

Praise for Shelter

‘Beautiful’
Adele Parks

‘A tender and illuminating novel, written with warmth
and eloquence’

Carys Bray, author of *A Song for Issy Bradley*

‘Powerful and moving. Connie and Seppe are amazing
characters. So well nuanced. I loved her feisty courage.
And such heartbreak! This compelling debut shows
how outsiders in a time of war seek to rebuild
their lives again.’

Essie Fox, author of *The Last Days of Leda Grey*

‘I LOVED it. Seppe is one of the most refreshing
portrayals of masculinity I have ever read’

Shelley Harris, author of *Jubilee*

‘A lovely hymn to the woods and the men and women
who worked there during the Second World War’

Lissa Evans, author of *Their Finest Hour and a Half*

‘One of the year’s hottest debuts’

NetGalley, Book of the Month

‘The deeply profound effects of war quietly resonate through Sarah Franklin’s gentle but delightful debut. Filled with characters armed with little more than their steadfast resolve and plucky humour, *Shelter* casts a light on the often forgotten work of the Women’s Timber Corps and presents it with charm and delicately refreshing warmth.’

Jason Hewitt, author of *Devastation Road*

‘Evocative, beautifully complex characters you grow to adore and a grittiness that grounds you within its message of loss, hope and what home really means’

Goodreads 5* review

‘Such a treat . . . a super sense of place’

Rachael Beale, London Review Bookshop

‘Beautifully written . . . Authentic and honest’

Roger Deek, ‘Reading the Forest’

‘An impressive debut’

WhatCathyReadNext

‘Fresh, moving and redemptive’

Isabel Costello, *Literary Sofa*

‘A brilliant book. Everyone should read it’

Alex Reeve, author of *House on Half Moon Street*

Shelter

Sarah
FRANKLIN



Zaffre

Spring, 1944

Five

BILLY'S LETTER CRACKLED IN his father's pocket as Amos picked his way back home through the gathering dusk, the sheep all accounted for until the morning. The oaks were starting to fill out, this time of year, and lime light spread through them and up over the spruce-flanked ridge Amos would have to climb to get home. Behind him, the sheep grazed peacefully down the hill. The ground beneath him was still just about purpling from the last of the bluebells, but it wouldn't be long now before it withered back to the brown of last year's leaf fall.

Amos brought up a fist, joints swollen with the damp, his eyes smarting with the last of the sun's rays. Bess trotted faithfully ahead, the collie showing no signs of tiring even after a day of herding and rounding the straggling ewes.

Amos juted the tip of his crook into a birch root and heaved on up the slope. No need to bring the letter out – he knew these words better than the nightly prayer he'd got his Billy saying. But he'd keep this one close until the

next one arrived, keep the lad safe and out here in the forest with him.

When Amos had walked Billy to the train up in Cinderford on that day two months ago, the boughs were still bare. The earth and bark of the forest had been scrubbed away from the boy too, replaced with starched white-and-blue, the smell of serge and carbolic soap. Amos shuddered, turned his gaze outward again.

Wouldn't be long until shearing time now. You could see it in the branches, feel it in the softening underfoot. The leaves were unfurling again and winter had mulched away those great big drifts that the sheep liked to wander into. All very well until they did turn around inside the leaf piles and start panicking. The daft blighters didn't seem to learn from one year to the next, and it was hard to find them when mist thickened the spaces between the trees. Fourth year of the flashlight ban and he still hadn't got used to it. As if Jerry was ever going to find them down here, let alone bomb them. Taken seriously though, the ban was; every week in the *Dean Forest Mercury* he saw more and more notices of people brought up before the county court accused of shining lights where none should be, slapped with fines people down here could ill afford. So instead Amos had to examine every last shadow, standing still beside the briar to judge if that shape or this was sheep or bush.

Amos didn't set much store by wishing for things; that was only a way of borrowing trouble from tomorrow, far as he could see. But it ran through him like a seam of ore, this deep longing that by the time the oaks were stripped of leaves again, this war would be done and Billy would be back where he belonged. Everything had its season. But it was all off-kilter nowadays. People didn't leave the Forest; why would they? All the life you'd need was right here.

What had he done to make Billy want to leave? It stuck

SHELTER

to Amos like a burr. What had he missed? The boy had seemed contented all right, grafting in the mine, sitting outside on a summer evening with him and Frank and a pint of cider. But sometimes if you looked at a thing every day, you stopped seeing the changes.

Amos skirted the remains of a fire pit. Started earlier by those new Eyetie prisoners and their funny ways, no doubt. No Forester would build a fire in the middle of a copse to keep warm. But now the forest, *his* forest, was being overrun with evacuees, with POWs, with GIs. Worse than the last war this was an' all, far worse; seemed like there'd be no rest until half of England was crammed in amongst the trees, and it just weren't intended that way, the forest. Women were coming on their own, too. It weren't right; anyone who knew the forest could see that.

According to Joyce, who did make it her business to know everything, these incomers were flocking to the two forest towns demanding things never needed in forest homes before: inside lavatories, water from a tap. They might as well ask for the forest drift mines to yield gold instead of coal, or for them to have them fancy elevators the deep mines did have 'stead of being built for walking into. Forest homes were two up, two down, built with stone from the quarry to fit the family as originally lived in it, more often than not. Even in Cinderford and Coleford and the towns you wouldn't find anything fancy. Forest folk didn't have need of them things.

In the centre of the fire pit, amber and ochre splashed against grey embers, molten tongues of ash and yew singing their scent into the crackling air. Amos tutted again, poking smouldering sticks with the tip of his boot. He arced patterns in the ash with his crook, strewing the embers over the base of the fire, making sure each last flame was extinguished.

Amos whistled to Bess and trudged the final steps home. There they were, his cottage and Frank's, where they'd been for generations, ever since their grandfathers had worked together to build the two of them, laying stone and digging gardens where before had just been a rough gap in the trees. You could do it like that then, mind.

The door didn't want to open again tonight so he put his shoulder to it. The weather was in the wood, swelling the door, making it uncooperative. Not likely to get proper rain, they weren't, not this late in spring, but you could tell where it had been, despite the onward march of the forest down through the seasons.

The fire had long since died in the grate and his breath puffed white into the gloom of the hall. Amos hung his coat up on the peg beside Billy's, hooked the stick beneath it. It boded Billy's and the hall filled up with the smell of the boy, of dust and apples and horses and bits of straw. Nothing else to fill it up, mind. The house was as empty as it had been nineteen years ago, a sweltering summer when May lay dying at the infirmary up the road in Cinderford and Billy was in isolation whilst the doctors waited to see if scarlet fever would claim him too. Heartsick and scared to his bones, Amos had tended the sheep day and night, same as he ever had. Weren't nothing else he could do. It hadn't helped, but that weren't the point of it. Every teatime he'd cut a bit of bread and walked up to the Dilke to look in on May and Billy. Then he'd gone back into the woods to get the sheep sorted out before coming home to a house ghosted with absence.

He glanced up at the pictures above the coats. The paint was lighter around the edge of May's photograph, marking time where the silver frame had once held it. 'I tried to stop him, May, honest I did. Tried talking to him but it was no use. What did he have to go off to war for?' He

SHELTER

noddled at Billy's picture, pinned up beside May, just barely touched his fingers to it, then moved away.

Amos sat down in his chair and stared again at the letter from Billy, in case the words had changed. '*I couldn't stay put.*' Amos shook his head at the page. Billy should be here now, talking about how them new lambs were doing up near Drybrook, not so many miles up the Severn he might as well be in Timbuktu.

The sudden banging nearly made him rip the letter clean in two. Right ruddy state that would have been. Bess pricked her ears but it wasn't an animal; she slumped back down. Shouldn't have the dog inside, really, working collie like that, but Billy had always snuck Bess in and Amos didn't mind the company, truth be told.

The front door knocker banged again. Couldn't remember the last time anyone'd used that. The noise blasted down the hall, carried on empty air.

'Keep your hair on; I'm coming.' He was slower up than he used to be since his Billy had gone. His feet didn't want to move anywhere once he'd made it home of an evening.

'Joyce. Don't expect you at the front door, all formal like.' Funny to see her in her coat this time of evening, though her hair was still tucked into its headscarf as usual. She filled the doorway like she always did. Bonnie woman, Joyce: you knew when she was in a room.

She was wearing that look that Amos had come to know all too well over the years. She wanted something, did Joyce, and she'd stay put until she'd got it. He steeled himself. Two could play at that game.

Some raggedy young woman was splayed beside her like a half-terrified yearling trying to put a brave face on it.

'Amos.' Joyce had one hand up already. 'I know Frank

spoke to you last week but I've been up at that site today and things are out of hand. Frank needs the help.'

Joyce shoved the girl forward and she smiled at him, hope in her eyes. Amos twisted away from her.

'I told your Frank, and I'm telling you, Joyce. That's our Billy's room and it's no being taken over by no wench. Someone else can have her.' He folded his arms, elbows firm against the doorjamb.

Joyce wasn't having any of it. 'Now listen, Amos. The whole forest's full up. Frank needs this, you know he does or I wouldn't be here. If we had the space we'd take her ourselves, but we don't. The spare room's full to bursting with all the sewing I'm taking in, and the longer we have to Make Do and Mend, the more stuffed that room becomes.'

Amos's bunions were giving him gyp, all this standing around. 'I'm not doing it, Joyce. It's our Billy's room, and that's that. The war'll be over soon enough.'

That brought a splutter from the girl. Full of kerfuffle she was, for someone who evidently had no home to go to.

Joyce came in closer and he drew back, away from the doorway. 'You can't go keeping that room as a shrine; it doesn't help anyone. If I know you, you haven't touched a thing up there since Billy's left, have you? Bet the door's shut tight to keep all of him in.' She was in the hallway now, the girl as well, bunched up like ewes trying to get through a gate. That young woman was more like a goat in the sheep pen, come to think of it. She was jittering about as if figuring out who to butt next, too brash, too colourful, in that bright lipstick of hers. His eyes hurt.

Joyce nodded up at the pictures of May and Billy, tugging at the belt of her coat as if missing the cardigan she would normally wrap around her. 'What would May here think of this? All these years you've kept your Billy alive, brought

SHELTER

up that lovely strong man we all love, and now you're acting like he's dead already, keeping his room all shut up like a mausoleum.'

Joyce had a point, but Amos was darned if he was going to admit it. If May were here she'd be on at him to fill the blessed room, especially if it was to help out Frank and Joyce. He ran a forefinger over the rough edge of the photograph, looked up and saw Joyce had caught it. Eagle-eyed, that woman was; didn't miss a trick.

'When May passed away and it looked like your Billy was going the same way, we did help out, didn't we? Gave what we could to keep that baby in the hospital until he was cured. Just like you helped out me and Frank when his leg got trapped under that oak and he couldn't work for months.'

Joyce put her hand on his arm. His body strained with the effort of not moving it away. 'Nobody's asking you to sell any more silver, Amos. All we need is a roof over this Connie's head, stop her getting any more daft ideas about sleeping in Frank's forestry hut. She's a good little worker, Frank says, and he doesn't make those claims lightly, as you know. You know how riled up he is about all these extra timber quotas sent down by them blokes who don't know how to manage a forest. Frank needs all the help he can get at the moment, and that includes keeping this one here, so it seems.' Joyce smiled briskly at Connie and the young woman returned her smile.

Wasn't often he saw Joyce plead, however used he was to her notions. His firm intentions mulched. That girl must have something going for her, if Joyce could see past the sickly scent and the bright lips.

'You have to have her, Amos. Can't leave her to her own devices out there. We wouldn't if she was one of ours, would we?'

SARAH FRANKLIN

There was no point arguing the toss with Joyce, not when she'd got her teeth into something.

'Can she cook?'

'Doubt it, but I'll teach her a few bits. Least I can do.'

'Aye, you do that. Want someone who can pull her weight a bit.'

Amos tipped his head at the stairs, led the way up. His hand shook on the banister. Joyce was right; this was what Foresters did, gave each other a hand. But it felt all wrong. What if something dreadful happened to Billy out there in that war of Mr Churchill's because Amos had moved life on without him? He wasn't sure he'd be able to bear it.

Amos pushed open the door to Billy's room, nodded the women in, his head aching slightly. He couldn't pretend Billy was coming back any time soon. And that didn't sit right, didn't sit right at all.

Six

WHOEVER HAD OWNED THESE boots before they were issued to Seppe had loved to play football. The leather was scuffed almost into oblivion at the right toe, the heel worn down where this mystery man had angled time and again for the ball. But they fitted Seppe as if they'd been waiting for him.

He resisted the urge to scuff the other toe so that the shoes matched up, and continued his walk around the perimeter fence, urgency setting in now he'd nearly arrived at the right spot. The sheer height and length of the fence spoke of hordes of POWs yet to come. Italy's wartime losses must be more severe even than they'd seen in the desert. More imprisoned Italian troops meant more Italian factions, more arguments about the dominance of the northern *fasci* over the soft, partisan south and whose fault it was that they were now incarcerated. Already the staunch *fasci* were making themselves known, even though they were in the minority here, forming a choir and lustily belting out the 'Giovinezza' as 'resistance'. The guards took

no action, even stopping sometimes to listen, feet tapping along. Seppe, for whom the song raised instant hackles of apprehension, couldn't believe the guards let it continue, reasoned that it was because they had no idea of its potency as a fascist anthem.

The night terrors had returned. He dreaded the days, the lies he had to tell to avoid being pulled in to the growing band of fascist troublemakers here. But the nights were worse. Violent colours clashed and screams rent the fabric of his soul so that he woke grasping for his knife, his garments soaked with sweat. He had been lucky, that's what they'd told him, his capture relatively bloodless, the Allies ambushing them before first light and surrounding them so that the only recourse was surrender. But still the wounds and horror of battle played nightly, a prelude to the memories of Alessa, rendering sleep futile and every day jagged and uncertain.

Seppe had managed to turn down an invitation – more of a command, really – to join the inmate choir by hinting that he'd smuggled a weapon into the camp and was thus doing his 'resistance duty'. But it was a patch of a lie, destined to wilt away the moment his compatriots saw this 'weapon' in action.

How he needed to find it now. The knife was the sole thing that could sustain him and he felt its absence in every muscle of his arms, in every vivid nightmare. Seppe glanced over his shoulder, apprehension never far away. Would the guards think he was trying to escape?

But none of them were watching; they'd joined in the game of five-a-side starting up on the scuffed parade ground. Perhaps his boots had belonged to one of the sentries before they'd made their way to the uniform stores.

He held his breath as he turned around, to stay less visible. What about the watchtowers? In the holding camp by the ferry, and before that, in that first camp in Egypt,

SHELTER

the barrels of the rifles had poked out, a constant, oppressive reminder that they were captives and alive only at the mercy of their captors.

But there were no watchtowers here. It had taken all of his first week for this to really sink in, so discomfited was he by the discrepancy. But he couldn't wait any longer. He had to do it today. This had been the longest period he'd been without the knife; the desert had yielded long patches of waiting around for the foot soldiers such as himself and he'd managed to use it daily despite the salt gumming his fingers from the sweat and the heat, the anxiety coursing through his fingers out into the smooth handle.

Only with the knife in his hands again would he gain some sense of self, some calm.

Seppe lined himself up so that he was opposite the ablutions barracks and dropped to his knees. In the confusion of their arrival he'd buried it somewhere here, in one of these mounds of earth that looked like a misguided escape attempt. 'Molehills,' the guard had told him. 'Can't stop the blighters.'

The molehills had multiplied in the few days since he'd used one as a hiding place. Seppe scrabbled at the first heap of earth he came to. It was damp and surprisingly silky, but yielded nothing.

Nothing in the second one, either. In the third, his increasingly desperate fingers met something hard and he pulled it out in relief, but it was a piece of stone, worn smooth from years of mud.

Seppe's pulse met his fingertips and his breath quickened. It *must* be here. Nobody else had noticed him bury it, he was sure of that. He straightened and looked again at the camp. No guards were in sight. He bent to his task again. Off beyond the fence a hawk called, the eerie bleat of a lost child.

His nails found it first, clinking against the blade. His fingers curled around the handle and relief surged through him. *Ecco*. Even covered in a pile of dirt, he knew this was it. Seppe lifted his hands and pulled out the knife. Perhaps these disturbingly relaxed guards wouldn't have confiscated it; maybe he hadn't needed to bury it after all. But he couldn't have taken that risk, his English not good enough to explain how he needed this knife, what the weight of it in his hand did to his soul. Seppe's breath eased as he shook the clinging remains of the dirt from the blade and slipped it into his pocket.

Now, if he could only find a piece of wood he could make a start. Anything would do. He paced the perimeter, his breath coming fast now, eyes sweeping like the searchlights. But the weather had been calm and still since they had arrived at the camp a few days ago, and the imposing ranks of trees beyond the perimeter fence hadn't given anything up.

He found what he was looking for at the furthest end of the camp, away from the locked gates and the parade ground, beside the ungainly structure of brick and concrete that was apparently on its way to becoming yet another sign of Italian dominance. An elbow of wood unable to support its spring foliage. *Perfetto*.

Seppe bumped down the knots in the wire until he was sitting on the ground. He turned the wood over in his hands. It was scaly against his palm, the lichen betraying its age. What did it smell of? Of the earth, of damp, and of something else that must be the scent particular to this timber. He studied the cluster of leaves, sticking out of the far end of the wood like a bunch of flowers at Holy Communion. Tiny hands, reaching out to greet him. This was oak.

Allora, finalmente. He fished the knife back out of his

SHELTER

pocket and tested it against his finger, then against the wood. Renzo's voice echoed in his ears, still clear and calm after a decade. 'Not quite sharp enough, not yet. Never start with a blunt blade.' With a rush he was in Livorno again, outside the stables at the port with the men rushing trolleys to the ships, the shriek of the seagulls and the brine of the sea against blue skies, his hands clamped around the blade's handle, the only place they didn't tremble.

The knife was his guardian, the bright thread that showed him how to be himself. Caught between these English guards and his volcanic, trapped fellow-prisoners, it was more vital to survival than ever.

Seppe ran the knife against the wire, wincing at the screech of metal against metal. He glanced around again: surely this would bring the guards running? He needed to be careful until he knew he could explain properly about the knife in English. But the football match was still in full flow, any noise he made drowned out by the shouts of outrage and success.

This time when he greeted wood with metal, the knife pulled through cleanly, despite its time in the soil. Seppe rotated the wood, sizing it up, slicing through soft layers of moss and bark, finding the rhythm of the grain, his breath slowing, his hands steadying, his mind calming.

The wood was softer here than he was used to. *L'acqua satura il legno*. He heard Renzo's voice again: there's water in the wood. But despite the unfamiliar quality of this English oak, the knife grounded him, carried in it all the memories of the happy times with Renzo, their backs warming against the sun on the stable door, knees up, forearms resting as they sat side by side with their knives and their carvings, taking a break before getting back to the 'proper' carpentry Renzo was paid for by the Livorno port authority.

Seppe's heartbeat settled. Gently, gently he carved,

twisting and turning the wood, humming, content, his fingers, thumbs and palm forming his own personal lathe. A soft gust of wind blew up over the hill and a timpani of fallen twigs rattled against the wire. He smiled to feel the reassuring ache in his fingers as they found the grooves of the knife, the grooves of the grain, and his breathing slowed, a tune came slowly to his lips.

During the interminable, confusing months in the camp in Egypt, he had carved by the light of the same unforgiving moon that had led to their capture, not daring to show the knife in daylight for fear of dying by it. The guards there had been brutal, unprepared, didn't take kindly to the hundreds of Italians thrust upon them, the near-constant escape attempts. *Certo* they would not have played football with the inmates. This English camp was an inexplicable place. There was talk here of some prisoners being sent out into the forest on work duties.

He peered at the dark outline of the trees just beyond the camp. To work outside, to carry the illusion that you were a free man, to be soothed by nature during the course of a prison day . . . To return each evening to this camp, which, despite the poisonous choirs and aggression that bubbled below the surface, threatening any moment to erupt, was proving to be a place of uneasy but nonetheless reassuring containment. Seppe shivered at the thought of it, dared to dream.

'Where did you get that knife?' A shadow fell over him. Now the trouble would come.

A guard, panting slightly, whether from the football or with self-importance was hard to assess yet.

'Thought I saw a funny glint and then we realised we had one missing from the roll call. Come on, Sonny Jim.'

Seppe put his hand over the blade the way Renzo had a decade earlier, but he didn't offer it up.

SHELTER

'No, no!' He gritted his teeth. The knife must stay with him. The guard would never understand. Even in Italian he couldn't have expressed this.

'What do you mean, no? Up here with a knife and half a blessed tree, by the looks of it? You want to tell me what you're up to?'

Seppe couldn't follow all the words but he had been an expert gauge of his father's tone since before he could read, and this man wasn't angry. He sounded curious. Seppe forced his shoulders back, met the guard's eyes.

'Is from friend, the knife. For make this.' He opened his palm. There in the centre like a communion wafer, was a thumb-sized acorn. It wasn't anywhere near finished yet. The bowl needed nicking with the inverse edge to dapple it, and the nut itself was too symmetrical. But it was a start.

'Crikey Moses, lad, you made that in the time it took the rest of us to have a bit of a kick about? Well, I'll be blowed.' Seppe's shoulders sagged.

'You'd better come with me. Hundreds more like you arriving these next few weeks and we haven't got anything like the furniture we need. The boss is in two minds if we're going to need to segregate you all, too. From the sounds of things it'll be them from the north of your country coming next, and from what we've heard on the wireless here, them's the ones that love that Mussolini. Reckon they'll be a whole other kettle of fish from these soft southerners we've had in, we do.'

The guard beamed.

'Anyway, reckon you could build a table or two?'

Seppe had built his first table, with only minor interventions from Renzo, when he was fourteen.

'*Certo.*'

The guard smiled again. 'Reckon you've got yourself a

SARAH FRANKLIN

job then, boy. And if you prove to be half decent, not one of them troublemakers, I'll see my way to getting your knife back to you.'

He had no choice. Working in the woods was only a dream, not something for someone like him. 'I start now.'

Seven

May

SHE WASN'T IN COVENTRY any more. Amos's house was her home for now, if you wanted to look at it that way. Perhaps it would feel more like home once she'd been to this dance tonight, started living a bit more like she used to. Not that living totally like she used to was an option any more. Connie smoothed down her yellow dress and shook her head to stop the bad memories landing. She pushed open the door into the little back room and concentrated on the biggest difference between here and home: the wiry black-and-white dog splayed out in front of the fire. Connie had never lived with an animal before and was surprised every day by that jolt of happiness when Bess nudged her rough nose under Connie's hand. She found herself wanting to say things to the dog that she couldn't say aloud to anyone in case she crumpled, and it made her pleased and terrified all at once.

Amos was shrunk into that wingback chair of his, head cocked to one side to catch the wireless despite it being up so loud that Frank and Joyce must be able to hear it from

their side of the wall too. Connie sighed, sympathy for Amos inflating her. He might not say much, but he didn't miss a bulletin. He spent a lot of time poring over a very crumpled envelope, apparently always in his pocket.

'Billy. His only son,' Joyce had said one Saturday afternoon when she'd come over to show Connie how to pluck a chicken (Joyce had killed it herself! She'd shot right up in Connie's estimation for such daredevilry).

In a flash Connie had got why Amos wasn't one for gabbing on. Even after all these years of war, it only hit hard when it came for your family.

It wasn't cold out, but Connie pulled her cardigan closer over her dress as she skirted the shadow-filled garden to get to the road down to Parkend and Hetty. It went on for miles, that garden; you'd fit another row of houses at least into that garden if this were Coventry. At the end, where there should be brick walls backing on to terraces behind, fuzzy green stone walls were locked in ownership battles with trees. All these trees! And Frank was worrying about getting down enough to fill some daft Ministry of Supply numbers. Frank felt about these trees the way Amos felt about his son; he was sending them off to a war when all he wanted to do was keep them safe.

There was the path. Wouldn't be long now. A gin and the music would perk her up.

This dance might yet be worth the trouble of sprucing herself up. The Yank looked a bit surprised at being asked to dance, but he recovered quickly enough. He was a pretty slick mover, too. Connie wanted to put her head back and howl at the sheer joyous rightness of it, but he'd probably do a runner. She ducked and twisted, smiling, staying at arm's length, the tiredness shucking off with every swoop, every twirl.

SHELTER

A slow number came on – who knew you could play slowly on seven accordions? – and the Yankee moved in closer, pulling her towards him.

No.

The panic of the bombs was upon Connie again without warning, sending sparks into her speech.

She pushed away and the GI took a step back, hands outstretched. ‘Hey, no offence meant.’

She smelled a trace of his Lucky Strikes and swallowed, her mouth slick and watery.

She needed to get out.

‘Sorry . . . sorry . . .’ She hustled her way to the door.

‘Watch it, you!’ Connie didn’t stop to see who was yelling like that, or why.

That tree with the big splayed leaves, opposite the hall, would have to do. Connie braced herself against its trunk and heaved up all the jolted memories along with her dinner. Nobody was queuing outside now, thank heavens, and even George Thomas’s accordions were muted from this distance. She stood gingerly upright and leaned against the tree, backhanding away tears.

She’d been so excited about coming to the dance that she hadn’t bargained for the way the music would slice right through the shell she’d been forming. Connie leaned over the branch and retched again, speckling the shadowy grey-green of the lichen with vomit. And the Yank’s accent, as he had got up close, it had been too much. The tears were back, streaming this time. Nothing to do but to let them out.

If only she could go back and change it all, she’d be dead – and that’d be easier than this. Easier than toughing it out and carrying on alone. If she could only will the bombers back. Connie looked up into the sky, but all she saw were the tops of the tree laced with soundless stars.

SARAH FRANKLIN

There hadn't been any cloud cover *that* night either.



January, 1944

The Coventry doormen are old hands at ramming them all through at double speed before their light and laughter betrays them. There's barely room to hop on the dance floor. It's heaving, joyous. Connie, spruced up in the bright yellow dress and on her second glass of gin and water, has already lost the girls from the factory in the crush of it all. What does it matter, though? The band, some local outfit with bad teeth and good tunes, is playing the 'Chattanooga Choo Choo' with as much spirit as Captain Glenn Miller himself, and all around couples are whooping and swooping. The music ripples through Connie and she laughs. Mam was expecting her home by teatime. She's supposed to be minding the littluns whilst Mam goes to the bingo to win the family fortune and Dad slopes off to the workingmen's club to drink it. But then Cass, working beside her on the munitions belt, started on about the dance.

'It's your Friday night too, you know; and God knows we've worked for it this week. I feel like we must have built twenty new tanks between us.' Cass has a point; they've worked like the devil was at their backs this week. To stay on top of their production targets the munitions factory has had them doing overtime whether they want it or not, the whole line of them.

'Aw; I dunno; I'm all done in and I've got nowt to wear.'

'What d'you think those dresses hanging up in the ladies' are for? For times like these, that's what.' Cass grabs her

SHELTER

arm and pulls her across towards the lavs, grinning that grin that means mischief is afoot. 'You don't really want to go home, be honest. You want to come and have a laugh with us.'

Cass is right; she does want some fun. So Connie borrows a dress from the spares in the lav, pinches her cheeks for the appearance of rouge and paints on her favourite red smile. Anything's possible.

And here she is, in the heat and the dark of the dance hall, ready.

'Looks like you've got it all figured out, lady.' Warm hands wrap themselves around Connie's waist and a lick of flame heats her thighs and her belly. She smiles at the familiar voice, arches and hooks one arm easily around Don's neck, brushing his cheek. Her forearm tingles at its smoothness. He must spend hours in front of the mirror making sure he hasn't missed a patch.

'Wondered if I'd see you here tonight,' she says, and twirls to face him as if they're already dancing.

'Is that right?' Don bends down, kisses her full on the mouth with beery lips. 'Well, it's your lucky day, lady.' He's a cocky sod; she fell straight for it the first time they danced. And he doesn't care that she matches it. Most blokes expect her to mind her P's and Q's, but this Yank seems entertained by her outspokenness. She'd ribbed him when he'd told her his name that first time they met in this very dance hall: 'Don Wayne? Where's your horse, cowboy?' but secretly she's glad of a way to remember it. And she's glad to see him, too. He reminds her that there's more to life than Coventry and the factory, that she can make it out of here and she's right to dream big.

Connie turns into Don, her body still swaying to the music. She can picture Mam sucking air through her teeth, muttering 'fast'. As if she herself hadn't been three months

gone with Connie when she and Dad had got hitched! And there's a war on. Life *is* fast in wartime, especially after those early years when the bombs were pelting down reminders every night. 'Fancy showing me how it's done?'

'Are you talking about the jive?' Don presses against her in a way that's got nothing to do with the dance move. Won't catch her complaining, though. His scrubbed soapiness twists through the smoke and clears her mind of anything but him.

'Let's start on the dance floor.' She flashes him a smile. And then they'll see. Whenever Connie meets up with Don it's as if he switches on ninety hidden flashlights all at once. She glows so strongly the ARP wardens'll be over soon to throw a bucket of water over her. It isn't only what she can feel under his uniform, though that doesn't harm. It's that way of talking he has, like someone out of the pictures. It gives her goosebumps. Like the real John Wayne himself coming out of the screen and showing her she could get out, have a different life. And get out she will. Connie isn't about to beg Don to take her back to America, but he's made her see that another life is possible. Ever since she's been knee-high to a grasshopper, no bigger than their Barbara really, Connie's had an itch that there must be more to life than their street and the factory. She hasn't got any idea what form that takes or how to get there, but she knows she needs to do it. And now, with the war moving people around all the time, she's started to formulate a plan. She'll get to London and take it from there. The big city will sort her out. Just as soon as she's saved enough, she's off.

Connie pushes against Don on the dance floor, his sweat salty on her lips. The waves of the jives throw them apart and her hips and belly scream their disapproval. The music swoons her back towards him and she laughs, Don laughing back. This war won't last forever; perhaps after London

SHELTER

she can get out to America, find a job with a bit of glamour, jive like this all the time. Who knows, they might take her for a film star with her accent: the Yanks never tire of telling her she speaks 'cute'. Why not? She scrubs up all right and it's the Land of Possibilities, that's what they're always telling her.

The band stops singing about trains and segues into 'White Cliffs of Dover'. Don grabs Connie's hand, pulls her away from the dance floor and out through a side door. She curls into him, breathless and laughing, as he steers her further down the alley into a doorway. Frost crisps the empty fag packets littering the alley; she shrugs closer into Don.

'Here.' A couple of steps lead down away from the street.

'Down there? It'll be full of cats and pee, and cold enough to freeze the brass balls off a monkey.' She knows this city better than to get all soppy about backstreets, but she's desperate for him really, needs that body back up close against hers, and here is as good as anywhere. Won't be the first time she's stooped down some alley for a quick knee-trembler.

Don laughs again, that bellow of his that's bigger than any she'd known before. 'You're such a romantic. C'mere.' He pulls again, insistent, not buying the innocent act for a second.

What the hell? You only live once. This week has been all about other people – her messed-up shifts, the buses home all over the shop, even Mam wanting her home for more endless looking after the littluns. But this moment, right here, this is about her, about living a bit, about a yellow dress on a dank grey night and doing something that feels good because she knows it's wrong. Those Jerries can't take away all her fun even now they've started bombing London again. She'll show 'em. She follows Don down the steps, giggling. 'Shh!' But he's laughing too. The

music is in them still and they sway together, her arms up around his neck. Her fingers push into his hair, finding him as he finds her; her breath becomes harder and more insistent as Don's hands move down her body, palm away her yellow skirt and trace their way up the top of her stockings. Her own hands trace their way up his thighs, explore. There's nothing now, only this.

From above, the sky splits with the laments of the siren. The door they've escaped through fills with shouts, laughs; the warmth of bodies hitting the night and racing to carry on Friday night. She should pull away; they should head for somewhere warmer, carry on the party. But the voice in her head is coming from far, far away; has nothing to do with this Connie right here, right now, her hips forward, legs curving around Don's, beyond caring about cold or propriety. Every part of him pulses in her. The air is thickening, with the siren that won't stop, with the frantic crossing of the searchlights. The urgency of the city mingles with his taste on her tongue. Don's fingers are separating her; her hands, her cheeks, her legs are slippery with need. Her thoughts are panting, her body racing, her mind far away and here, here, here.

She stayed there with Don, collapsed onto him, concertinaed, until dawn on the back steps of the dance hall that sloped down into the alley, swigging something smoky and bitter from a hip flask he produced and chain-smoking those Yankee ciggies until her throat was sore and her eyes were as gravelly as when the iron filings spangled the factory. She didn't want that evening to end, which goes to show what she knew. *Got your wish in a way, didn't you, eh?*

When a fox shows its snout down the steps, a scraggy vixen nosing for scraps to take back to its mangy cubs,

SHELTER

Connie yawns, stretching along the length of Don, and stands up. Her breath billows out, warm against the early morning, and she laughs, a dragon ready to take on any comers. Just as well.

‘Time to get home and see what damage faces me.’ He grabs her fingers, languid, greedy, but the oozing need has turned gritty in the grainy morning light and she shakes her head. ‘It’ll be ugly but I can face it. Better to get it over with now.’ She blows him a kiss full of sunshine despite the proper nip in the air and clambers up the steps, no looking back, beaming as she marches forwards. No ties means no ties. And no shame means no shame.

She struts to the bus stop, despite the pinching of her dancing shoes and the chill in her bones now she’s not all snuggled up beside Don. Should she circle back to the factory and collect her lace-ups? No, best get home and get it over with. Mam will read her the riot act, no doubt, but she’ll stand there and take it. Connie has promised she’ll always try and get word home if she’s staying out, especially with all the raids and sirens. But last night she’d known Mam would be mardy that she wasn’t coming home like she’d promised, so she’d ‘forgotten’. There’ll be hell to pay when she gets in, and she probably won’t get any kip for ages, neither. Worth it, though. Her smile widens.

The conductor looks at her oddly when she steps on, hands over the fare and asks for Hillview Road. Is it that obvious? Is there some pitch to her voice that sings *see what I’ve done, see what I’ve done*? Can he smell it on her, that mingling of sex and dare? Her joy at his disapproval bubbles up into a beam. But the conductor simply shakes his head. What is that look, anyway? He isn’t having a go, isn’t criticising. She looks at him again as she jams her purse back into her bag. It’s pity.

Pity!

Connie bridles. Judging is one thing, but to feel sorry for her after the night she's just tasted and smelled and danced in? He's off his rocker. She strides to the nearest seat and plonks her handbag beside her on the bench, smooths her coat over her borrowed yellow dress as the bus pulls away from the kerb, the vibrations low beneath her thighs. It's her lucky dress now so she'll hang on to it, 'forget' to take it back to the factory. The girls understand about lucky dresses; nobody'll mind. Her coat's dusty where she'd balled it up for a pillow on the steps last night, a bit damp too maybe, but nothing worse than you see after a night in the shelters.

Already she's scheming which dance Don might next show up to, whether it would be too bold to persuade Cass to come up with her to one of the hops held near the US base at Grafton Underwood. Her body aches with the absence of him. More than that – as if that's not enough! – she feels better when she's with Don. The very fact he made it all the way over to England shows her that her path to America isn't just a pipe dream. All she needs to do is get to London. And from there the world's her oyster.

Everything in life is improved by time fooling around with Don. Today she's unbeatable.

She rummages in her bag for her lipstick. Warpaint's what she needs now. She'd better get ready; there's going to be a doozy of a battle once she gets home.

The conductor taps her on the shoulder. She peers up at him. He's still got that strange look on his face.

'This is your stop, miss.'

She's been so wrapped up in thoughts of Don that she hasn't paid the blindest bit of attention. And she still hasn't found that lipstick. Have to deal with Mam barefaced, then. Connie claps the bag shut and marches down to the end of the bus.

SHELTER

What the hell's happened here?

Dust is everywhere, dust and freezing damp and the clanking of shovels. But Hillview Road is no more.