



What's the Story?

In 1940 two young women join the many who leave their native Ireland to nurse in south London. How will they adapt amongst the bombs and rationing as they nurse TB patients in their Lewisham hospital? This dramatisation was written as a tribute to Staff Nurse Mary Fleming and Senior Assistant Nurse Aileen Turner, two Irish nurses who were awarded the George Medal in 1941.

By Maureen Alcorn

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Cast

Bert Woodhouse - Journalist

Aileen McBride - Nurse

Mary Murphy - Nurse

Martin Barrow - Patient at the hospital

Medical Officer

Doctor

Policeman

The copyright is retained by the author. The piece may not be performed fully or in part without her written permission. Those wishing to perform the play should contact Green Curtain Theatre at anne@greencurtaintheatre.co.uk.

Anyone receiving permission to produce '**What's the Story?**' is required to give credit to the name of the Maureen Alcorn as the sole and exclusive author of the play on the title page of all programmes distributed in connection with the performance of the play and, in all instances in which the title of the play appears for purposes of advertising, publicising, or otherwise exploiting the play and/ or a production there of. This includes any performances of part or the whole play in a digital or electronic medium.

Green Curtain Theatre 2022

WWW.GREENCURTAINTHEATRE.CO.UK

SCENE 1

(Aileen, wearing her nurse's uniform, is striding quickly across the stage, glances at her watch then rests against a low wall. Her movements are quick. Decisive. She checks watch again then removes packet of cigarettes from her bag. She quickly lights one with a match then blows out a long smoke filled sigh. Bert approaches, stage right. Aileen looks at him disinterestedly then looks away, taking another drag on her cigarette. Bert moves next to her, miming that he wants a cigarette too).

Bert Spare one, can't you, for a desperate, handsome young man like me self? *(Aileen ignores him)* You'll suck the paper off of that one if you're not careful... *(Aileen hands Bert a cigarette then lights it for him without speaking)*

Bert Cat got your tongue?

Aileen ?

Bert So, you're a nurse then?

Aileen Who's asking?

Bert If you're not a nurse then what are you doing dressed up like that?

Aileen I'm a film star, going to play the part of Florence Nightingale. Getting a bit of practice in before I go to America.

Bert You off to Hollywood? Blimey

Aileen I'm a nurse, you daft eejit. You didn't really think? Over there, at Grove Park

Bert Ain't you worried you'll get TB yourself?

Aileen I'm a very careful girl.

Bert Are you indeed?

Aileen You know what I mean

Bert What's your name, darlin'? I can tell you're a long way from home.

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Aileen Don't you be darling me. I know your sort.

Bert What sort is that then?

Aileen The sort me mammy told me about

Bert Bet you if you really got to know me I'd be your sort, all right? *(Takes a bow)* Milady?

Aileen Me name's Aileen and I'm from Dublin. Satisfied?

Bert I won't be satisfied till you've promised me your heart, soul and anything else you've got to spare...

Aileen Didn't you hear me say, that me mam warned me about fellas like you?

Bert Fellas like me?

Aileen The English in wartime. Everything in a hurry. "Don't be doing anything in haste Aileen, lest you regret it at your leisure."

Bert I only tapped you for a cigarette

Aileen And 'I only' don't even know your name.

Bert Give us another cigarette and I'll tell you...

Aileen You'd better hurry up then- I've to be back in the ward in ten minutes.

Bert It's Lionel Fortesque-Smythe!

Aileen It is not!

Bert You're right! Meet Bert - Bert Woodhouse. Pleased to meet you Aileen.

Aileen You too.

Bert So what you doing for the rest of your life?

Aileen Top secret

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Bert You're not going to tell me?

Aileen Dead right

Bert Already spoken for

Aileen Might be

Bert You're after a fella in uniform?

Aileen I might already have a fella in uniform

Bert All the other girls are

Aileen All the other English girls

Bert Ah so I might be in with a chance?

Aileen That would be telling. But no I don't think so.

Bert It's this isn't it?

Aileen Jesus forgive me. I didn't know/, I wouldn't have said even if I had. I'm terrible sorry. Poliomyelitis is it? That's a dreadful thing altogether

Bert Six years old I was when I thought swimming in a pond would be a great lark.One of little choices that turn out so big - turn one way, you end up waist deep in shit.Turn the other and you're lining up on a beach in Dunkirk - starving, blasted by stukkas and waiting for some little boat to take you back to Blighty. So, not much different really...

Aileen Terrible hard

Bert (*Thumps the side of his iron leg*). Think it'll set a trend? What every London gent is wearing this season?

Aileen Try painting it red, white and blue - you could be on to a winner -

Bert I'll tell the War Office. You might get an award

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Aileen ?

Bert You've found a use for patriotic cripples. They can't think of what else to do with us

Aileen That's not what I/

Bert Worst thing? My parents terrified my younger brother Ian might get it too. Separated us in every way they could.

Aileen And did/

Bert Little bugger was all right - running around was never any problem for him - happy as Larry, smile as wide as a bicycle wheel - till -

Aileen ?

Bert Telegram arrived - be a year next week

Aileen *(Puts her hand over her mouth anticipating horror)*

Bert Beautiful day it was. Loud bang on the door. Telegraph boy held it out in his hand ...

Aileen Your poor mammy

Bert Can't get rid of the sound of her crying. And dad's expression - sad, of course, but also a bit proud -

Aileen That his son was dead?

Bert Fought in the Great War - used to talk about it sometimes - mud up to his knees in the trenches. Proud to have done his bit - one in the eye for old Fritz

Aileen My uncle died in France 1916. Me auntie never recovered

Bert Remember him staring at me, at my leg, over mum's shoulder, Like he was proud to have had at least one son who died for England.

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Aileen God love you

Bert You're too easy to talk to. Sorry,

Aileen ?

Bert Didn't mean to depress you just before you start work! And in a TB hospital too. You must have seen your share of -

Aileen Well I won't be seeing much more of it unless I get back. Here take one. Nice to meet you and good luck

Bert Can I see you again?

Aileen Good luck and take care

Bert Will you be out her tomorrow? (**Aileen ignores him and walks off**) I told you my story- what's yours?

My story. What's a cripple like me got to tell? Bert the cripple. I even tried to volunteer - what a fucking farce that was. Thought there was something I could do - no chance.

All the men in line for the medic stared at my leg, wondering what the hell someone like me was doing volunteering. Some sniggered behind their hands - not even the balls to look me in the eye. Arse holes. This doesn't make me any less of a man.

Pity was what I saw in the face of the medic, raw pity. Went through all the motions though, give him that. Listened to me breathing. Tapped my ribs. Tested my reflexes. Kept his face neutral. Professional. Then he shook his head. Said he was sorry but he couldn't rule me fit to serve. Felt like a slap in the face. Like he was saying I wasn't fit to live.

I was doing it for Ian. The golden boy, Mum and Dad pinned all their hopes on. He was going to get the good job. Give 'em grandchildren. Look after 'em in their old age. Then, when he died in France - that was it. Like the light went out o' their eyes. Nineteen

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Dad - no sympathy, o' course. "They must have thought that you were a right Charlie, trying to sign up. Most important thing a soldier needs is trust. You've gotta trust your comrades in battle. "Then he goes on about how he saved a mate's life by carrying him back to the trench when some shrapnel got him in the leg. "Couldn't have done that with a great heavy piece of iron strapped to me leg, could I?"

I really tried. For Ian. For me. Didn't stop the whispers though. The sneers. "Living the life of Riley while we get the shit bombed out of us"; "Bet 'e wasn't up to 'is arsehole in freezing cold water at Dunkirk!"; "Lads, let's show this coward what it's like to fight for your life." Here's to the heroes. Here's to Ian Stupid bastard getting himself blown up in the first week of the war. Why were you in such a hurry to die? (Pause)

So, someone should tell their stories, shouldn't they? All those ordinary blokes - my brother, his mates, thousands of 'em. terrified out of their minds, caked in filth - yet still they marched. Do you think they knew they were never coming home? Do you think Ian - in that second before the bomb ripped him apart, knew he'd never be playing cards with dad again, or push mum out the door to join us in the pub?. (Fade)

SCENE 2 - (In the men's Ward. It is the night before Martin's op. He is sitting on a hospital chair, his blanket wrapped round his shoulders. He is hunched over, looking bleak, thin, tired. Every so often, his speech is punctuated by a hacking cough. Mary is standing next to him, stroking his hand. She occasionally looks round nervously. The scene opens in the middle of their dialogue).

Mary Come on. Cheer up.

Martin Why? I've become nothing but a walking disease. Know what people do when they see me coming?

Mary ?

Martin Cross the street. People I'd known for years, crossing the street when they see me coming.

Mary Sure, people are ignorant, scared -

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Martin Like I chose this!

Mary You'll get better, I promise you...

Martin Be dancing out of here in a fortnight, suitcase in each hand...

Mary Three weeks, if you're good, and do exactly what the doctors tell you...

Martin This cough. It feels like it's taking over my whole body

Mary You'll feel better after tomorrow

Martin Sounds so drastic. ...

Mary Sure aren't the doctors' expert at that sort of thing?

Martin It is not your lung. *(Pause)* What's the matter?

Mary Thought I heard something - no, you're all right.

Martin You need to take care. I'd never forgive myself if you lost your job

Mary Sure, I'm grand

Martin You know what I'd love to do?

Mary Tell me

Martin I'd love to take you in my arms, waltz you round the dancehall and then kiss you on the lips.

Mary Shh. "You know who with those big flappy ears" might hear you ***(Mary puts his fingers to his head to make a devil sign. Martin has a coughing fit.)*** You're terrible hot? Stop that you know what I mean. You heard from that brother of yours?

Martin ***(Takes a letter from the bedside table)*** Being redeployed next week

Mary Shrapnel wound's healed so?

Martin Can't say where, of course.

Mary He had a time of it there, didn't he?

Martin 'The Dunkirk Spirit' and all that.

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Mary Sister Hannan going on about the crowds on the streets welcoming them home. Didn't give us time off to go of course. "Don't expect you Irish girls will be interested". Thinks that we're all in favour of the neutrality

Martin Aren't you?

Mary How would I know? Sure me da wouldn't allow talk of politics into the house

Martin ?

Mary Said he seen enough of what politics had done to families in the civil war to know that you were best to keep out if it.

Martin Isn't being over here taking sides?

Mary Sure what's Hitler ever done to Ireland?

Martin But you've come over to a war zone

Mary I'm having an adventure

Martin But the risks

Mary No worse than at home

Martin That's crazy- what could possibly happen to you there?

Mary What could happen to me at home? Well let me think. I could've lived a life where I never left Sligo- never found a lad to marry because they've all gone elsewhere to look for work. Die an old maid - oh I'd avoid that alright.

Martin Prefer to be a heroine

Mary Not me- your Colin maybe

Martin I doubt if he thought he was that as he stood waist deep in water for two days on the trot - terrified of being blown to smithereens any second

Mary Thanks to God for His grace and protection till those little tug boats...

Martin It's probably wrong of me to say this but

Mary What?

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

- Martin** I wish he'd see how he's just being used
- Mary** Aren't we all in it together? All doing our bit
- Martin** Like that Doctor Davis telling me to cough towards you nurses -not towards him, when he comes to examine him?
- Mary** Ah. He probably thinks that we're stronger than you?
- Martin** No Mary, he's just a pawn, like all the rest - this war is just some big game between filthy capitalists, fighting for a bigger slice of the pie
- Mary** Not the kind of talk I understand
- Martin** Our comrades in Russia got it right- sharing wealth means owning the means of production
- Mary** Well, you'll have to get better if you want to sort it out
- Martin** It's so frustrating being stuck in here whilst the rich are getting richer. Selling weapons for this war while poor soldiers, like my brother, are losing their lives.
- Mary** Sure, the papers say it will be over soon
- Martin** And who do you think owns the papers? It's all lies...Lord Rothermere, owns the Daily Mail...he even supported Hitler, the Nazis...
- Mary** I don't read that one
- Martin** They're all...never mind.
- Mary** Listen - the war will soon be over - With the Grace of God. Your brother will come back safe. Just concentrate on getting better...
- Martin** Can't imagine ever getting the strength back in my legs, my arms to be able to do what I always wanted
- Mary** ?
- Martin** A photographer. Not much of a dream in the midst of all this bravery.
- Mary** Not at all. Doesn't everyone like looking at a nice picture of themselves?

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Martin A bloke at the union gave me one of his old cameras, a second hand Brownie - Six 16 model. Got me started taking pictures of the fields behind the house. Practised on - people, trees, birds flying..

Mary Sounds lovely

Martin Showed me how to develop the film - I got really good at it -

Mary *(Laughs)* Did you indeed?

Martin Colin, mum, dad loved them - even the bloke at the corner shop offered to buy one of the photographs for two and six!

Mary And you'll be doing it again just as soon as you are out of here.

No I won't

Martin

Mary The treatment's going to work. I heard the doctors/
My days of wasting film on people and trees are over

Martin

Mary Don't say that

Martin Only because I want to take photos of working men - and women - capture their lives.

Mary A photo for their mantelpiece, won't that be great?

Martin Want to expose the conditions people live in. The cost of poverty.

Mary Then you'll have to have one of those exhibition things people could go to on their day off

Martin It's a pipe dream -

Mary Don't talk like that! Come over to Ireland when all this is over - you'd love Sligo - I promise you, there's plenty of people working in the fields you could take their pictures - I mean, we don't need to stay forever - just for a visit, like...

(Mary wipes the sweat from his forehead slowly and carefully. As Martin falls asleep).

(LIGHTS FADE)

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

SCENE 3

Aileen *(Mary and Aileen are standing by the wall. Mary offers Aileen an open packet of cigarettes. Aileen selects one then Mary lights it and her own with the same match)* Thanks. *(Both nurses lean against a low wall)*

Mary You know, I never smoked one cigarette in Eniscrone - not one. Now, can't go ten minutes without one - first thing I want when I wake up is a Woodie.

Aileen Sure at least it's healthy. Strange that food's rationed but not cigarettes.

Mary It's probably to help us stop feeling hungry

Aileen Do you think so?

Mary War does strange things to people's minds. Did I tell you, Sister Hannan refused to let me go to Mass again last Sunday? Again. Father Reilly will be forgetting who I am!

Aileen He'll understand You're doing good work.

Mary Do you really think so?

Aileen Ah he would. Sure if nursing the sick isn't God's work what is?

Mary Aileen?

Aileen Yes?

Mary You know one the patients is having his lung collapsed tomorrow morning?

Aileen Martin Barrow, you mean.

Mary Marty .Well, have you heard what any of the doctors think about it? Whether - if -

Aileen What?

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Mary Have you heard them say what his chances are? Whether it'll, oh I don't know. Will it be too much for him -

Aileen What's going on here?

Mary He's very weak -

Aileen The man's lungs are riddled with TB - of course he's weak!

Mary So -

Aileen If they're doing the procedure, then they think it'll help him. Give the lung a chance to rest -

Mary I know, but -

Aileen He's the one you're sweet on, isn't he? I keep seeing you going into his room - be careful - you know if Sister catches you -

Mary I know, I know.

Aileen I'm not joking - you'll be in real trouble if you carry on -

Mary I know. It's just -

Aileen Just what?

Mary There's something really special about Marty. And I know he feels the same about me -

Aileen Sure you hardly know him - he's only been with us for three weeks

Mary It may only be three weeks, but that's enough to know when there's something between you

Aileen You know how Sister Hannan feels about us Irish nurses - she'd have you transferred before your feet touched the ground -

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Mary He's a way about him

Aileen Lots of fellas have 'a away about them' and they're not sick

Mary He's interested in me -wants to know all about Ireland

Aileen Sure what else would he talk to you about? Stuck in that isolation room. Oh God you haven't

Mary Wha'?

Aileen Done anything stupid - like lean close up. You haven't kissed him?

Mary No but I liked to. She couldn't sack me though, could she? They're desperate for us nurses

Aileen You're right but she could have you put on special duties and you don't want that.

Mary Marty

Aileen Is a very sick man. Who knows if -

Mary You see, that's the difference between you and me - I have faith he'll pull through. I pray for him every night - I

Aileen Oh Mary

Mary What?

Aileen I just don't want to see you get hurt -

Mary Just shut up about him being so ill - will ye.

Aileen All right -

Mary Don't mention it again - d'you hear me?

Aileen I hear you - just don't -

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Mary I'll not say it again -

Aileen On your head be -

Mary Who's that? Waving at you? Over there? Your man in the heavy overcoat. Fella with the limp.

Aileen Him? Think he said his name was Bert -

Mary Oh Bert is it now? So - how did you meet him?

Aileen Get away with you - he just cadged a cigarette off me the other day -

Mary Well, he's got more than cigarettes on his mind by the look of it. He's waving at you.

Aileen Time to go back *(Pause)* What?

Mary By the way he is looking at you I'd say Bert would be more than happy to share a cigarette with you any time you're ready -

Aileen Come on we'll be late.

(LIGHTS FADE)

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

SCENE 4- *(Aileen walks on stage and sits on the wall. She is just about to light a cigarette when Bert sneaks up behind her, puts his hands over her eyes and whips the cigarette out of her mouth.)*

Aileen Stop it! Who is it? Get off me

Bert *(Removing his hands and laughing, he moves next to her, putting the cigarette he took from her in his mouth)*

Aileen Stop that -d'you hear me?

Bert Only me, Bert the fella you're really mad about but too frightened to admit

Aileen Cheek of the devil, you. *(She lights Bert's cigarette then lights her own)* What you doing here?

Bert Well, could say it was the thought of seeing your deep blue eyes, your smile, your lovely face

Aileen Ah stop *(Gives him a playful shove)* Why aren't you at work?

Bert I am. I'm a reporter. Local rag. Looking for a story.

Aileen D'you expect something interesting to happen near this wall?

Bert You tell me darling

Aileen Stop

Bert A story about our lovely Lewisham Angels of Mercy...

Aileen And who might they be?

Bert You nurses - day and night, your gentle hands tending to your patients our unsung heroines....

Aileen Gentle hands? Look. In water half the time. Chapped and raw!

Bert *(Grabs one of Aileen's hands she's holding out to him and kisses the back of it so quickly she gets no chance to pull it away before he lets go)* Never one to let the truth get in the way of a good story! *(Takes out his notebook and pen)* So - let's get started -

Aileen Wait! I never -

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Bert WhY will it hurt to tell your story? I know you've got a few tales to tell

Aileen I'll need to ask Sister Hannan and she'll need to ask Matron

Bert It's your story not theirs

Aileen I'm a lowly nurse. I don't have a story

Bert Yes you do

Aileen Listen to yourself- there's a war going on

Bert I'm not asking you about troop movements- just stuff that people already know

Aileen You call that a story?

Bert Grove Park Hospital?

Aileen Workhouse, way back

Bert Yeah got that dark, prison look about it...

Aileen Turned it into a TB hospice.1920s I think

Bert Hospice?

Aileen Let's just say that a lot of our patients don't walk out carrying their suitcases home...

Bert "Nurses succeed against the odds". That's a good headline.

Aileen No we don't. And you can forget about the headline.

Bert You must do something

Aileen Only thing we can do is pneumothorax - plombage technique

Bert Plombage- sounds like something you do to unblock the toilet **(Makes unblocking sink noises)**

Aileen Ah stop. Means collapsing the infected lung, to rest it.

Bert Blimey. I need a rest if my lungs made noises like that. **(Makes more unblocking the toilet noises)** Go on

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Aileen Mostly, we're treating infected ulcers, comforting patients who are fighting for breath - cooling the patients down, trying to keep the fevers at bay -

Bert Heart breaking our readers will love it

Aileen In the end, all we can do is treat them with kindness

Bert I like that - "Kindness - the magic cure"

Aileen You'll not be writing that Bert - it's a lie! Many of our patients will die - some in a month if it gets to their brain, some in a year - but they'll die,

Bert All of them?

Aileen Those with money can go to some expensive sanatorium in Switzerland - get lots of healthy fresh air, good nourishing food

Bert And that cures it?

Aileen More common amongst poor people

Bert That's too simple to be fair

Aileen Fact is Bert, I'm nursing the dying. Now can you understand why Sister Hannan won't want people to read that? She may be an old bitch but even she isn't nasty enough to want her patients to read that they are dying.

Bert Okay. So if you won't tell me about the hospital tell me about you. Please

Aileen Me plans to go to Philadelphia, the US fell through...sure I'd already half left Dublin. Think I must have heard so many arguments about the war - and Ireland staying out of it that some of the ideas stuck in me head - Atlantic ports-ya di ya di da

Bert I read about that. Those were the ones Ireland wouldn't let Churchill use?

Aileen Then you've heard about Loch Swilley or Berehaven. Anyway, some of my friends said that it was right - Ireland was too small and too poor to fight against Hitler. If we joined the war, Hitler would wipe us all out. Bomb us to hell and back.

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Bert Might have a point there, darlin'

Aileen But my friend Jimmy *(Pause)* well, he said we were no better than cowards. Said we should always stand against evil - that we Irish were holding hands with murder, being neutral.

Bert He's your boyfriend?

Aileen That would be telling

Bert But you wish he was, am I right?

Aileen Jimmy's words really got into my head - "sometimes, you have to pick a side". He joined the RAF and I picked London. Could have worked in an arms factory, o' course, but I really liked the idea of nursing...

Bert I bet your patients love you -

Aileen Do you? Most of them are too weak to know I'm there -

Bert Nursing I get. But a TB hospital?

Aileen It's such a cruel disease. Eats away at you, leaving you hollow. Someone has to help you through that.

Bert "Nursing Angels Defy the Risk"

Aileen No worse than at home. TBs really bad there too.

Bert In Dublin? I thought you Irish had all the food and fresh air you could ever need

Aileen Another one who thinks that we're living in the lap of luxury. Eating bacon and eggs, steak and potatoes. Food is hard to get and expensive. I worry about my family.

Bert I'm sure they'll be all right...

Aileen How can you know that?

Bert You're right. Don't know if we'll survive the next bomb. The next bullet. All we can do is live for now - and right now, me little darling - I could do with another cigarette - hand 'em over -

Aileen Tell me - do you ever buy your own cigarettes?

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Bert Tell you what! You can smoke all you like from my packet - if you'll meet me here again tomorrow - before your shift -

Aileen The cheek of it, Bert Woodhouse. Resortin' to blackmail now, are you?

Bert Why? What's wrong with the odd little bit of blackmail between friends?

Aileen You know what. I might just do that. Making no promises though...

Bert I'll see you tomorrow, if one of us isn't blown to kingdom come tonight --

Aileen You won't write the story

Bert About the hospital? No

Aileen Good. ***(Aileen walks off stage)***

Bert ***(Aside)*** But I might put something together about my Irish angel

(LIGHTS FADE)

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

SCENE 5- *(Mary is sterilising a stethoscope in front of a trolley, humming cheerfully. Aileen comes up behind her, startling.)*

Aileen Hannan says that this is the last batch of soluble aspirin - what'll we use for patients to gargle?

Mary We're low on the morphine too...hope Lewisham has some spare they can let us have *(Mary, who smiles and whirls the stethoscope around in the air)*

Aileen What are you doing? Stop it! Supposing Sister -

Mary *(Does a little dance with the stethoscope as her imaginary partner)* What do I care about Hannan? She can stuff it up her big -

Aileen Stop it! Someone will hear. Make sure you pour that Izal over your gloves first and put them on before you touch that sputum mug. Why you in such a good mood?

Mary It's Marty - saw him not half an hour ago and he's come round - looks so much better after the plombage - he even managed a wee smile...

Aileen Careful. You don't want to go believing in these false dawns.

Mary Would you listen to yourself? False dawns! He's going to be one of the patients who pulls through. You'll see.

Aileen You know how this disease goes, one minute everything is clear, next minutes there is blood in the sputum mug. *(Pause)* I hope Sister didn't see you two talking -

Mary No, she didn't. I was careful. Very careful. *(Pause)* He will be okay- won't he?

Aileen *(Pause)* Please God. Now. Tell me some news.

Mary You know they're stacking the dead bodies on the floor at Lewisham hospital now that the mortuary has been destroyed. Well guess what happened to the new nurse?

Aileen ?

Mary First time on duty in the blackout and she's only gone and tripped over a dead body.

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Aileen Poor wee soul - how -

Mary She was all right - just sat on the floor and laughed!

Aileen If it was me I'd weep

Mary Oh, get over yourself Aileen! Jesus, Mary and Joseph, if we can't laugh at ourselves in the middle of all this madness, what can we do?

Aileen The nights at this place terrify me.

Mary For God's sake.

Aileen Any news from home?

Mary Mammy was telling me that the smuggling's got really bad... Some eejit got arrested at the border trying to smuggle a couple of white loaves in. Wrapped them up in a blanket and put them in a pram! Looked like two wee babies. That's so funny.

Aileen Not to the people in Dublin without a scrap to eat

Mary Sorry.

Aileen Perhaps it is different up country

Mary Will I see you in the canteen later on?

Aileen Not sure

Mary - Meeting your young man? What's his name again? Bob?

Aileen Bert - and he's not my young man -

Mary If you say so -though

Aileen Though what?

Mary You can't hide the red on your cheeks after you've met up with him -

Aileen I do not blush -

Mary You'll not make me a liar, Aileen McBride - just as well we have the blackouts here otherwise Jerry would be using your cheeks as a target - and they're on fire now

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Aileen You'll need to be washing that thing again, Mary.
(*LIGHTS FADE*)

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

SCENE 6- *(Aileen is leaning against a low wall at the front of the hospital gates, looking out for Bert. He arrives a few moments later, looking annoyed. He leans next to her and looks away.)*

Aileen Are you going to tell me what's wrong?

Bert Don't ask

Aileen Well, if that's how you're going to be, Bert Woodhouse, I'm off to start me shift - can't be doing with your bad mood

Bert Don't go

Aileen Spit it out, or I'm gone

Bert Don't go mad

Aileen Why?

Bert It's about the article

Aileen What? I thought I asked you not to

Bert I know but, I went to the library and found out a bit more about you Irish nurses

Aileen Maybe I should get one of the doctors to look inside your ears

Bert You didn't have to come did you? England's never been nice to your country. You could have stayed at home nice and safe. But you're over here helping people who aren't going even make it. Now I call that fucking brave

Aileen Bert

Bert You should be recognised

Aileen If you do that sure the only person who'll recognise me is Sister Hannan

Bert I wanted to show you the finished piece in the paper but the Editor said he couldn't use it

Aileen Thanks be to God for that

Bert *(Mimics the voice of the editor, who speaks in pompous, clipped voice)* 'Don't you know by now our public just want a bit of comfort - heart-warming stories". TB for heavens' sake - who wants to read about a TB hospital

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

- have you lost your senses boy? Now there's two people who think that I am rubbish

Aileen Och I know you're only trying to be kind of you but even in Hannan didn't object there are still nurses on the wards from England and we've even one Jewish girl. They'd be left out of you only wrote about Irish nurses.

Bert How do you do it?

Aileen What! How do I do what?

Bert Make me feel so much better? Was ready to punch the nearest lamp post when I was walking along - but now -

Aileen Don't you go punching any lampposts while I'm around! I won't be fixing you up!

Bert I think it was him calling me 'boy' as if I was twelve years old as much as the story, to be honest. The Editor Mr Seaton-Hogg Esquire. Doesn't take me seriously. Doesn't trust me to do a proper job

Aileen Why?

Bert He takes one look at my leg, and I can see what he's thinking - it's written plain on his ugly, red fat face...

Aileen Oh, Bert...

Bert He's thinking he'll only have to put up with me while the war's on, then he'll get his "proper" team back -

Aileen You'll show him, Bert. I know you will. A story will come up, you'll see, soon enough...

Bert He's asked me to go and cover some story about a maypole dance at that school up on Kelvin Grove. Can you believe it?

Aileen Sounds grand - now you make sure you write a beautiful piece about it -

Bert Goes on about how I've to make sure I put as many names in it as I can" That's how we get our readers, dear boy - the parents want to read about their little darlings - and it's good news - d'you see!"

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Aileen "Get yourself up to that maypole this instant do you hear me -?"

Bert You've got him to a T... Reality is that I've got to make every story special - doesn't matter how small they are - got to write my way out of this -

Aileen You'll find a great story one day- I know you will

Bert Come out with me one evening

Aileen Ah sure our shifts are very long and I get very

Bert All work and no play...or don't they have that saying in Dublin?

Aileen Where would we go? Sure everything's a pile of rubble round here

Bert Then we'll go to where all the action is. Up West. Piccadilly Circus, Trafalgar Square, Oxford Circus. We'll end up at the Paramount in Tottenham Court Road. Howzat?

(LIGHTS FADE)

SCENE 8 - (Mary is supporting Martin's looking out the window.

- Mary** So dark last night I nearly got lost!
- Martin** Thanks for collecting these leaflets. Sometimes I think I'll go mad with the boredom
- Mary** That's a sign you're getting better. Couldn't even see me hand in front of me face!
- Martin** I feel bad asking you
- Mary** Get outta that, aren't I delighted that you're taking an interest?
- Martin** Even so they're all sorts out on the streets during black outs... things go on in London that wouldn't happen in Eniscrone.
- Mary** Sure, I've got nothing for them to steal unless - these are something top secret
- Martin** Could be a bit more than thieves Mary
- Mary** Sure there's the only thing worse than thieves is bombs. And we'd none on Lewisham last night. Thank God I hate the sound of those sirens! Like wild banshees, wailing and calling..
- Martin** You've a great imagination.
- Mary** Anyway. Twas a brilliant day off. You should have seen Aileen and myself at Joe Lyons - like two royal princesses we were. We'd little teacups and sandwiches with the crusts cut off. And the tablecloths - falling in folds all the way to the floor
- Martin** Very smart
- Mary** We'd a pot of tea between us and some sandwiches Corned beef. They were delicious.
- Martin** A nice treat
- Mary** And the people there - so la di da, with their little fingers sticking out from their cups. Calling each other Binky and Fiona in really loud voices! We couldn't stop laughing - had to pretend we had a fit of the coughs!

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

- Martin** Careful they might have thought you had TB!
- Mary** And guess what we did afterwards? Went to see how they're getting on with the new 'ladies bridge' at Waterloo. Being built by women so it is. Can you imagine what the fellas in Sligo would think of that?
- Martin** Have to get used to it- like our comrades in Russia
- Mary** Pickaxes over their shoulders an' all. Dressed in those thick blue trousers with a top
- Martin** Dungarees?
- Mary** Covered in mud. Laughing and having a bit of a craic.
- Martin** Wish I could have been there. Made a great photo
(Sits down)
- Mary** Then off to meet Ruby. We'd great fun. Wasn't she a bit drunk by the time I got there? Telling me all kinds of mad jokes about her hospital, so she was - there was one about an old soldier and an actress - but I can't remember the punchline...
- Martin** Don't worry
- Mary** I'll see if I can remember it later. Made me laugh, it really did. And in the evening I did my sewing. Finishing of my new blouse. Ruby's gave me a pattern and Aileen some cloth her Aunty sent over from America
- Martin** Can't wait to see you in it
- Mary** I dunno The collar looks a bit odd, the sides don't match up but... sure I can put a safety pin in to hide the gap.
- Martin** My mum had a lovely brooch that my dad gave her. You can have that.
- Mary** No Marty - I couldn't
- Martin** Please.
- Mary** What would your da think?
- Martin** You do such much for me

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Mary We're not allowed presents

Martin Be my way of saying thank you. Mum would have really liked you Mary. I'm sure of it

Mary That's lovely and I am sure that I would have liked her too. *(Bends over to kiss him)*

Martin Mary - careful - you mustn't take risks -

Mary Oh hush yourself - Sister Hannan is nowhere near -

Martin I don't mean that! Be careful - the TB -

Mary I'll be all right. God won't forget me - I pray to Him every night to stay safe -

Martin Mary... please don't

Mary It's not for me I'm praying I have to stay well -
- for all my patients...and for you, Marty

Martin Mary, look around you -do you really think anyone's listening to your prayers?

Mary What *(Sounds of bombs dropping nearby. Mary instinctively throws her body across Martin to protect him, then realises she's hurting his chest)* Sorry

Martin I'm fine - but you should think about your own safety first, Mary...

Mary Oh no - I've only gone and made you worse..

Martin You could never do that -

Mary What were we talking about?

Martin Doesn't matter...

Mary Makes you think, doesn't it?

Martin What does?

Mary That bomb - really close...you know

Martin You worried?

Mary Worried about my parents, how they'd take it if anything happened...they really need the money I send..

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Martin You're just such a brick -

Mary That doesn't sound very nice

Martin It means you're solid, reliable - a lovely person -

Mary Get away with you. It's what anyone would do -

Martin I wish -

Mary Don't say it -

Martin We could do things together. I could be part of your stories instead of just sitting here listening

Mary One day please God. Now, I'd better get these sheets down to the laundry

Martin I'm serious about you having Mum's brooch. Please. It's in my personal belongings box

Mary But that's in Sister Hannan's office!

Martin I'll ask her to give it to you tomorrow

Mary And let her find out about us! No Marty.

Martin Then you can go and take it

Mary Do you know the trouble I'll be in if she finds something's missing from one of the boxes?

Martin It's my property. And how would she know anyway?

Mary She'd kill me if she found me in her office

Martin Nothing else for it then I'll go and get it myself

Mary You will not. You're sick. You need to stay in this room.

Martin Mary, I'm not stupid. I know how many people recover and it might not be me.

Mary Don't say that

Martin I want you to have something to remember me by. Just in case

Mary No Martin. I don't want to be taking your stuff and that's an end to it. You're going to get well. D'you hear me know?

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Martin And I want you to take something of me with you
when you're out. Do you hear me know?

(LIGHTS FADE)

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

SCENE 8- Bert and Aileen appear on the stage, they have just emerged from a nightclub. In the background music of the era can be heard.

Aileen That was just brilliant

Bert Life in London to your liking Milady?

Aileen That music (*Starts dancing and humming*)

Bert Sorry I couldn't, you know, with you

Aileen Don't mind that- sure haven't I been on my feet all day

Bert You can't beat the Paramount

Aileen The buzz and the bounce, the life of the place so different from the grey of the ward

Bert Stick with me and I'll show you the bright lights of London- well maybe not lights

Aileen What are those above the Café de Paris?

Bert Barrage balloons- stops old Fritz flying in too low and bombing us to/ (*Air raid sirens go off*) Come on. Quick. (*They exit stage and re-enter as if they have entered a downstairs room/ shelter of some sort. The stage lights go to dark*)

Aileen: It's really dark down here. You sure we'll be alright?

Bert: Here have a cigarette look, I've bought a packet this time

Aileen: Jerry lining up to bomb the bejesus out of us, and the first thing you think about is cigarettes! (*Knocks his arm playfully*)

Bert: Look what you've done. Down the bleedin' crater

Aileen: You'll have to buy another packet

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Bert: Think I'll just carry on smoking yours!

Aileen You've the cheek of the -

Bert *(Moves forward to kiss Aileen)* There - been wanting to do that for a long time -

Aileen Bert! What you -

Bert It feels right, don't you feel that?

Aileen I don't know - I don't know what I feel Bert -

Bert It's just you. Just me

Aileen Never mind the air raid, is it?

Bert *(Puts his finger over her mouth)* Shh - it won't touch us...you'll see...*(Kisses her again, softly)*

Aileen Bert! You're a mad one! An air raid going on all around us and all you can think about is having your way with me!

Bert Oh, don't be like that. I really like you Aileen. Really like you. *(Sound of bombing getting louder, nearer. Sky lights up with bombings.)*

Aileen Oh! My God - that was close -*(Loud explosion cuts across the dialogue)*

Bert Safer in here - *(Lights on Aileen who is looking closely at her hand again. Raising it up in front of her and turning it around)* What you doing? Not hurt are you?

Aileen Just thinking....

Bert What pretty little hands you've got?

Aileen Don't be silly Bert. No. It's me that's being an eejit

Bert Tell me -

Aileen This hand - here. Solid. Real.

Bert Very real, darling.

Aileen This hand. This body. Me. Could all be gone in a second. If one of those bombers...

Bert Not going to happen. Not on my watch.

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Aileen Oh, Bert. Saying it doesn't make it true. Could happen now. Tomorrow. Next week - to you - to me...I'd never get to see me ma and da again...

Bert Don't say that milady-

Aileen Sometimes- when there's a direct hit, they can't even recognise the bodies

Bert You're going to be alright. Trust your old Bert

Aileen You can stop Fritz and his bombers can ye?

Bert Listen. I've got plans for you and me -no coward Jerry pilot's going to mess that up...

Aileen Plans. Listen to the man. Plans, indeed, ...

Bert I want to write... not just about the war...I want to write ...Oh, I don't know...write something that gets right into people's heads ... And I want you there beside me...

Aileen Bert...

Bert Well, what do you think?

Aileen I don't know

Bert Yes or no?

Aileen Sure, I haven't known you that long. You don't know much about me, I don't know much about you.

Bert Does that matter?

Aileen Doesn't seem right

Bert Right?

Aileen Not respectable

Bert Respectable. Respectable who gives a fuck, sorry who cares about respectable when there's a war going on?

Aileen I just

Bert I tell you what I think of respectable? It ain't got no place in wartime. Respectable didn't keep Ian or other young men like him alive. Respectable ain't going stop your patients dying of TB, it ain't going stop you catching it or me

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

catching it, it ain't going fix this leg or change anything. List to me, all we got is us and now. You're right it could all disappear today, tomorrow, we don't know when. That's why we've got to.... we'd be great together I know we would

Aileen I don't know

Bert Then tell me why not.

Aileen I can't, but I'll tell you this. If we both get through this, I'll give you my answer then.

Bert I know you won't be able to resist my charms.

Aileen *(Sound of all clear)* I need some air

Bert It could be dangerous

Aileen Be more dangerous if we miss the last train.

Bert Stay in here a bit longer

Aileen No. Come on. *(Aileen and Bert disappear off stage where the next part of the dialogue is hear out of sight of the audience)*. Bert- over there. That crowd of people. What are they doing? Oh my God

Bert Come on. It's nothing to do with us

Aileen You're supposed to cover the dead up. Not pull around like that,

Bert I told you.

Aileen But they're taking things that don't belong to them. Bert they're stealing jewellery, that man's pulling a wedding ring off. Oh my God we need to tell someone

Bert Come on

Aileen Stop pulling me - you're hurting *(They appear on stage)*

Bert You wanted to catch the last train didn't ye?

Aileen But

Bert There's things happening in this city that you don't want to know about. War brings people to their lowest, turns them into scum

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Aileen Then let's find a guard- a policeman

Bert That's the last thing you're going to do. See?
See that bloke over there? The one who's
collecting all the jewellery.

Aileen Will he be giving it back to the family?

Bert He's the fence, he's going to sell all that
jewellery to the highest bidder. Yeah, wherever
that money is going, it is not going to the
victim's families

Aileen That's terrible. You should get that editor of
yours to let you write about it

Bert And how long d'you think any of us would be
around after that? This is wartime London - some
things you can't write about

Aileen Then how do we to stop him?

Bert You got a gun? He has

(LIGHTS FADE)

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

SCENE 8 - *(Medical director's office. The medical director a man is standing holding a letter. Aileen is standing with her hands behind her back. The medical officer has an upper class accent and speaks with a slow deliberate tone)*

M.O Nurse Turner. Do you know why you've been called in here?

Aileen No sir

M.O Sister Hannan hasn't?

Aileen No sir

M.O I see. You're aware that there is a war on. Not one that your country chose to get involved in, but a war none the less.

Aileen Of course Sir

M.O Good. Then you will have heard of the evacuation from Dunkirk

Aileen Indeed Sir, I'd have loved to welcome the lads back only Sister Hannan didn't think it/

M.O Quite right

Aileen One of our patients had a friend at Dunkirk who found a little puppy, he tried to smuggle it back under his jacket only they made him throw it/

M.O Nurse Turner please. Sentimentality won't win us the war

Aileen Sorry. I didn't think

M.O Exactly Nurse Turner. You don't always think do you?

Aileen When didn't I think sir?

M.O Tell me Nurse Turner. Supposing you were Gerry and eager to get your spies into England and you had a retreating army of thousands of enemy soldiers stuck on a beach in Northern France? What might you do?

Aileen I'm a nurse Sir. I don't know about those kinds of things

M.O Infiltration Nurse Turner.

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

- Aileen** Sir?
- M.O** Could each of those soldier's identity papers have been checked as they got into the rescue boats?
- Aileen** No Sir. Sure wouldn't the ink have run and the papers got soggy?
- M.O** Spot on Nurse Turner. So the people rescuing them would have had no idea who any of those soldiers were, would they?
- Aileen** No sir
- M.O** I don't suppose they would Nurse Turner. I don't suppose they would. Now I'm going to ask you a second question. Now, the small boats who rescued them. How would anyone have known if any of those boats wasn't manned by a Gerry?
- Aileen** I thought they sailed over from England sir.
- M.O** And that's your only proof?
- Aileen** I don't think Germany's much of a coastline sir and
- M.O** Indeed Nurse Turner but take it from me. Gerry is clever- a lot cleverer than you.
- Aileen** I expect he is Sir
- M.O** That is why in order to defeat Gerry Nurse Turner we have to think like him
- Aileen** In German sir?
- M.O** Nurse Turner "Loose lips sink ships"
- Aileen** Still not with you sir
- M.O** My brother Douglas Seaton Hogg tells me that you have been talking to one of his journalists- about the Irish Atlantic ports
- Aileen** Bert's a German?
- M.O** No but he could be
- Aileen** I told him that he wasn't to write anything down
- M.O** I am sure you did. But do you think that Gerry would have taken any notice of you? Bert Woodhouse

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

didn't. Remember: "Your words are Gerry's weapons".
Be careful who you speak to in future.

Aileen Are you saying that Bert is a spy?

M.O. *(Laughs sarcastically)* Good Lord Nurse Turner. Hitler may get desperate but I doubt if even he would ever be that desperate. Take it from me Gerry will use everything in his power to infiltrate our fine land. Good day Nurse Turner. Let this be the last time I speak to you. Please tell Sister Hannan that I have finished with you. *(M.O. waves his hands at Aileen indicating that she should leave)* **(Black)**

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

SCENE 9 - *(Mary is teaching Aileen to jitterbug. She walks through the steps)*

Mary Come on. Rock step. Side one. Side Two. Rock step. Side. Rock. *(Aileen moves away discouraged)*. Let's try again

Aileen It's no good me heart's not in it

Mary This is supposed to cheer you up

Aileen Sorry

Mary Come on

Aileen Tis hard to feel cheerful about anything at the moment

Mary Tis bad luck about the new roster alright

Aileen A month on 'lates' just for spite. She hates me

Mary I'm sure that /

Aileen Twasn't you who got a roasting for just talking to someone. Jesus it's not as if De Valera and the Atlantic ports are top secret

Mary Would you like me to tell you a joke? I've a great one about a hen and a chicken and I think that there was a road in there *(Aileen shakes her head)*. Ah well. Sure, I can't remember the punchline anyway

Aileen Why are some decisions in life so hard?

Mary Bert's mad about you. Be content with him

Aileen But Jimmy Fenton will only be in London for a couple of days before he's sent to Suffolk

Mary Go and see him there then, another time.

Aileen How? The RAF have their airbases miles out in the country so even if I could get to Ipswich I'd never be able to get to his barracks. There's nothing for it. I'll have to meet him in London.

Mary Is that's wise? It's hard getting back to Lewisham in the dark, you'll never get back in before the doors are locked

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Aileen And tell me what would you know about wise? Sure you only have to go as far as Marty's bedside for your date.

Mary Kind of you to remind me.

Aileen Sorry I'm just

Mary A great one for the "what might be".

Aileen ?

Mary What might have been if you'd gone to Philadelphia? What might have happened if you and Jimmy had stayed in Dublin? What 'might be' if you risk your job to have a wild evening with Fighter Pilot Fenton, whilst here in Lewisham, a man who is crazy about you, waits!

Aileen That's the problem

Mary Tell that to the lassie who got the news got this morning that her husband's not coming back.

Aileen It's all too quick. Sure, I hardly know him and there he is confessing dying love for me- wants us to get married

Mary Well, I'd take that as a great compliment

Aileen It's this bloody war. People so terrified of dying that they marry people they hardly know. (Pause)
Sorry

Mary Two pounds for the sex

Aileen Wha?

Mary Cost of the special licence to get married. Fellas want the sex but the women want the marriage. Martin says 'tis exploitation. Said to be careful. Anyway don't a third of TB patients get better?

Aileen I have to see Jimmy. How will I know otherwise?

Mary And what will you tell Bert if...?

Aileen Feeling sorry for someone isn't enough

Mary But if you get caught trying to get back in. Bad enough being out in the curfew without /

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Aileen I'll be grand. There's bound to be taxis at the station

Mary Marty doesn't like me being out in the blackout

Aileen Seems that Marty doesn't like you doing much

Mary Says it's dangerous. He cares about me. And I care about him

Aileen You haven't done anything stupid about the brooch?

Mary I don't need a brooch to know he loves me

Aileen Now that is wise

Mary So I can't do anything stupid but you can?

Aileen Supposing I didn't accept Jimmy's invite and then something happened to him. This might be the last time I see him

Mary Not all fighter pilots get killed

Aileen If only he'd joined the army

Mary Sure that would stop 'you looking up to the sky'

Aileen You sound like me ma. Telling me to 'take me head out of the clouds'.

Mary Mine always told me to 'keep me feet on the ground'

Aileen Is it so wrong to want more? (Pause) I envy you in some ways

Mary ?

Aileen You're so content

Mary I'm lucky. And when Marty gets better.....we'll, we'll.. well twon't be long before I'm standing behind the counter of our own camera shop in London minding the place whilst he's out taking photos of weddings and nice things like that.

Aileen You're not going back?

Mary Eniscrone after London, I don't think so

Aileen You seem very certain

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Mary Mammy and Daddy will be sad but sure there has to be more to life than watching a cow moving from one part of a field to another and then back again. Nah, my life is where Marty is, and if you want to know, I think that yours would be a lot safer if you made up your mind that yours was with Bert

Aileen I won't get caught

Mary Good

(LIGHTS FADE)

SCENE 10 (Sounds of air raid sirens. Traffic. Aileen shouting taxi offstage. Man replies off stage- "No taxis tonight miss- you'll have to walk". Aileen appears on an empty stage- she is walking across a common she goes off stage on the other side of the stage. Suddenly we hear her scream and she runs across the stage in terror- sound of akka- akka guns and she stumbles and falls. She screams).

(LIGHTS FADE)

SCENE 11- *Aileen is sitting on a chair with a blanket round her shoulders. She is drinking tea from a tine mug. A medic is standing beside here, he has an Irish accent*

Aileen Thanks- for agreeing not to tell

Doctor You're lucky I'm on. You'd be in big trouble if it had been the other fella

Aileen I know. Thanks

Doctor I should prescribe a day's complete bed rest

Aileen No. I can't risk Sister Hannan finding out

Doctor Civilian shrapnel wounds, more common than people realise.

Aileen Twas only an old cut

Doctor You lost a fair bit of blood.

Aileen I'll be grand

Doctor And had a terrible shock

Aileen I bet the soldiers on the front don't get a day's bed rest for a few cuts

Doctor They are not trying to nurse the sick.

Aileen Takes more than someone trying to rob me handbag

Doctor You're shaking

Aileen I'm grand

Doctor You're sure you've told me everything?

Aileen What kind of a girl d'you take me for?

Doctor The kind that shouldn't be walking across the common at night

Aileen There were no taxis. Look, I'll be grand

Doctor Wasn't that what you thought before you set out from the station?

Aileen It was the shock that made me cry. Nothing else happened I promise

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Doctor When will you girls realise that the blackout is dangerous? I'm going to organise for van to take you back to the nurses home

Aileen Please don't. Sister Hannan's bound to find out

Doctor Which is why she'll be delighted that you're safe

Aileen You don't understand. She hates the Irish, her brother was one of the first officers killed In Normandy.

Doctor Rubbish Sister Hannan's always been perfectly nice to me

Aileen That's because you're a doctor. Listen the raid's over and it's almost light. I 'll be fine walking back

Doctor Okay, I'll ring the ward and see if they have a bed

Aileen Please doctor, no. I'm already halfway towards being put on Special Duties.

Doctor Then accept the lift back and no arguments. Believe me- he's still out there. (*Aileen breaks down in tears*)

(LIGHTS FADE)

SCENE 12- *(Mary is standing being questioned by a policeman, she looks visibly shaken. The policeman is fast losing his patience, he speaks slowly at first but there is a rising anger as the scene develops.)*

Policeman Let's go over this once more. You say that a friend gave you the brooch. Yet you won't tell me the name of the friend?

Mary I can't. I promised

Policeman Yet the person who gave you this brooch was the rightful owner?

Mary Saints preserve us sir, you don't think that I'd let anyone make me a present of something that didn't belong to them.

Policeman *(Pause)* Sister Hannan tells me that you and another Irish nurse don't join the other nurses in the canteen at break time

Mary We prefer a bit of fresh air

Policeman And that's all?

Mary What else could it be sir?

Policeman There's a young man who hangs around the hospital entrance

Mary Bert? Sure, he's sweet on Aileen

Policeman And have you ever seen this Bert in an ARP uniform?

Mary Not meself but it wouldn't surprise me. Sure he'd borrow anything from anyone to go undercover

Policeman Really?

Mary Isn't he just a stupid lad looking for a story? Wants to be a great journalist

Policeman And that's what he tells you. *(Mary nods)* D'you know how many young men wearing ARP uniform we arrest and send to prison Miss?

Mary Arrest them, what for? Sure aren't they all doing a fine job?

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Policeman If you call robbing people during bomb raids doing a fine job I suppose they are

Mary People don't do that! Do they?

Policeman So If I suggested that you were part of a gang that robs people under the cover of a bombing raid what would you say?

Mary Me? I've never robbed anyone in my life

Policeman You may not steal the things yourself. But could that brooch be your reward for letting the robbers in to the hospital? Directing them to Ward Sister's office and the patients' personal boxes?

Mary As God's my witness, I would never do such.... You can

Policeman Ask him Miss? I'm not a believer myself so I don't think that I'll be/

Mary Ask Father Reilly so, he'll tell you

Policeman I have Miss. Unfortunately- he couldn't remember you

Mary But I'm a good Catholic

Policeman Whose attendance at his Church is sporadic

Mary Only cos I can't get time off

Policeman You sure that's all Miss. Only we found a copy of the Communist manifesto in your room

Mary What's wrong with that?

Policeman What's wrong with that? You mean you don't know

Mary No Sir

Policeman Communists don't believe in God

Mary That's terrible

Policeman Depends on your point of view.

Mary But they'll go to hell when they die sir

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

- Policeman** Look around you Miss, some people would say that you don't need to die to experience hell in wartime.
- Mary** Would they?
- Policeman** Back to things we can prove. Tuesday the night of the bombing raid, the night when Sister Hannan discovered that some items in her office had been tampered with
- Mary** It was my night off sir
- Policeman** I know. And how did you spend it?
- Mary** I planned to go to the pictures with Ruby
- Policeman** Planned?
- Mary** The bombing was awful sir, 'Twasn't safe on the streets. I'd to find the nearest shelter and hoped Ruby would do the same. It's the truth I promise you.
- Policeman** So, no one can verify where you were
- Mary** I don't suppose they can Sir. *(Pause)* What's going to happen to me sir? Will I lose my job?
- Policeman** It's going to be a bit hard doing your nursing duties in a prison, don't you think? However you might be lucky and find a hospital that will take you when you get out, but I doubt it.
- Mary** I can't go to prison.
- Policeman** Then you'll have to go back to Sligo (*Pronounces Sligo- Sleego*) or wherever you call it. Mind you I heard that the Germans are bombing Dublin so the ferry landing could be a bit tricky
- Mary** It would kill me ma and da if I was thought of as a thief.
- Policeman** Then I suggest you start telling me the truth Miss. It might surprise you but crime has been on the rise since the day the war started. Black market's rife, smuggling's up and let's not talk about what some of the local girls get up to in the park. In the light of that, d'you think that His Majesty's Constabulary wants to be bothered

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

with petty pilfering? Now tell me- who gave you that brooch?

Mary Martin Barrow he's one of my patients

Policeman Love at the bedside. I thought that was a dismissible offence.

Mary I didn't even want the brooch- he asked me to take from old Hannan's office but I said 'no' he should keep it because it 'twas his mums'. And if Sister Hannan found out then

Policeman You'd have been sent packing

Mary I'd nearly a heart attack when he gave it me, he should never have been out of bed. I promise you Sir, I promised you I didn't take it

Policeman So that would explain his relapse.

Mary A relapse- oh God, he's not going to die Sir is he, I don't know what I'll do

Policeman I hope not, because you're in the cells until his well enough to be questioned. Sergeant takes the nurse down.

(LIGHTS FADE)

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Scene 13 - (Aileen and Mary are standing at the front of the stage during a bomb raid)

Mary Come on

Aileen I can't go back

Mary You have to

Aileen I haven't had a day off in weeks.

Mary We'll be after getting killed if we're caught out here

Aileen With our luck we'll probably die anyway

Mary Stop that

Aileen Exhaustion, TB or bombs. Take your pick

Mary Isn't our Holy Mother up there protecting us?

Aileen I don't have your faith

Mary Don't worry. I've enough for both of us

Aileen A black curtain hiding evil

Mary Tis a bad night you're having. Besides if you want to find evil you don't need go any further than

Aileen Hannan's office?

Mary Exactly.

Aileen The old bitch. Wasn't she young once? Or did she come into this world old and crabby?

Mary At least she didn't send me away. Lucky Marty came out of the coma. 'Twould have killed mammy and daddy to think that I was thought of as a thief. God when will these special duties ever end?

Aileen God knows. I wish I could look up there and see a heaven or a Holy Mother

Mary Tis very dark

Aileen I shouldn't have come to this country. All this death- tis no good for you

MARY Sure we're nurses

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

- AILEEN** Give me the name of one person whose life we've saved. *(Pause)* See you can't.
- Mary** I'm not surprised that the nights are getting to you. Twas very sad about Jimmy and terrible what happened to you a couple of weeks back.
- Aileen** Twenty-two, Bert's brother-nineteen. I don't even want to think about Martin's/ *(Pause)* Jaysus are we mad or what?
- Mary** We came here to help
- Aileen** I wish you'd stop saying that.
- Mary** And we will
- Aileen** D'you know what I can't stand? It is the lies. Making out that everyone is decent, that we're 'all pulling together', Bert being told what he can and can't write about- stories about maypoles and turnip recipes, when he should be writing real stories about how low people stoop. Stealing clothes and jewellery off dead corpses- stripping the shells of bombed out buildings
- Mary** Robbing girls on their way home in the blackout?
- Aileen** No one appreciates what we Irish nurses do
- Mary** Ah they do.
- Aileen** Really? They think I'm a traitor just for talking to Bert about me own country, I'm reported to Matron for visiting a friend from home and you end up in the bloody police cells cos your boyfriend was after giving you a brooch. They don't trust us. Devalera was right- it's not out bloody war and we should keep out if it.
- Mary** Isn't the disease that we're fighting here the same as the one we'd be fighting back home? And who are we to say whether an Irish life is more important than an English one?
- Aileen** You and your bloody faith. If I could just save one person, one person...
- Mary** You will. You'll see
- Aileen** I'm glad Marty is getting better but, thing is I can't get Mr Prentice out of my head. Doctor said

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

disease has moved to his brain now - three or four days left at most. His poor wife came in for a visit. Poor love. Probably won't see him again

MARY Death's different here.

AILEEN I hate it. Families sent away. Noone by the bedside. I can't go back in. I can't face going to give someone their medicine and finding them stone cold/

MARY Last night gave you a terrible shock

AILEEN I can deal with it during the day when you can see it coming, do something, but at night **(Loud explosion)** Saints preserve us- that must be the next street.

MARY Miles away. Stop worrying.

AILEEN What if a bomb landed on our ward?

MARY So that's why you won't go back?

AILEEN I can't sleep for thinking about Jimmy. Keep seeing the flames- him stuck there- no way out. Oh God- tis a terrible way to

MARY Come here. *(Guides Aileen as if she is showing her something that is slightly out of the way)* Look up there. D'you see behind those trees?

AILEEN I've never noticed that

MARY Wide enough to walk on. Listen to me now, if we get a direct hit which please God we won't. Then we'll head for that ledge. Now, put that out and come on

(Bert appears stage left wearing an ARP uniform. The girls do not see him)

BERT **(In a deep voice)** Smokers out under curfew. You two best come with me.

MARY Oh Jesus. I told we'd get cau/

AILEEN Oh God. Tis the ARP

BERT Not quite. Bert Woodhouse - At your service.
(Holds put his hand. Mary tries to take it but he pinches her on the nose)

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

AILEEN Oh Bert. Behave. Poor girl's not used to you.

BERT Why are you out here? Fire watch duty?

MARY No. Aileen's scared of the night since that awful thing happened to her

BERT What awful thing?

AILEEN She means that the junior doctors are on tonight - and I'm worried they're not as vigilant as us. And what did we tell you about wearing that ARP uniform?

BERT Give me a break. I'm just a guy looking for the next big story

MARY Tonight? Jesus, Mary and Joseph - have a Twitter of wit! *(Aileen and Mary exit.)*

BERT What's that when it's at home?

AILEEN As long as that is all you're ***(There is a huge explosion near them. Bert moves immediately to Aileen to shield her from the falling debris.)*** Oh God -

MARY The hospital

AILEEN Our ward - it's been hit -

MARY ***(Rushes forward as if to enter the hospital).***

BERT Don't be stupid

AILEEN It could collapse.

MARY Marty.

BERT ***(Bert tries to stop her)*** You don't know if anyone will still be alive

MARY I can't leave him

BERT You could get killed

MARY Not on his own. He'll think I don't care

BERT If he loves you he's not going to want you to get yourself killed

AILEEN He's right

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

MARY So I just leave the patients?

BERT Think about yourself

MARY We're nurses

BERT I'm not a medical man - but TB and smoke- well

MARY Aileen?

BERT There's no way in

MARY We can try the back stairs

AILEEN That's madness.

BERT The glass in the windows has been shattered- you'll get cut to ribbons

AILEEN He's right. Best to keep away

MARY So the people who rushed towards Jimmy's plane as it crash landed and dragged him out of the flames were stupid were they?

AILEEN **(To Bert)** A friend

BERT What was that?

AILEEN Another window?

MARY No. Look-

BERT The roof's about to cave in! *(Loud creaking sound)* They'll have no chance now

MARY I have to go

BERT **(Aileen moves forward)** No. It's too dangerous

AILEEN Mary **(Aileen grabs Mary)**

MARY Leave me go.

AILEEN But

MARY I'm a nurse Aileen. I believe in saving my patients. Now are you coming with me or not. **(Bert bars the way. Mary wallops him)** Get outa my way

BERT I can't let you risk your/

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

MARY Ah go and sharpen your fookin' pencil- yer useless piece of

BERT You just swore.....Aileen

AILEEN *(Aileen rushes to go in. Bert grabs her)* You can't stop us

BERT But

AILEEN Like you said to me all those weeks ago. This country has never been kind to Ireland and we could let our English patients die. An' Mary and I were probably mad to come to nurse in a war zone but we did. And, I'll tell you something, when this horrible war's over, I don't want anyone thinking like that old bitch, Hannan, that the Irish were cowards. So I suggest you shut the fuck up and help us.

BERT My leg I can't

AILEEN How many time are you going make that leg of yours an excuse? Thought you were a reporter then look around. There's men covered in burns, missing arms, legs and look at you, still carrying on about an old limp. In case you didn't hear, Mary and I are going in- so if you wanna help us then do something useful and find someone. Cos I'll tell you something- we're going in there and we're going to bring those patients out. *(Aileen grabs Mary's hand and runs. Stage goes black sound of steam pipe exploding. We can hear patients calling out.)*

(LIGHTS FADE)

SCENE 14 - (Aileen, Mary and Bert are in the pub. They have just received their George Cross for their act of exceptional bravery. There are sounds of laughter, glasses clinking in the background)

Aileen Look! George Cross! You'll have to be treating me a bit different now, Bert Woodhouse.

Bert Don't you go thinking you're Lady Muck, now!

Aileen Not much chance of that - not with you around

Mary And here's mine! Gorgeous, isn't it?

Bert The ceremony - how was it?

Mary It was lovely - just lovely... Who would have thought? Mary Murphy from County Sligo - met the King of England

Aileen Bit more than that Mary - the United Kingdom and Dominions no less!

Mary Uniform had so much starch on it he couldn't get the pin in at first!

Bert No! Now there's a story - what did he say?

Mary Not much sure the poor fella's a terrible stutter

Aileen Oh - some such about our bravery - we didn't do anything special. Anyone in our shoes would have done it.

Bert There was no stopping you - straight into a bomb crater you went

Aileen Bert, don't exaggerate!

Bert But there is one thing that I don't understand. Mary how did you know how to get the patients out in all that dark and steam?

Mary Simple. I'd been planning my escape since the day I arrived at the hospital

Aileen You were more scared than me?

Mary Terrified.

Aileen But your faith?

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Mary I knew that the Blessed Mother would protect me, but sure there's no harm in giving her a head start

Bert Your patients must be so grateful

Aileen They're so sick. Don't think they really know what is going on

Mary Marty knew. Called us very fine lasses

Bert *(Drawing a piece of paper from his pocket)* Just started my story about your medals - here, let me read out the beginning 'The George Cross is awarded for acts of the greatest heroism or for most conspicuous courage in circumstance of extreme danger. Two Irish nurses, Aileen McBride and Mary Murphy, received the highest accolade for their bravery yesterday from King George VI for their selfless act of courage in rescuing 17 patients from certain death. Their hospital, Grove Park in Lewisham, suffered a -

Mary Oh, stop it would you - it's making me blush...

Bert And listen to what matron said "Nurse Turner was simply marvellous. I have never seen anything like the way she took complete charge of the situation. It was entirely due to their heroism that all" Good job I made you so mad

Aileen Let's read it later, enjoy our drinks for now, while we can. Slainte

Mary May you always have a clean shirt, a clear conscience and coins in your pocket!

Aileen Twas good of you to write the story -

Bert It deserved to be told - someone had to tell it...

Mary No one would have known about it if you hadn't done that -

Bert My pleasure - you two fine girls -

Aileen So thanks, but we didn't do anything special at all -

Bert For once in your life, Aileen McBride -accept a compliment!

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

Mary Well, I'm glad - me ma and da are so proud - it was in the local paper too. They've kept it for me for when I get home...

Aileen Well, I must admit, even Sister Hannan's been a bit kinder since -so it must have been worth it - eh Mary?

Mary (*laughs*) Right enough...

All (*They clink glasses*) Slainte! (*The air raid siren sounds*)

Bert Oh no -just got these in - better get to the shelter

Aileen (*They start moving quickly to stage right*)
Another day, another story, eh Bert?

Bert You're right there -

Mary May the angels protect us and heaven accept us.

Aileen Amen

(LIGHTS FADE)

SCENE 15- Sequel

(Martin is at the front of the stage - he has recovered from TB and is taking pictures with his camera, focusing on different members of the audience)

Great! Get these printed up tonight - hope there's enough light to capture them properly..... *(Slings camera round his shoulder)* Was good to see Bert after all these years. Filled out a bit now. A big man. In more ways than one. Got his by line all over the Daily Mail. The Mail- how he could he write for that capitalist rag - I just don't know. Confident too. That sort of confidence successful men have - as if his opinion counts for more than anyone else.

Saw him at the bar of my local. He bought me a pint, on expenses, of course. He was doing some piece about Britain five years after the war. Asked me what I thought about the new National Health Service Attlee brought in. Said it was a good start - one Churchill would never have made. Bert probably won't print that. 'We all have to make a living' he said. I suppose we all have to make compromises.

Asked him about Aileen - seems they stayed together all during the war, but she went back to Dublin as soon as the ferries started. He thinks she's still nursing over there but he's not heard from her for the past three or four years.

When he asked about Mary - I spouted some story about losing touch too. Didn't feel like talking about her. Anyway - what has Bert done to deserve the truth from me? Too hard, truth telling. He kept saying we should keep in touch - relive the old Lewisham days. Not me. Not ever. Mary was the only good thing to come out of it ...and now...

The streptomycin saved me. Came out just in time to save most of us who were there the night of the Blitz. Like some magic cure. One day we were dying of TB, the next we were walking out of that hospital with suitcases in our hands, just like Mary promised. Well, not quite the next day - but it felt like it.

First thing Mary and I did? We went dancing. She could dance too -feet flying over the dance floor like she was air. And her smile -lit up the room. Felt like I was fitting into my life again. Felt we had a future. Visited Ireland after the war. What a place. You could smell the cleanness of the air. Taste the salt by the sea. The colours. Fields so green you'd think you were in a fairy story. Beautiful. But tragic, too. So many people living hard lives. Scraping a living. Knowing

What's the Story? By Maureen Alcorn

their sons and daughters would be leaving. Going abroad. Only way to survive.

Took so many pictures didn't think I'd ever be able to develop them all. And Mary -there in all of them. Smiling. Looking out to sea. We only had the two weeks - wish we'd had more time. But Ireland was where our son was made - so glad for that.

Got married as soon as we got back to London. Dad got me a job in Young's brewery. With a child on the way all those dreams about photography - well, I had to accept that's just what they were - dreams. But we had such dreams for our child. And the world he'd grow up in. A better one. Not afraid to be ill. Not afraid of dying in some far off battlefield. A decent job. A decent home. But then there were complications. They saved the baby - but couldn't save my lovely Mary. The saddest thing? That was the way Mary would have wanted it. She never cared about herself. Risked her life when the bomb dropped on the ward. Risked TB every day - gave me hope. Never thought that she would be the one to die. Oh, Mary -

So, our son, Declan. I'll make sure he knows all about his mother. Mary. I'll show him her George Cross. How she met the King. Show him the article in the London Gazette, calling her a heroine. Tell him how she saved us all. Never boasting. Saying anyone would have done what she did. That's her story. My Mary's story. My beautiful, modest, smiling Mary.

The End