

AN explosion tore the night apart. Rifle fire answered a hail of mortars. Glass shattered. Buildings fell. Screams were drowned by a fresh wave of shelling.

On the hill above the town a ragged figure cowered behind a rock, terrified, desperate thoughts crashing so hard against each other that they seemed louder than the fighting below. Move. Get away. Now! Over the mountains. Across the border. Sleep? No! No rest. No food. Escape! Leave the horror. Blood. Fear. Stink of death. Leave it behind. Dead! So many dead! The men. Shot. Gone. All gone. Who is fighting now? Women? Children? Will the battle rage until the whole town is slaughtered?

Keeping low to the ground the figure moved, scurrying from rock to rock like a frightened rodent evading a bird of prey.

The world is big. Find somewhere. Make a new home. A new beginning. A fresh start. Go. Now. Go!

THE CIRCUS IS COMING TO TOWN

MY name is Poppy Fields. I'm not very keen on circuses. I'm not saying that the performers aren't talented – I mean, there aren't many people who can juggle and unicycle and eat fire; fewer still can walk a tightrope or turn a somersault or dangle ten metres above the ground suspended by their teeth. So you have to admire people who can. The trouble is, I don't quite see the point of it all. It's not like there's a riveting storyline to follow. As far as I can see, a circus is just a load of people in spangly leotards showing off.

So when Brady Sparkles's outfit came to town, why was I practically elbowing old ladies out of the queue so that Graham and I could get front-row seats?

It was because this particular circus was offering its audience something completely different. The posters promised that the first performance would end in Certain Death.

The advance publicity had started appearing two weeks before the circus arrived. It was the same every year: the caravans and lorries would always pitch up at our local park on the last Friday before the summer half-term holiday. They'd erect the big top (a pretty spectacular event in itself) and then do three days of performances, beginning with a Saturday matinee. My mum had taken me years ago, but we hadn't been back since: one afternoon being blinded by cheesy grins and tangerine tans was enough as far as I was concerned.

So on the way to Graham's house I walked straight past the first poster without giving it so much as a glance. But a second one had been stuck on the wall of the bus shelter, and I ended up reading it while we waited for the bus to school.

WORLD PREMIERE! it screamed. DEBUT PERFORMANCE!!! NEVER BEFORE SEEN!!!! IRENA, THE FLYING BALLERINA, PRESENTS HER HEART-STOPPING NEW ACT!!!!!!

"Whoever wrote that should be prosecuted for reckless use of exclamation marks," I said. "Talk

about squandering the planet's resources. There'll be a worldwide punctuation shortage if they're not careful."

Graham flashed one of his blink-and-you-miss-it grins. I turned back to the poster and read the last line.

WITHOUT A SAFETY NET, IRENA DEFIES GRAVITY AND FACES ALMOST CERTAIN DEATH!!!!!!!!!!

Or at least that was what it was *supposed* to say. But someone had taken a black marker to it and crossed out the word "almost".

"Look at that," I said, pointing.

"Someone's idea of a joke, presumably," Graham replied with a shrug.

I wasn't so sure. "I don't think so," I said, peering at it more closely. I mean, posters are always being defaced in that bus shelter. But people usually draw moustaches or scrawl their names or write rude words. This was different. Whoever had done it must have been pretty angry – they'd pressed so hard that they'd wrecked the pen, you could see a splodge of ink where the felt tip had collapsed. Then I noticed something even more odd.

"That line's dead straight," I said.

"Do you think that has some sort of significance?" asked Graham.

“Yes, I do,” I answered thoughtfully. “How many vandals do you know who bother to use a ruler?”

The third poster was on the school noticeboard and I was drawn to it like a magnet. When I saw the same heavy black line through the word “almost”, I felt a prickle of concern.

“That poster,” I said to Mrs Cook, the school secretary.

“Which one?” she replied, looking harassed as usual.

“Brady Sparkles’s Circus. It’s been drawn on.”

“Has it, dear? I hadn’t noticed.”

“So you don’t know who did it?”

“No, I’m afraid not. Does it matter?”

“Who gave it to you?” I asked.

“Some man from the circus,” Mrs Cook said. “He offered half-price tickets for the staff if I put it up.”

“But you don’t know if it was already marked like that when you stuck it on the board?”

“No dear, sorry.”

By now I was holding up a queue of people who wanted to pay their lunch money or hand in permission slips for school trips, so I couldn’t pursue it further. Not that Mrs Cook had any more to tell me. In fact, all the grown-ups we talked to over the next couple of weeks

proved to be amazingly unobservant. Graham and I hunted down posters like a pair of sniffer dogs, and each and every one we found was marked in the same way. What we couldn't discover was whether they'd been tampered with *before* they'd been put up, which would probably mean someone in the circus had done it, or afterwards, in which case someone in the town must have a pretty warped sense of humour. We tried asking in the shops that displayed posters, but all the conversations we had went pretty much the same as the one I'd had with Mrs Cook.

"Your poster's been drawn on."

"Has it? Oh yes."

"You didn't see anyone do it?"

"No. Certain death, eh? Sounds exciting. Maybe I'll take the kids."

The day before the circus was due to arrive, the local newspaper ran a big feature on it. There was a double-page spread showing photographs of Peepo, a mad-looking clown with a big moustache who would be running circus-skills workshops between performances; the Dashing Blade, a knife-thrower who wore alarmingly thick glasses; Alonzo and the Bouncing Bellinis, a troupe of exceedingly springy acrobats; and Carlotta, a lady who did something bizarre with a hula

hoop. But pride of place had been given to Irena, who I suspected was actually quite pretty under the heavy make-up. It seemed that Irena and Alonzo (who had a scarily hairy chest) had developed a new act together, and the caption under their photo declared in big black letters that when they premiered it on Saturday, Irena would face Certain Death.

“Do you think the journalist has made a mistake?” I said to Graham. “A typing error or something?”

“I don’t think the article was written by someone at the paper,” Graham replied. “Look – it says at the top of the page that it’s an Advertisement Feature.”

“What does that mean?”

“As I understand it, the circus will have paid for it to go in – it’s a glorified advert. They’ll have provided all the words and pictures.”

“So someone must have tampered with the wording *before* it was sent in to the newspaper?” I asked. Graham nodded. “In that case it has to be someone in the circus. No one else could have done it, could they?”

“I believe not,” Graham agreed.

“Do you reckon it’s a joke? Or is someone really planning to kill Irena?”

“Oh dear. Here we go again.” Graham looked at me, sighed wearily and said, “I suppose you want us to find out.”