**A Docks Life**

The factory siren began its ascending morning moan, seven on the dot, like a cockney call to prayer, a cue for the East End to wipe the sleep from its eyes, roll its shirtsleeves up and get on with it. Alongside the wail of the siren, the familiar sound of the docks and the bustle of the streets began to stutter into life; Men’s steel toecaps clanking on the pavement, women vigorously scrubbing doorsteps with wire brushes, milk bottles clinking and babies crying heralded the dawn chorus.

All the while, a thick fog lay its grey counterpane across the still sleeping river, creating a backdrop of eternal calm.

Peg Bridges, headscarf tightly coiled around her curlers and a cigarette dangling from her lips braced herself for the early morning chill on the hard scullery floor. She wrapped her pinnie tighter, trying desperately to warm herself in front of the copper singing kettle. She had overslept again and the copper kettle, seeming to sense her distress, resolutely refused to boil. A watched pot, Peg thought to herself, one of her mother’s sayings, never truer than on these ice cold mornings when she was quite clearly ‘up against it’

‘Alright, alright keep yer hair on I’m coming, Peg bellowed at the factory wail

‘That you Peg? Called May Bridges,

‘Who else would it be Rulolph Valentino?’ quipped Peg

‘I can see to meself this morning if you’re running late.

Peg knew she couldn’t leave her mother to struggle out of bed and battle her way downstairs. They were family and family stuck together. She would just have to be late again. Maybe one of the girls would clock her in. Peg shuddered at the thought of what might happen if they were caught fiddling the clocks, but she couldn’t risk getting docked again. Especially as the country still hadn’t got back on its feet after the war and money was tight.

The kettle finally condescended to boil and knowing it had won let out a triumphant whistle. Peg poured the boiling water into a bowl, grabbed a flannel from the side of the sink and started to make her way up the dark narrow staircase. She noticed as she did every morning, the pink patterned wallpaper peeling off from the damp walls and more black splodges starting to appear. Was it worse than it had been last week? A fortnight ago? How long could they hold out before it really became a real eyesore? Perhaps she was being too house-proud; she’d been called that before, snobbish even by some of the other women living on the Albert Road.

‘Thinks her doings don’t stink’ she had heard one of them say.

Peg tried to shelve her stress at the thought of the mould and what others might think of her by concentrating on the water in the bowl, sloshing rhythmically from side to side as she made her way up to the room with the door ajar. The room, large and square had a double iron bedstead stuck in the corner from which May Bridges’ grey, thinning hair could be seen sticking out from the top of the eiderdown like a baby duckling.

‘Come on then Sleeping Beauty rise and shine’ chirped Peg

‘Ooh I must’ve dozed off again, I am sorry Peg I know you need to get to work. You could do without this old girl, I’m neither use nor ornament’

‘Yeah but you’re my old girl, so let’s be having yer’

As May tried to use her thin, mottled arms to lever herself up, Peg moved an array of pill bottles and a glass of stale water to make room for the bowl of water. She then bolstered the pillows as her mother finally made her way up to the top, panting yet triumphant as if she had just conquered Everest.

‘Right it’s just a lick and a promise this morning’

Peg submerged the flannel in the water, and wrung it out, her deftness and self-assurance, revealing a practised art. Opening the bedside table cabinet she found a cracked bar of carbolic in a soap dish, caked in soap-sud residue. She worked hard to get the soap to lather and then passed it unceremoniously over the flannel.

Peg handed the flannel to May who rubbed it slowly and purposefully over her face, leaving her skin pink and shiny and handed it back to her daughter. Peg began to feel the panic and stress rising as the factory siren let out its final call. Hurriedly she rinsed the flannel, re-soaped it and handed it to her mother. Peg was conscious that she didn’t want her mother to see her stress and suddenly realised her foot was tapping.

As if on cue, May offered ‘Go On I can get meself up in me own time’

‘And risk finding you at the bottom of the stairs when I get home, not likely’

Trying to keep her patience in check, Peg pulled back the covers, revealing the rest of her mother’s frail body, draped in a white, gauzy nightdress. Seeing her mother’s frailty always brought a lump to her throat, which Peg quickly stifled with a whistle.

‘A whistling woman, a cackling hen’ intoned May

‘Is neither good for horse nor men’ chimed Peg

Another of her mother’s sayings. Where they all came from, she’d never know. Trying to be quick yet careful at the same time, Peg swiped her mother’s legs out at 90 degrees and onto the floor. And imagining herself the matron of a hospital ward, cupped her forearm under May’s armpit and brought her to a sitting position at the edge of the bed.

‘Go on, go on look at the time, I can do it, honest’ May pleaded

Realising she had very little time and even fewer options, Peg gave in.

‘Well promise me you’ll hold on the stair rail’ and ‘handing her mother the metal walking frame which sat like a discarded plaything, added ‘and make sure you use this to get to the top of the stairs’.

With that Peg hurried out of the room without looking back, flew down the stairs at break-neck speed. A gust of wind slammed the door shut behind her as she click-clacked along the pavement to the familiar sounds of the East End streets.

As Peg turned the corner she noticed three of the Briggs children, playing marbles, thin as sticks. Their father had never come back from the war, presumed dead and Peg had heard women round in North Woolwich telling their children not to play with them because they had nits. But Peg could never see the harm, unless of course heartbreak was catching.

Suddenly Josie Briggs appeared at her front gate. Josie Briggs was as fat as her children were thin, and as if being privy to Peg’s thoughts, Josie thundered,

‘Don’t think I can’t see you, miss high and mighty looking down on us’

‘Sorry’’ peg stuttered I wasn’t, I mean’

‘I seen the way you looked at my kids just then, like they was dirt on the bottom of your shoe. You’ve always thought you was too good for round here. Sally, Johnny get inside before this one here starts talking about us.

‘Really. I wasn’t, I’

But before Peg could get out another word out, Josie had corralled her waifs inside and loudly slammed the door.

Peg’s cheeks burned with outrage and indignation and she fought back the tears that she could feel gathering momentum behind her eyes. She thought about knocking on Josie Brigg’s door to try to explain. But realised at once that she couldn’t face the humiliation a second time.

And it was in that instant Peg realised that she couldn’t face the factory either, the loud clanking machinery, the bawdiness and banter of the girls which she tried so hard to join in with.

Suddenly, like Cinderella’s carriage, a number 69 trolley bus turned the corner of Pier Road. Peg, desperately wanting to run away from the shame she felt at Josie Briggs’ unkind words, the endless repetition of the daily grind and the worry and sadness she felt for her poor old mother, jumped on it.

The trolley bus trundled with its stowaway down Silvertown Way, past the smoking factories, Keiller’s , Knights’, Tates and Venestas - the grey mile. Peg got off at Rathbone Market without a clue how she had ended up there; her cheeks still smarting and her ears still ringing from Josie Briggs false accusations.

Then she saw it, standing tall like a kind old gentleman. The library.

Peg opened the tall stately door with its long brass handle and walked inside; the beautiful mosaic floor and the wooden staircase, like something out of a Hollywood movie took her breath away. Peg felt instantly calmer. She walked gingerly up to the impressive wooden desk, behind which sat the librarian. A balding man with tortoise shell rimmed glasses and kind eyes.

‘Can I help you miss?’

‘Could I just come in and read for a bit? Peg ventured

Like a magician , the librarian pressed a hidden lever and the gate swung open.

‘Step inside Miss’ he lulled

Peg walked into the reading room, shelves of books on mahogany shelves from floor to ceiling. She ran her fingers along the rows of order, calm and reassurance and then sat down alone in a corner.

The relief of this space, allowed the tears to fall. And Peg didn’t try to stop them.

Peg knew she would have to go back and face the world but for this moment, in this hallowed place she could feel all the stress and anxiety leave her body. And she knew that when she did go back to face it things would be better, because she had found her escape.