

Marie's stall is next to the lekkies on Paradise Street. The wreckage of split wood and broken pipes looks like rows of jagged teeth and has stopped the trams from running. The dust catches my breath causing a horrible tickle at the back of my throat and my already tired eyes are stinging. As we pass the stalls, marketers shout out their end of the day bargains whilst trying to pack up. Everyone wants to rush home early nowadays in case the siren sounds but a man about Mam's age looks as though he's staying put. He's walking up and down in front of his bookstall trying to persuade passers-by that they'll be disappointed if they don't buy his last few Penguin paperbacks.

'C'mon love, what about one for the little fella?' He says to a young mum pushing a pram. She shakes her head and waves him away. He then moves towards an older man leaning against a bent lamppost smoking a cigarette. 'Alright mate, how about a nice romantic novel for the missus?' The marketer shoves a thick paperback into the man's hand.

'Do I look like I need a bleedin' book lad? Bugger off will yer!'

'Yer missus would be made up I reckon. C'mon, it's the last one, give yer it for threepence.' The marketer says.

The older man laughs and throws the book back at the marketer who catches it into his chest. 'Threepence?! You must be jokin'.' He stubs his ciggy out and walks away from the lamppost, away from the bookseller.

'Alright, what about twopence? Now that's a bargain.' The marketer stands and calls after his lost customer, who's already out of earshot.

'Blimey, he's not going to sell much is he?' I say to Mam who's quickened the pace to avoid the book man.

'He's a poor sod really. No one can afford a loaf of bread never mind a book. At least the fella's still trying.' Mam says.

I look back to his stall and see him throwing his leftover paperbacks into a half ripped cardboard box, his cockiness gone. Marketers have set up their stalls along this street because their shops have been damaged or completely destroyed by the Jerries. Poor Marie's shop was gutted during the last blitz in December and she's been on Paradise Street ever since.

We walk through a clearing across the tracks; Marie turns to see Mam and waves. We visit her at least once every two weeks so Mam can keep the orders coming in. Marie's an older lady, and small, with grey hair swept back in a tight bun and a fag hangs from her mouth. Every time I see her there's one stuck to her dry lips, sometimes she forgets to even light it. Even though she is only little and older than my mam, Marie scares me. Her right eye is glazed over and looks almost see-through. Mam says it's something called cataract and Marie can't see too well but I can never look her in the eye. It makes her look like a ghost.

Marie is packing away the last bits of her stock while two women haggle for the final bargain of the day. Dark shadows circle her eyes, her fingers form a claw-like shape from years of sewing, and her feet bulge over her worn out shoes. One of the ladies fighting for the bargain is Nora Moretta, the mum of my best friend, Bella. My stomach flutters as I look around for my friend, she must be here with her mam. Mrs Moretta turns and gives me a tired smile before shouting over my shoulder.

'Bella! Come here love and say hello to Joseph.'

I spot her kicking stones against the wall not too far away. Her tight ginger curls bounce around her freckled face. She turns to her mother's voice and spots me as I squint against the glare of the afternoon. I wave at her smiling face as she skips towards us.

We've been friends for about a year now, Bella and me. She's a laugh, especially outside school when she's more like herself. They all skit her at school, say she doesn't belong here. Her dad, Nico is Italian, like mine, but her mum is Irish. Mam says the Morettas had a hard time when they decided to marry. A lot of people in the community stopped speaking to Nora altogether, but she went ahead and married Nico anyway. Mam says 'as long as you look to God first, then love is love.' I like having a mate like Bella though. She stands up for herself, even backchats the teachers sometimes.

'Hiya Joseph, y'alright?' says Bella as she stops next to me.

'Good ta.' I feel the heat rush to my face.

'What you been doin'?

'Just dropping some things off with Mam. Dresses and that.'

'Me mam's had me walkin' all over town too, I'm knackered.' She sweeps a curl away from her eyes. 'Jerry was bad last night wasn't he?'

'Yeah, real bad last night. I reckon about twenty odd planes came.' I say.

'Nah, defo more than that. I reckon about a hundred. Our road got it bad, but we were ok, we hid under the stairs. I woke up with a load of plaster in my hair though.' She laughs and taps the top of her head.

'Nah, looks alright.' I say.

Bella smiles and nudges me with her elbow. I try not to lose my footing and balance the bombazine under my arm.

Mrs Moretta is still talking to Marie, determined to take home the pink blouse hanging alone on the rail. Its colour stands out against the dusty, grey background of Paradise Street. As we stand next to the stall, Marie dismisses the other woman and takes Mrs Moretta's money; who turns to a patiently waiting Mam.

'Rosa! How are ye love?'

'We're as good as can be thanks Nora. How's your Nico after last night?' Mam asks.

Mrs Moretta looks pale and drained, like most of the women I see. Bella's dad works on the docks shifting cargo. He's the biggest man I've ever seen, taller and wider than *my* dad was. Mrs Moretta sighs as she slips her new blouse into a shoulder bag.

'He's ok thanks love, completely worn out, but after the past two nights I'm just thanking Our Lord he's alive.' All three women nod in agreement. 'He came home for a couple of hours kip and a bit of scran, but he's back down the front helping to clear the mess.' She turns to Marie for her change, who shakes her head in disgust.

'Those 'orrible lot can sod off. That buggerlugs Hitler coming over 'ere trying to flatten us.' Her deep, husky voice always surprises me. 'No matter how many nights they come back, they won't take the heart and soul of this city. Bloody no chance!'

I smile at Marie's courage and realise people like her are what she says; Liverpool's heart and soul.