

The Report

Jessica Francis Kane

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The best historical fiction breathes life into inanimate history. Protagonists fight wars, influence events, or survive horrifying disasters such as the bomb shelter tragedy in London's Bethnal Green on March 8, 1943. To commemorate the event's thirtieth anniversary, an aspiring film director with a secret connection to the tragedy interviews the real-life London magistrate who investigated how 173 people could have died in less than a minute when no German bombs had fallen.

Sir Laurence Dunne was appointed to investigate the incident by a wartime government concerned with civilian morale. In just thirteen days, he interviewed eighty witnesses and wrote his report, only to have it suppressed by the war cabinet. Jessica Francis Kane's first novel builds on this official silence, recreating events as they might have happened. When Dunne's wife comments that annoyance is "the least emotion," Dunne realizes that the testimony of Ada Barber, whose youngest daughter died that night, may conceal a guilty truth.

Ada and her daughters are near the front of a large shelter-bound crowd spurred by fear of a heavy German attack. She feels inadequate "watching her children grow thin, explaining over and over why there wasn't more to eat," and she resents Mrs. Wigdorowicz, a Jewish refugee just ahead, whose bundle of blankets jolts Ada's memory; her blankets are still at the flat, and her daughters will be cold that night.

When Mrs. Wigdorowicz stumbles, the pressing crowd heedlessly surges forward, creating an impassable wall of human bodies. The shelter's wardens struggle desperately to separate interwoven limbs to save lives. The dead are virtually intact, killed by "severe hypoxia," a rapid decompression of the lungs.

Skillfully weaving fact with fiction, Kane details Dunne's inquiry. Officials describe futile efforts to light the small landing's awkward turn and the overly wide stairs that lack a center railing. Deft character sketches punctuate the narrative: the guilt-wracked chief warden who hangs himself and a parish priest who knows when mourners need to protest illustrate the hardships of living among burned-out buildings while loved ones fight far away.

Dunne omits all hints of blame from his report, but its futility combines with his son's death in Italy to leave him a broken man. Like Ada, he learns that sometimes "you don't get to be happy again. You simply change, and then you decide if you can live with the change."

ELIZABETH BREAU (September / October 2010)

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