

# meadowyarn

**the light inside**

a #yarnfictions novella

by Anj Medhurst

part two : shelter/dorothea fish

## Shelter

Owen sits on the wooden bench, hands pressing down onto his knees, pushing his feet into the concrete floor in an attempt to keeping his legs still. He is shaking, sweating and his breath is shallow as babies wail and mothers shush and fathers are quiet and still and helpless, heads bowed. They might be praying. He can't believe the shelter roof can withstand a direct hit. It might all be in vain.

Two boys, aged no more than eight or nine, chatter. Who is going to find the largest piece of shrapnel, will there be an unexploded bomb?

'Terry's uncle's on the bomb disposal team, isn't he dad? Dad, isn't he?'

'A shell went straight through Kitty Pomfret's nan's kitchen roof, did you know that? Killed her stone dead.'

'Imagine being buried under all that rubble. I'd find a way out, I would. I'd dig myself out. Those Jerries won't make bones outta me. I'll show 'em.'

One has a small tin aeroplane and is whooshing it around the other's head complete with sound effects. Owen clamps his hands over his ears, to block out the staccato rat-a-tat. The boys' mother gives him a nervous smile and pulls the smaller of the two closer to her.

'Now boys, we'll not have that kind of talk, please. We're safe as houses in here. We'll be back home in no time. There'll be no bomb tonight, you'll see.'

Owen doesn't believe her. He pictures the shell falling through the dark sky, a silhouette against a crackling orange glow, lit from the fires below, whistling through the smoke-filled air. As it falls his imagination guides it, leading it to its target. He sees it hit the roof, watches it explode, hears the roar as the bricks and tiles and joists implode. He sees the ceilings and floors collapsing, one on top of the other. He sees the canvas, he sees her, wrapped in paper and oilcloth and packed in a wooden case, barricaded in the space beneath the stairs but it is

not enough. He sees her buckle and cave, splintered timber tearing through her, destroying her. Like Kitty Pomfret's nan. He can't bear it. He holds his knees to keep them still, bows his head, prays.

Eventually, the planes become less frequent, the noise less intense. Around him, his neighbours start to relax, stretching limbs, loosening tight, stiff muscles. When the all-clear sounds, they emerge from the shelter, stand and look around, survey the street, nodding to each other in recognition that they have made it through another night. Men light cigarettes and clean their glasses with handkerchiefs; mothers hurry, guiding their children home. Home to houses that are still there, still standing. The street is still there, his house is still there, she is still there.

The sky is lightening, pale and milky with dust and smoke. He can hear the noise from fire engines nearby. There's been a hit somewhere close and he scans the rooftops looking for the rising smoke, listening for the shouts and cries. It's very near, just a street away. He was lucky, she was lucky, but luck runs out. He's not sure how much longer he can bear it; the fear, the waiting, night after night, imagining the worst. He walks slowly back home, to the terraced house on the north London street that has been his safe harbour for so many years, almost his entire adult life. It doesn't feel safe anymore.

## **Dorothea Fish**

'Remind me again, dear. Who are you? Whose daughter are you? Why do you come and see me?'

Those last few months, visiting Mum in the nursing home required a strange combination of steely emotions and thick skin. Sitting in that slippery fake leather chair, wanting to hold

her hand, scared that she'd reject it – why would a stranger want to hold her hand? – I'd witnessed her brain disintegrate. I'd imagined the neural pathways shutting down, like lights turning out one by one; pictured the soft, grey matter as a shrinking map. But even as her memory splintered, there were revelations; stories emerging from the shards.

'I was nearly Dorothea Fish, not Dot Killick,' she said out of the blue.

'What do you mean, Mum?' I was cautious, careful not to disrupt her train of thought.

'Well Helen, we're pretty sure your Auntie Peg was Laurie Fish the lodger's doing, I mean Father was still posted in Burma when Peggy was born, we worked that much out from Mother's papers after she passed. So, it stands to reason, if the war hadn't ended when it did, Mr Fish would have stuck around and he'd have been my father too. He was on the stage you know; headlined at the Wellington Pier Pavilion, Great Yarmouth. I could have been Dorothea Fish.'

She sounds wistful. Mum had always credited her down to earth, matter-of-factness to her father. Fondly, I thought. He'd worked for the post office for forty years. He was dependable. You could rely on Grandad Killick. A shed full of tools, a short back and sides, and a steady pace.

A few weeks later I listened to the nurse telling me that – sadly – Mum had passed away in the night and I remembered Dorothea Fish, the mum I never had, could never have had. Surely if Dot Killick hadn't been born, then neither would I.

'Remind me again, dear. Who are you? Whose daughter are you? Why do you come and see me?'

I walked up Highgate Hill after the call ended and sat on a bench outside the pub with a large glass of red wine. I scrolled through my phone contacts and realised there was no one I wanted to tell or see, and I made the decision. I'd spent my whole life traversing this small patch of London and almost twelve years working in the mortuary, confronting the damage

wrought in – and by – this city every day; the myriad ways a life can end, sometimes abruptly, other times more slowly than it seems possible to imagine. It was time to go.

Go where? I'd whiled away quiet afternoons at work imagining converting my overpriced North London flat into a country cottage and a pile of cash. A part-time job; a bit of gardening? Maybe a shop assistant. No dead bodies. Even as I sipped that glass of wine, tasting the grief I had been anticipating for months, I could feel the ties loosening. I could feel the fresh air, sense the difference in my lungs. I would have a garden; I could have a dog. A black Labrador, I would him call Scout.

I scattered Mum's ashes on Yarmouth beach, in the shadow of the pier, on a cold November afternoon with a solitary jogger unintentionally bearing witness. Scout unerringly fetched a well-chewed tennis ball as I strolled along the tide line, stopping to look up at the Pavilion and watch the grey mist of bone dust disperse in the salt-sharp air. Yarmouth might have seemed like a strange choice but I spent a bit of time Googling after mum died, and the great Lorenzo Fish had indeed graced the stage at the Pier Pavilion, entertaining day-trippers with his magic tricks, skits and vaudeville characters.

I sorted through Mum's papers looking for clues but there was nothing to back up her fanciful, demented, revelation. Maybe Laurie 'Lorenzo' Fish had been Auntie Peg's father, maybe he hadn't, maybe he'd scarpered knowing Grandad Killick was on his way back from the war, or maybe he'd been none the wiser. Maybe I could have been Dorothea Fish's daughter.

'Remind me again, dear. Who are you? Whose daughter are you? Why do you come and see me?'