

That night she slept heavily, under the greatcoat. Somewhere in the depths of sleep she heard the phone ringing, and then felt the heave of the bedclothes as Philip snatched the receiver from its cradle. His voice came at her in waves and then cold air trickled over her body as he got out of bed.

‘Phil?’

‘Hush. Go back to sleep. I’ve got to go out to a delivery.’

‘D’you wan’ tea—’

‘Go back to sleep, Is.’ His hand was on the covers, pressing them down around her. He liked to think of her curled and warm while he drove out through the deserted town.

It was the coat that pressed her down. She would push it off her in a minute. It was too heavy. But sleep caught her again, melting her limbs, and she was gone deep into the wide skies of Suffolk with the smell of the salt marshes blowing in on the east wind.

‘Your parents will be home at Christmas,’ said her aunt’s voice, firm, practical and utterly to be trusted.

The tapping wove itself into her dream. It was her cousin Charlie, tapping on the underside of the table while she did her maths homework, to annoy her. He had already finished his. Tap, tap, tap, went his fingers, louder and louder.

‘Stop it, Charlie,’ she said in her dream, but then she looked around and it wasn’t Charlie at all, there was a man sitting at the table with her and he had one long fingernail, yellow as bone and hooked over until it was almost double. It was the nail that tapped and the man who looked at her and smiled. Then, very slowly, and so that no one else could see, he winked at her.

Isabel heaved herself out of sleep. She was bolt upright in the bed and her nightie clung to her. Her heart thundered. It was a bad dream, she said to herself, it wasn't real. But in her head her aunt still said, 'Your parents will be home at Christmas,' and the tapping man still winked knowingly. Philip's side of the bed was empty. He must have gone out on a call.

She could still hear the tapping sound that had woken her. It must be her dream still turning, like a record after the needle had been lifted off. Tap, tap, tap. Soft, insistent, determined. It was a real sound. It was coming from the living room. It sounded like someone tapping on glass . . . on a window . . .

Relief flooded her. Philip must have gone out without his key and he was tapping on the front window to attract her attention. He didn't want to rouse the landlady by ringing the bell at this hour.

Isabel snatched up the greatcoat and pulled it around her. Thank heavens he was back. She'd make some tea and he'd tell her about his case and everything would be fine. She ran over the cold lino, into the living room and across to the window, without switching on the light. She drew back the curtains.

There was a man outside the window. She saw the pallor of his face first, as it seemed to bob against the glass, too high up to belong to a man who had his feet on the ground. The street lamp lit him from the side, throwing the sharp shadow of his cap over his face. He was too close, inside the railings that separated the house from the pavement. Of course, the level of the ground there was higher than the level of the floor inside. That was why he seemed to float in mid-air. A man in a greatcoat. An RAF greatcoat, exactly like the one around her shoulders: she couldn't mistake it. An officer.

There he was, an everyday figure, safe as houses, but her heart clenched in fear. It was the look on his face: recognition, a familiarity so deep he didn't have to say a word. But she had never seen him before in her life.

He gave her a thumbs-up, as if to say, 'Good show. I wasn't sure if you'd heard me tapping.' She stared at him without moving. He was young. Her age, maybe a year or two more.

Her mind struggled from point to point. He thought he knew her but he was a stranger to her. He was on the other side of the glass. He hadn't wanted to ring the doorbell or rouse the house. But he still wasn't Philip.

Suddenly, breaking across her thoughts, her body moved. Her arms snatched at the curtains and dragged them across. The man was blotted out. The room was dark. She stood there, clutching the coat to her while the blood banged in her ears. Was he still there on the other side of the glass, waiting? How long had he been tapping before she woke? If only Philip would come home.

But then she reproached herself. Why had she pulled the curtains in his face like that? What a coward she was. He must have lost his way, and wanted directions. There were other airfields not far away, she knew, and some were still operational. The minster was a landmark and it would have been natural to try at a nearby house. Air crew didn't stand on ceremony. They thumbed lifts and whistled at girls. He hadn't meant to frighten her.

Cautiously, Isabel drew back the curtains again. There was no one there. She took a deep breath: of relief, of disappointment, she didn't know. There was the street lamp, shining. Even now, years after the end of the blackout, it seemed like a blessing. She'd grown

up in the dark. Isabel pulled the curtains right back, felt for the window-catch and unlocked it. The window slid up easily. She leaned out into the cold night, looked to the right and then to the left, towards the minster. There was no one. The streets were still and the town muffled in sleep. Not a single car was moving. He had rounded the corner and disappeared. She strained for footsteps, but there was nothing.

How good the night air tasted. Cold, fresh and wild, as if the country had blown over the town; but there was no wind. She huddled into the coat and the wool of the collar rubbed her neck. Well, he would find someone to help him, no doubt. There was frost settling on the ground and clinging to the lamp post. The minster roof shone faintly in the moonlight. A man wouldn't choose to walk around for long on a night like this. He would go out to the main road and thumb a lift from a passing lorry, to wherever he was stationed.

She should go back to bed. What if Philip were to come back and find her hanging out of the window, half frozen? In the morning he would say again, in that would-be casual way: 'Is, you are starting to settle down, aren't you? You do like it here?' Or worse, he wouldn't ask. He'd worry over it silently: *Poor old Is, she's letting things get to her.*

She put her hands on the cold sill, ready to draw her head back inside, but a sound arrested her: a vibration, very far off, chafing the air. She listened for a long time but the sound wouldn't come closer and wouldn't define itself. As it faded it pulled at her teasingly, like a memory that she couldn't touch, until the town was silent. Isabel ducked her head inside, pulled down the sash and

slipped the window-catch across. Again, she drew the curtains, and this time she felt her way across to the light-switch.

The living room sprang out at her in all its dull, ugly banality. What was the time? Ten past three, and Philip was out there somewhere, perhaps at the side of a woman in labour, and so far away from Isabel that she wasn't even in his thoughts.

She ought not to have closed the curtains like that. It was cowardice.