

3 ROSIE

by Robert Westall

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🔊 Rosie cut down Lime Street, walking fast. Not easy in the blackout. But there was a moon tonight, flirting with the clouds. A bomber's moon.

Rosie was an ARP warden; air-raid patrol, a full-timer and proud of it. She liked being one of the few women wardens, even if she'd had to lie about her age to get in. She was only eighteen, but big with it.

She liked the comradeship of the Warden's Post. She liked all the new people she met.

Before the War she'd been a mother's help. A comfy life, but not a lot of thrills. Changing nappies; wheeling prams round Seffie Park. She'd loved the babies and they had loved her, but it hadn't been getting her anywhere.

Now she was meeting new people from morning 'til night. And she usually called in at some dance, after she came off duty. Strange, dancing in her warden's uniform; but there were plenty of girls in uniform now, Wrens and Waafs.

She met such interesting fellers. Tonight's bloke had lived in Australia and caught crocodiles with his bare hands to sell to zoos. Last week she'd met a cheerful undertaker, serving with the Irish Guards. The way he'd eyed her, she hadn't been sure he wasn't measuring her up for a coffin!

She liked a good time; but she wasn't a good-time girl. She always went home before eleven. Alone. That way, fellers didn't get the wrong idea.

Liverpool was safe enough. Nothing worse than some amorous drunk you had to hold up while he was talking to you. Easy enough to get away from them; they usually fell over when you let go of them.

The worst thing that could happen was you might fall into one of those great gaping pigswill bins in the dark, stinking of potato peelings and boiled-out fish-heads.

It was lonely, out on the streets. Her sharp footsteps echoed off the tall buildings, but her gas mask case and tin hat banged against her bottom reassuringly.

And the pubs might be dark, but they were full to bursting behind their blackout curtains; roared-out choruses of *We'll Meet Again* and *Roll Out The Barrel* cheered her on her way.



Mind you, the war was terrible for some people; like those poor people down that shelter in Mellor Street. The bomb had burst outside the door and killed them all with the blast. With hardly a mark on them, even the little kids.

But Mellor Street wasn't in Rosie's district and you only worried about your own district now. Rosie's district had had a few bombs, a few people buried under the rubble. But she'd helped to dig them out with her bare hands, working shoulder to shoulder with the fellers; and held their hands till the ambulance came. She'd cheered them up and that made her feel good.

Rosie hurried on. The pubs were further apart now and even the alleys were silent. Just the odd moggie, poor things, scavenging at the pigswill bins.

She was just bending down to stroke one when the siren went. For the third time that day. Rosie got the usual sinking feeling in her gut, but she wasn't all that worried. Air-raid sirens couldn't kill you. She listened intently, through the dying drone of the siren, for the sound of bombers' engines ...

And heard nothing.

She'd carry on for a bit, try and get home before anything happened. Her ma would worry if she was caught out in a raid. Ma might even leave the shelter and come looking for her, as far as the chippie in Scobie Street. Then batter Rosie over the ear when she found her, for causing so much worry.

"G'night, moggie. Best of British luck!"

Her footsteps quickened; the gas mask banged harder against her bottom, as if urging her on.

She'd gone nearly half a mile before she heard



the bombers coming. She was in a district she hardly knew. Really poor people, to judge from the state of their doors and windows. But you couldn't be choosy when the bombers came. You just ran for the nearest brick street-shelter with its concrete-slab roof.

Not many shelters round here. Poor people were always the worst looked after. Bet the toffs had shelters, and to spare, up Croxteth way.

She ran and ran. Turned a corner by a chapel with bombed-out windows. Saw the three brass balls of a pawnbroker's ... Then a great square shelter loomed up.

She made the doorway, just as the first guns opened up overhead, turning the night white-black, white-black. Making a noise like some daft kid banging a tin tray right in your ear that echoed across the whole sky after.

Then she heard the shrapnel shrieking down like dead rockets on Bonfire Night. And ducked through the blackout curtain into the shelter.

There was room by the door, on the benches. She flung herself into it, to get her breath back. She must cut down on the ciggies; except it was hard to refuse when the men wardens offered them, friendly-like.

Still panting, she looked around. And sighed. It seemed a totally miserable sort of shelter.

People huddled together in a dim, blue light. Silent, except for the racking cough and the dismal wail of a baby at the far end.

Some shelters were really jolly. Fellers brought a fiddle or a squeeze-box, and you could have a good sing-song to drown the noise of the bombs. In some of the bigger ones there was dancing – a good knees-up as those Cockneys called it. In some there was even a drop to drink, or people passing round home-made toffee and biscuits.

Some even had buskers, doing their spoon-bashing or playing on a musical saw. Or telling rude jokes that made the mums scream with laughter, and then tell their kids to put their hands over their ears so they couldn't hear.

But this was a bunch of real miserable sods. Looked really sorry for themselves. Nothing but cough, cough, wheeze and snore.

Might as well be dead, Rosie thought. Where there's life there's hope ...



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She caught the eye of an old feller opposite. She said, just to say something, "Big raid tonight. Hope they don't hit the off-licence!"

The old man nodded, friendly enough; but he didn't say anything. Then he pursed his lips and shook his head, as if he was afraid she might wake the kid he was nursing on his lap.

God, even the kids were spiritless. In the shelter at home they were always yelling for a condensed-milk buttie, or punching each other and chasing round the whole shelter, and getting their ears battered all the way round. What was the matter with this lot? Had they left their sense of humour at the pawnbroker's up the road?

So she told the only really dirty joke she knew. If that didn't get them laughing, it would take a thousand-pound bomb to shift them ...

Again, the old man raised a finger to his lips.

Rotten old killjoy. Like the deacons in chapel when she was a kid. Children should be seen and not heard. No giggling in the House of God.

Cripes, she thought, this isn't a chapel, it's only a shelter. There must be *somebody* lively, further down ...

She turned her head and shouted, "Are we downhearted?"

In her home shelter, the yell of "No!" would have raised the concrete roof two feet in the air, and made the Liver Birds rock on their perches.

Here, nothing. Silence.

Cough, cough. Wheeze. Snore. They might as well be dead.

Chin up, she thought. Grin and bear it. Never say die.

But she didn't actually say any of those things. A chill was working into her, even through her thick warden's greatcoat. She shivered. And shivered again.

This shelter's damp, she thought. They've all caught bronchitis. She studied them intently in the dim blue light. They did look sort of ill; wrinkled, poverty-battered faces, mouths hanging open to show ill-fitting false teeth.

Unemployment, she thought, scrimping and saving and spreading marge on bread then scraping it off again. Years and years when hardly anybody's boat ever came in. Poor Liverpool! Let the poor souls rest in peace ...

She shivered again. Shut up, Rosie, they haven't all been as lucky as you. The babies you looked after might have been boring, but at least you got four square meals a day, and a hottie in a nice clean bed at night. Count your blessings. Don't despise those who are worse off ...

And then it began to bother her.

Where was that blue light coming from?

Normally the light in a shelter was yellow. Candles burning. Kids showing off their torches, flicking them round the ceiling. Or the hurricane lamps that the ARP laid on.

But the light was always *yellow*.

You only got blue lights in hospitals and factories, where they had mains electricity.

And there was no electricity in shelters. It was forbidden by law, in case the shelter was hit by a bomb and the broken electric cable-ends fried everyone to death.

So where *was* the blue light coming from?

Rosie stared around her.

It seemed to be coming from the people themselves. From their clothes, hands, faces ... all over them.

"Where's the blue light coming from?" she shouted at the old man, a sudden cold fear gripping her heart.

With a ghastly little smile he raised his cap to her. Under his cap, his domed bald head was broken. Cracked open like an egg. Stuff oozing out.

She was up and out and running before she knew her legs had moved. Running through streets as bright as day with searchlights, shells and bombs exploding. But still she ran. She would have run into the mouth of Hell itself to get away from that shelter ...

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It was the singing that stopped her in the end.

"The White Cliffs of Dover ..."

Another shelter. An accordion playing. People bellowing their lungs out.

She staggered inside. Every face turned to look at her. Interested grinning faces.

"Ey, whacker," said the warden by the door. "Catch your breath. You look like you've seen a ghost."

When Rosie finally caught her breath, in the *yellow* candle-light, the hot breath from the singing, the little kids tripping over her legs, she asked the warden, "Do you know a street near here, wi' a bombed-out chapel and a pawnbrokers?"

He flinched, as if at some quite unbearably horrible memory.

"You mean Mellor ... Street?" he asked.

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- What do you think is meant by "a bomber's moon"?
- What do you think Rosie meant by "That way, fellers didn't get the wrong idea"?
- What is meant by "the guns turned the night white-black, white-black"?
- How would you have reacted if you were in Rosie's shoes in Mellor Street?

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