1941

THE DILEMMA

Last night had been a bad one. The air raid sirens had gone off twice. The first time was about eight o'clock, when the wardens had sent nine people down into the passageway outside Rona’s flat for cover. The second wave of bombers came over about ten o'clock, and, since most people were off the streets by then, only five people were herded down into Rona’s passageway by the wardens.

Just as she had done in the past, Rona opened the door of her basement apartment for each group."Come on in and keep warm," she said. Some of the people in the dark passageway murmured their thanks, but hung back, while the others jumped at her offer, and by the time the all-clear was sounded they were all in her kitchen.

"It's a bit crowded, but it's warmer than the passageway. I wish I could give you a cup of tea, but you know how it is with the rationing," she said as the men and women filled the room. Since there was only enough coal rations to heat the kitchen, Rona slept in the bed recess, and her three children slept together on the pull-out couch.

Since they had sounded the air-raid sirens several times in the past few weeks, Rona had gotten in the habit of bundling the children into their one-piece siren suits before they went to sleep, so that they would be warm in case they had to get out of the apartment in a hurry. Last night four-year-old Rona Anne and three-year-old Arlene had wakened up when the first group of people came in off the street, but eventually they got bored with adult conversation and went back to sleep.

They had heard the anti-aircraft guns last night, but they hadn't felt any bomb blasts. "Probably another raid on Clydebank," speculated one of the men. "I saw in the paper more than 600 people were killed in Clydebank in those two raids back in March."

"Aye, Gerry didnae wipe oot the shipyards," said another man with a heavy brogue. “But they got a lot o’ hooses. I heard there's only seven buildin’s left in the whole toon." In 1941 the German planes came across the North Sea to Scotland and flew over Edinburgh as they headed for the shipyards and factories in Glasgow and Clydebank. Any bombs left in their bays were dropped on Edinburgh to lighten their loads and save fuel as they headed back across the North Sea.

It was after midnight before the all-clear sounded and the last people left her kitchen. Rona was groggy the next morning when she heard a loud knock on her door. “Rona, wake up!! Wake up!!" It was Mrs. Pierri, her elderly neighbor from across the hall calling through the letterbox.

Rona pulled on a dressing gown over her nightgown and stumbled to the door. "What is it?"

Mrs. Pierri was still in her nightgown. "I just heard on the wireless three o’ they big landmines fell doon in Leith. They think Gerry meant them fer the docks but they missed. A dinnae ken exactly where they landed, but two o’ them didnae explode yet an‘ they’re near the hospital."

"Oh, my god, have they moved the children?" Rona's eighteen month old son, John, had been taken into the hospital the week before because of an infection on his mastoid bone. She had managed to get friends to watch the girls a couple of times so she could visit her wee boy, and he was recovering from the surgery, but he still couldn't come home. She would have visited him every day, but she felt she couldn’t impose on her friends too many times, and the hospital didn’t allow children to visit.

"Mrs. Pierri can you watch the wee ones so I can go down there? I'll bring John home if I can." As her neighbor nodded and headed back to her apartment, Rona ran back into the kitchen, pulling off her robe and nightie as she went. The fire needed to be stoked, but she didn't have time. She pulled on the clothes she had worn the day before, dressed Rona Anne and Arlene, took them down the hall to the toilet, then hurried them into her neighbor’s apartment.

"Thanks, Mrs. Pierri, I'll be back as soon as I can." Bending down and kissing the girls, she cautioned them, “Be good and don’t give Mrs. Pierri any trouble.” She then ran up the stairs to the street and headed in the direction of the hospital.

She had only gone about a quarter mile down Leith Walk when she saw that the police had blocked the road. All the tram cars were being detoured down Pilrig, and the horse drawn wagons were being detoured in various directions. She ran up to a policeman. "I have to get to the Children's Hospital. My wee boy is there."

"Sorry Miss, we've evacuated this whole area. Naebody kin go doon there. There's a couple o’ unexploded land mines that have tae be defused."

"I know about the mines. What about the children in the hospital? What about my baby?" she cried, tears running down her cheeks.

"The bairns have all been moved tae the shelter, they'll be alright. The nurses will move them back into the hospital as soon as army ordinance takes care o’ the landmines." He patted her shoulder and looked genuinely concerned. “Why don't ye go home, Missus, there isn't anythin’ ye kin dae here."

The policeman was right. She couldn't do any good here. She might as well go home. Rona turned and walked back towards Annandale Street. As the policemen and air raid wardens herded groups of people further up Leith Walk away from the danger zone she heard snippets of conversation.

"It's some o’ yon big ones…”

"Some of them blow up when they try to defuse them…"

"Gerry drops them doon by parachute now…"

Rona had seen pictures of landmines in the paper last week. Some were about eight feet long and as big around as a whiskey barrel. She could only imagine what it would do if it blew up.

By the time she got home, she had dried her tears and was able to put on a cheerful face for the girls. "Mrs. Pierri, will you let me know if you hear anything else on the wireless about the mines?" She wished she had a wireless so she knew what was going on. But her neighbor told her any important news she heard on the BBC, and Mrs. Pierri also let her read the newspaper when she and her husband were finished with it, so long as she gave it back so the Pierris could use it if they needed to re-start their fire or make toilet paper.

Rona took Rona Anne and Arlene next door, put the kettle on for a cup of tea, and made some toast for lunch. Then she sat down with her ration books and tried to figure out what she could afford to buy with the little money she had left from her husband’s army pay. Johnny had been called up in October, the day of baby John's first birthday. That was six months ago, but It had taken several weeks for the army to send her the allotment. She had borrowed money from her cousin, Betty Watson, to tide her over, and now she was paying a little bit back from every week's pay. When she saw how little money she was to get, she had been shocked. *How am I supposed to feed four of us on this, and what about money for coal and the rent?* Johnny had told her in his last letter that she would be getting a little more money now that he had passed the six-month mark, but he didn't know how much more.

For a short time before the war, they had rented out their front room to their best friends, Betty and Jimmy Balloch, when they were first married, then to Ronnie Keene, one of Johnny’s friends. Rona smiled now remembering Ronnie playing his guitar and singing “Sweet Leilani” while she was in labor with Arlene. It had soothed her so much she had even considered naming her daughter Leilani. But, like most single men, Ronnie had been drafted shortly after the war started and they had lost touch. Now it was time for her to rent out the front room again. She didn’t need that space, and lots of people were being moved around the country because of the war and needed somewhere to stay. And she could certainly use the extra money.

After lunch the girls climbed onto her bed to play with their dolls. As was her usual afternoon routine, Rona sat down and played the piano. Eventually Rona Anne and Arlene fell asleep, and she was able to play for a couple of hours without interruption. She generally kept nap-time music soft and gentle, and today Chopin was her choice, not only to soothe the girls, but to soothe herself. She didn't know what she would do without her music. Today she needed it more than ever. Mrs. Pierri hadn't come to give her any further news from the wireless about the land mines. She really wanted to try again to get to the hospital again, but she couldn't ask her elderly neighbor to watch the girls twice in one day, besides she didn’t know whether the area was cleared yet.

When the children woke up, she reluctantly rose from the piano; closed the wooden black-out shutters; lit the single gas mantle over the fireplace and set the table. When she had gone to the grocery store yesterday, Mr. Crearer had greeted her with a big smile. He had eggs. One for each member of the family. It was the first time in over a month that she had used her egg coupons. She had carefully carried the 4 eggs home in her mesh grocery bag, terrified she would bump into someone or something and crack one. She was going to cook three of them tonight. She had one for baby John, but she would save that one and maybe they would all have pancakes when he came home from the hospital. She had saved some Lyles Golden Syrup to put on the pancakes and he would love that too.

As Rona started to prepare the meal, Rona Anne looked up from where she and Arlene were playing with blocks in front of the fire. "That smells good, Mummy. I’m hungry. What are we having for tea?”

Rona smiled. "It's a surprise." It did smell good. She had saved the grease from the last time she had cooked bacon, and she was going to cook the eggs in it, and make fried bread too. She told the girls to put their blocks away, and go sit at the table. She fried three slices of bread and put them aside on a warm plate, then cracked the eggs into the hot bacon fat. She splashed the three yolks with the hot fat until they turned pink, and lifted the iron frying pan off the hot gas ring.

The concussion when one of the land mines exploded, blew open the wooden shutters and knocked her on her back while she was still holding the frying pan. The girls were screaming and the eggs and bacon grease were splattered all over the threadbare carpet that covered the stone floor. As she tried to calm Rona Anne and Arlene, someone was banging on the door. She carried Arlene while Rona Anne held onto her skirt as she went to answer the knock.

It was Mrs. Pierri. "Are you and the bairns alright? That mine must hae been one o’ thae big ones. I’m glad a wis sittin doon when it happened. I hope naebody got kilt doon there." She followed Rona back into the kitchen. "Oh my! Is that eggs all mashed up on yer carpet? What a shame! We didnae hae oors yet. We'll hae them the ‘morrow."

When Mrs. Pierri left Rona closed the blackout shutters then tried to clean up the mess while she was still carrying Arlene and Rona Anne was clinging to her leg. The children had stopped crying, but they still wanted to be close to their mother. She gave up on tidying the room and sat down by the fire pulling the two little girls into her lap. *I don't know what to do. How can I take care of these two and still find out what's happened to my wee boy?*

The next day when Mrs. Pierri’s daughter, Menta, heard on the wireless about the blast, she came to see if her mother and father and older brother were alright. When she heard about Rona’s wee boy she offered to watch the girls so that Rona could go to the hospital.

As she got close, Rona saw that the buildings near the hospital had sustained little damage, but the news on the street was that there had been some loss of life on a nearby street, the buildings around the blast site were now uninhabitable, and the roof had been blown off the Leith Town Hall.

In the hospital everything seemed to be back to normal. “I’m Rona Murray. I’ve come to take my wee boy home,” Rona told the head Sister at the nurses’ station.

“He only had the surgery this morning,” said the nurse looking at a clipboard. “You can see him for a few minutes, but you can’t take him home for two days.”

“No, there must be some mistake. I’m talking about John Murray. He had mastoid surgery last week.”

“Yes, I know that,” snapped the nurse. “But the doctor decided to do some additional surgery this morning, so he can’t go home yet. He’s down that corridor in Ward Two.”

“What are you talking about?” asked a bewildered Rona “What additional surgery?”

“Circumcision,” said the officious nurse, returning her attention to her paperwork.