

Extract from *Cormorano* by Nicola Williams

A haze gathers over the roof of Lime Street station and shimmers like oil has been spilled on the glass. Outside the station, groups of women pull their children behind them, gas mask boxes swinging over their shoulders, pillowcases stuffed with clothes, and teddy bears under their arms, all wondering where they're headed. A boy has stopped in his tracks and cries loudly, refusing to take another step. His mother turns back and hugs him tightly; she rests her chin on his head and looks up to the blue sky. I know how they're feeling. Thankfully, Mam never allowed for me to be evacuated again after the first time. This mum must be panicking to evacuate her son seeing as the Luftwaffe has come back strong this week.

'Thank god our mams brought us home early eh, Joseph,' Bella says. 'I'm glad it was the Phoney War when we were evacuated. I couldn't be doing with leavin' me mam now in the middle of all this.'

Bella was brought home from Denbigh a few months after me because there was no bombing in Liverpool at the time. She ended up staying with a nice family but she got very homesick and hated how quiet it was in the country. I shiver at the memory of that morning we left and Mr Watson's fat face appears in my mind. I hope none of those children are going to stay with him.

'Echo! Echo! Get yer paper 'ere!' I jump out of my daze as an older lad shouts about the newspaper. He stands outside The Vines pub as the headline glares at passers-by, *1000 DEATHS EXPECTED*. My tummy drops like a sinking ship. Please God don't let my mam be one of them.

A few men appear from inside the pub and stand next to the paperboy. They light their ciggies and hold glasses of golden beer. 'Who needs water eh, boys?' The

bigger of the bunch says. Silence follows as they gulp the beer like they haven't drank in weeks.

We walk on quickly, reaching the end of Lime Street. The grand Adelphi Hotel looms before us. Bella normally becomes dead excited by the posh hotel with its brass doors and men with top hats welcoming the guests, but she stops in her tracks.

'What's the matter?' I look back at her.

She points over my shoulder. I turn to see the ruins of Liverpool's finest shops. Dark grey smoke leaks out of Blacklers and Lewis's department stores, swirling this way and that way as it moves around the huge pillars at the front. Barriers block the way as bobbies search for the last flicker of fire, hurrying to and from the huge steel water tanks that now line most main streets. There are lots of water tanks in the city centre and big yellow letters, EWS, stand out on the side of the metal. Miss Hayes told us it means Emergency Water Supply and that we are not to go near them.

'Bloody hell!' Bella whispers. 'I can't believe it, look at all that smoke, Joseph.'

My eyes sting just like they did last night after the bomb dropped. All my thoughts turn to Mam, of all the times we walked past Blacklers and she'd be gazing at the window displays wishing she was rich so she could buy us all the lovely things on show. I remember how much she loves wandering through this part of town and watching the posh people come and go from the Aldelphi.

At that moment, I see a woman over the other side of Renshaw Street. I can't make out a face, but a long dark plait stretches down her back. 'Mam?' I shout.

She's walking just like her, slow and steady. Blood pounds in my head as I leap down from the kerb and run towards the empty shell of Lewis's, my friend soon

following behind. I pull my jumper tight around my waist and dive under the red and white barriers. Together we dodge between fire bobbies and wardens, hearing them shout at us as we fly past, 'Get out the way', 'It's too bleedin' dangerous', 'D'yer wanna get yerselves killed!'

The heat from the smouldering shops sticks to the side of our faces, and our shoes are thick with ash. We reach the other side of Renshaw Street where a massive mound of rubble blocks the pavement. We climb over doorframes, broken tables and metal bars. It's like the Jerries have eaten the city but then spat it back out. My heart races as the figure of Mam moves further away down the street. Bella reaches the other side of the mound before me but is collared by an ARP warden. He grips her by the wrist.

'You got a death wish, girl?' he shouts into her face.

'Lemme go!' Bella shouts back, twisting and turning but not able to free herself.

I stub my toes on cracked bricks and splinters spike my fingers as I scramble over planks of wood to get to my friend.

'Eh, mister! Let her go!' My voice is loud, and my hands pull on his grip.

His fingers slip from her wrist. I squeeze Bella's hand in mine, and we leg it over the lekkies, too fast for the warden to catch us.

We push through crowds of people until we come up against another barricade at the top of Renshaw and I search frantically up and down the street, hoping to see the long plait I know so well to be Mam's. We pant heavily, our hands still clasped together, searching the worn-out faces of strangers. There's no way around this blockage.

‘No entry this way!’ a warden shouts as a woman tries to bend under the barrier. ‘The street won’t be open for hours, love, terrible electrical fire. You’ll have to come back or find another way.’

My shoulders collapse into my body as I strain to see over the chaos.

‘Argh! Which way did she go?’ I shout.

Bella bends, resting her hands on her knees, panting quickly.

If it was Mam, then she’s gone from sight.