

SILVERTOWN

Poplar and the story of the Isle of Dogs.

Poplar was built around the sea trade. In 1512 the East India Company built a ship-building business at the eastern edge at Blackwall Reach. Soon afterwards houses were built and craftsmen moved in. Poplar became a town of ropemakers and sailmakers, chandlers and uniform-makers, seamen and carpenters, ships' engineers and, of course, ships.

In 1802 the East India Company built two huge docks, the East and West India, one on each side of the Isle of Dogs. The docks were full of boats carrying everything from pineapples to parrots, from tea to alabaster, from bananas to asbestos.

Today Poplar is very different. The workhouse has gone, and so has the East India Dock, but if you look carefully, what remains tells a story of how Poplar used to be. At the bottom of Chrisp Street, where a fine market once stood, the Poplar Baths still stands. Along the High Street there are the remnants of Poplar's shipping past: a customs house and an old seamen's mission. Further east on the Tunnel Approach, the magnificent colonnades of Poplar Library are still there, the walls embedded with sea shells.

This is the story of a life in Poplar. The story of Jenny Fulcher who was born in 1903 between the Cut and the River Lea.

We start when Jenny was about six and living in a two bedroom flat in Ullin Street. She sleeps in the same room as her five brothers and sisters. The room is small with a horsehair mattress that is shaken of its bedbugs every morning and rolled into a bolster to serve as a seat and a table. The room is known as the little room. Occasionally when there is no money for coal the whole family including her parents sleep in the Little Room just to stop themselves from freezing to death.

Jenny has two loves in life: sweets and the East End.

'Mum, where's the End in East End?'

'The Docks, Jenny love, the Docks is the End. The East End is the Docks.'

'But Mum, where's the Beginning then?'

'Oh Jenny, Jenny, the questions you ask! How should I know?'

'You knew where the Finish was.'

'But it's harder to say where the Beginning is. Ain't no East Beginning s'far as I know. There's only an East End.'

Jenny's father, Frenchie, works as a ships' carpenter at the Thames Ironworks on Bow Creek. Each morning before seven he goes down in the hope of work and each evening he returns at seven when they have bread with marg and jam and maybe a few potatoes with gravy or a hard-boiled egg. Later when the children go to bed and have their overcoats spread over them, Frenchie will tell them stories. He tells them about the parrots which came in a boat from Uruguay and swear in fourteen different languages, or about the performing monkeys who could write the alphabet. He tells them about the docker who was pushed into the water by a side of beef swinging from a ship, and how his workmates made a fire right on the quayside and roasted the beef in tribute to their lost friend. He tells them about the body of a whale that was dug up out of the marsh at the West India.

But Jenny has a favourite story. It is one that happened a long time ago and it is one that Frenchie tells often. It is about two mastiff dogs and a cow.

The cow had been left to graze on the marsh south of Poplar in the loop of the Thames. The dogs were there to protect the cow from hungry poachers and were

chained to its feet. Every week the cow's owner left meat for the dogs to eat. But one night a mist came down on the marsh and the cow could not see where it was going. It stumbled on its chains and fell into a nearby bog, taking with it the two mastiff dogs. After a struggle the cow died but because the dogs were lighter they remained on the surface of the bog for a while longer. For four days and nights the people of Poplar heard the dogs' terrible wailing but were too frightened to go down to the bog and see what it was. There were rumours that the devil had landed in the marsh and was up to no good. When the cow's owner eventually returned he found the two dogs were dead, their heads preserved in the marshy mud and their jaws still open.

And that is how, so Frenchie says, the Isle of Dogs got its name.

Sweets and Dora

Jenny Fulcher lives in a two bedroom flat in Ullin Street in the East End. She is one of six and her father works as a ship's carpenter in the Thames Ironworks. The year is 1914.

All the children of school age living in Ullin Street go to the same school, just a few roads away in Bright Street. The Bright Street School is big and red-bricked, between a terrace of houses and a lot of pubs. The Fulcher children walk to school. They take the route via Zetland Street, although it's not strictly on the way. Zetland Street is where Mrs Selina Folkman's confectionary store is. To Jenny, the store is a sugar palace. In the window are bricks of pink and white coconut ice sitting on a paving of cream fudge with cherry-spotted nougat arches.

'Get a move on Jenny, you can't have none,' says Rosie her elder sister. But it's no good. Jenny can think of nothing else. Bit by bit the sugar palace consumes her. Rowntree's Treacle Toffee, Fry's Chocolate Crème, McIntyre's Toffee Tablet, Maynard's Rum 'n' Raisin.

Just after Jenny turns eleven, a dirty-skinned, yellow-haired girl appears in her class. This isn't much of an event in itself. Children come and go and a bitter winter is enough to take off one or two. But there is something about this particular girl which attracts Jenny. Perhaps it is her confidence. Perhaps it is the faint smell of violets she gives off, reminding her of violet crèmes and violet dragees and violet lozenges.

At the end of the second day the yellow-haired girl is waiting for Jenny at the school gates.

'Who's this then?' Her sister Rosie asks.

'Guess,' says the yellow-haired girl.

'Can't, won't and shan't,' says Rosie pulling Jenny out into the street.

The yellow-haired girl follows them across Bright Street and out into St Leonard's Road, singing: 'Poplar is popular but Wapping is topping.'

At the crossroads Jenny turns and says, 'So why pick on us to tell?'

Pretty soon they reach Ullin Street and the girl says 'How's about we play ginger?'

In ginger you tie the one doorknob to its neighbour, ring the doorbells and run off as quickly as possible to a place where you can watch what happens.

'My mum says ginger is common,' says Jenny.

'Please yerself,' says the girl, her yellow hair falling across her face like sunlight 'I don't care anyway.'

And that, over the years, is what Jenny Fulcher finds most appealing about her friend Dora Trelling. Dora Trelling really doesn't care.

Jenny begins meeting Dora (the yellow-haired girl) after school. They walk together to Mrs Folkman's confectionary store on Zetland Street and discuss the relative merits of sweets they have never tasted.

'Cough candy, now, there's a nice little tablet,' says Jenny,

They fall silent for a moment, imagining the crust of sugar on the outside, and then the welcoming interior.

'Dor, wha's your all-time favourite sweet?'

They scan the rainbow piles in the shop window.

'I ain't never had none of 'em. Wha's yours?' says Dora

'Lemme see,' says Jenny running her mind across imaginary tastes. Trying to

think what might be her favourite since she has never tasted most of them. 'Liquorice comfits or montelimar? Fruit gems or marshmallow? Tell the truth, Dor, I'm a little bit partial to the lot but all considered I think montelimar gets it.'

'Liar, liar,' says Dora 'Liar, liar, pants on fire.'

Until the day she died the two things Jenny loved the most in the world were the East End and..... sweets.

War and Headcheese

Jenny Fulcher lives in a two bedroom flat in Ullin Street in the East End. She is one of six and her father works as a ship's carpenter in the Thames Ironworks. Her best friend is Dora Trelling and her favourite things in the world are sweets. The year is 1914.

A hot afternoon in early September finds Jenny Fulcher and Dora Trelling hiding behind a postbox on the East India Dock Road. They watch several hundred thousand men in uniform march in the direction of the ships that will take them to war. All along the route, men and women are leaning from windows laced with bunting, waving and whistling. There's a band playing military tunes and everywhere people are fluttering little Union Jacks on sticks and clapping. A few women are hurrying alongside the marchers, grasping the last few moments before their husband or brother or son finally disappears. One or two are crying, but only one or two, because the papers say it will be the shortest of wars.

'Me dad says signing up is for the birds,' says Dora.

The men continue to march, their faces serious.

'D'you think they'll be getting theirselves killed, Dor?' asks Jenny.

'Nah, no chance. It's the Germs what's getting theirselves killed.'

'Dor,' says Jenny 'you got some coinage on yer?'

Dora shakes her head. 'Nothing. Why?'

'Jess thinking 'bout sweets, is all.'

They peer out from behind the postbox at the khaki-coloured column in the road.

'When we win the war, do you think we'll have more money, Dor?'

'Sure as eggs is eggs, Jenny pet.'

They make their way south then east to Bow Lane and find themselves in a small crowd outside number 278 – William Utz the butcher's. The crowd is quite unlike the one waving on the soldiers. There is something ugly about it. A young man with a red face has grabbed a brick and is looking as if he means to throw it at Utz's shop window. Some of the crowd appear to be egging him on; others are standing back, shaking their heads.

'What's goin on, Dor?' says Jenny.

'Don't ask me Jenny girl.'

'I suppose he ain't paid the tallyman.'

'I suppose that's it.'

The two girls pass through the crowd and out the other side. Jenny doesn't mention the incident at home, but the image of the man throwing a brick through Utz's window stays with her. She doesn't like thinking about it and for a few hours she manages to stop, until at tea that day her mother puts a glistening slab of headcheese on the table.

'I got it at Utz's place,' says her mother 'A chap was selling everythin' off cheap right out at the front. He had a little trestle with Utz's meat piled up, bits of glass all over everything but nuffink you couldn't pick out. I dunno where Utz was but when things is going cheap you don't ask questions.'

The family stares at the headcheese sitting on the plate with its little bits of brain, ear, cheek and snout meat. They can't remember how long its been since they had meat of any kind. Since the start of the war, everything has become so expensive.

'I ain't gonna eat no German meat,' Jenny's father says 'Not now.'

Silence falls and the children stare at their laps.

‘Me neither,’ says Jenny’s brother John, sliding away from the table.

‘Nor me,’ says Frances Maud.

Jenny notices her father is staring at her. Her mother gets up from the table and moves the headcheese over to her side.

‘Oh you are silly billies.’

Jenny’s father gets up from the table, goes to his chair by the fire and lights a cigarette. Now there are only two people left: Jenny and her mother.

‘Silly billies,’ repeats her mother, ‘Slicing the slab in two. Here you go Jenny.’

Jenny sits there for a moment, thinking about the boy with the brick at Utz’s shop and the ugly crowd. Every part of her is saying no except the part that counts. And suddenly she can hear the headcheese saying, *I know how badly you want me Jenny*, and then it’s too late and her tongue is lapping around the jellied crust and her teeth are sinking into the meat of the headcheese.

Later, when she and her mother are down at the yard tap washing jam jars, Jenny says ‘How big is the war, Mum?’

‘It’s the size of the world, pet,’ her mother says.

‘Does that mean it’s going on in Aldgate and Whitechapel?’

‘Course it do!’

Jenny rescues a few hairs escaping from her plait. The war is a puzzle to her. If Britain rules the waves, then what is there to fight about? And why is Mr Utz bad now? They’ve been buying tripe off him for years and he wasn’t bad then. Maybe its to do with the name Utz.

‘Mum?’ says Jenny.

‘Oh, you’re a right little Miss Why this evening. What is it now?’

‘We ain’t foreigners are we?’

Her mother smiles and shakes her head ‘No love. We ain’t foreigners. But poor Mr Utz was.’

Sewing

Jenny Fulcher lives in a two bedroom flat in Ullin Street in the East End. She is one of six and her father works as a ship's carpenter in the Thames Ironworks. Her best friend is Dora Treling and her favourite things in the world are sweets.

In 1917 Jenny leaves Bright Street school for good. She is fourteen. Through a cousin of Dora's she hears there are vacancies for seamstresses at Moses' outfitters in Stepney, just east of the Mile End Waste. A few days later Jenny and Dora find themselves in front of an old brick house with a peeling sign reading M. Moses, Quality Tailoring. Pushing through the entrance, they clamber up broken stairs and knock tentatively at a brown door marked Office. The supervisor is a grey-faced man in his fifties with a voice like an old hinge. He says that Mr Moses is thinking of taking on a couple of youngsters. Moses prefers boys but there is little point in taking on anyone who might be drafted in a year or two's time should the war go on. So girls it is, says the supervisor, if girls it has to be. They can come back and speak to Mr Moses himself on Friday afternoon.

'Ere Dor' says Jenny on the walk back to Poplar 'When we start working will we be rich?' They make their way down to Commercial Road, past the alleys of Stepney.

'Sure as eggs is eggs,' says Dor.

'How rich?'

'So rich that we'll eat headcheese and corny beef and sweets.'

They are walking along the towpath at Limehouse Cut, beside the gypsy boats with their brilliantly painted cabins.

'When I'm rich I'm gonna walk through the door of Mrs Folkman's and say, So Mrs F, what have you got in today that is particularly good? And Mrs F will say, Well Miss Fulcher, it's funny you ask because only this morning I made up a batch of violet crèmes and there's some splendid fudge and all. And I'll say, Very good Mrs F, top hole, make me up a half pound of both. I shall be paying, as usual, in cash.'

The following Friday afternoon, Jenny and Dora return to the Mile End Workshops. A large lady in a brown wig shows them into the main workroom. She sets them in front of a sewing machine and takes ten minutes explaining how to use it. Then she hands each of the girls two small scraps of fabric and says she'll be back in ten minutes to inspect their work. The girls sit speechless.

'Blow me if I know where to start,' says Dora poking at the needle. 'I ain't been this scared of nothing since me mum cut a loaf and there was a rat baked inside. But at least the rat was dead.' Dora brings her foot hard down on the treadle and the needle begins jerking madly 'Jenny,' she says 'We ain't never gonna be rich unless we get them seams done.'

'I think you 'ave to do it slower, Dor,' says Jenny and with the greatest caution she eases her foot on to the treadle and the needle floats upwards. 'Like this.'

Five minutes later Jenny has put an elegant seam across the fabric.

'How d'you get it straight then?' asks Dora struggling with a net of knotted threads. 'Finish this off before Mrs Wig comes back, will yer?'

'Right-o Dor.'

'And Jenny you won't tell, will yer?'

Jenny Fulcher shakes her head and smiles. 'Not in a million years Dor.'

The two girls leave with the promise of a job picking pins and clearing away

threads for six shillings a week and all the sugared tea they can drink. Marching across the Mile End Waste they feel as though they have grown a foot in an afternoon. All along the route men are busy putting London back together, replacing bombed brickwork, boarding up shattered windows and clearing up empty plots for rebuild.

‘Let’s check on the mooches and the gyppos,’ says Dora.

‘Me mum don’t like us having nothing to do with them, Dor. Me mum says they’re common as muck.’

‘We can do what we like,’ says Dora fingering her yellow hair.

‘Can we?’

‘Course. We’re in the money now, ain’t we?’

Teeth

Jenny Fulcher lives in a two bedroom flat in Ullin Street in the East End. She is one of six and her father works as a ship's carpenter in the Thames Ironworks. Jenny works at Mark Moses Tailoring as a machinist. Her best friend is Dora Treling and her favourite things in the world are sweets.

On 18 February 1920, Jenny Fulcher turns seventeen. It is a dreary morning and she is woken early by the cold. Trying not to wake her sisters and brothers, she gets up, pulls on her coat and boots and goes out into the yard to the privy.

Back upstairs the family has risen. Her mother is starting a fire in the grate and her father is smoking.

'Phew, what's that pong?' her father says 'You brought the privy in with you?'

'Happy Birthday Jenny,' says her mother.

They sit down to their usual breakfast of bread and marg, dunked in sweet tea.

'Here go,' says her mother handing Jenny a package and a sixpence. 'Spend it on something nice for your hair.'

'Make the most of it anyway,' says her father 'There'll be no more.'

All morning at work Jenny can't stop thinking about what's inside the package. But if she takes it out in public everyone would want a piece. She takes it into the backyard privy and unwraps the paper. From inside there is a smell of chocolate and rose Turkish Delight.

'Oh Miss Crème,' she says to herself 'You devil,' and for fifteen minutes she sits there eating the sweets on the privy.

That night when she gets back to Ullin Street the atmosphere is tense. Her mother looks guilty.

'Jenny pet,' she says 'Drink your cuppa then we'll be off.'

'Off where?'

'Off where you'll see.'

It might be reasonable to think that Jenny would be going on some surprise outing to celebrate her birthday. But this is the East End in 1920 and there are no surprise outings, leastwise no celebratory ones. Jenny puts on her coat and follows her daughter out of the door of number four Ullin Street.

They walk along St Leonard's Road then turn west towards Chrisp Street where a few men still stand behind their market stalls. Then they take the alleys towards Limehouse and finally to a dingy shop front. They stop before the door and Jenny looks up at her mother.

'Shh,' she says 'Enough questions.'

Inside is an oily wooden floor and a bell above the door. There is a metallic smell.

'Mum?' says Jenny.

'Shh, you'll see.'

Hearing the bell, a stout man in his fifties comes out of the back room. 'Ah,' he says 'The young lady.'

'Well,' says Jenny's mother awkwardly 'Well I'll be off then.'

The stout man smiles then he goes to a hook on the back of the door and takes down a butcher's apron.

It takes three hours to pull out all the teeth in Jenny Fulcher's mouth. Three quarters of a century she will still recall the pain. The butcher uses a monkey wrench,

more commonly used for unscrewing rivets and rusty bolts. There is no anaesthetic. Jenny is strapped into a chair with docker's belts . Every so often an old woman appears and offers her a jar of cheap hooch, and tells Jenny to drink deep and stop making a fuss.

When she gets back home her face is as puffed as a cottage loaf.

'Cup of tea pet?' her mother says 'No? Well then.'

Her mother moves to wipe the tears falling down her daughter's face. She leans over and kisses the girl on the forehead. 'I'll get Maudie to go round Dora's and ask her to come over tomorrow and cheer you up.'

The next morning the first thing Jenny sees is Dora sitting at the end of her bed knitting. She is singing

Oh we lark down Poplar way
It's a cheery place to be
For they ain't too posh down Poplar way
For the likes of you and me.

Dora winks at her 'Our Jenny love. I thought you was never waking up.'

Jenny tries to speak 'Are, En?'

Dora puts down her knitting and kisses her friend on the forehead.

'You must have known it was coming Jenny, I mean what with your sister Frances having it done.'

But Jenny didn't know it was coming. She always assumed her sister had been born with teeth you took out.

'Frances is probably grateful now she's getting married and all,' Dora says. Jenny tries to frown. She doesn't understand what Frances' teeth have to do with marriage. And why is Dora such an expert on the subject?

Jenny waits two weeks for the holes in her mouth to seal and is then fitted with some porcelain teeth which make her feel she is chewing on tea cups. For weeks she cannot bear to approach a mirror and when she does the face she sees is not her own.

No explanation is given to Jenny for what has happened. But about a month later the topic comes up in a conversation with Dora. They are talking about the wedding of Jenny's sister Frances.

Dora says 'It ain't cheap getting married, is it? What with the bunch of flowers and what you got ter pay the vicar.'

'Oh,' says Jenny 'don't you worry, Frances' fancy man's got a bit of money.'

'That's the risk you take,' says Dora shrugging her shoulders.

'What?'

'Well,' says Dora 'havin' yer teeth pulled then marrying a chap what's got money anyway.'

Jenny is confused 'Money for what?' she asks.

'What I mean is, it's a bit rich when you 'ave yer teeth pulled to save yer future hubbie the cost of the dentist and then you wind up with an old man who got coinage to pay for 'em anyway.'

Jenny isn't sure she understands. Does Dora think her parents had their daughter's teeth removed to save her future husband money?

Dora looks at her with astonishment 'Well of course they did.' she says, 'lots of parents do that.'

The Date

Jenny Fulcher lives in the East End. She is twenty nine now and still living with her parents. The rest of her brothers and sisters have married and moved away. Her best friend Dora Treling is also married. Jenny works as a seamstress. The year is 1932. A dozen years have passed since she had all her teeth pulled out.

It is a Saturday night and the young people from Barking, West Ham, Silvertown, Tidal Basin, Plaistow, Canning Town, Custom House, Beckton, Manor Park, Upton Park and Forest Gate are milling around the Premier Picturehouse in East Ham. Standing among the dandyish boys and dolled up girls is Jenny Fulcher in a blue dress she made herself and a pair of brown leather shoes that are pinching her feet.

Suddenly there he is in front of her: Len Page. Her suitor. Her beau. Her knight in shining armour. Well, to be precise he's in a brown wool suit. But how la-di-da he is, not handsome exactly, but strong and purposeful in his white shirt with collar and tie. He is, it seems, the essence of respectability.

'Lo' she says shyly, inspecting her shoes.

'Well you look a picture,' he says.

'Oh,' she says. For a moment she thinks he has said 'you'll look at a picture' which is what they have come to do, then realising her mistake she adds 'I mean, do I?'

'Yes,' he says.

'Oh,' she says.

Jenny is twenty nine and still living with her parents. Home is no longer 4 Ullin Street but Caulfield road in the more prosperous East Ham. Len lives in Kempton Road just two streets down.

'I brung you these,' says Len outside the Premier handing Jenny a paper twist. They raise their eyes to meet each other's. Jenny pokes open the bag and inspects the iced gems lying inside.

'Want one?' she says

'Nah.'

She pops a gem into her mouth and floats off into sugar heaven. They reach the head of the queue and the cashier says 'Fourpence balcony seats or thru'penny stalls?'

'Two balcony,' says Len.

Jenny stops sucking on her gem for a moment. 'Why waste tuppence?' she says removing two pennies from the pile on the counter. 'Yer backside don't know the difference. We could sit in the thru'pennies and make a tanner of it.'

Len smiles and squeezes her elbow with his hand 'Jenny Fulcher,' he says 'You are a woman after me own heart.'

Inside Jenny keeps eating her iced gems, trying to open the bag without making a noise.

'Shhhh,' hisses a woman beside them.

Len turns and frowns. For a while Jenny withdraws her hand but after half an hour she can't help but have another go. Digging in the bag for another and holding it to the screen she whispers 'Now, is this blackcurrant or strawberry?'

Len's voice is raised just above a whisper 'If you don't like strawberry spit it out.'

'I do like strawberry.'

Then the woman beside them says 'Oh shhh why don't yer?'

‘Gawd and bleedn Bennett,’ says Len ‘Will the bleedn saints preserve us from the bleedn moans of bleedn women.’

After the film Len walks Jenny back to Caulfield Road.

‘Well then Jenny,’ he says as they reach her door. ‘You got any objections to the Dogs? Cos if you ‘ave then I won’t take you, save you moaning about it.’

‘Well,’ she says.

‘Dogs it is then,’ he says definitively, backing off down the road.

She waits for him to leave, then rings the bell. Her father Frenchie opens the door.

‘You’ve been your time out here. What you been doing?’ He eyes her from the side ‘You know you have to be in by nine. That’s the rule’

With that her father pulls her roughly into the house and slams the door.

Marriage

Jenny Fulcher lives in the East End. She is twenty nine now and been courting with a Len Page who lives two streets away. They are getting married.

On the morning of 25 September 1932, dressed in his good suit Frenchie Fulcher walks the bride, Jenny Fulcher, from her home in Caulfield Street along East Ham High Street to St Bartholomew's church. The bride meets her groom in an ivory dress.

The service is the usual Church of England and the vicar is polite. Back at Caulfield Road, the wedding party drink beer and eat sandwiches made with potted meat, and one by one the male guests press gifts of money into the groom's hands. After that the guests start up a sing-song, but because there is no piano they decamp to the pub where the men continue drinking beer and the women knock back port and gin and everyone gets merry and drinks to the happy couple. After closing time, Len and Jenny make their way back to their new place in Altmore Avenue, about four streets away from the Fulchers in Caulfield road.

Jenny quickly learns the job of being a wife. In particular she learns the skill of making a slice. Len likes his morning slice. And not just any old slice, but the right kind of slice fried in the right kind of way. Len's slice must be cut from half-stale bread, the middle section, before the crust tumbles down to meet the sides. The perfect slice has to be of the correct thickness, not so thick as a stack of four half crowns but thicker than three. It must be fried in lard which is not fresh but not yet rancid, preferably from bacon or gammon. Once the lard is hot but not yet sizzling, the slice can be placed flat down. It must be fried for two minutes and then turned and fried for a further two until it is the colour of a milky cup of tea. Only then can it be served, piping hot, with a little gravy if there is any, or salt if there is not.

'What the bleedn hell is this?' Len will say if the slice is not up to standard.

'A slice,' Jenny will reply.

'A *slice*,' Len will say. Shoving the plate to the other side of the table, he'll continue 'What colour do you call this?'

Jenny will try to avoid his eyes 'A bit on the dark side.'

'A bit bleedn dark?'

'Yes,' she'll say 'Darkish.'

'Darkish my arse,' he'll say '*This....*' He'll hold up the slice by one corner, shaking his head as though revealing some national shame 'This is bleedn black. You could put this on the bleedn fire and keep a family of bleedn Eskimos warm for a bleedn week with this.'

Len likes his morning slice just right, and if he doesn't get it 'just right' there's all hell to pay.

War again

Jenny Fulcher lives in the East End. She always has done. She is married to Len Page who works on the buses. The two of them live in Altmore avenue and have been married seven years. They have two children now: a girl and a boy.

In the spring of 1939 war is approaching. Preparations begin. Gas lamps are taken down and the window of shops are boarded. Overground shelters go up. Trenches are made across Lyle Park in Silvertown. The Royal Victoria Gardens' rose beds are dug up and replaced with potatoes. Soldiers paint the red pillar boxes with yellow gas-sensitive paint and buses change colour from scarlet to grey. In Altmore Avenue women begin sewing blackout curtains while their men dig Anderson shelters.

One night in October just after the war has begun, Len swings open the door to Altmore Avenue. His is breath heavy with beer and in his arms is a set of overalls.

'Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree
Neville Chamberlain said to me
If you want to get yer gas masks free
Join the bleeding ARP'

He slings his overalls down on the table and looks at his wife 'So I did,' he says.

'Blimey,' she says 'Well I never.'

Before the declaration of war, a letter arrives. It is printed on thin paper and breaks unexpected news. The War Office is evacuating Jenny Page and the boy to Billericay, South Essex. They are to stay with a farming couple called the Berrys. The girl is to remain in London.

The news puts Len into a rage.

'Who'll do the washing?' he says 'Who'll look after the girl and see to tea? I'll not do a woman's job. Has the whole world gone topsy-turvy?'

But Len's mother says she'll visit twice a week to clean the place and see to the washing. And so the time comes for Jenny and the boy to leave and they find themselves boarding a train at Liverpool Street station.

The train arrives in Billericay just as the sun is disappearing. Half an hour later Mr Berry finally appears and bundles them into an old-fashioned trap.

'Mrs Berry and me dunno much about children, don't have none ourselves,' he says. 'Can you milk?'

Jenny shakes her head.

'Plant?'

She smiles awkwardly. Mr Berry turns to her and says 'Well, we'll just have to make a countrywoman of yer somehow.'

The next morning Jenny wakes to the sound of a cockerel crowing. She draws the curtain and the air is frosty. Outside there are hedges and fields. It is five thirty in the morning.

There is a knock on the attic door.

'Mrs Page,' says Mrs Berry 'What with the help gone sick we'll not be short of things for you to do. We start the day early here in the country.'

Jenny's first chore is to fetch water from the outside well. When she has hauled three or four buckets and put them in the cooper to heat, there is the hay to

fork, the eggs to be collected, the hens to feed, the household laundry to scrub and the cottons to put through the mangle. Everyday is like this and in between times she has the boy to dress and feed and watch over.

After six weeks she has had enough.

'Mr and Mrs Berry,' she says one day at supper 'I reckon we'll be going back home.'

'What?' says Mrs Berry 'When we've only just got used to yer?'

Jenny shrugs 'It's jess that we ain't used to the noises, the mud an' that,' says Jenny 'We're used to London, see?'

'Oh well, Mrs Page,' says Mrs Berry in a curt voice 'If that's how you feel there's no arguing with you. Go back to Lonnon then and get yer two selves bombed to bits.'

Back in London, there are queues everywhere and the shops appear almost empty. Blackout blinds hang at every window. A week later another letter arrives requesting that the Page children report to the Evacuation Board. Jenny packs her children's few belongings in a sacking bag and reminds them to wash their necks. Then she watches them board their train at Liverpool Station and wonders when they will be home.

On 24 August 1940 the sirens begin to sing, but still Jenny would prefer to be in the East End rather than in the countryside.

Bombing London

Jenny Page lives in Altmore Avenue in East Ham. She loves the East End and she loves sweets. She is married to Len Page and they have two children who have been evacuated since the bombing started. The year is 1940. Jenny is thirty seven.

The next door neighbours scurry out into the yard, blinking from their afternoon nap and stand with their mouths open.

‘Well ain’t that a thing?’ says Mickey ‘And me thinking it was the wireless.’

At number 27 Jenny is in her yard, looking up at the sky to the east where one hundred and fifty Heinkel and Dornier bombers are moving towards London.

Jenny watches and suddenly decides that she wants to see her mother. On Altmore Avenue men and women are running everywhere. Jenny can feel herself trembling.

The buzzing noise is getting louder now. Jenny walks faster and starts running down the High Street towards Caulfield Road. From somewhere along a sidestreet an ARP man is shouting ‘To your shelters!’ People begin to panic, racing along and leaving their abandoned shopping bags.

Just as Jenny’s legs are about to give way with running she reaches 147 Caulfield Road where she lived before she got married. She bursts through the door and sees her mother standing beside the bed.

‘Oh God, Jenny, Jenny, what’ll we come to?’

‘I’m here Mum,’ says Jenny and bundles her mother into the cupboard under the stairs. The sound of engines is loud. Jenny strikes a match and lights a paraffin lamp. There is nothing to be done but wait for whatever it is. Bombs? Incendiaries? Gas? Her mother is moaning now, her eyes closed. From somewhere quite close there comes an unmistakable thud and a slight tremor.

‘Oh my lord,’ cries her mother.

There is another thud, louder this time. The old woman’s shoulders are shaking and she starts to cry.

‘Mum, Mum, don’t cry,’ whispers her daughter. Jenny puts her hands into her pockets to stop the shaking. Inside something small and hard and sticky touches her fingers. Barley sugar, she thinks, ah, *barley sugar*. The thought of it comforts her.

Then another bomb thuds down somewhere close, followed by a shower of breaking glass.

‘Oh my god. Oh my god we’ll be buried alive,’ cries her mother ‘Jenny love, Jenny?’

‘Yes mum,’ whispers Jenny ‘I’m here.’

‘I ain’t half scared Jenny.’

Jenny reaches out and grasps her mother’s hand.

‘I know,’ she says and pulls out the barley sugar from her pocket and dusts it down. ‘Have a sweet Mum.’ She puts the barley sugar in her mother’s mouth and watches her suck on it. The dear old face is trembling. They sit like that for a moment while the thumps carry on but fainter now.

‘Ere,’ whispers her mother finally ‘You had any of them bangers from Paterson’s?’

‘No mum.’

‘They were letting em out generous with the coupons. I thought there must be something wrong with em,’ says her mother ‘Your father would have said don’t trust ‘em, pet, we’ll go without. We ain’t eating no iffy bangers, he would have said. Not

for no money. You know that? It wouldn't surprise me if they was made of nag's meat.'

'You reckon?'

'Have you seen 'em? Awful dark they are.'

From somewhere very distant there comes the crack of anti-aircraft fire.

Jenny's mother shakes her head 'Awful dark.'

The old lady takes another hard suck on her barley sugar and stops trembling. The barley sugar has done it's work.

The Pig

Jenny Page lives in Altmore Avenue in East Ham. She is married to Len Page and they have two children who have been evacuated since the war started. Len is in the ARP and he has been bringing home all kinds of things: tins of corned beef, dried milk and packet of peas. Jenny doesn't ask him where he gets it from. Then one day she finds a real surprise. The year is 1944.

On one particular day sometime in the last winter of the war something unexpected happens. Jenny notices the tin bath is missing. She is curious and goes into the bedroom to check beneath the bed. It isn't there but then she remembers the understairs cupboard. She opens the door and there she finds it. The tub. And inside the tub is a body. But whose? Her first thought it is to rush and tell someone but on a moment's consideration she changes her mind. A dead body in the bath, not her husband's (somehow she is sure of that) but very likely something to do with him. What if the body is a German and *Len has killed him?* A German! She realises that she doesn't really know what a German might look like. She directs the torch to the form in the bath and as she looks closer she sees a pig. A large, dead pig.

The next morning the pig has gone, the only reminder is a thin brown stain on the lino. She passes the day imagining thick streaky bacon or the stew of belly pork with a few carrots. She thinks of sausages sizzling in a pan and gammon steak with parsley sauce.

Sometime in the afternoon the doorbell rings. She shuffles through the hallway and sees two coppers on the step. One is thin and dark and the other has ginger whiskers.

'Oh lord,' she thinks 'It must be about the pig.'

The dark one says hello and explains that they are on a routine visit.

'What's up?' says Jenny.

'It's nothing urgent Mrs Page,' says the ginger one 'Nothing urgent at all. We're just popping by for a nice chat.'

'Well you'll have to come back,' she says defensively 'I'm here on me own.'

'Appreciate that Mrs Page,' the ginger one smiles back. The two policemen don't move. 'Mind if we come in for a minute?'

And before she knows it they are already in the hallway. The ginger one says 'I could murder a cup of tea.'

Jenny puts the water on and searches for an explanation for the pig.

'A very tidy place if I might say so Mrs Page,' says the ginger one 'Lots of space to store things. Husband fond of the dogs, I hear.'

She brings the pot of tea to the table and says nothing. The dark one stirs his tea. 'Is it just the dogs he likes, Mrs Page, or is Mr Page partial to the beasts of the field or the farmyard, say?'

'He's fond of canary birds,' she says 'If that's what you mean.'

The coppers swap glances. The dark one makes a slurping noise with his tea.

'He do come home with a rabbit from time to time,' she continues.

'A rabbit?' says the dark one nodding. 'Skinny thing a rabbit is. Not much meat on a rabbit. More meat on a pig than a rabbit.'

'Don't see many of them around nowadays,' says Jenny. 'Except in the pig clubs of course.'

'Not so many in the pig clubs neither, Mrs Page. You wouldn't believe it but there's all kinds of pigs going astray from the pig clubs. Amazing how many of them

pigs just disappear. You'd think they'd be located wandering the streets eventually. It's a bit of a mystery.' The policeman sighs and stands ready to leave. 'Well we won't keep you from your work.'

Jenny never heard anything more about the pig.

The children return

Jenny Page lives in Altmore Avenue in East Ham. She is married to Len Page and they have two children who were evacuated during the war. The year is 1945. Len Page has started a café called the Cosy Corner on Silvertown Way by the docks.

A greying day in late autumn finds Jenny Page walking through Liverpool Street Station to wait for the 11.07 from Cambridgeshire. Her chest tightens from the engine smoke, or is it nerves? She makes her way to the same platform from where she had waved her children off six years ago. The platform is crowded with women talking.

Jenny stands and waits and sucks on an Everton mint. She wonders what her children will look like. She wonders if she will have enough to give them. She wonders what to say.

The train from St Ives is twenty minutes late and draws slowly into the station. Moments later, doors swing open. There is the smell of brakes and children tumble to the platform. She peers through the haze and then she spots them. The girl is pale with chestnut curls, the boy falling behind. They are dressed in clothes she made for them to come home in and the clothes are too big. Jenny waves and the little girl's face suddenly beams. Step by step they approach until they are right in front of her, not six feet away.

'Hello,' says Jenny.

The girl and boy look at each other. Eventually the girl says 'The train stopped at St Albans and a man got on with a funny hat.'

The boy begins to cry and Jenny reaches down and takes his wrist. 'There there,' she says 'Are you hungry?'

'They gave us a sandwich but it was horrid,' says the girl 'We swapped it with a girl who had an egg but she started crying.'

'We'll go down to the caff and get you a bit of tea.'

They clamber on to the top deck of the bus, sucking on bullseyes and head for Shoreditch.

'We usually walk,' the girl says at last 'Where we live we don't take the bus.'

'You live 'ere now,' says Jenny.

The girl nods and stares out of the window.

'Where you were living before was different, see?' says Jenny 'There wasn't so many holes to trip over.'

'No holes,' repeats the girl.

'Mind you,' says Jenny 'There weren't so many holes here neither, before.'

And so after six years separation Jenny starts to get to know her children again.

The Car

Jenny Page lives in Altmore Avenue in East Ham. She is married to Len Page and they have two children. Len Page has started a café called the Cosy Corner on Silvertown Way by the docks. The year is 1946.

One hazy Sunday morning Len rises early. He tells Jenny to get the children looking nice and to make some sandwiches. He has ‘a surprise’ in store, he says. Jenny does as she’s told and half an hour later Len tells the family to wait for him on the pavement while he fetches ‘the surprise’. So there they stand feeling awkward, when turning into the top of the road comes a glossy black motor car and at the wheel, looking mighty pleased with himself, is Len.

‘Blimey,’ says Jenny.

A real motor car it is. All the way up the street, the neighbours begin to creep from their houses to stand on their steps and stare.

‘Well get in then,’ says Len ‘I brung Harry. You remember Harry. His missus June gets terrible travel sick so she’ll go in the front with me.’

Jenny leans down and peeps in the back window. The woman in the front catches her eye, smiles and, holding up the hand of a baby in her lap makes it wave.

‘Ah,’ says Len ‘That’s their little girl.’

For the first ten miles or so, Harry holds a paper bag to his mouth and makes retching sounds. They look at the view.

The route to Southend takes them through Barking, Ilford and Dagenham. Fields begin to emerge from behind the rows of housing.

‘Funny smell,’ says June in the front gazing out of the window.

‘Good enough to fill yer lungs, ain’t it?’ laughs Len. They slow at a junction, turn right then continue along a road running between fields. Just as they are picking up speed along the straight, a big bang detonates from the back of the car. For an instant Jenny looks at Harry and Harry looks back. Then they grab the children and crash to the floor, clutching their heads and thinking of bombs.

‘Daft buggers!’ shouts Len ‘It’s only a backfire!’

The sun pours in at the windows and the outskirts of Southend begin to appear, neat bungalows scattered between ordered parades of shops and the odd pub. Driving along the seafront they pass theatres and picture houses and coconut shies, bathing huts and eel and pie stalls. The beaches are still covered in sandbags and tank traps but the sea is radiant in the sunshine and everything feels happy.

They make their way towards the pier. Harry forks out sixpence for a cardboard hat with Kiss Me Quick written on the front.

‘If you’ve come to have fun,’ he says ‘You might as well bleedn have it.’

They eat their sandwiches and wash them down with a strong sweet tea then they walk along the end of the pier to look at the sea.

On the way back they fork out sixpence to see a bearded lady sitting in a dark tent who is not very convincing. It starts to rain and they shelter in the arcade with the other daytrippers. Then the rain clears.

‘Where’s Harry,’ asks Len looking at June. She looks at him wearily and sighs.

‘Can’t have gone far, the bugger,’ says Len ‘Want me to check the pubs June?’ ‘S’pose you’ll have to.’

Len goes off to look for Harry and a thought drifts into Jenny’s head. It is a thought about June and Len. Jenny noticed that Len asked June what *she* wanted.

A trip to the dogs

Jenny Page lives in Altmore Avenue in East Ham. She is married to Len Page and they have two children. Len Page has started a café called the Cosy Corner on Silvertown Way by the docks. The café is doing very well but Jenny suspects that her husband has a fancy woman. The wife of a friend of Len's called June.

One evening in the spring of 1950, Jenny is sitting at a table in West Ham dogs finishing up a plate of ham and eggs. Opposite Jenny at the same table sits June with her hair pinned back at the sides and curled at the bottom. She is younger than Jenny by ten years or so.

On the other side of the table sits Len and Harry. Poor Harry is tipsy as always and Len is talking about the dogs he owns. The dogs live in a row of crude brick hutches at the kennels in Plaistow. He has two particular favourites: Silvertown Streak and Silvertown Sailor. Len says that Streak has the Edge.

'The Edge,' he says 'You can tell when a pup has the Edge. There's an Edgeness about him you can feel. Now, Streak boy here, he has the Edge.'

On this particular night Len is quietly tipping Silvertown Streak. For the last few weeks Streak has been on terrible form. But tonight something – call it instinct – tells Len Page that Streak is going to run like the clappers. There are five minutes to go before the tenth race and Streak is at long odds of 15 to 1. The handlers lead the runners out into the arena. The number one, a large black dog called 'Daddy's Boy' is followed by Streak.

'Blow me,' says Harry 'If your pup ain't got his blood up.'

'The thing is,' says Len winking 'You can never tell with a dog.'

They sit and wait for the dogs to be placed in their traps then move over to the balcony to get a better look. The hare runs, the traps open and the dogs are flinging themselves across the dirt track. They shear round the first bend, the number one in lead. On the back straight, Streak inches closer, overtaking one dog at the second bend. And as they round the corner, Streak is gunning. He's ahead by a length now. When they reach the finishing mast you can hear the crowd gasp and see the shock in their faces that this 15 to 1 has just wiped out all the competition.

'Well I never,' says Len slapping Harry on the back 'It's my round.'

They make their way to the bar where Len goes up to a group of policemen that he recognises.

'Gents,' Len says 'You on splits tonight? Or off-duty?'

'We're off.'

'Thought I'd buy you fellas a pint to celebrate, like.' Len takes his wad from his pocket and begins counting notes.

'That's big of you.'

'When you've finished come and say hello to the' He hesitates for an instant 'To the wife.'

One of the policeman looks over to Jenny and June sat at the table 'Which one?'

The men laugh and wink.

'Whichever one you like,' says Len 'Whichever you like.'

Harry doesn't hear. He is taking the drinks back to Jenny and June.

June smiles at him 'Know what Harry?' she says 'I fancy some of them whelks from that stall we passed. You wouldn't be a lovely chap, would you, and go and get some?'

Harry goes and the two women sit awkwardly for a moment.

‘Oh Harry,’ June says when the whelks arrive ‘They don’t half look tough. It’s not me I’m thinking about so much as Jen, with her teeth and all. You wouldn’t take them back, pet, get us some cockles instead?’

Harry disappears again and June plumps her hair. Just then Len bounces over and says ‘Come on, June, I’ll take you and Harry down the kennels. See Streak before they take him back to Plaistow.’ He looks about. ‘Oh, Harry ain’t here is he? Well just you and me then June.’

‘Oh I don’t know,’ June pulls back her chair ‘I look a mess.’

‘You look...’ Len stands over her for a moment staring at her face, its familiar contours and lines the face of the woman he should have married. ‘You look a picture.’

In miserable silence Jenny watches them go and waits for Harry.

Its very late when Len and June return. The bar has closed and the remaining customers have gone to a back room to play gin rummy.

‘June, let’s go home,’ says Harry grabbing his wife’s arm.

Sliding away from his grasp, June lights a cigarette. ‘Shut up Harry.’

‘C’mon sonny boy,’ says Len ‘Don’t be a creeping Jesus. Let’s put some of them winnings on a game of cards.’

‘I don’t want a game of cards,’ says Harry sounding sober now ‘I want to go home with my wife.’

Len and June exchange anxious glances.

‘Listen sonny boy,’ says Len patting Harry on the back ‘The thing is, your wife don’t want to go home jess yet. Do yer, June?’

‘No,’ says June ‘No, I want to watch gin rummy.’

‘So how’s about it Harry?’

Harry blinks and sighs ‘All right Lenny. All right.’

The garbardine coat

Jenny Page lives in Altmore Avenue in East Ham. She is married to Len Page and they have two children. Len has started a café called the Cosy Corner on Silvertown Way by the docks. The café is doing very well but Jenny knows that her husband has a fancy woman. Her name is June and she's the wife of a friend of Len's. Jenny knows this but she doesn't say anything. Jenny is forty nine.

One day in early September 1952 Len hurries into the house with a parcel.

'Morning,' he says.

Jenny looks up. The years have treated Len well. He is heavier than he once was but still upright. Jenny on the other hand has shrunk so much she looks like a whippet. Her hair is thinning and her face has become beaky. For an instant, looking at him standing there, she remembers how much she once liked him, loved him even.

'Morning,' she says a little nervously.

Len holds out the parcel 'Unwrap it,' he says.

She unwraps the parcel carefully, expecting she doesn't know what. She lays the paper to one side and parts the tissue to reveal a beige garbardine raincoat. She looks at him in disbelief.

'Get it out then,' he says.

She shakes the coat free from the paper, and then holds the fabric to her body. The coat is a beauty: three-quarters lined with bone buttons, patch pockets and top stitching around the collar. A practical coat and a handsome coat. She has never seen such a gorgeous thing.

'So what d'yer think?' he says.

'Its.....its....' she loses the thread 'Who is it for?'

'Who d'yer bleedn think?'

She feels confused now. She wishes she had a lemon bon bon in her mouth.

'June?' she says.

'No,' he says angrily 'Its for you, you daft idiot.'

Later on that evening she drapes the coat around her shoulders, scared to put it on properly in case he changes his mind and takes it away. She admires herself in the hallway mirror, twirls around to see it move. The fabric swishes about. What can Len be cooking up?

She doesn't have to wait long to find out. 'The thing is,' he says 'The thing is the East End ain't like it used to be.'

'No,' she says.

'Do you remember when we were courtin', how it was? We knew where we were, old girl. We didn't have much but we knew what was what.'

She doesn't say anything.

'The thing is, this bleedn place is going to the dogs. So I've decided,' he says 'I've decided we're getting out the East End, old girl. We're goin' to the country.'

Jenny still doesn't say anything.

'I know we got our differences,' Len says 'But some things a man does and some things he don't and a man don't quit his family. You see, if *she* came it might be different. I can't promise anything but maybe..'

'*She*?'

'Yes. June of course.'

After they've talked and closed up the café, Jenny doesn't feel like going straight

home. She wanders down Silvertown Way towards Lyle Park and finds a spot on a bench. She sits sucking lemon bon bons in her new coat and thinking. On the other side, she catches sight of the massive frame of Bill Walter coming towards her.

‘How you doin’ pet?’ Bill sits besides her and pulls out a rubber ball from his pocket and throws it for the dog. ‘What brings you down this way?’

‘Oh,’ she says ‘Thinking.’

He shakes his head and tuts ‘Well that won’t do.’

The dog bounds back with the ball in its mouth, its tail wagging.

‘Cheery fella isn’t he?’ says Jenny.

Bill laughs then notices her coat. ‘Ere,’ he says ‘What a get up! You off to see the Queen?’

‘Don’t be daft!’

They smile and look in opposite directions.

‘It was a present from Len,’ she says ‘The raincoat.’

‘Oh,’ says Bill and picks up a stick. There is a gust of wind and the thick smell of molasses from Tate’s. Jenny loves the smell of Silvertown, the sheer weight and history of sugar.

‘Len’s selling the caff, moving out west to the country,’ she says ‘He’s taking the boy.....’ She feels her eyes filling with tears. ‘And he’s taking June.’

There is a silence then Bill says ‘You going too, I s’pose?’

‘He says he wants me to.’

‘Ah then.’

‘Only,’ begins Jenny ‘I dunno if I will.’

A young couple are wandering beside the flowerbeds at the entrance to the park. The man is wearing docker’s garb and the woman is wearing a beige raincoat.

‘Best get back,’ Jenny says.

‘I’ll walk yer to the bus stop,’ Bill says.

Ten minutes later she is standing beside the bus stop alone. The bus to Canning Town draws up and half a dozen people get off. A woman in a beige gabardine coat joins her at the stop and starts powdering her nose. Another bus pulls up and moves away. And another woman in a gabardine coat crosses the road and begins to make her way towards Plaistow Wharf. Jenny watches and suddenly it hits her. Of course, the gabardine coats. A job lot fallen off a lorry. Cheap, they are, and second rate. She rushes onto the bus, jangling her change and thinking, ‘Oh Len Page, you’ve really gone and done it now.’

That is the moment when Jenny decides she won’t go with Len to the country. She’ll stay in her beloved East End.

Butlins

Jenny Page lives in Altmore Avenue in East Ham. She is married to Len Page but Len has moved to the country with a fancy woman called June and their son. Jenny has become good friends with Bill Walter and his sister Olive. She is sixty five now. Her two loves are still the East End and sweets.

‘I ain’t even took me rollers out yet,’ says Olive Walter opening the door to Jenny. ‘But never mind, come in and have a cuppa, pet. I got them fig biscuits you like.’

Jenny steps into the hallway of the tiny house in Parker street. Since that evening long ago in Lyle Park, Jenny has become friends with the Walters, first Bill and then his sister Olive. Bill and Olive live in a small house with a small bit of money and a parrot. Jenny never went to the country with Len. She is now sixty-five.

‘So how are you Jenny?’ Olive shouts from the kitchen.

‘Been better.’ Jenny says taking a barley sugar from a dish before Olive comes back.

‘Oh, haven’t we all pet?’ shouts Olive ‘Still never mind eh?’ She bustles in minus her rollers, carrying a tray with tea and biscuits.

Jenny is chewing on a fig biscuit as Bill Walter bounds in through the front door.

‘Ah,’ he cries ‘if it ain’t me second favourite bird. How are you, Jenny pet?’

‘Hello,’ shrieks the pet parrot and Bill runs his fingers along its head.

‘Did Olive mention our holiday?’ he says ‘We’re reckoning to go down to Butlins at Bognor for a week. Thought you might swing along, pet.’

Jenny thinks about Butlins: the cooked meals, the Old Time dance halls, the Entertainers, Arthur English, Tommy Steele, the Pig and Whistle bars, the home from home atmosphere.

‘I’ll take that as a yes then,’ he says helping himself to another cup of tea.

In May 1968 Bill and Olive Walter and Jenny sit on a bus to Butlins Holiday Camp eating paste sandwiches and singing the Butlins song.

Come all you scholars now and put away your studies
Come and join the happy band, known as the Butlins Buddies.

By the time the bus pulls into the holiday camp it is beginning to rain. Jenny and Olive put on their plastic hats to protect their newly-rollered hair. A redcoat appears to show them to their chalets.

‘Hoorah,’ says Bill ‘Ain’t this something?’

The chalets are in a row of about twenty. Bizzy lizzies and geraniums bloom beside the litter bins. Inside each chalet is a bed, a desk and chair, a basin and a cupboard, the whole decorated in jolly colours with pictures of yachts on the walls. A map of the camp is stapled to the back of the door and says ‘You are Here’ in red lettering.

‘This is nice,’ Olive says ‘Different. But not too different.’

‘Righty-ho. I’ll leave you to it,’ beams the redcoat. ‘Don’t forget there’s trampoline practice and bingo at half past two, Hi-de-hi.’

‘Very dainty,’ Jenny says ‘What are we supposed to do, again?’

‘Have fun,’ says Bill.

Jenny wakes the next morning to the sound of the camp tannoy requesting

campers to roll out of bed with a great big smile. After breakfast in the Golden Grill they join in a beetle drive and after a post-lunch nap they are at the bingo. The Walters get stuck right in, frantically marking the numbers as they are called: two fat ladies, eighty-eight, snake eyes, eleven, three-oh, thirty. Suddenly the scent of Bill's hair tonic hits Jenny. Twenty-two, me and you. Twenty-three, you and me.

They pass their final evening at Butlins at the Old Time dance in the ballroom. Jenny wears a homemade crimplene dress with pearls around her neck. She puts on raspberry lipstick.

'Look at you,' whistles Bill 'A right picture.'

'Ah now, Bill Walter, keep a hold on yerself,' she says, embarrassed.

He winks at her and taking both her and Olive by the arm, says 'Let's go then ladies.'

As they walk along the concrete path to the ballroom they feel as though they are floating in a bubble. They sit at the tropical bar with plastic pineapples and sip on sherries. A twelve-piece band begins a swing number and to Jenny Page it seems that some other life is opening up.

'Come on, old girl, let's have a dance,' says Bill.

'Oh no Bill, I can't'

'Yes you can Jenny Page,' says Bill pulling her out of her chair 'And you're just about to.'

She stands with her arms at her side while the band strikes up the 'Chattanooga Choo Choo.'

'C'mon,' says Bill pushing her towards the dance floor and she suddenly feels herself smiling and a moment after that Bill's arm snakes around her waist and they are off.

'This is the life pet, ain't it?'

She feels herself stiff as a board, swaying in his arms.

'You know,' he says 'We could have done this years ago. What ninnies we are!'

'I ain't much of a dancer,' she says stepping on Bill's toe.

'Never too late to learn.'

They dance their way around the room again, gazing out into the middle distance.

But all too soon the holiday is over and they are trundling back to London on the coach. They are dropped off at Victoria Station and take a bus to Bow Road where they have to change. As they stand at the bus stop outside Kelly's, the smell of fried fish finally overcomes them.

They go inside and immerse themselves in the pleasure of softly flaking cod with its crisp oily jacket and salted chips. It was nice to go to Butlins but it was even nicer to be back home and eat fish and chips in the East End.