

Silvertown - The Blitz

*In the Second World War, Jenny Page lives with her husband, Len, in East Ham. Their two children have been evacuated. Jenny loves sweet things, and she survived the first bombing raid in 1940, hiding under the stairs with her mother sucking on one of her few precious barley sugars.*

A couple of nights later, one hundred and seventy-one bombers flew over London. Four hundred were left dead. The day after that two hundred bombers pummelled the streets in broad daylight, and another one hundred and seventy dropped bombs through the night, leaving three hundred and seventy dead. And so it went on, on on, and on, night after night, pounding the East End. Shops and homes gaped like mouths, fires sprang up. Drains burst, gas pipes leaked. Sandbags, wood shards, glass, brick, even tree branches obscured roads and passageways. In a matter of days from the start of the Blitz the civil administration of London almost disappeared. Sewers went unrepaired, electricity cables spat sparks into the streets. People were left unpaid, certificates unsigned, births and deaths unregistered. Hundreds crowded into the tube and set up camp there, saying it was no longer safe to remain above ground. They had a point. Above-ground shelters proved hopelessly inadequate. Some collapsed without any bomb ever having fallen near them. The sense of impending doom was magnified by food and water shortages. In the East End, life became very stark, a coarse scramble for food and money.

About two months into the bombardment, Jenny is in the back yard digging winter cabbages when Mrs MacReady's head appears above the yard fence. 'Ere, Mrs P,' says Mrs MacReady, 'it's Mr Mac, he's having a turn. He's been like it all week, I dunno what to do with the bugger.'

Jenny shakes the earth from her fingers.

'I'll come round,' she says.

'I don't suppose you have a biscuit,' says Mrs MacReady.

'I don't suppose I have'

'Only I thought—with your hubbies connections'

'The thing about Mr P's connections, Mrs Mac, is that they don't connect in my way'

It's yesterday's tea-leaves, powdered milk. There is no sugar.

'Where's Mr Mac then?' asks Jenny, unable to see a space big enough to store a man.

'In the cupboard.'

There she finds him, unwashed, smelly and huddled up like a beetle, wearing his outdoor clothes and a gas mask.

'Mr MacReady,' says Jenny, 'I don't know why you don't come down to number 27 and have a cup of tea *and a drop of bread and scrape*'. She shouts this last, remembering that Mr MacReady is hard of hearing. Back when all this started – it seems an age ago – he thought the sound of German bombers was interference on his wireless.

'No, I ain't leaving', grunts Mr MacReady.

'He won't listen or nothing', tuts Mrs MacReady. 'He ain't eaten nor drunk, ain't slept for weeks neither.' The old woman bites her lip.

Jenny studies the man in the cupboard for a moment. His eyes are rubies, hard and red. The skin on his face is yellow with wear. He has the mean look of the sleepless. It's a look you see all over the East End. From time to time even the strongest of them has it. You can get used to the taste of powdered egg, pea flour soup, whale meat rissoles, you can manage the stomach cramps, the ulcers, pasty skin and weight loss. It is even, after a while, possible to cope with the daily threat and presence of death. But the lack of sleep drives you almost insane. The dreadful lying awake, night after night, listening to the thundering bombs and the buildings falling.

Jenny reaches out a hand and gently pulls on Mr MacReady's elbow but the old man stays where he is and snarls.

Some time the following day a nurse takes Mr MacReady away in an ambulance, and that's the last time Jenny Page ever sees her neighbour. Another casualty of war, but one who will never make the honours lists or be remembered at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

From her firewatching post Jenny Page witnesses the transformation of the city. Four nights a week she surveys her patch from the roof of an old factory building. Over the months she watches her city burn.

One night in the spring of 1941 the bombers release their arsenal over Silvertown. At the sound of the siren Jenny rushes down to the cellar which serves as a makeshift shelter. When the all-clear rings she scrambles up on to the roof to check for fires. She is hit by the strongest, oddest smell. To the south, at Silvertown, a sheet of transparent blue flame shivers across the Thames, sending waves of warmth and a tart, throat-clenching odour towards her. There is a quality to the smell she recognises. She thinks for a moment, trying to place it. Of course! Sugar. The blue flame floating above the Thames is burning sugar. The sugar mile is a mile of flames.