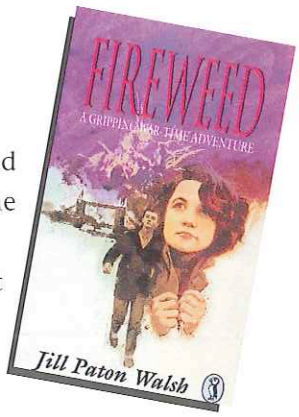
# Fireweed

8

*by Jill Paton Walsh*




*They would never have met if it hadn't been war time, but there they were, both alone in London in the middle of the blitz, and both of them were runaways: Bill had returned home to London from Wales to where he had been evacuated with other kids. His father was at war. He didn't own a penny. Julie should have been on her way to Canada and safety and had a whole fifty pounds to keep her going. But she didn't want to go to Canada, and ran away before boarding the ship.*

*They tried to hide themselves from wardens and the police. At night they often slept in underground stations.*

Remember? I can still smell it. I met her in the Aldwych Underground Station, at half past six in the morning when people were busily rolling up their bedding, and climbing out to see how much of the street was left standing. There were no lavatories down there, and with houses going down like nine-pins every night there was a shortage of baths in London just then, and the stench of the Underground was appalling. I noticed, as I lurked around, trying to keep inconspicuous, that there was someone else doing the same. I was lurking because I wanted to stay in the warm for as long as possible, without being one of the very last out, in case any busybody asked me tricky questions. And there was this girl, as clearly as anything, lurking too.

I was fifteen that year, and she seemed sometimes younger, sometimes older. She looked older now, because she had that air adults have, of knowing exactly what they are doing and why. Now I come to think of it, lurking is the wrong word for her; I was lurking – she was just staying put. But I knew she was playing some game like mine, because she hadn't any bedding either. She was clever at getting out unnoticed. She waited till a great loudly-yapping family with kids all sizes came swarming past her, and then just tagged along behind them. I joined their wake too. Mum and Dad were staggering under so many blankets they might perfectly well have been carrying ours too.

When we trudged up the steps to street level, she looked around her. So did everyone else. There was always less damage than you would think. This time, as far as I recall, the street looked the same as it had done the night before. She wasn't looking for bomb-damage though, she was wondering which way to go. I went along beside her and said "Hello".

She just glanced at me, and then went hurrying on, looking straight ahead of her, but that quick glance stopped me in my tracks for fully sixty seconds. There was no mistaking the expression in them. She was terrified. She was running now, down towards the Law Courts. But when some bowler-hatted Johnnie turned round to look at her she slowed up, and went in a

trotting sort of walk, sidling through the people, not looking back. I went after her. I don't really know why.

She left the Strand, and went down into the warren of little streets between the Strand and the river. I lost her for a bit, so I slowed up, and looked around. There was a great crater in the Strand, with the cars going gingerly round the edge of it. There were a lot of new shrapnel holes in the pavement, and across the river there were still fires burning on the South Bank. Down towards Charing Cross an ambulance bell wailed shrilly.

I found her again sitting on a bench in the Embankment Gardens. I came up behind the bench so she shouldn't see me, and then stepped smartly round, and stood right in front of her, so she couldn't very easily jump up and run away.

"Hello," I said. "What did you run away for?"

She looked up at me, eyes wide. "I'm cold," she said in a shaky voice. "I want something hot to drink."

"Sorry," I said. "I haven't any money." I was down to my last sixpence.

"I have. Take me and buy some breakfast." I just looked at her. "You can have some too, if you take me," she said.

I was very hungry. Too hungry to turn her down, but I didn't feel like leaving it at that.

"Why did you run away ?" I asked. She looked at me coldly, with large brown eyes.

"I didn't know what sort of boy you were," she said. "You might have been anybody."

"I *am* anybody," I protested.

"You'll do all right for taking me to have some breakfast," she said.

"Thanks," I said, crossly. "Why don't you go by yourself?"

"Girls don't go around by themselves like that," she said. "And anyway, I don't know where to go."

"Well, how much money have you got?" I thought of all the eating-places I knew near by.

"Plenty for bacon and eggs," she said. My mouth watered embarrassingly at the thought. "Whizzo!" I said. "I'll take you."

"Hold my hand," she said, getting up.

"Why?"

"So that we look like brother and sister. Then nobody will ask us what we're doing by ourselves."

"Brother and sister, *holding hands*?" I said, disgustedly, but then she looked as though she might be going to cry, and her hand was still held out towards me, so I took it, quickly.

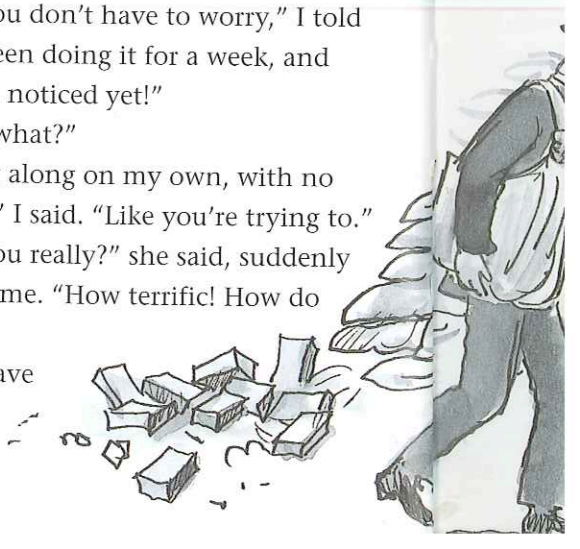
"If you start crying all over the Embankment, that really will look inconspicuous," I said icily. Then I relented a bit (well, I hadn't had anyone to talk to for days and days, and I couldn't keep up the iciness). "You don't have to worry," I told her, "I've been doing it for a week, and nobody has noticed yet!"

"Doing what?"

"Getting along on my own, with no grown-ups," I said. "Like you're trying to."

"Have you really?" she said, suddenly grinning at me. "How terrific! How do you do it?"

"Oh, I have



things worked out," I told her, loftily, not wanting to throw away my moment of glory. "I'll tell you later."

"It must be easier for you," she said, as we crossed out of the gardens and began to walk up towards the Strand again.

"Why must it?" I asked, annoyed at her for being disparaging.

"Well, you're a boy, after all, and then, well you see, *I've* run away!"

"So have I," I retorted. "And if you think it's so easy, I suppose you won't want me to tell you how it's done!"

I thought she would fall off her high-horse at that, and say, "Please tell me, oh, please", but she said, "Anyway it will be easier with two of us."

"You've got the hell of a cheek!" I told her.

"You haven't any money for breakfast," she said, and that was true, and there we were at the door of Marco's Cosmopolitan Snack-Bar, and the heavy warm smell of frying and coffee was wafting round us.

I glared at her, and she said, "Pax. What's your name?"

"Bill," I said. That isn't my name, but I decided in that split second to lie about it just in case, and then I couldn't bring myself later to admit I'd not trusted her, and tell her my real one. "What's yours?"

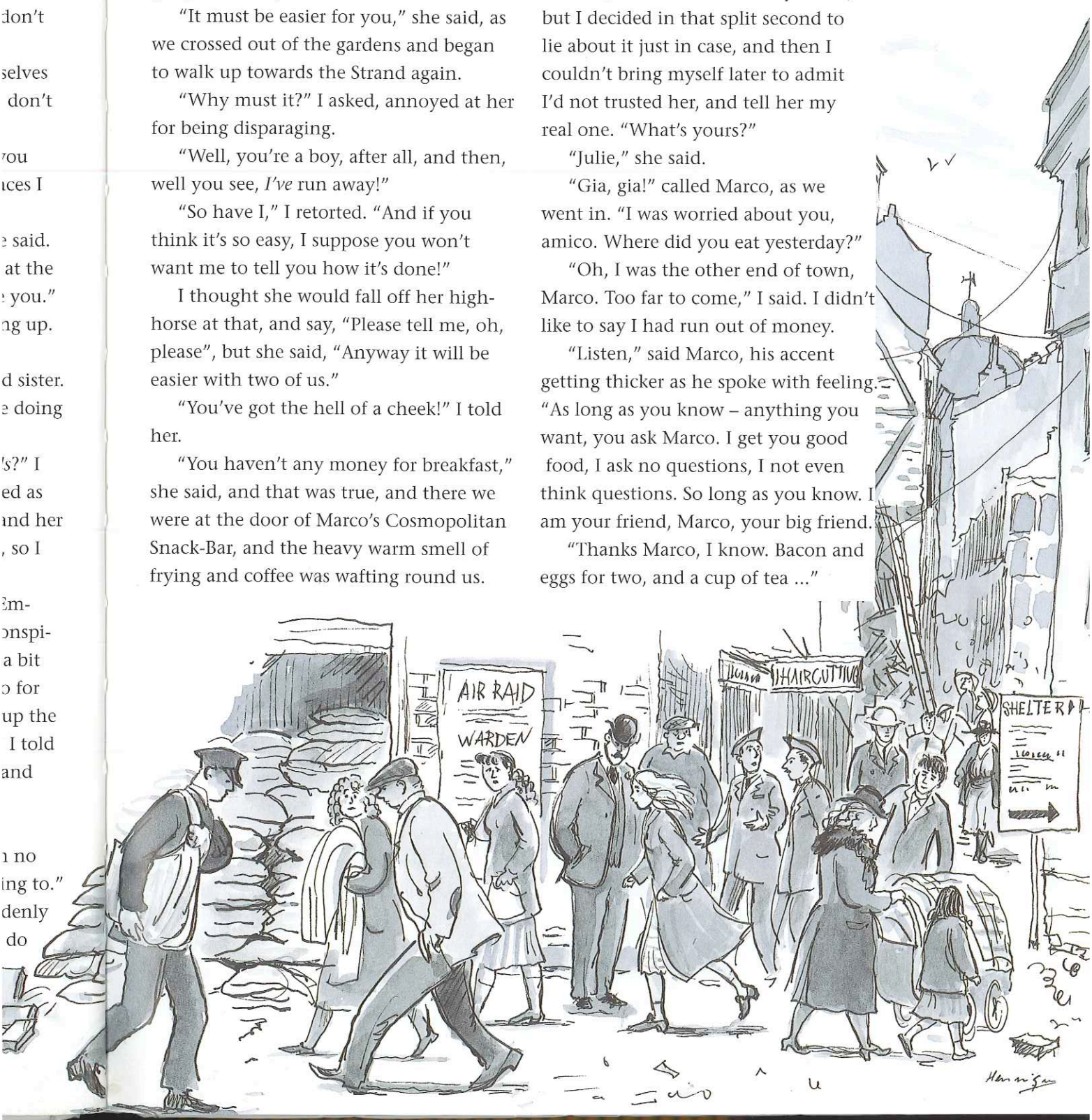
"Julie," she said.

"Gia, gia!" called Marco, as we went in. "I was worried about you, amico. Where did you eat yesterday?"

"Oh, I was the other end of town, Marco. Too far to come," I said. I didn't like to say I had run out of money.

"Listen," said Marco, his accent getting thicker as he spoke with feeling. "As long as you know – anything you want, you ask Marco. I get you good food, I ask no questions, I not even think questions. So long as you know. I am your friend, Marco, your big friend."

"Thanks Marco, I know. Bacon and eggs for two, and a cup of tea ..."



"Coffee for me," said Julie.

"Ah!" said Marco. "Is good. Is better to have coffee. Black or white, Miss ... Miss?"

"Julie," she said. "White please."

"White coffee for Miss Julia," he said, with a flourish. For a moment I thought she looked a bit startled. As soon as he moved away from the table she said, "Is he all right? Is he really your friend?"

"He's all right. He's not really a friend. But he guessed I was up to something, because I came here so much on my own. He's jolly sore about having been interned as an enemy alien, because he's lived here years and years, and only had another few weeks to go for his naturalisation to come through. Or so he says. They let him out again though, so I suppose that's true. But the whole business made him very angry. He says he doesn't like people who push people around, so I reckon he's on our side."

Marco brought bacon and eggs, and tea for me, and coffee for her. My tea was in the usual thick white cup with brown chips on the rim, but he brought Julie's coffee in a pot, with a jug of hot milk, and a blue cup, unchipped.

"Thank you," she said, smiling.

I remember seeing that she was smiling very nicely, and realising that this was why her cup wasn't a chipped one. I was a bit rueful as I gulped my lukewarm tea, but I tucked into that plate of bacon and eggs gladly enough.

"It's jolly nice in its way, but it doesn't taste quite the same, somehow," I said thoughtfully, mopping up yellow egg-yolk with a chunk of bread.

"He cooks in olive oil," she said.

"You are my friends," said Marco, appearing to pour more coffee into Julie's cup, though she could perfectly well have done that herself as far as I could see. "For you, I cook in the olive oil. Only the best for you."

A few more people were straggling into the place, two air-raid wardens in tin hats, and some workers on their way between shelters and work.

"You stay here as long as you like," said Marco. "You sit, you drink coffee, no hurry, plenty room."

"Tell me about running away," said Julie, looking at me over the coffee pot.

I told her a bit. I can't really remember how much. After all this time it's no good trying to remember just what I said; when I try to remember I remember very clearly what it was like, what I might have told her; and I remember trying to impress her, thinking that if I made out that I had had a rough time she would see what a brave, tough type I was. And pathetic though it seems to me now, I think I really did think things had been rough.

*A* 53 *B* 54

### Act it out

- Choose a part of the chapter above and prepare it as a role play. You can

**either**

choose the part where Bill and Julia meet in the park (pairwork)

**or**

choose the part at Marco's restaurant (work in a group of three).

- Perform it for the class.

*At first it was fun moving round London on their own and avoiding detection from the grown-ups, sheltering deep down in the Underground stations during the raids at night and picking up a little money on a street market by day. Laughter blew up from nowhere in those days, though death and ruin rained out of the sky and there seemed no end to the terrible destruction. One night they wanted to cross the Thames.*

We moved out again into the night. We clambered up the steps at the side of the bridge where it crosses above the Tube station, and while we climbed the night was quiet; only distant thumps and distant flares disturbed it.

We had nearly reached the second bay on the bridge when there was a tremendous bang on our left somewhere. Seconds later the air hardened into a wall, struck us, and lifted us, threw us against the fencing on the girders, and held us there. Somehow in the same split second, reacting to pain in my ears, remembering something I knew, I thrust the fingers of my left hand between my own lips, and those of my right hand into Julie's mouth. Turning her head, she tried to drag my hand away. I held on to her, fingers hooked over her teeth, while the air pressed down on us, held us spreadeagled, and crushed the breath out of us. Then we were being showered with specks of grit, which scratched our faces, and forced their way into our closed eyes; then the blast wave passed by, and the air dropped us, let us go, so that we slithered to the ground. On hands and knees we dragged ourselves into the lee of the parapet where it curved away from the line of the railway, making a small balcony over the river. And there we stayed. I was terrified. Not quaking with fear, but tingling with it – it was a prickling sensation on the skin, like having a high temperature. And although it was a cold night, with frost in the air, I was sweating. Yet I remember working it out quite coolly in my head; it was dangerous to stay where we were, but on balance more dangerous to move on.

Julie wriggled herself up close to the foot of the wall, and lay quite still, face turned skywards. We didn't say anything at all for a long time. We could hear a lot of noise: explosions, gunfire, and nearer to us, shrapnel winding down from the sky, making a funny sound like a gurgle with a whistle in it. After a little she said, "You hurt my mouth."

"If you don't keep your mouth open, the blast bursts your ears, I think," I said.

"Oh, yes," she said. "I remember something about keeping a cork between one's teeth. Thanks, then." Then, a lot later, "Bill, are you all right?"

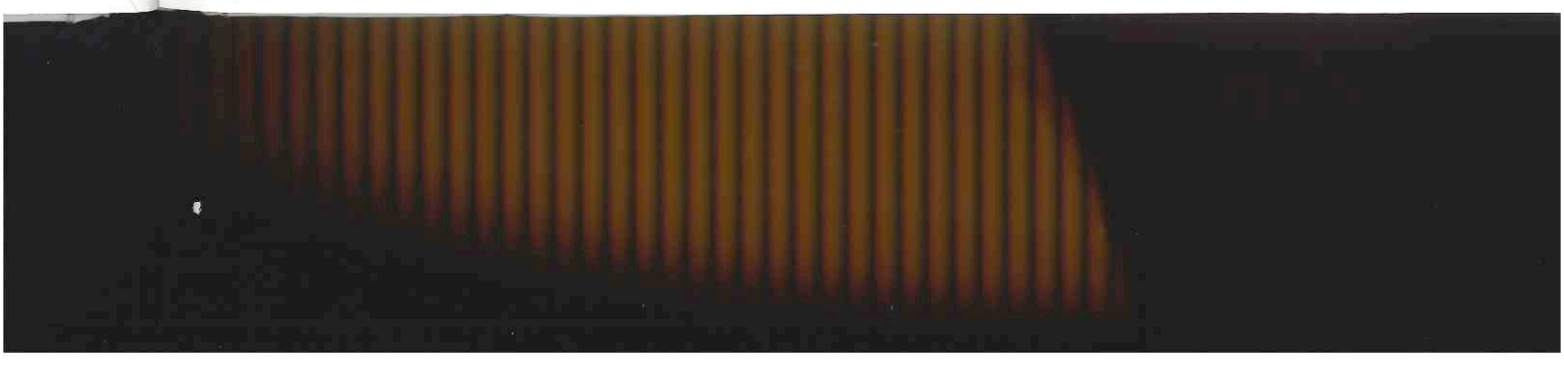
"Fine. Just a bit shaken. How about you?"

"All right. Bill, why isn't it dark? I wish it were dark!"

Very cautiously, I got up, and put my head over the parapet. I remember hearing my own voice, saying very slowly and clearly, "God ... in heaven ... look at that!"

She moved. She looked too. Below us the water of the river was a sheet of orange and gold. The eastern sky, as in a monstrous sunrise looked as though the sky itself was on fire. Against it we could





## Fact File

Jill Paton Walsh was born in London. At St Anne's College, Oxford, she took an honours degree in English and a Diploma in Education. From 1959 to 1962 she taught English at Enfield Girls' Grammar School. She won the Book World Festival Award in 1970, for *Fire-weed*, The Universe Prize in 1984 for *A Parcel of Patterns*, and the Smarties Prize Grand Prix for *Gaffer Samson's Luck* in 1985.

see the great dome of St Paul's. London was burning. It was all on fire.

Our danger was only, after all, a small thing, seen in that light. I got right up, stood up, and pulled her to her feet too. Leading her by the hand I went on over the bridge, walking steadily. At the other end of the bridge was a little hut, a firewatcher's post. In front of it a man was sitting, on a pile of sandbags. Round his neck hung a pair of binoculars, and a field telephone dangled in his drooped hand. His head was thrown back, so that the light of the burning city drew a circle of gold round his face, on the under side of the rim of his helmet. As we passed him I saw that his eyes were open, and the fire glinted in them too. They were still shining, still moist; he was very newly dead.

When we climbed down from the bridge we were in a warren of unfamiliar streets. I don't very well remember how long we wandered around there, but in the end we were found by a warden, who took us to a rest-centre; a grim sort of school building. It was like a very overcrowded shelter inside, or so it seemed at first glance. Then I saw that everyone there was filthy, covered with dirt and plaster, clothes torn and thick with dirt. A woman sitting at a table by the door said to us, "Bombed out?"

Looking sideways at Julie, I saw that she was covered in sooty grime from crawling around on the bridge, and I supposed I was in the same state myself. "Over there," the woman said, without waiting for an answer. We went over there, and sat down. After a while someone brought strong black tea in chipped enamel mugs, and bread and jam. There was nowhere to wash. The people around us looked vacant, stunned. Children cried, and could not be quieted. We slept, almost at once, since sleep seemed the only good place to go.

**C** 54

- ***Listen to an interview with Dean who is an American. Dean was a soldier in World War II. Find out (take notes)***

1. ***when he joined the Navy,***
2. ***how old he was,***
3. ***how many friends enlisted together with him,***
4. ***what sort of ship he worked on,***
5. ***what his job was,***
6. ***for how long the ship had to stay in Liverpool,***
7. ***what it was like in Liverpool during the war,***
8. ***what Liverpool was like at night,***
9. ***what he and the other soldiers did in their spare time in Liverpool,***
10. ***how many of his friends survived.***

- ***Compare your notes with a partner and discuss them.***

- ***Imagine you are a journalist. Write a newspaper article about what Bill and Julia experienced on the bridge. Write some background information, and also include an interview with Julia and Bill.***

### *Three articles*

*Would you like to read more about World War II and the blitz? If so, your teacher has three articles:*

**D** 23 *Food supplies and rationing.*
**E** 24 *Women in the workforce.*
**F** 25 *The Night of the Bombing of Coventry Cathedral.*