

There was still no sign of her dad when, sleepy and stiff, Ellen crawled out from under the table the next morning. She ran to the window to see if his lorry was parked in the empty lot across the street — but it wasn't.

“Mind you don't cut yourself,” Ellen's mother shouted from the kitchen.

Ellen stepped carefully over the pieces of broken glass lying on the floor beneath the shattered window. She went over to the cooker where her mother was pouring dried egg mixture onto the hot grease in the cast-iron frying pan. Ellen noticed she'd put a large sticking plaster over the cut on her forehead.

“Dad didn't come home, then?” Ellen asked. She remembered the all-clear signal waking her sometime in the middle of the night, but she'd gone right back to sleep.

“No, hinny, he didn't, but he will. He must have got held up

by the bombing. I heard from the milkman that Loansdean was hit, and the road from Newcastle's closed.”

“Loansdean!” That was close. “Was anybody hurt?” Ellen asked anxiously. Some of her schoolmates lived at Loansdean, which was on the outskirts of the town.

“No — Jerry must be blind — or wearing the wrong glasses. They missed the houses and hit the golf course. Trying for a hole-in-one I guess.” Ellen's mam laughed, but Ellen noticed the black circles around her eyes and later, when they sat down to breakfast, her mother just pushed the flat rubbery egg around on her plate.

Ellen finished *her* egg — it wasn't too bad with tomato sauce on it — and was sipping the strong hot tea when there was a knocking sound from the flat downstairs. They had an arrangement with Nellie Diamond that if she wanted to talk to them she would knock on her ceiling with the shank of her sweeping brush.

“Oh dear,” Ellen's mam said as she knocked back in acknowledgement, “I've got the glass and plaster to clean up before I go to work and me skirt needs ironing. Could you check on her on your way to school, pet? She probably just wants to know if we're all right after last night.”

Or maybe she wants to complain about me not pulling the

chain in the lav, thought Ellen. She was a little bit afraid of tiny, feisty old Miss Diamond who spent all day cleaning and polishing her flat till it shone like a new penny. But better she got the chance to say she was sorry before Miss Diamond spoke to her mam.

“Yes, Mam, I’ll look in. And it’s dinner money day.”

Ellen poured some hot water from the kettle into the wash-basin, picked up the soap and flannel and went into her tiny bedroom. It was separated from the only other bedroom by a wooden partition. Inside, her bed, a small dressing table and a single wardrobe were crammed in beside each other like sardines in a can.

Ellen gave her face and hands a quick wash, then pulled open the dressing table drawer, looking for a school blouse. There was only one, tucked in under the green knickers and the lisle thread stockings, and she was disappointed to see it was the old one. Her other two blouses must be in the linen basket to be washed. This was one someone had given her, or rather had given to her mother, who had turned the collar and cuffs. But now the collar didn’t sit right.

Maybe if I don’t pull the tie tight, it won’t look so bad, Ellen thought as she slipped her bottle-green gym tunic over the blouse and reached for the green and yellow striped tie. She’d been tying the tie almost every day for the last eight months,

ever since she’d started at the high school, yet still she got all mixed up between left and right when she tried to do it looking in the mirror.

It’s uneven, but it’ll have to do, she thought as she ran the hairbrush through her shoulder-length blond hair, curling the ends over her fingers into a pageboy. She picked up the silver-coloured identification bracelet all the students had to wear and fastened the leather strap around her left wrist. A quick look out of the narrow window at the dark clouds scudding across the sky told her she needed her blazer. Grabbing it, along with her leather schoolbag and her gas mask, she hurried to the front room where her mam was trying to tack a piece of cardboard over the broken windowpane.

“Your dinner money’s on the table. If you get home before I do and your dad’s got back, the rabbit pie’s in the pantry,” she said.

Ellen took the silver half-crown which would pay for her week’s dinners and put it in her blazer pocket. There was a small hole in the lining, but after pushing her fingers in a bit farther, Ellen decided it wasn’t big enough for the money to fall through.

I hope it’s not mince and lumpy semolina again today, she thought. The mince wasn’t too bad, but the prefects who sat at the heads of the tables got to serve the food and always left

the dried-up bits of meat and the lumps in the puddings for the first form girls.

“Ta-ta, Mam,” Ellen called as she ran down the stairs.

“Ta-ta,” she heard her mam shout back as she closed the door of the flat and ran up the yard to the street.

The high school with its shiny brass name plate was across the road and a short way down the main street. From the front it looked like an ordinary grey stone building, but behind the large wooden entrance gates there were ivy-covered walls and sweeping green lawns. Near the lawns was the netball court, and over to the right, the apple orchard snuggled in behind the recently built air-raid shelters.

I love this place, Ellen thought. She still found it hard to believe she'd won the scholarship and been one of only five girls chosen from the elementary school to come here. The rest of the high school's 180 pupils came from the surrounding towns and villages — some from the coal mining areas of Ashington and Pegswood, and some from the farming districts of Rothbury and Woodburn.

It had been exciting making new friends over the past eight months, but Ellen's best friend was still Mavis, who had been in her class ever since they'd both started at the infants' school when they were five. Mavis who was clever and pretty and who

lived in a beautiful big house on the estate surrounding the hospital where Ellen's mam worked, the kind of house Ellen hoped *she* would have when the war was over and they started building again. One with a big kitchen and a bath and an indoor lav.

Oh no, I forgot about Miss Diamond. The thought entered Ellen's head like a thunderclap. There isn't time to go back. Now I'm really in for it! Ellen hurried to the school lav, then on to the cloakroom to hang up her blazer. She met Mavis as she walked to the gym for opening prayers.

“Hello, Ellen — heard the news?”

“What news?” Ellen asked.

“A German aeroplane crashed in Top Field last night,” Mavis said.

Top Field bordered the hospital and was about a five-minute walk uphill from the back of the high school. It was shared by the girls' high school and the boys' grammar school for rounders, rugby, track events and other sports.

“What happened?” Ellen asked.

“No one's sure. The pilot was killed. Me dad says he must have hit the trees.” Mavis's dad was superintendent of the hospital and, like Ellen's dad, was too old to join up, but he was an active member of the Home Guard. Mavis had an older brother, Peter, who was in the Royal Air Force.

“Did you see it?” Ellen asked. Mavis had all the luck — all Ellen ever did was spend the night under the table when there was a raid.

“I saw the aeroplane come down, but me mam made me go in the stupid shelter for the rest of the night,” Mavis said.

“I wonder if he was the one who bombed Loansdean. If he was heading for the shipyards, he could have got off course,” Ellen said.

“Loansdean was bombed?”

“Yes,” Ellen said, pleased that for once she knew something Mavis didn’t. “No one was hurt though. They hit the golf course. The road from Newcastle’s closed. Me dad — he didn’t get back last night — he probably couldn’t get home ’cos the road was closed.” She wanted to tell Mavis how her mam had been scared, thinking her dad had been caught in the bombing, but she didn’t. Saying it would somehow make it seem true and it wasn’t — nothing like that could ever happen to her dad. Not her dad.

“Where was your dad coming from?” Mavis asked as they filed into the wooden seats set out in rows in the gym.

“Manchester.”

“I heard Manchester took a pasting night before last.”

A flutter of fear went through Ellen. Bombs in Manchester, bombs right here in Morpeth — and her dad caught some-

where in between. Oh, please, God, let him be somewhere in between, Ellen prayed instead of the Lord’s Prayer the other girls were saying.

“Want to come to my house after school?” Mavis whispered between the prayers and the announcements. “We can go by Top Field and see where the aeroplane crashed, if you want.”

Miss Blackthorn was explaining about the bombing at Loansdean — several of the girls wouldn’t be at school that day, but they were all right. No one had been hurt.

“No,” Ellen whispered back. “I can’t — maybe tomorrow.”

As they all stood and Miss Embleton began to play the opening bars of the school hymn on the piano, Ellen went all hot and sticky. She couldn’t stop thinking about the crashed aeroplane and the dead pilot up on Top Field, and her dad, and bombs falling. Her mouth was singing the familiar words to “Our Father by Whose Servants Our House was Built of Old,” but her mind was full of bombs and death. She found herself wondering if somewhere in Germany there was a girl like herself waiting with a rabbit pie for the dead pilot, and when it came to the part in the hymn about children and blessings, she was shocked and horrified to hear herself make a strange sound — a sound somewhere between a high-pitched giggle and a sob.