingered at to the cosmetics, the racks of powder compacts and pancake foundation, the pots of cream kohl and liquid rouge, all gleaming under the lights. Her hand hovered over the lipsticks.

This is our latest, said the salesgirl through her own bright quick lips. *Victory Red*. Or here I've *Carmine*, which is very becoming on sallower skin tones like yours, so it is. If you don't mind me saying.

Audrey didn't: not today. Today she just laughed. She selected a gold tube at random, unscrewed it.

Ruby Kiss, said the salesgirl. That's more of your blue kind of a red. But it could work on you too, so it could, she adds.

I'll take it, Audrey said. *Ruby Kiss*: it was perfect, the feel of the word on your lips.

In the ladies' cloakroom she daubed, then more confidently dragged the lipstick back and forth until her lips were a full, luscious red. Father disapproved of young women

making themselves up too heavily. Mr Hammond would no doubt disapprove too. And Richard.

Oh hell's bells, she said aloud, let them, and she blew a ruby kiss at herself, to the amusement of the attendant on her stool in the corner.

It's my birthday, she said, feeling herself flush. She added a conciliatory, So it is, immediately hating herself for the pandering. Why must I always do that? Why do I always try to make people like me, to prove I'm no different to them?

I'm twenty-one, she added.

So am I, the woman said, and winked. And I'm sure you'd be the first to tell me I don't look a day older. Ach, she said, I'm only pulling your leg. Many happy returns.

Oh no, but! Audrey said. I don't *want* happy returns. I don't want more of the same. I'm ready for something different. I'm ready for – for life to begin!

Aye, well, good luck with that, love, the attendant said, shaking her head and laughing with a smoker's wheeze, curls and chin and bosom wobbling. See the more things change? In my experience, the more they stay the same.

Well, said Audrey, feeling slightly foolish now. We shall see.

A clock somewhere was chiming a quarter past the hour. She *was* late now – properly late. But it isn't every day you're twenty-one: even Mr Hammond must surely understand that. She took one last look in the mirror. She had no spots, her hair had been manageable without being greasy this morning, she was wearing a new Viyella blouse with polka dots and her best felt hat, and the lipstick looked good on her, good against the pale dove-grey of her jacket.

In a burst of largesse, she gave the change from her note to

the attendant on the way out. She could afford to be generous: the morning, the day, the city was hers.

After work, she took the tram back east, out along the Hollywood Road, and walked up the hill. At this time of year it always felt to her like being underwater, the wash of green light from the new leaves of the great old beech trees, planted, Father liked to say, to commemorate victory over Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo. All those history book battles, those columns of statistics and manoeuvres and outcomes to memorise and recite . . . They bore no relation to how it must have been, how it must have felt. According to Wellington, it had been the nearest-run thing you ever saw in your life, with victory by no means guaranteed. And more of the men who fought under him had been German than English, people always forgot that, how quickly our allies became our enemies, how enmeshed we all really are . . . Though that wasn't the sort of thing, of course, that you could say nowadays.

She unlatched the gate at the tradesmen's entrance, even though the habit infuriated Mother, and walked up the little mossy path lined by bluebells, then past the brick outhouses and in through the back door to the cool of the kitchen, its smooth terrazzo floor that curved up the walls, so Mrs Price could more easily mop, and which Audrey had spent hours lying with her nose against, as a girl, looking for patterns and faces in the speckles . . . odd, dreamy child that she'd been. And there was Mrs Price now, sleeves rolled up, bony elbows protruding, making rock cakes, which Audrey and Emma used to make with her, kneeling on stools and solemnly

weighing handfuls of currants and candied peel, and which Audrey hasn't had the heart to tell her – so stodgy! so heavy on the stomach! – haven't been a favourite in years, but which she was faithfully making today for Audrey's birthday tea.

Oh Mrs Price! she said, and she swooped in and kissed Mrs Price's cheek, only embarrassing them both.

Get out of it, go on, said Mrs Price, so Audrey went on through into the panelled hallway, always so dark, so gloomy – if this were her house she would strip off the wood stain and sand it back down to natural oak so it glowed . . . Then, feeling vaguely disloyal, she called out, Hello, it's me, I'm home.

Hiya! guldered Paul, barrelling down the stairs, and their mother, Paul, I wish you wouldn't gulder like that (to which Paul guldered, I do not!). Hello, dear, she went on, I didn't hear you come in, oh Audrey, would you never use the front door like the rest of us, that tradesmen's path just trails the mud in everywhere, well, and how was the tax office, asked as always in a faintly comical tone, because Audrey's facility for numbers was to her mother a constant bemusement, just as it was to her father a source of baffled pride; and because there was no point in really replying, Audrey just said, Grand, thanks, Mother, and reached to tug Paul's earlobe (Ow, get off!).

Emma called then, from inside the dining room, Hello, Aud, Mother, tell Audrey she's not to come in, and Paul said, importantly and unnecessarily, You're not to go into the dining room, adding, But, Mother, when oh when will Father be home? because it was the family's tradition that on birthdays, rather than normal tea at four then supper at seven, there was a lavish birthday tea at six, and Paul, as he was now telling

her, had set off on his bicycle this morning with a packet of sandwiches and a flask of ginger ale for a first-day-of-the-Easter-holidays day of cricket in the playing fields at Ashfield, and was practically famished with hunger . . .

The grandmother clock was no help to him: she ticked on slowly, her stubborn, innocent face with its rosettes and vines not even yet at quarter to, and Mother shooed him back up the stairs.

I wish tempus would fugit a bit faster, he said.

Time flies, 'tis not so, time remains, 'tis man must go, Audrey sing-songed back at him, and he stuck out his tongue at her and stomped up the stairs.

She followed him, pausing on the half-landing to touch her fingertip to one of the hellebores floating in a bowl of water on the etagere, and seeming to swim, too, in the red and blue light streaming in through the stained-glass diamonds of the high hall window. She has felt a peculiar fondness for such things, recently, all of these almost unseen, taken-for-granted touches of their mother's, of the family home. She imagines it's because she's not far off her own household, weekly menus and a garden to oversee, a Mrs Price of her own, or at least a twice-weekly Betty, and then inevitably a baby and all the rest of it. But when she tries to picture it, the edges somehow slip away.

She has been stepping out with Richard for almost a year now. Cinemas, dance halls, walks on Sunday afternoons, drives out into the countryside, picnics. But his face – his moustache – his earnest, tentative lips – she can't seem to imagine

it on the pillow next to her, waking to it every day . . . But perhaps, she thought now, you never can.

She sat down in front of her washbasin and rubbed two fingers of Pond's Cream into her cheeks, slowly cleansing away the grime of the trams, Mr Hammond's pipe smoke, the last grains of lipstick which she had, in the end, wiped off in the lavatory before work, and then dabbed her face with witch hazel astringent. Now that I'm twenty-one, she thought, maybe my skin will clear up for good . . . Sallow, the shop assistant had said. It's true: she has got her father's dark hair and slightly Spanish-looking skin. She massaged a dutiful dollop of vanishing cream in, then screwed the lids back on, stood, stretched. The armpits of her new blouse were damp from the press of people on the tram, the walk up the hill. She changed into a fresh blouse and her cherry-red jumper. One of the girls in the office had a theory that you have to wear the colour of the thing you want to attract: red is passion, yellow is happiness, green is love, and so on, although it was hard when Mr Hammond deemed only sober colours appropriate.

Her wristwatch said five to six. She could hear the sounds, in the hallway, of her father arriving home. Doors opening and closing. The distant trill of the bell as her mother rang for Mrs Price. Paul thundering once again down the stairs, the sudden break in footsteps as he leapt over the side of the banister – and yes, there was the thump, the protesting rattle of the doo-dahs on the bureau, the row of china plates on the sill of the wood panelling, Mother's admonishment . . . and with it all came that feeling again, that not-quite, almost-nostalgia that she couldn't seem to shake.

Mother had assumed that Richard was coming to the birthday tea, but Audrey hadn't invited him, for reasons that she couldn't quite articulate, even to herself. This time last year, she thought, I hadn't even met him, and this time next year – who knows, it's enough time to be married and have a baby . . . And so I want it to be us, just us, this one last time, in case it is the last time.

She was going with Richard, instead, to a dance at the Plaza on Saturday, and Mother was helping her to make a new dress especially, and every time she put it on and did up the run of buttons on the chest she tried to imagine him undoing them, slipping his fingers in . . .

She turned to the bedroom window, unlatched it, leaned out. Now that the year has passed the vernal equinox there are hours of light, still, at this time of day, pouring, westerly. The two cherry trees are just starting to bud: a month from now they'll be foamy with blossom. A pair of dozy woodpigeons bumbled in the cypress tree, cooing their somnolent coo. A blackbird, somewhere, singing its heart out in a liquid stream. The stooped figure of Mr Gracy, the old gardener, come out of retirement after his son, the young Mr Gracy, signed up. Old Mr Gracy was coming from the greenhouse, where he'd been planting tomatoes. The sweet, rank smell of them in a few weeks' time in the damp trapped heat of the mullioned glass . . . Beyond the apple trees and the gnarled plum tree, he's dug up the lawn into vegetable beds. Potatoes, peas and bush beans, lettuce, marrows and scallions. Dig for Victory!

But it all felt so far away, the war, on a day like today. She thought of the advertisements in Anderson & McAuley last autumn, when the air raids over London began, for

semi-adhesive strips to prevent flying glass splinters: she queued up to buy six rolls of them that day, helped Mother affix them to all of the bedroom windows, but since then they have begun to curl up at the edges and come unstuck. The Ministry of Public Security leaflets, a new one every week, advising on how to prepare a refuge in your house, on protection against high-explosive bombs, on precautions against incendiaries. Old Inspector Johnston, from the Somme veterans' hospital across the way, blustering up and down all of the driveways, his big broken-veined nose, his false teeth clattering with the effort of guldering inside his gas mask, insisting that a bucket of water be put out by each household during practice alerts. Mrs Price, rolling her eyes to heaven: He's in his element, she'd say fondly enough, but boy's a dear, what use is a wee bucket of water against one of them insanitary bombs? Then as he'd stand there, stubbornly sweating in his mackintosh and mask, tin hat clamped to his head, she'd fill the old pail in the scullery and sling it outside. That do ye?

And yet, Audrey thought, he was right, in a way, poor old Inspector Johnston, because we do have to live a little bit as if it will come to that, or at least as if it might: the heavy damp sandbags piled by the outhouses, the blackout blinds each night, the pail of water . . . It was getting the balance between carrying on as if life were normal, and preparing for it suddenly not being normal at all – but, she thought, wasn't that just life, at any time? Wasn't that the trick, the balancing act of it all? The mystics said, Live every moment as if it were your last. And what if it were to be, she thought, what if this were it, the last time she stood here on a spring evening, looking out of her bedroom window at the garden and the

trees and the playing fields beyond, and beyond them the lough and the hills, Divis, Colin, the sleeping giant of Cave Hill . . . If this were the last time she watched the cypress tree swaying like that, heard that blackbird singing, what, with her life, would she do differently?

Then she shook her head and laughed to herself: Catch yourself on. Sure every minute of every day was a last time all of its own: the last seventh of April 1941, the last first Monday of the month, the last and only day she would ever turn twenty-one. And the clock was chiming six now, and Paul was going like the clappers at the gong, brass battalions rippling through the air: they were waiting for her downstairs.

Try as she might, though, she couldn't quite shake the feeling: all through the reading aloud of the cards that had arrived for her in the second post, hamming up their turgid verses only slightly (*May God to-day, from His throne above, Shower on you blessings of joy and love, Then happy your birthday will be, If the Heavenly Father is watching o'er thee; Your hopes, your longings and desires, Your fondest wishes big and small, Your every dream and your ambitions, May future years fulfil them all*). Through the self-conscious ritual of accepting and admiring presents, Paul's tin of toffee (given, she suspected, not without ulterior motive), Emma's *Modern American Short Stories*, the latest in the Penguin series, Mother and Father's filigree key on a silver chain, which she dipped her head ceremonially to have put around her neck . . . Through Father asking her, as he has asked each of them every birthday for as long as she can remember, Well, how does it feel? and of not knowing, as ever, what to say,

because much as you might want to, you suddenly don't, do you, ever truly feel any different, and maybe you never do, not at twenty-one, or forty, or sixty . . . And through the birthday tea, ham baps and salad sandwiches and drop scones, a Victoria sponge as well as the rock cakes, and thinking vaguely that she should have invited Miss Bates from the office, recently posted from England, who couldn't get over how much food there was here, it was practically all she ever talked about; through Father's bad jokes and Paul's chattering with his mouth full about wickets, and Mother's pouring the tea and passing cake. Emma was quiet, as she often was these days, though when Audrey squeezed her hand under the table and thanked her again for the stories she smiled . . . In this room as it had always been, wood-panelled walls and drapes and French windows and claw-foot chairs and the brass scuttle filled with coal and the fireguard and tongs and the sweet-faced china shepherdess on the mantelpiece and the old ottoman that they used to pretend to ride like a pony and the slightly threadbare Turkish tasselled rug – all of it so familiar it was somehow unreal, so exactly had she pictured it, so much did she feel like an actor going through the motions of her own life.

3.

Audrey thinks of this now.

When the All-Clear sounded, they were too exhausted, too wrung out to go back to bed. They went out into the garden, into the street, to see that the neighbours were alright, and they were, not a house on the road was hit, although you could see whole streets ablaze further east, towards the docks. They stood there for a few minutes, relieved, numb, appalled, breathing in the choking, acrid air, before Mother ushered them all back inside. She made a pot of coffee, and an Ovaltine for Paul; added a good dash of Father's brandy to the pot. They sat around the kitchen table, hands tight on the warmth of their cups. Emma was shaking. Audrey went upstairs to fetch a quilt for her, came back down laughing: how might a sink and a third of a bathtub have helped them, should an incendiary have crashed through their roof? How might one tin pail of water at the bottom of the drive – which, incidentally, they had forgotten to leave out – how might that have saved them?

Audrey, Mother said, setting down her coffee cup, meaning, not in front of Paul, but Audrey couldn't help it, these ridiculous waves of laughter, and something not-quite laughter.

It's time we went to bed, Mother said then, firmly.

But I want to wait up till Father gets home, Paul said, but he was already yawning, despite himself.

It may be hours yet, Mother said, and she stood up and said, in that firm voice again, that they'd be no use to Father or anyone if they didn't get some rest themselves, and so Audrey and Emma meekly washed up the cups and they all went upstairs.

Although she knows Mother is right, she can't seem to sleep: she can only think of how, as they sat there, round that table, in that room, oblivious, life as they knew it was already over. All the while, at their Juvincourt base in Picardy, at Poix in Amiens, in Utrecht, across the north of occupied France and the Low Countries, the young Luftflotte squads had been preparing . . . She thinks that they, too, must be approaching the point of utter exhaustion, these Karls and Kurts and Gerhards and Ottos, these Peters and Friedrichs and Franzes, after eight months of almost uninterrupted nightly bombardments of the mainland: the hazardous long round trip, fuel tanks perilously full, thousands of pounds of explosives slung under the fuselage, or wherever they're stored . . . But they must try not to think about that. They must have spent the day napping, or playing cards, or in the mess hall playing ping-pong, or kicking an old leather football around outside. Some lying on their bunks, writing letters back home, to their mothers or kid brothers or to their girlfriends, their Ilses and Gerdas and Liselottes . . . What would they have been saying? She no longer has enough schoolgirl German to imagine it, though she liked German, was good at it, liked the dark, nervous eyes of Fräulein Ziegler, Ziggy, they all called her . . . But they would have been saying, no doubt, all

the same words that sons write to mothers, older brothers to younger, that lovers write, have always written, always will, to far-away, longed-for loved ones . . . *Mein Liebling*, she thinks, *ich kann es kaum abwarten, dich wiederzusehen* . . . Or *in meinen Armen zu halten* . . .

They must have signed and sealed the letters – or maybe not, they must have censors, as we do . . . in any case, finished and left the letters wherever letters had to be left, then gone outside to check their parachutes, stash their logbooks – zip up their horsehair jackets, the gold eagle emblem over the right breast, and their flying boots. Adjust their goggles, a final cigarette, perhaps, before tying thin cotton scarves over their mouths and climbing into the cockpit, pilots and their navigators, dorsal gunners and radio operators and all the rest of it . . . She thinks of the Yeats poem: *this tumult in the clouds . . . in balance with this life, this death* . . . and she thinks how strange, how strange it is, the sides on which we find ourselves, the things we, really, have no choice or say in, the ways we blindly go through a life in which the grooves are already set . . .

. . . and she is finally tumbling down through layers of something like sleep when she hears the noise of boots in the hallway, voices, the shudder and clang of the wrought-iron door to the porch. Mother's quick light footsteps, Father's voice, then – Richard? Is that Richard's voice?

She sits up. Her eyes feel tight and gritty, her head is swimming. There is a tightness at her temples, a vice lightly clamped, the threat of one of her headaches. It takes a while to focus on the hands of her bedside clock: it is just after

seven. She thought she'd have almost an hour more before getting up and ready for work. She could have done with it. She heaves back the quilts and gets out of bed. She still has on her thick Donegal wool socks, a cardy misbuttoned over her nightgown – she crawled into bed still wearing them. She runs her fingers through her hair, attempts to part it sideways. It must look like a bird's nest – and she can feel a spot throbbing at the edge of her jaw, the stubborn, angry sort she always gets a week before her monthlies.

Audrey? Mother is tapping lightly at the door.

Yes, she says. Come in.

Richard's here.

I thought I heard him.

He came back with Father. He's insistent that he has to see you. I said I would check, though I thought you were sleeping.

There is a slight smile at the corner of Mother's lips, a soft watchfulness to her eyes.

What would you like me to tell him?

I'll come down, Audrey says. I'll be down in a minute.

He's in the dining room.

Right. Alright.

She sits for a moment after Mother's gone, then goes to the washbasin and splashes cold water on her face. Her hair is a mess. And there is a spot – two. Rats, she says. Oh rats, oh rats. She brushes her hair, which is on the turn, now, from manageable to greasy, until it fluffs and crackles with static, makes up her face as best she can. Dabs foundation over her jawline, and sets it with powder. A fingertip of petroleum jelly to smooth her eyebrows into shape. Then she dresses quickly,

her brown, no, her navy wool skirt, her check blouse. Her heart beneath it, thumping.

She goes downstairs. Richard's bag, a chestnut version of Father's, by the door. His brown hat on the stand. She hovers for a moment in the hallway, just outside the dining room, but he has heard her coming down, is already opening the door, taking her into his arms, eventually standing back to look at her.

Oh Audrey!

Hello, Richard.

His hair is wet where he must have dunked his head and freshly combed it. A streak of soot on his neck that he's missed.

You were called in too? she says.

Everyone was. They panicked and didn't know how bad it was. They got McCue Dick's. Christ, they say it was an inferno. They got a good few other timber yards, builders' yards, the soap and chemical factories down there – the whole length of Duncrue Street got it pretty bad. Parts of Templemore, Albertbridge. But it isn't as bad as it could have been. Thank God.

He gazes at her. Christ, he says again. Oh Audrey.

His chin, ever so slightly cleft, is quivering. The faint graze of stubble where he needs to shave. She can see a pulse jumping wildly in his neck. She reaches out a fingertip to touch it. He grips her waist more tightly, fingers digging in.

Ow, she says. Richard.

Audrey Louise Bell, he says then. Will you marry me?

What? she says. But, Richard . . .

I know, he says. I know, I wasn't going to ask you like this. I haven't even got the ring. But all night – when it was clear they were hitting the east – I was just terrified, oh, I can't

even tell you. I love you, Audrey, is what I mean to say. So will you marry me?

Have you asked Father? she says, stupidly.

Of course I have, silly – I told him in the car on the way. He thought I should wait – he thought you'd want me to do it properly. But, Audrey! These are – unprecedented times, this is—

He breaks off. All night, he begins again. All night – I just thought – Christ.

Then he says, You haven't said yes yet.

Yes, Richard Graham. Yes, Dr Richard Clive Graham. Yes, I'll marry you. I'll be your – wife.

He is still waiting, and she realises that she hasn't yet spoken the words.

Hell's bells, she says.

What do you mean, hell's bells? You mean, hell's bells, yes, you'll marry me?

Hell's bells, yes, I'll marry you, she says, slowly, but aloud this time.

He stares at her for a moment. Then he laughs. Shakes her like a rag doll – Richard! – then spins her around. Lets go of her. Turns in a circle by himself, exhales. Hoo! Turns back to her, his face alight, so nakedly she almost can't bear it.

We'll get the ring today, he says. I'll meet you at lunch – do you think you can get away? I'll meet you at lunch and we'll choose it together. If the shops are open. But of course they'll be open. The city centre was untouched, it'll be business as normal there. I'll meet you, and we'll choose the ring, and – oh Christ! You're going to marry me, Audrey – you're going to be my wife!

He kisses her then. The warm press of his lips, the edge of his moustache, his tongue. He tastes of chicory coffee, and peppermint. It is impossible, she thinks, that – is it only yesterday? – I was opening my birthday cards in here. And I knew it at the time – I did – I couldn't have told you how, but I knew it. And here I am, here we are, and somehow it has all already happened, more than I could have possibly imagined, and quicker, only not, because – oh! my head is spinning.

Audrey, he says.

I feel – swimmy, she says.

It's the shock of it, poor soul. It's too much for you (said with infinite tenderness). Sit down – and drawing out a chair, he presses her into it. I'll ask Mother for some coffee for you, and some distant part of her thinks, Already you call Mother *Mother*? but she shakes the thought away, closes her eyes, lets herself slip into the comfort of his solicitude. The bunch of hothouse lilies that he sent her yesterday are in the centre of the table, in Mother's best winged glass vase, and overnight they have started to unfurl, loosening the pale, clenched knots of themselves, releasing their heady, creeping scent. She imagines telling all this to the girls in the office later, and then she thinks with a start that she won't be going to work much longer, not once she's *Mrs Richard Graham*, not once she's *Dr Graham's wife*. In fact, maybe he'll want her to stop now, as they're engaged – some men do. They have never discussed it. There is so much we haven't discussed, she thinks, so much we haven't yet done . . .

But it's all beginning now, she thinks, my real life – all of it.

4.

Wee Betty Binks, though the eldest of five, has never in her fourteen-and-a-bit years managed to shake off the *wee*, or even to pass it on like a hand-me-down to one of her sisters, despite her best efforts to redress her diminutive stature by climbing on a footstool to reach the door-jamb, then hanging on and swinging there for as long as she can, toes pointed and straining for the floor, despite the whack her ma gives her on the backside, despite her cheeky wee clatter of sisters saying sure it's only her arms she'll stretch, and capering round her like monkeys, the skitters. Wee Betty Binks, with her sticky-out left ear, the other bane of her life, taped with sticking plaster to the side of her head each night, the patch it leaves at the nape of her neck, like that spot on the back of a wean's head where the fine hair rubs off.

She knows about weans, Wee Betty, seeing as it's long been her job to look after them, though that has lately fallen to her next-oldest sister, Clara, now that Betty's a working woman, the one in her family to bring home a weekly wage packet, to grandly hand it over.

Her da used to be a joiner at the wee yard, as it was known, Woodman Clark's, the one that closed first. There'd sometimes have been two or three hundred joiners down the back of the shop, waiting at the gate, hoping for a job, though there was never more than a dozen a day got hired. Sometimes her

da'd hang around there all day anyway, until the siren went, hoping to see someone he knew could put in a word for him, get him a job the next day, or at least the chance of one.

The grown-ups shudder when they talk of the thirties. No work to be had, eventually not even for a dozen out of two or three hundred. Some of them, after a few pints, talk of the Poor Law board of guardians and the Outdoor Relief Strike, they talk bitterly of the unemployment panel sitting in Corporation Street, and of the fat cats at Stormont, the financiers, looking out only for their own backs, from the comfort of their own well-padded backsides. But mostly they don't talk about it at all.

Wee Betty, even wee-er then, of course, remembers the chants of *We want grub, we want work*, remembers soup kitchens, the murky green or brown liquid ladled up, discs of oil sliding over its surface, the cubes of carrot or turnip or other unidentifiable floating veg. The hunk of bread you'd get, and the looking over your shoulder to see that the ones coming after you hadn't got more, got given two hunks, because the lady doing the serving reckoned a wee girl only had a wee appetite. She remembers her da going with her Uncle Sammy and Uncle Shooey out to Crawfordsburn, the Dufferin estate, to trap rabbits, and her ma beside herself at the thought they'd get caught or even shot by the gamekeepers. She remembers that one of the neighbours caught a hare once, not in Crawfordsburn this time but up in the hills to the west of the city, and although it wasn't said to be good eating, it made a beautiful stew. She remembers waiting outside Sawers on Christmas Eve, for a turkey neck or some gizzards for their Christmas dinner. Or the smell that pork skin makes when

you singe the hairs off of it with a red-hot poker. She remembers whichever one of the weans she had charge of while her ma went down the pawn shop or the labour exchange, giving her a rag dipped in water to suck, to stop her gurnin’.

Things brightened up with the talk of war. The British government had to order more ships. There was HMS *Belfast*, and then Harland’s works got the reputation for turning out the finest engines, and the orders came in, and they were hiring again. But first her da did his back in, and that was him out of work for two months, and then there was the second accident a year ago, when his leg got crushed. Now, because the steep wee staircase in their two-up two-down is beyond him, he sleeps in the front room – does everything, in fact, in the front room (even his business in a chamber pot) – and has visions. The most recent: the sky filled with coffins, coffin after coffin after coffin, he said, some full-size, others only four or two foot long, drifting down over the whole of Belfast on pale white parachutes, in total silence.

The family usually roll their eyes at his doomsday nonsense, but there was something about this one – the way he told it – the way you could almost see them yourself, so you could, God help you – that they listened this time. They got Willy Smith from across the way to take down two of their internal doors and nail them onto the scullery table, to fortify it, for use as a shelter.

And when the incendiaries started raining down over Ballymacarrett, her ma grabbed the baby from the bottom drawer of the press, and Wee Betty woke her other sisters, Clara she shares a bed with, and Maggie and Jenny top-to-tail in the cot, and all six of them piled under the table, feeling the roof, the

windows, the house itself, rattling like a bad tooth, listening to the crackle and fizz and thud of the bombs, while John Binks refused all efforts to haul him in with them and sat instead in the doorway, face rapt, and when an incendiary did indeed come crashing through the roof, and through the bedroom, and right into the scullery, finally bouncing off of the reinforced table, Wee Betty and her ma were able to slosh it with a pail of water just as it caught, where otherwise it would have made splinters of the table, and burned them alive.

Wee Betty is full of it when she reaches the Big House the next morning, late, face gleaming with excitement and perspiration, hair flying loose from its pins after running all the way up the hill, after running, in fact, most of the way, as the trolleybuses are down in Ballymacarrett.

Swear to God, Missus, she says, forgetting that Missus doesn't like you taking the Lord's name in vain, he seen it all, only two weeks back. All them coffins, falling from the sky – he seen it all!

She dances round for the mop – realises she's forgotten to take off her coat – goes to take it off but forgets she's holding the mop and lets it clatter to the ground. Apologises! Picks up the mop and props it up and apologises to it. Goes for the bucket and realises once more she's forgotten to take off her coat.

Why don't you sit down with us, dear, and catch your breath, Missus says, and Wee Betty stops fissling and footering and just stands there, mouth open, looking from Missus to auld Mrs Price.

Are you looking to catch flies, her ma would say. Auld Mrs Price has her on her feet all day long – would have her guts for garters if she ever caught her sitting down. But it's Missus saying it, and so she hastily hangs up her coat and pulls out a chair and joins them at the kitchen table.

Let me pour you a cup of tea, says Missus. Sugar?

Two, please, says Wee Betty, and would say three if she thought she could get away with it, Missus giving up her own sugar ration like this!

The three of them sit there for the best part of an hour then, housework seemingly forgotten, while auld Mrs Price tells of her night spent in the coal-hole, and Wee Betty gets to tell the story of her da's vision over again, both women listening in awe, and when she's finished she wraps her chapped hands around her second cup of syrupy tea and finds herself glowing with more than just the warmth of it. And even when auld Mrs Price eventually snorts and says, Can you ask your da to tell my Jim the name of the horse he should back in the Tote, and Missus shakes her head and laughs, Wee Betty's not put out, because she knows her da was right, and she knows, too, she couldn't for the life of her tell you how, but she knows, she does, that what happened last night marks her out for something special, something better.

The talk moves on: the cauliflower pie that's to be attempted for supper, as posh people call their tea, made from one of Lady Edith's hints, cut out of the paper and pasted in the big book, which Mrs Price will read aloud, and Wee Betty attempt to follow, laboriously, each unfamiliar word with her finger.

One day, Wee Betty thinks (though she thinks it fondly, vaguely, as she is grateful to auld Mrs Price, who got her the position), one day, when auld Mrs Price kicks the bucket, all this will be hers – all of it. Hers the kitchen, hers the pantry, hers the scullery, hers the entire domain. Hers the gardener, to tell what to pick and bring in, and hers too the misshapen or excess veg, the excess jars of preserves, that Missus lets you take; and it will be her to get first dibs on the darned shirts and jackets that Missus passes on.

Wee Betty thinks of it all and she feels herself growing – she actually does! – at least an inch in height.