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The Glass Trumpet

The Glass Trumpet

The Glass Trumpet

The house was so utterly destroyed that ARP wardens said last night that they were unlikely to be able to recover some of the bodies at the address for burial.

Police are trying to trace the relatives of an expectant mother lodging temporarily at the address, number seventeen. The young lady, known to her neighbours only as Elizabeth or Lizzie, arrived in May, her particulars being known only to her landlord, who also perished in the explosion. If anyone can identify the young lady from the photograph above, which was found in the wreckage, please contact the Chief Warden for the Belsize Ward on Maida Vale 1805.

Mark Cairns

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The Glass Trumpet

For my mother, who waited so long.

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1 - Battle of The Thing

December 1957

The boy clung to the thick black drainpipe in the freezing darkness as the winter wind whipped at his jacket and his teeth chattered. He looked up and wondered if he should try and return to the safety of his room, and then down at the three remaining storeys of the building and the gardens below. It seemed an awfully long way, especially if one were to fall. He longed to cup his hands and blow some warmth and feeling back into the fingers but dared not release his grip on The Glass Trumpet the icy pipe for fear of falling off. The Glass Trumpet

Eventually, after carefully clambering down its various branches, he edged from the pipe onto the relative safety of the study windowsill. He had just breathed some life into the tips of his fingers again, when his whole body suddenly froze with fear as the light snapped on and the angry voice of his father rose, bellowing out through the glass.

May 1958

Jim opened one eye. He peered down the table at the hunched figure of his father and strained to hear the old man's prayer, a sustained mumble, rising and falling at regular intervals, accompanied by the even tick of the grandfather clock that stood behind him. The prayer, quiet though it was, seemed to reverberate in the spartan dining room. Jim looked around in the soft grey light filtering through the net curtains.

To The Glass Trumpet his right, his mother was curled over her plate, her fingers and eyes bound tight shut, a supplicant at her own table. She murmured the occasional response, prompted by almost inaudible changes in the rhythm and cadences of her husband's prayer.

The slightly dank smell of the food led Jim to examine his plate of boiled cabbage and brawn, as it cooled under his nose. He looked at the meagre portion and wondered if she knew that rationing had ended four The Glass Trumpet years ago.

He began to drift, his mind tiptoeing over the opening phrases of Haydn's Trumpet Concerto from this afternoon's music lesson. As the room lost focus, his father's voice retreated, leaving him alone with the looming string arrangements which preceded the first call of the trumpet. This was Jim's retreat; at will he could disappear from the world around and exist only in the centre The Glass Trumpet of a soundscape so real that he could have been sat among the orchestra itself. Other people had record collections; Jim had recall, perfect recall.

He almost missed the rising intonation in his father's prayer that signalled its end, only just closing his eyes and lowering his head in time for the Amen. His heart beat at the near miss but his father had a blow ready prepared for him anyway.

'You'll not be travelling away with the Outsiders,' he said, snapping his napkin open and tucking it into his collar.

There was no more, no explanation, no reasoning or apology. Any pain Jim felt he knew he The Glass Trumpet would be expected to relish, as a chance to draw nearer to God, and so no more need be said. He squirmed with disappointment but remained silent. His face flushed and he felt his skin tighten on him like a drum. He looked The Glass Trumpet across at his mother but she did not look back at him and seemed lost in prayer still, although her husband had already finished thanking God for their dinner. When he did manage to catch her eye, his most desperate and imploring look just made her twitch, as if the thought of interceding for him would be enough to bring on one of her fits.

Jim finished his dinner and seethed in silence, waiting for his father to conclude the meal with another round of thanks to Our Lord; that the food had made its way safely inside them.

Only later, when he had climbed the stepladder to his attic room and listened to it being removed, did he feel the drum skin gradually slacken; releasing the tension across his chest and

with the relief came tears. With the tears came anger. Not so much anger at his father, who was at least reliably obstinate, or at his mother for her flinching subservience, but at himself. Against his better judgement he had launched this slender raft of hope and now, as it sank under him, he tasted his own salty tears and railed against the pity he felt for himself. He took a deep breath and held it a few seconds before releasing The Glass Trumpet it, letting all the air run out of his lungs and squeezing the last of the tears from his eyes.

He rose from the bed, crossed the floor and opened the The Glass Trumpet small dormer window, which looked west The Glass Trumpet across London. Jim rested his chin down on his hands and watched the sun sink towards the tall poplars The Glass Trumpet at the bottom of the garden.

'Outsiders,' he repeated to himself bitterly. The word was given a twist in the Church by stressing the 'out', in the same way other people said 'outlaws'.

Everyone, apart from the three members of his immediate family, were Outsiders to his father. A few years ago there had at least been the Church, but since the The Glass Trumpet Great Schism his parents saw virtually no one, apart from each other and himself. Even the big lawns of the house had been converted to lines of vegetables, mainly so that contact with Outsiders could be kept to a minimum, but also from puritan thrift and to ease the shortages caused by rationing, although this had finally ended in 1954, fully nine years after the end of the war. If he leaned slightly forward he could see over the broad sill of the dormer window and just make out the lines of cabbages in the gloom beneath.

The irony was that the Schism was caused by one of the church marrying an Outsider, but now that he could no longer attend the Church School he had to go to an ordinary school, at which he himself was the Outsider. Although, at first, he was happy and excited to go to the local school, the differences between his life and that of his new classmates set an unbridgeable gap. He wasn't allowed in their houses and nor were they welcome to visit his. Jim wouldn't have dared to bring them home anyway as his father seemed built by God to intimidate ordinary folk. Although much older than most parents (Jim wasn't even sure how old he was) his father was still well over six The Glass Trumpet feet tall and his long grey beard, matching bushy eyebrows and his way of staring, as if there were something not quite right about you, put most people off. Jim wasn't even The Glass Trumpet meant The Glass Trumpet to talk to the other kids at school but this, at least, was one rule that could not be enforced.

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