1

London, 31st August 1939

There was a hint of afternoon sunshine as Anna Sands and her mother Roberta stepped off their bus into Kensington High Street. To Anna, the broad street flickered with colour as shop-pers flowed past her, clutching their bags. Beyond the crowds, she could see the parade of shops tricked out with displays of every kind: tins of toffee, new-minted bowls and cups, rolls of ribbon, hats, coats and gloves from every corner of the Empire.

Mother and daughter set off down the wide pavement, Anna swinging her arms, always a little ahead. But she kept criss-crossing in front of her mother, as if uncertain whether to turn and hold her hand. For tomorrow, early, she and thousands of other children were to be evacuated from London – “In case of German air raids,” her mother had told her airily, as if this was a standard routine for all families.

“Once this crisis is over, you can come straight home again,” she had explained. Anna was looking forward to country life – or seemed to be, when asked. There were things to buy for the journey, but Anna’s impending departure hovered between them and lit every moment with unusual intimacy.

Roberta’s nerves and Anna’s excitement meshed into mutual high spirits as they strolled through the penny arcades, just for the fun of it, before reaching Pontings, the famous drapers, with its fluted pillars and white-iron galleries.

This was Anna’s favourite shop, an Aladdin’s cave of coloured cloths and trimmings, laden with rolls of silk and swathes of damask. On the ground floor, beyond the hanging boas, she chose herself a white handkerchief

starred with violets.

"*Thank* you," she said, kissing her mother.

While Roberta queued to pay, Anna glanced upwards to the bright atrium above, where sunshine streamed through the stained-glass flowers in rays of coloured light. Anna's eyes swam around the shop, with its reams of ribbons and baskets of glinting buttons, brass, silver, mother-of-pearl. The sounds of the shop receded as the dream light washed through her until, for a moment, she vanished from herself.

"You can carry your package, my darling," said her mother, breaking her reverie. Anna sprang to attention, and was the first out of the shop, planning the next purchase. At Woolworth's they bought a small cardboard case and luggage labels for Anna's journey, then they crossed the road to look for shoes.

Shiny brown lace-ups they bought, at Barkers. They smelt new and luxuriant. They reminded Anna of her father in his uniform, with his big black boots. She and her mother had seen him off a month ago, just after her eighth birthday; he had swung her right round when she hugged him goodbye. Sometimes he sent her letters with funny drawings, describing his army drills. She wasn't really worried about him, because it was common knowledge that most of Hitler's tanks were made of cardboard.

"Britain has the greatest empire in the world, so the war won't last long," she announced to the bespectacled lady who fitted her shoes.

Then mother and daughter were out on the street again. It was time for Anna's promised treat: a knickerbocker glory. She had seen American films in which children sat at counters, with ice creams in tall glasses. That was her dream.

Roberta led the way through the art-deco splendour of Derry and Tom's department store, along lavish blue

carpets, whisper-quiet, until they reached a wall of lifts and stepped into a cool chamber of copper and nickel.

“Fifth Floor, ladies and gentlemen, world-famous Roof Gardens,” chanted the liveried lift boy. The gardens had opened with much fanfare a year ago, but they had never visited: it was too dear.

But today was special, and they emerged to glittering sunlight amidst the rooftops of Kensington. Before them, a profusion of flowers stretched away on every side, out-stripping all their hopes. There was a Spanish garden, with a terracotta Moorish tower, and tumbling bougainvillea. Beyond, through a winding courtyard, they found themselves in a water garden of lily pads with a hint of gleaming carp. Another turn took them through dainty Elizabethan arches with climbing roses.

They found their way to the café, with tables set out beneath striped umbrellas, and a fountain tinkling nearby. From the tall menu Anna picked her ice cream with care: vanilla and chocolate, topped with cream and cherries and nuts. To her mother’s relief, she did not seem disappointed when the towering confection arrived.

A small palm-court band played familiar melodies, muting any sound from the streets below. The unreality of the place and the peculiar occasion of their visit only increased their light-headed pleasure in each other.

“Before today, have you ever sat in a garden in the sky?” asked Anna.

“Never,” laughed her mother, “nor would I want to, without you here too.”

“When I get home again, can we come back here?”

“Of course, sweetheart.”

“With Daddy too?”

“*For sure*,” said Roberta, and clasped her daughter’s hand.

Later, when the ice cream was finished, and the teacups

empty, and the garden’s secrets all explored, they set off together, subdued, for home.

It was not until they reached the store’s entrance lobby that Anna admitted the one shadow lurking over her day: she had no bathing costume.

Anna had seen the newsreels about evacuation, and they all showed children travelling westwards, to the seaside, to Devon and Cornwall. She longed to join them, but feared that with all they had spent today a bathing costume would be one item too many to ask for.

“But how will I swim?” she blurted out.

Roberta paused to hear her child’s fumbled request, and knew at once that she must keep this afternoon intact, not scupper her daughter’s hopes. Back to the lifts they went, and up to the sporting department. With abandon, Roberta spent two shillings on a blue striped bathing costume, and saw her daughter’s face shine with pleasure. It was more than she meant to pay, but it perfected the afternoon. Then they set off for the underground station, united in satisfaction.

As Anna skipped ahead, Roberta rejoiced in her daughter, knowing that she was bright and resourceful, with an un-cluttered face easily lit by smiles. That tiny gap between her front teeth gave her a frank charm.

They clattered down the station steps, Anna always in front. A train rolled in and opened its doors, and passengers stepped past them. Suddenly, on the half-filled platform, Roberta found herself brimming over with love for her straw-haired child.

“Anna—” she said, and Anna turned, her eyes bright and clear. In that instant, Roberta sensed the spontaneous rise of her daughter’s soul, which had flickered to life in her eight years before. She reached out for her daughter and held her fast in her arms. For a moment, they could feel

each other’s heartbeats.

“I love you, my darling,” said Roberta, stroking her daughter’s hair.

Anna looked up at her mother with unblinking eyes.

In the years to come, she would remember that fragile day, its touchless light, their quiet elations.