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The Air Raid

The bomb fell in the middle of the night. Such a clear, still, starry night too. But this was wartime. September 1943. Adolf Hitler was at the door, pounding away at Britain's defences.

One moment all was as quiet as the grave. The next there was bedlam, noise loud enough to wake the dead.

The air-raid siren sounded the alarm.

Then an eerie silence. The lull before the storm.

Next came the distant drone of bombers approaching like a swarm of angry bees.

Almost at once the anti-aircraft guns started up.

The cheery boom of the Bofors guns merged with the death rattle of machine-gun fire. It was like the War God Thor running an iron spike across the sky's corrugated roof.

Another pause.

Then came quite a different sound, one which the ground watchers silently cheered: a flight of Spitfires thundering up the sky to intercept the foe.

Now began a desperate fight against time: to prevent the bombers releasing their deadly load.

But in the boundless night sky nothing could stop each and every German plane. The fighters might wing a Heinkel, even shoot one down; yet some always got through.

That meant the inevitable sound people dreaded: a bomb falling . . . and exploding.

It announced its coming clearly enough. But there was nothing you could do to stop it blowing you to smithereens.

To ten-year-old Tom and his thirteen-year-old sister

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Iris war was serious fun. It was the greatest game ever invented. Danger made it so exciting.

Take the sky show. It was more brilliant than bonfire night. The two children would strain their ears to spot the different sounds.

‘That’s a Stuka divebomber.’ (Tom) ‘Must be after the ships in harbour or the radar masts on Portsdown Hill.’

‘No, no.’ (Iris) ‘They do a high-pitched whine. It’s a Dornier bomber—makes a noise like Grandad snoring.’

If the sounds of war grabbed their attention, it was the sights that exploded on their minds—like lightning after thunder.

The sky would come alive with twinkling shells and brilliant yellow searchlights, criss-crossing overhead. The white spray of tracer bullets climbed upwards, intersecting the orange-red flashes of salvos from the ground.

It was so eerily beautiful against the backdrop of a pale crescent moon in a starry sky. A monster firework display.

If they were lucky, they’d see a direct hit—POOOFF!—an exploding firecracker: a red glow and cascading sparks, followed by a ball of fire spiralling round and round like a falling sycamore seed. They waited for the thud and mushroom cloud of black smoke as it hit the ground.

‘GOT THE BLIGHTER!’

Never a thought that some poor devil was dead or dying, trapped in a burning plane or splattered in the mud with his guts spilling out.

Tom collected the names of warplanes like some kids collected names of motor cars—Ford, Morris, Wolseley, Rolls Royce. He’d made a set of model planes out of balsa-wood, paper, and glue. His enemy planes, though, were all of plasticine—because they were always crashing to the floor, downed by daring RAF pilots.

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Tom's 'dog-fights' were set to special noise effects—buzzing and exploding mouth sounds that sent the two cats scurrying behind the copper boiler in the scullery. Even when he had his once-a-week bath in the zinc tub on Friday nights, he would perform heroic air-sea battles. Brave dive bombers were out to sink enemy U-boats (Camp coffee bottles) and battleships (empty Spam tins and bars of Lifebuoy soap).

Whenever he managed to corner Iris, usually when she was stuck in the air-raid shelter, he'd treat her to his war lore.

'Luftwaffe planes are dark grey with a black cross edged in white on the fuselage, and a black swastika on the tail. The Heinkel HE One Eleven is a dive bomber, just like the Stuka. Then there's the Heinkel seaplane, the Junker and Dornier Flying Pencil bombers. They're easy to spot from their odd cranked wings and flat undercarriages like coffin lids.

'Remember that; your life may depend on it one day. They're evil. But they're no match for our planes. Ours are brown and green with a red, white, and blue circle on the wings and sides. There are the twin-engined Blenheim, Wellington, and Halifax bombers. It's our brave fighters Hitler's most scared of—the Spitfire, Hurricane, and Hawker Tempest . . . '

Planes bored Iris rigid. She was more interested in exploring bombed buildings after the raids. You weren't supposed to, of course. But the wardens had more urgent jobs than keeping nosy kids out.

Iris and her best friend Maisie used to push open the door of any empty house and dive inside. Their hearts would be in their mouths as they linked hands for comfort.

When they poked around in the rubble, they half expected to unearth a dead body—or, worse, bits of bodies, like torn-off arms or bloody leg stumps. Up the rickety staircase they'd go in search of discarded relics—a

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dusty Snakes and Ladders board, a blackened poker, or a cracked picture frame.

Once they got a terrible shock. All of a sudden, they heard a rushing and groaning in the upstairs chimney, followed by a big crash. And a black, sooty creature with horns and tail landed in the fireplace. It was Old Nick himself out to nab them!

They couldn't get down the stairs and out of the house quickly enough. Afterwards, neither liked to admit it was most likely a sooty old rat!

Grandad once told her of a friend of his whose job it was to patrol the seashore—in case the enemy tried to sneak up by sea. He had to be on the look-out for anything unusual and report it—like spiky black mines drifting ashore.

'Well, see, one night he found the bloated body of a German sailor. It didn't half scare him. But that wasn't an end to it. Next night he was walking in pitch blackness along the shingle when someone goes and grabs him by the trouser leg . . . The poor bleeder nearly leapt sky high.

'Do you know what it was? A wee black and white terrier!'