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The Report

Written by Jessica Francis Kane

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The Report

Jessica Francis Kane

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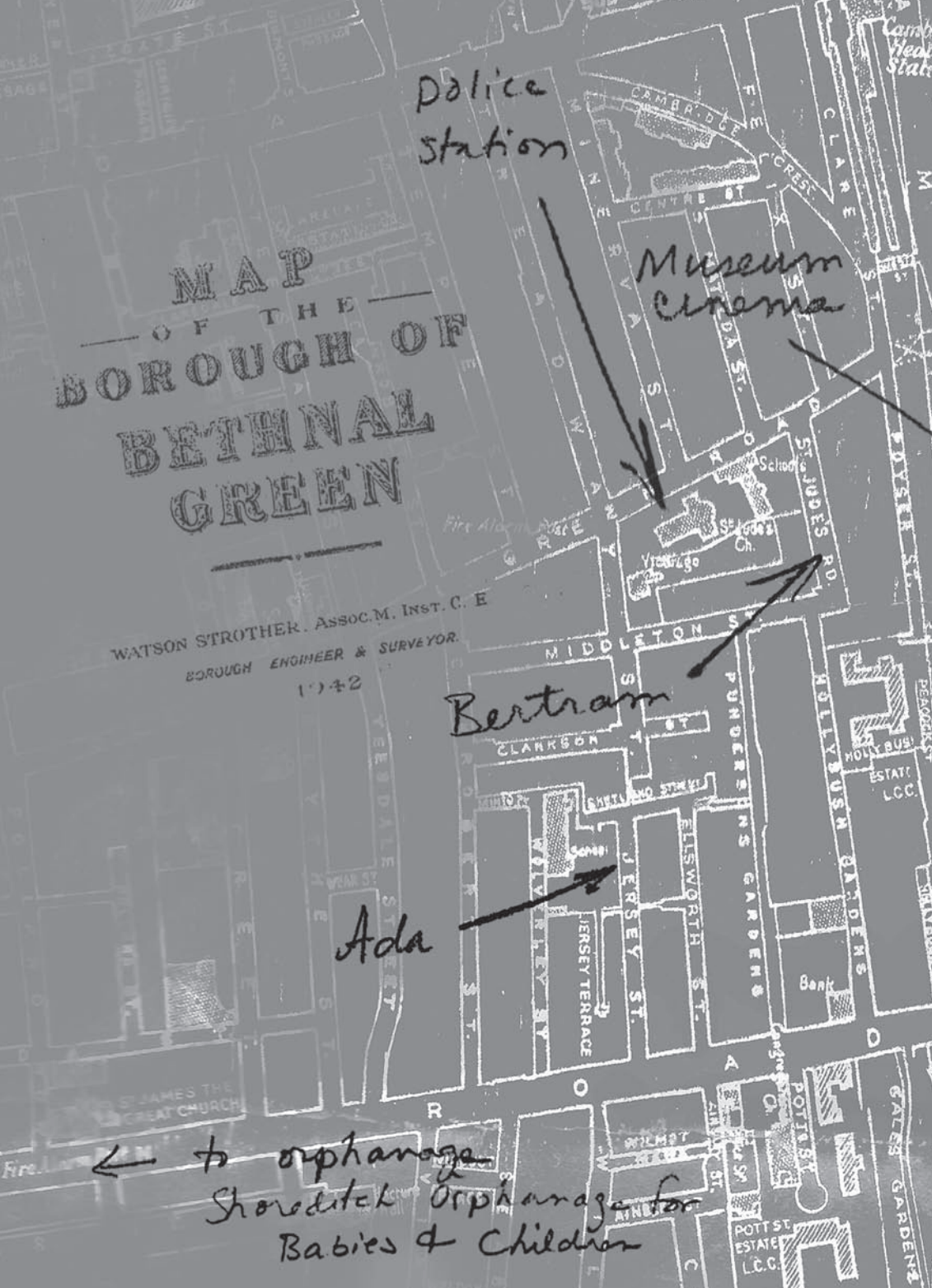
For Mitchell

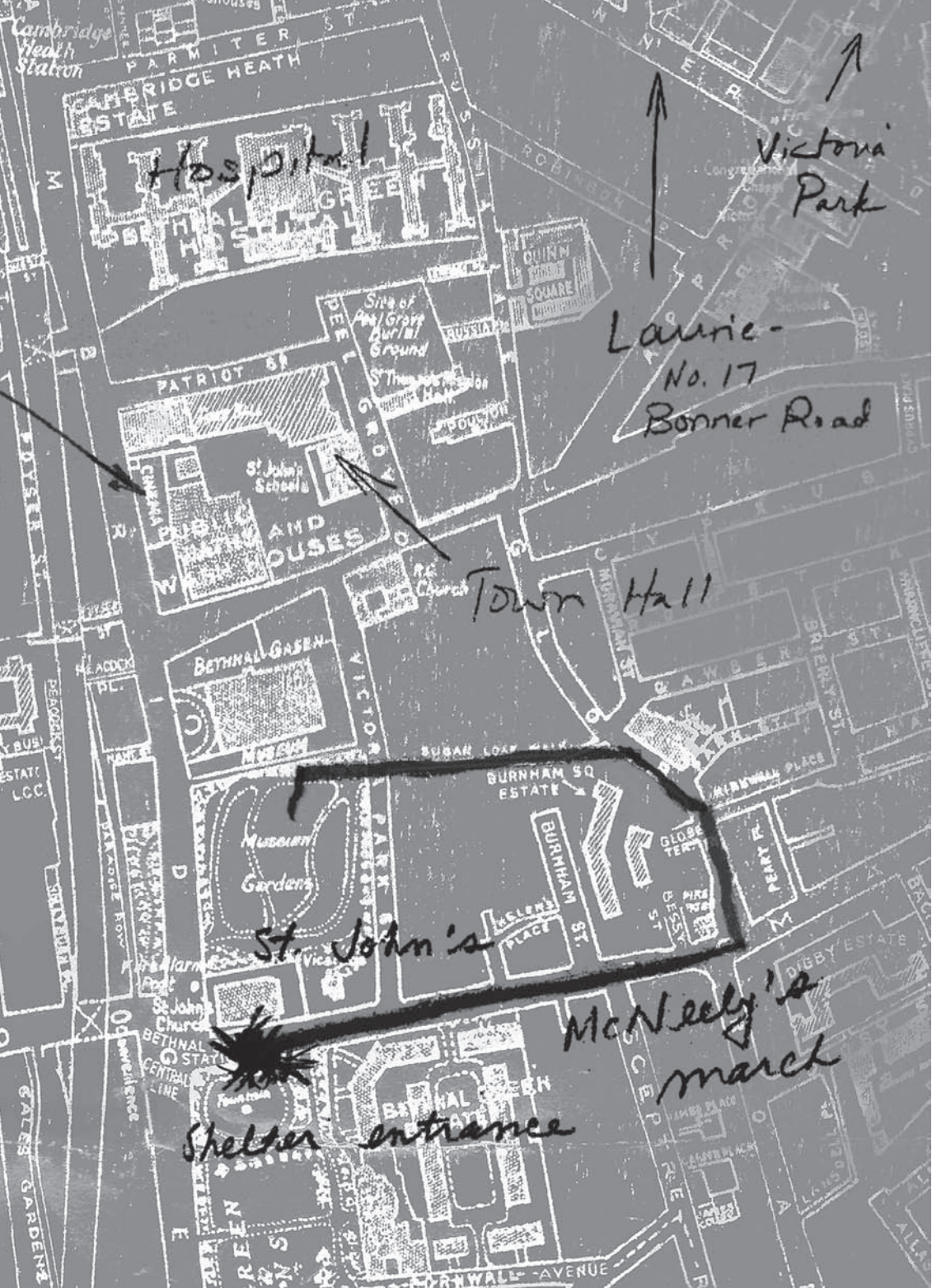
"We want to note what we have done, and not done."

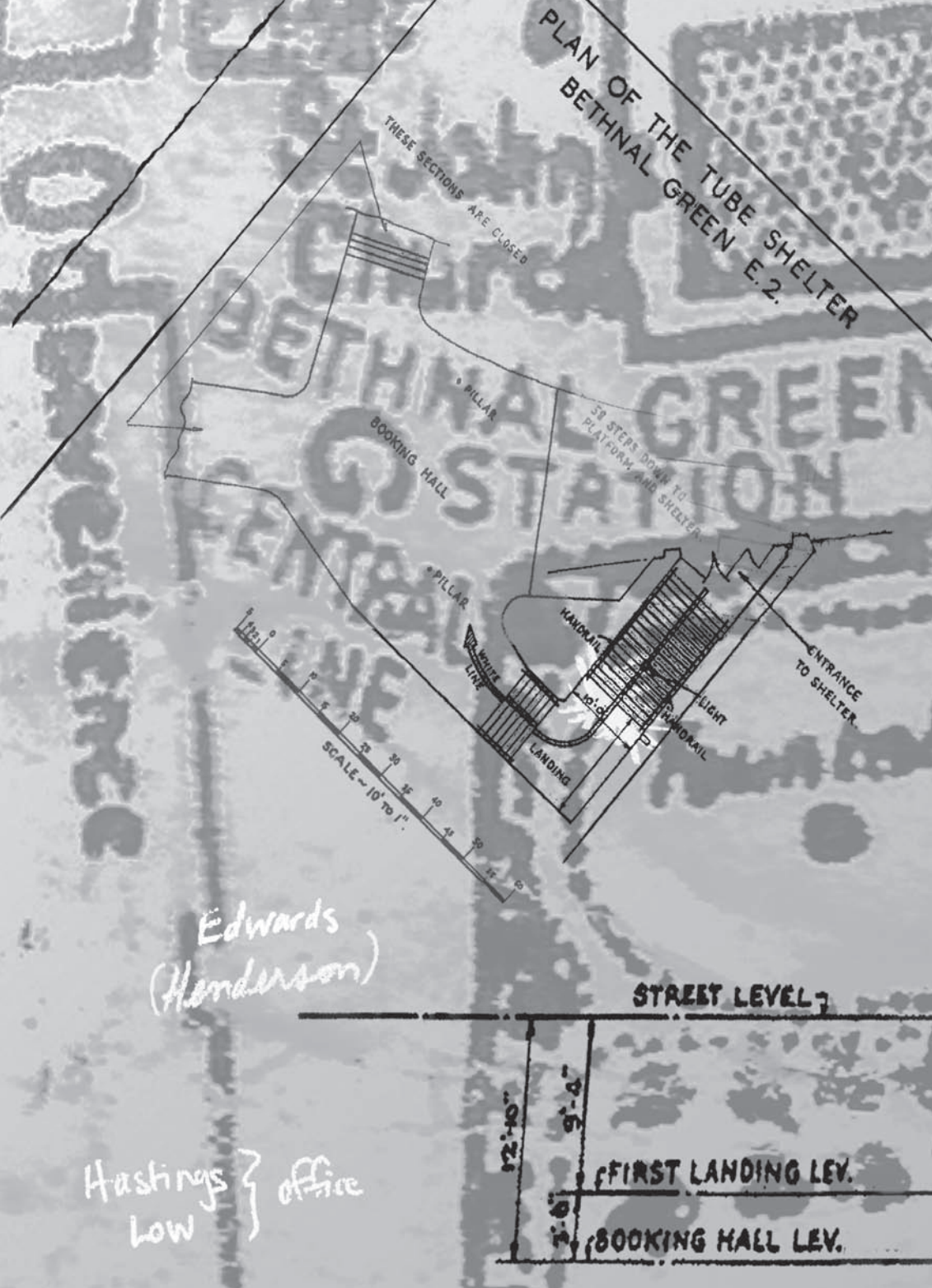
—Preface, *The 9/11 Commission Report*

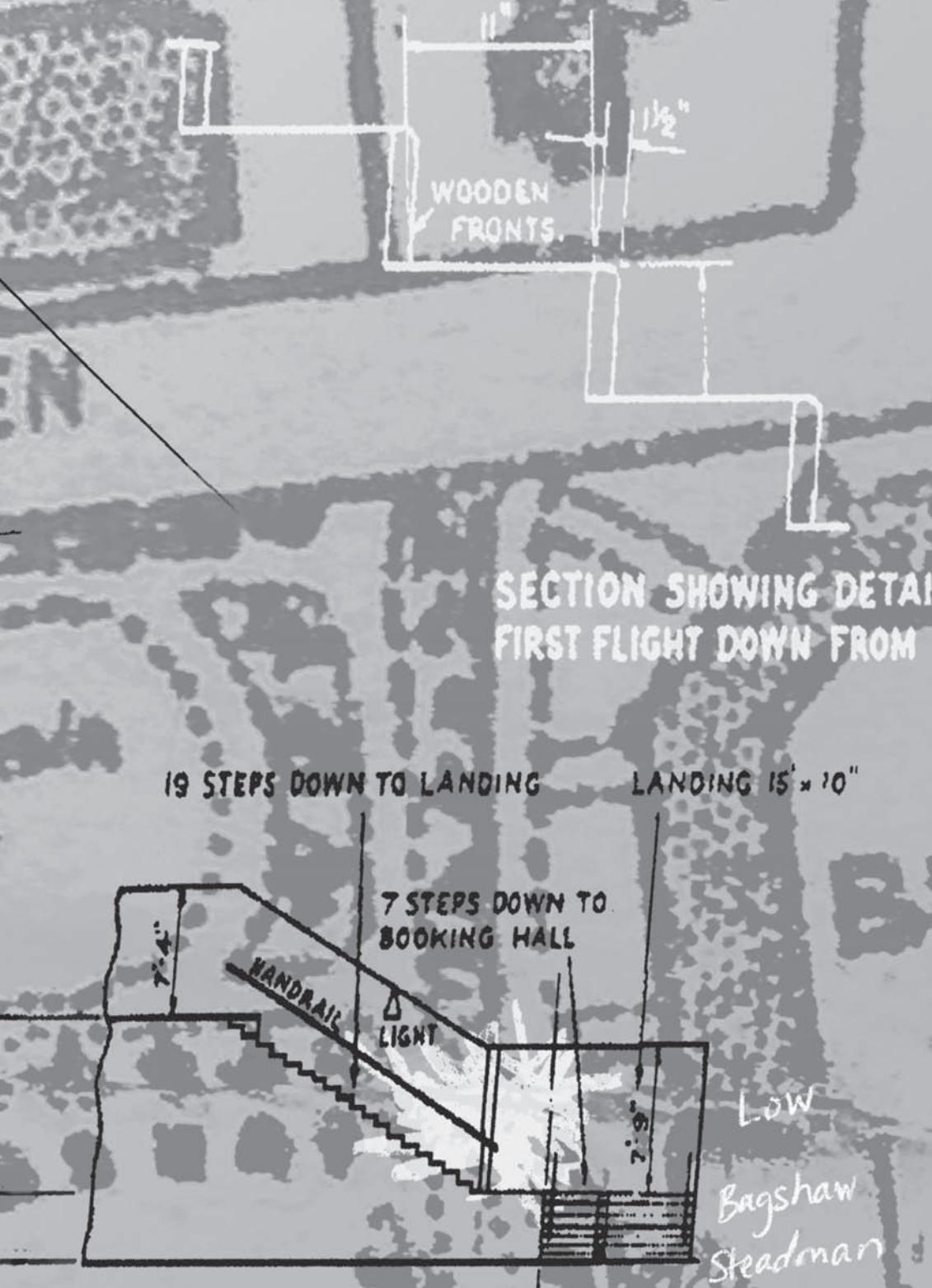
"When hope is lost, blame is the only true religion."

—John Burnham Schwartz, *Reservation Road*


MAP
OF THE
BOROUGH OF
BETHNAL
GREEN
WATSON STROTHER. ASSOC.M. INST. C. E
BOROUGH ENGINEER & SURVEYOR.
1942
Police station
Museum Cinema
Bertram
Ada
← to orphanage
Shoreditch Orphanage for
Babies & Children
CAMBRIDGE CREST
CENTRE ST
CLARE ST
MINERVA ST
ST. JUDE'S RD.
POYSER ST.
MIDDLETON ST
CLARKSON ST
PUNDERSONS GARDENS
HOLLYBUSH GARDENS
ELLSWORTH ST.
JERSEY ST.
JERSEY TERRACE
WOLVERLEY ST
Bank
POTT ST.
POTT ST. ESTATE L.C.C.
GALES GARDENS
ST. JAMES THE GREAT CHURCH


Hospital
Victoria Park
Laurie-
No. 17
Bonner Road
Town Hall
St. John's
McNeely's
march
Shelter entrance
Cambridge Heath Station
PARMITER ST
CAMBRIDGE HEATH ESTATE
BETHNAL GREEN HOSPITAL
QUINN SQUARE
Site of Peel Grove Burial Ground
PATRIOT SQ
St John's Schools
PUBLIC WASH AND HOUSES
BETHNAL GASEN
BURNHAM SQ ESTATE
BURNHAM ST.
Museum Gardens
St John's Church
BETHNAL STATION
CENTRAL LINE
DIGBY ESTATE
AVENUE


PLAN OF THE TUBE SHELTER
BETHNAL GREEN E.2.
THESE SECTIONS ARE CLOSED
PILLAR
BOOKING HALL
50 STEPS DOWN TO PLATFORM AND SHELTER
PILLAR
HANDRAIL
ENTRANCE TO SHELTER
WHITE LINE
LIGHT
HANDRAIL
LANDING
SCALE ~ 10' TO 1"
Edwards
(Henderson)
STREET LEVEL
12'-0"
9'-6"
FIRST LANDING LEV.
9'-0"
BOOKING HALL LEV.
Hastings
Low
office


11"
1½"
WOODEN FRONTS.
SECTION SHOWING DETAI
FIRST FLIGHT DOWN FROM
19 STEPS DOWN TO LANDING
LANDING 15' × 10"
7 STEPS DOWN TO BOOKING HALL
HANDRAIL
LIGHT
LOW
Bagshaw
Steadman

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Retrospective

Begin with the retrospective.

On an overcast evening in early March, after the weather forecast, a television special about the tragedy at Bethnal Green begins. In a sonorous voice a narrator describes the underground shelters, the unseasonably cold weather of March 1943, the psychological effects of long-term aerial bombardment. The camera pans over a series of images of wartime Bethnal Green, and several survivors speak, a man named Bill Steadman among the most compelling. His face ruddy from high blood pressure, he talks about receiving the babies. "Greatest thing I've ever done," he says. "I've tried to live the rest of my life as though it meant something. Why else was I there?"

It is the thirtieth anniversary of the tragedy. Not to the day. That would have been 3 March, last Saturday, but various television authorities felt the retrospective would do better during the week, so Wednesday, 7 March, it is. The weather is cold, snow beginning to mix with rain, though the weather report failed to mention it. At Paddington trains slow, and on Oxford Street a bus stalls, impeding the evening commute in several directions. By eight o'clock, however, most problems clear, and people continue home.

When the programme is over, Tilly Barber switches off her set. She's eight years older than the tragedy and remembers it well. Thin and strong, she looks like a survivor, though she does not think of herself that way. She stands a minute, then instinctively begins to move towards her boys. They're not far away; the flat is small, though with two bedrooms and everything she needs behind her own door, it's the most space she's ever had. When she sees that the two are sleeping soundly, their small backs rising and falling, she opens the boys' door wide and begins to cry.

She misses her mother, to whom, after the accident, she was never kind. She can still hear Ada's question when Tilly was pregnant the first time, "If you have a girl, do you think you'd call her Emma?"

"No, Mum," she answered, surprised by the need she still felt to hold her mother accountable. "I don't think I would."

Tilly closes the door and starts to get ready for bed herself. She runs a hand through her cropped hair, folds her clothes, and puts them in a neat pile on a chair in the corner. She can't wait for the time when this story will no longer be alive for her. She wants to be able to look back on it, see its beginning, middle, and end. Laurence Dunne tried to give her family an ending—she understands that now—but she shuts her eyes against the idea. Tilly has held on to the truth, the hardest thing she's ever done. She hopes one day to be able to say in simple summary, "It was a difficult time," and be done with it, but she isn't there yet, and so she says very little at all.

Shelter

One

When the cinema went dark, the audience stirred into life. People leaned towards the shapes in the seats next to them. "What happened?" they asked. "Did you see?"

The film stars had been arguing, a humorous disagreement because they didn't know they were in love. The heroine was *feisty,* a popular word of the time, 1943, though the people of London were exhausted, grimy, numb. Clean and feisty existed only in American movies; that's why they were adored and why the Museum Cinema that night in Bethnal Green was full. People were standing along the walls and sitting cross-legged in the aisles.

The hero of the film had just turned and lifted his hands. There had been some kind of movement. Did he cup her face? Put his hands in her hair?

"Did you see?"

Several boys switched on torches, and when the voices began to subside, the cinema manager, walking up to the stage, said the usual bit: the alert had sounded; if you wish to leave, please do so quietly.

Someone in front shouted, "Never mind! Put the film back on!"

The manager sighed. Four films had shown through the previous night after a large portion of the audience refused to leave. He stared a moment, remembering the fish-and-chip mess he'd faced in the cinema that morning and the puffy, sleepless face of his youngest projectionist. Tonight he wanted the crowd to go.

"If you wish to leave, please do so quietly," he said again.

The audience stayed, the torchlight settled. There wasn't much incentive to go. The cinemas were fairly good shelters and the dark wasn't a problem; they'd all been living under the rules of blackout for years. Their homes, behind boarded windows, could be oppressive, but the darkness of the streets or shelters or cinemas, especially on the night of a raid, was a world they understood. When the ice-cream seller opened the back door, however, which let in the siren's wail, people began to move.

It had been a beautiful afternoon, though later no one would remember that. A football match in the Museum Gardens had drawn a large crowd, and when the young borough engineer won the game with an impossible header, people heard the cheer in Stepney. Afterwards a group gathered outside the pub on Russia Lane (affectionately known as the Plots & Pints because of the neighbouring cemetery). The air felt thinner, cleaner, partly because it was—a six-week break in the raids had given the dust and smoke of broken, smouldering buildings time to clear—and partly because the sun was making a rare appearance, polishing the winter-weary houses and trees.

Ada covered her ears before the siren could reach its peak. All afternoon in her shop the women had talked about Monday's bombing of Berlin. The heaviest air raid so far, they said. So many bombs, German farmers saw the fires a hundred miles away. Tonight seemed to them a likely time for the enemy's response, but Ada prayed they were wrong.

She lowered her hands, aware that her girls were watching her. Tilly, eight, had dark half-moons beneath her eyes. Emma, nearly four, had lost weight. Neither girl looked well, even though half an hour before the blackout, she'd taken them out to breathe the fresh tar fumes on the new portion of Jersey Street. All the mothers were talking of the reprisal, of what the new high explosives could do. Before dinner Ada had put two jumpers in her bag and

the extra blanket by the front door. The new bombs, the women said, would leave less time to get to the shelter.

Tilly spoke first. "We'd better go."

Ada hurried them from the table and helped them into their winter coats. She pulled Tilly's collar up around her neck, and Tilly winced. "I just want you to stay warm," Ada said.

"I know."

"I'll try to get us something at the canteen," Ada offered, and the girls glanced at each other. That meant she had money, and if she had money, they might be able to get a bunk. They weren't registered for one, but sometimes that didn't matter, depending on the wardens. It was much better to have a bunk in the tunnel than a mat on the platform or tracks.

"Can we bring something to eat and get a bunk instead?" Tilly asked.

"You've just finished dinner!" Ada knew it hadn't been much. She'd served broth and fried potatoes, nothing else, for the third night in a row. She planned to surprise them, though, when they got to the shelter. She had two pieces of chocolate in her pocket. "Now go!"

"We'll play draughts," Tilly whispered to Emma as they went out. She rubbed her sister's hand.

"Can I be black?"

"Of course." Tilly squeezed her. "And if we get a bunk, you can have the pillow."

Emma was impressed. Her sister had let her have the black draughts last time, too, and so she solemnly promised to let Tilly have the pillow.

As Ada locked the door, the girls waited behind her; then the three joined the stream of people pouring out of the tenements that formed the low and boxy skyline of the borough. Ada had moved to Jersey Street when she married, but she and her husband, Robby, like many young couples in Bethnal Green, had grown up

only a few streets away. They lived in a row of Victorian terraced houses chopped up into tiny three-room flats—kitchen, living room, bedroom—two flats upstairs, two downstairs. Their stove and toilet were on the landing, shared only with Mr. Levin, across the hall. On the ground floor they kept a greengrocer's, Barber's. "Proof you can escape your name," Robby often joked.

Ada looked down the street, which was quickly growing more crowded. She wondered if Robby would come for them or if he would head straight to the shelter from the Plots & Pints. Several pale faces bobbed forwards against the dark tide.

"Your father will meet us there," Ada said brightly, hoping Robby wouldn't have had too much to drink.

"We should have set out sooner," Tilly said, scanning the crowd. "There are a lot of people tonight, Mum."

Emma started to cry, and Ada picked her up. "Don't pay any attention," she said. "We're fine. Let's count the faces. Do you want to?"

"No," Tilly said.

"How?" asked Emma.

"See how bright they look in the dusk, with everyone else walking the other way? A little ghostly. We could count them."

Nothing about this reassured the girls, and Ada gave up. They liked to be quiet, and she knew she often tried too hard to distract them with games and stories. She was never at her best when she was out alone with them. Before Emma was born she'd managed all right, but her mother had urged her to have another baby. Two hands, two sides, two children, she'd said. Ada wasn't convinced, and when Emma was born, she'd felt the strain immediately. It's just the time, people told her, 1939, war just declared. Then her mother died, and Ada was overwhelmed with the business of running the shop and caring for two children. Tilly was an enormous help, but Ada worried she relied on her too much.

"Mum," Tilly said. "Your slippers?"

Ada looked down and saw that she was walking in her slip-

pers. She forced herself to laugh. "I'll be more comfortable in the shelter. Next time you'll be begging to bring yours."

Ada was glad to see Tilly smile. When was the last time Tilly had laughed? Ada couldn't remember. When she thought of Tilly, the first image that came to mind was a frown of concentration. She touched her daughter's shoulder. "You have slippers, don't you?"

Tilly shook her head. "They're too small."

At the corner of Jersey Street and the Bethnal Green Road, Ada spotted Martin Henderson speaking to a group of boys. It was a comfort to see a constable, and Ada put Emma down and called his name. Martin acknowledged her but was preoccupied with the boys, all of whom were holding torches, one of them lit, a blackout violation.

"Look," Ada said, "it's Constable Henderson. Everything's going to be fine."

She waved as she passed, and Emma, taking her mother's hand on one side, her sister's on the other, blinked away her tears.

The crowd from the cinema filed out slowly along the worn red carpet, and it seemed to Bertram Lodge, at the end of a row and alone, that everyone was holding hands, touching shoulders, whispering. Twenty-two years old, Bertram was a clerk in the town hall and not at the front because of his flat feet. He lived on St. Jude's Road, in a small flat he shared secretly with Clare Newbury, an artist and a nurse, who had gone ahead to the shelter to sketch. Thinking he might join her there now, he stood up and concentrated on the shoes of the girl in front of him, a sleepy girl who kept leaning on the shoulder of a blond boy so that she could lift and twirl her foot whenever the crowd halted. The soles of her shoes were lime green, beautiful and astonishing. How was it that the government forbade the making of trousers with cuffs or pockets or buttons, yet the soles of shoes could be this colour? Bertram thought it must have something to do with surpluses.

They moved into the damaged, dingy lobby, past the gold-painted ticket stall, already abandoned (the proprietor notoriously nervous), and out of the doors on to Cambridge Heath Road. Everyone knew it was Cambridge Heath, though the street sign had been removed at the start of the war, just as everyone knew, despite the ban on weather reports, that it had rained during the film. The pavement was damp. The sky was clear again now, as it had been most of the day, and the Thames was at low ebb. At the beginning of the war, they would look up, searching for planes, delighted to see stars. Now they understood that a clear night with a full moon was dangerous, and they were quiet.

It was a Wednesday, so birds and flowers had been for sale that morning at the stalls along the Bethnal Green Road. Brisk business pleased the traders, but many customers wanted to know when the violets and daffodils would arrive. The traders shook their heads and referred them to the home secretary, Herbert S. Morrison, the only person in England who could lift the ban on flower transport by rail. Until he did so, most of the spring flowers would remain hostage in Wales.

Nevertheless, the *Times* and the *Daily Herald* had run their usual chipper beginning-of-the-month stories that morning, various bright predictions and tallies: pastels popular for spring (dusty pink and leaf green), seventy-eight hours of sunshine last month, and 252 Londoners killed or missing in enemy raids. This monthly total was lower than usual, and yet the numbers had become nearly meaningless, everyone simply marking them as more or less in order to endure the truth.

"Boys," Constable Henderson began severely. The boys froze. Henderson reached down and took the lit torch. He switched it off, then stood, feet apart, slapping the end of it in his palm.

The stance seemed ominous, but if the boys had observed more closely, they might have noticed the sag in Henderson's

shoulders, the extra weight around his middle, the puffiness under his eyes, and they would have realized they had little to fear. Henderson was tired, not yet ready for his evening patrol, and feeling grim about the night's probable direction. According to protocol he was due at the shelter entrance as soon as possible after the alert, but he felt he should give the boys a lecture and was summoning the strength. Many evacuated children had recently returned to the area, yet most of the schools were closed. Reports of petty crime were on the rise; a looting gang was working in the area. And then there were the refugees, groups of quiet people who seemed to wait for something no one could give them. What had started slowly before the war—a few children here, a family there—had accelerated. Now places where his friends had once congregated or shopped were often full of strangers. Everyone said they needed time, they'd suffered horribly. Thus it had become customary to help the refugees while expecting them to change soon, an unsatisfactory arrangement for all. It made Henderson rub his forehead. Someone needed to start cracking down, he thought, and so he delayed his arrival at the shelter to speak to the boys.

Bertram, the young clerk, followed the quick licks of green in front of him, wondering if Clare would like a pair of shoes like that. He had just bought her a new sketchbook, but as he was always giving her those, it didn't feel like a proper present. She'd been drawing when they met, in the Museum Gardens at the beginning of the war. Her posture and steady concentration had made him think she must be very talented. He walked behind her to see the scene from her perspective, and that was when he discovered two things: she drew poorly, and the main object of her attention was not a tree, as he'd assumed, but a dead woman caught upside down in its branches. Blown there by one of the bombs the night before. Torn by shrapnel.

The sound that escaped him stopped her hand, and Clare looked up. Then they both turned back to the dead woman. Part of the scalp was dangling off, but her long blond hair glowed in the sun.

"Why are you drawing?" Bertram managed.

She told him that since the bombing had started, people had spent a lot of time saying, "It's unimaginable," but she thought they meant, "I hadn't imagined it before this."

Her blue eyes steady and dry, she said, "I will. I'll draw and remember and I won't be surprised again."

He nodded and sat down beside her until she finished.

Now Bertram turned left with everyone else towards the corner and the Bethnal Green Road. He smiled when he saw the petals and loose feathers the evening rain had pinned in the gutters and was happy for the company of the crowd. In spite of the siren, no one seemed rushed or worried.