READING PASSAGE

Cecily is a 12 year old girl living in London during the Second World War. She is at home, hiding.

She heard it: footsteps in the dark.

Cecily Lockwood, aged recently twelve, cowered in the darkness beneath her bed and listened to the steps coming closer. The curtains of her bedroom were drawn and only a ribbon of light nosed past the door, and sense told Cecily that she must be nearly invisible in the blackness: but she did not feel invisible. Her teeth bit her lip. Her heart bounced like a trout.

The footsteps had climbed the stairs. Cecily had heard the creak of each tread. The steps had come stealthily along the hall, pausing in each doorway. There'd been a silence when the steps reached her brother's room; Cecily had pictured Jeremy folded under his bed, his heart flipping and diving. But no: Jeremy was too smart to hide under a bed. Jeremy would hide somewhere that could keep him secret all night. Only Cecily was silly enough to hide under a bed.

Now the footsteps had resumed. The rugs muffled them, but still they could be heard. Closer, closer – then a sudden bump, an *oof*. The steps had walked into the hall table. Cecily couldn't help but smile.

But the hall table stood just outside her bedroom, and it was abruptly too late to change her hiding-place for a better one. The door eased back on its hinges, letting in a shaft of soft light. Cecily held her breath, peeked past the bedspread's hem. The maker of the footsteps was carrying a candle, a quavering circle of orange light. It radiated its glow on to the face of a man wearing a mask – a gas mask. The silvery goggles reflected the flame as a pair of burning pupils. The canister below them heaved like a horrible snout. At the sight of this monster, Cecily almost screamed. Almost.

Holding the candle to one side, the man felt amid the curtains. From beneath the bed Cecily watched, her heart denting the floor. When he didn't find her in the drapery, the man turned and pondered the darkness again.

Three strides took him to the wardrobe. He threw back its door with a conjuror's flourish. Cecily nearly shrieked. She wasn't in the wardrobe, but she felt as if she was. He had no voice, but Cecily heard him say, *Come out!*

She could not bite back the tension any longer: she squeaked. Instantly the intruder dropped to the floor, flinging aside the quilt. The treacherous candle sent its rays on to the girl's aghast face.

Cecily yelled. "Murder! Kidnap! Help!" She struggled, grabbing at the bedsprings, but the hand dragged her from beneath the bed. She plunged into the man's arms. "Kidnap, police, help!" she bellowed.

The man pulled off his mask. In the charcoal darkness Cecily saw his glittering eyes. "Found you!" he cried. "Now you're doomed, little girl! Any last requests?" And he wrapped his arms around her, and cuddled her like a lion.

"You're supposed to kidnap me, Daddy, play properly!" Nonetheless, she ceased writhing and hugged him extravagantly.

In the flurry of her unearthing a gap had opened between the curtains, and her father went to close them. He lingered a moment at the glass, staring down into the street. Cecily looked too. All the windows of the houses were taped and blackened. No lamp illuminated the footpath, no cars travelled the road. Every street in London was subdued, lit only by candles and the kindness of the moon. Cecily knew the banning of bright light was a good thing, intended to keep the city safe…but it frightened her. What the blackout *meant* frightened her. Her entire world was hiding in darkness, but not because it was playing a child's game.

Her father closed the curtains fastidiously. He looked down at his daughter. "Come downstairs, Cecily," he said. "There's something I want to tell you."

Jeremy was standing victoriously at the top of the stairs.

"Where were you hiding?" Cecily asked, but her brother would not give away such holy secrets and his only answer was to raise a haughty chin.

"Daddy's going to tell us something," she bragged. "What were you going to tell us, Daddy?"

"Children," he said, "you know why London is blacked out, don't you?"

It was a question insulting in its simplicity, and Jeremy narrowed his eyes. "In case of an air raid," Cecily obliged.

The war has come very close to us now," said her father.

"Daddy," she said, "will we die?"

"No, Cecily, you are not going to die. You're going to be evacuated."

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