KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON

We were halfway through the news when the air raid started. It was a Friday in January: we were at the Picture Palace for the 6 p.m. showing of *The Mark of Zorro*. All month the Luftwaffe had been attacking us, their bombs falling on London like pennies from a jar, so the fact they couldn't hold off for just a few measly hours made me hate the Germans that little bit more.

The cinema trip had been my sister Sukie's idea, as most things were. We were all in need of cheering up that evening: after the tea we'd just eaten at home it was a wonder we were still alive.

'It's like brains,' Cliff, my eight-year-old brother, said, lifting the pan lid to show us. It was probably only minced meat and potatoes, but you never knew with Mum's dinners, especially the ones you had to reheat when she was working late. And Cliff relished gory details, being the sort who'd pick scabs off his knee just to see what was underneath.

'Well, you *never* get scabby knees, Olive,' he once said to me, like it was the biggest character flaw in the world. The truth was I preferred reading books to running about in the street. I didn't see it as a weakness, either.

But we had to eat the horrid supper, of course. No one chucked food away with a war on, not even stuff that resembled brains. You simply pinched your nose and swallowed hard, then glugged down a glass of water. Afterwards, Sukie, being the eldest and in charge, said we deserved a trip out. She'd already seen the film last week with a friend.

'It's the cat's pyjamas. You'll both love it!' she gushed, as we went around the house closing the blackout curtains. Then to me, teasingly: 'Cheer up. It's going to be fun!'

People were always telling me I had a serious face, because I was dark and thoughtful-looking like my dad. What they really meant was I wasn't as pretty as Sukie, and I didn't mind because I was proud of my big sister, not jealous. She was just as marvellous on the inside – everyone seemed to think so.

'Is that better?' I beamed up at Sukie so she could tell how thrilled I was to be going out, especially with her. We didn't see nearly enough of her any more. She'd recently got a penpal and acted mysterious when

letters postmarked 'Devon' arrived addressed to her. We'd all guessed who she was writing to: our next-door neighbour Gloria had a younger sister called Queenie, who was nineteen and lived in Devon. Having a penpal was, according to Sukie, all the rage.

And like she was with anything new, Sukie threw herself into it, kicking off her office shoes each night after work, then disappearing to her room to write. It wasn't the same as when we'd sent letters to Dad, where we each got to add our own line on the official blue army paper. Sukie shut her door on us. These were her letters – hers and Queenie's. I often wondered what they had to say to each other that was so private, and took up so much time.

Once we'd got our coats and grabbed our gas masks from where they hung in the hallway, we were ready for the cinema. It was a cold, damp evening and we were all done up in woolly hats and scarves. Cliff's mittens, on string threaded through his coat, dangled limp at the end of his sleeves, and he flapped them like wings to make me laugh.

Such was my excitement, I didn't think to ask why Sukie was buttoning up Mum's best green checked coat rather than her own. She'd done her hair different too, curled like a film star's, and was wearing postbox-red

lipstick. It made her look older than seventeen and rather like Mum – the Mum before Dad died, who'd styled her hair and worn make-up and could argue for England.

*

By the time we reached the Picture Palace, the lights were already dimming. We'd only just found our seats – Row K, plush velvet that prickled the backs of your knees – when the great maroon curtains swung apart with a squeak.

First up was the newsreel. Every film show started like this, with five minutes of news from home and abroad. It was all very upbeat, with a proper English voice telling us everything would be all right, even if the film footage showed bombsites and battlefields. I watched eagerly, chin in hand, as the big white titles and the word 'Pathé' filled the screen.

Sukie, though, leaped to her feet.

'Stay here,' she whispered to us. 'If I'm not back in two minutes, meet me in the foyer when the film's over.'

Just like that she disappeared.

'She needs the lav,' Cliff said knowingly. 'That supper's giving her grief.'

'You're disgusting, you are,' I replied, not taking my

eyes from the newsreel. The footage was of men in RAF uniforms walking across an airfield. Immediately, it made me think of Dad.

In August last year we'd had a telegram from the War Office, telling us Dad's plane had been shot down over France. Six long months had passed, of every day hearing someone in my family crying, and Mum getting sadder and thinner. I couldn't sleep through a whole night any more. Often I barely slept at all.

'Look for the light,' Dad used to say when things were difficult.

I did try. He'd died for his country, people said. He was a hero. Watching the news helped me believe this was true, and as I listened to what a mightily fine job 'our boys' were doing, I could feel myself filling up with pride.

Tonight's news switched from RAF men to a city somewhere abroad – I didn't catch where. The footage showed hungry-looking people queuing for food, flanked either side by soldiers. There was snow on the ground. The people in line wore star-shaped badges on their coats.

Watching, I began to feel uncomfortable instead of proud. The Pathé news voice – jolly and brisk – jarred with what I was seeing. These people weren't just hungry but *scared*. I could tell by their faces how

desperate they were, and it made me horribly guilty for the fuss we'd made about our supper.

Abruptly, the film stopped. The lights came up.

I blinked at the announcement on the screen:

AIR RAID IN PROGRESS.
PLEASE LEAVE THE THEATRE IMMEDIATELY.
HEAD TO THE NEAREST SHELTER.

'Blast it,' I said, reaching for my coat and gas mask. 'Come on, Cliff, we'd better find Sukie.'

People began to leave, though not very quickly. All around us seats thudded as they flipped upright. Coats were shaken out, hats pinned in place. There was a fair bit of complaining going on too.

'Should we ask for our money back?' asked Cliff.

'What?' I was still half thinking of those poor people in the newsreel. 'Oh, we'll ask Sukie. Keep hold of my hand.'

Weaving through the crowds we headed for the foyer. It was then the seriousness of our situation sank in. Beginning to worry, I told myself this was no different from any other raid – and they were happening almost every day now. Most of the action was down near the docks; on Fairfoot Road where

we lived, they'd been more of an annoyance, forcing you out of bed in the middle of the night and into a freezing-cold air-raid shelter.

In the foyer, the lights were off. All I could see were the outlines of the front doors and the cash desk just inside. Already the space was filling up with people – but our sister wasn't one of them.

'She can't still be in the lavs.' Cliff's hand felt sticky in mine.

'She's probably powdering her nose,' I said, with a confidence I wasn't feeling. 'You've seen how glammed up she is tonight.'

'She's the dead spit of Mum.'

'She's got her best coat on, that's why.' I tapped my foot anxiously. 'Oh come on, Sukie.'

As the last few people came out into the foyer, the mood seemed to change. People were hurrying, jostling into those already making their way out.

'Stop pushing!' a man shouted like he was in charge. 'We'll get you all out, just slow down!'

Holding Cliff's hand even tighter, I wasn't sure what to do: stay and wait for Sukie, or go with everyone else to the nearest shelter. Someone was shining a torch at the floor to help guide people's feet. Then that went out too. A woman screamed, and though no one else