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O! Call Back Yesterday

Joy Trott

In memory of Susan

1945 -1997

With thanks to Ruth without whose gentle prodding

this would never have been written

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O! Call back yesterday, bid time return. Shakespeare. *Richard III*, ii, 69

Contents

PART I

Chapter 1

The myth is that as we grow older memories of our early years are more acute than those of the recent past. Perhaps. Certainly I find myself forgetful of some of the more important things in my present life. I make grocery lists then leave them on the kitchen table and come home with fiddleheads (an impulse treat) rather than the cooking onions I need for dinner. I sometimes forget things my friends have told me, often at great length, about the complicated lives of their adult offspring; I sometimes overlook details in the lives of my own adult offspring. It can be disconcerting. On the other hand, supporting the myth, I do remember with clarity the exact layout of my grandmother's kitchen; my smiling mother allowing me to see the new year in, I must have been about four, and giving me a little sip of sherry to mark the occasion; my father teaching me to ride my first bicycle.

Advancing age might certainly be one factor, but I believe not the only explanation. As time goes on lives become so tremendously cluttered—there is just too much going on to keep our memories tidily organized. Perhaps one can also refer to the "life's a stage" concept. When we are young we are centre stage at all times. We are given star billing and never upstaged by other actors; and often the applause is loud and sustained. As time goes on the cast increases in size and the story becomes more and more complex. The plot thickens, as they say, but there are also sub-plots, actors come on stage and take over for a time, sometimes they disappear and are never heard of again, sometimes they turn up again with new lines. Sometimes our play is a comedy and sometimes a tragedy. Sometimes we are upstaged by other colourful players who divert audience attention with annoying bits of business. No wonder that sometimes we don't recognise some important aspect of this drama. No wonder that sometimes we forget our lines, fail to recognise our cues.

The theatre of life analogy is an ancient and overworked literary convention but it is handy because it strikes such a recognisable chord and, although tattered, it works for a while. Here then are the opening acts of a very long life—not complete for one's memories come in note form and much is missing. I have endeavoured, however, to capture these memories while I may for they cover a period that was interesting and indeed dramatic for many people—for my children, who only know bits of the story, my grandchildren who know even less and for myself because…

I was born in Colwyn Bay, then a fashionable seaside resort in North Wales. It was my mother's old home and she had gone there to be with supportive family for the birth of her first child. My grandfather, John Thomas, had been a photographer and probably a good one for the family if not wealthy was what was then called *comfortable*. He had had a studio in the town and had taught his two sons and two daughters to be proficient photographers although none of them followed him into the profession as a career. He had been married twice and my mother was the youngest of the melded family. Ada and Percy were the two older children by his first wife and Sidney and Gwen, my mother, of his second.

I never knew my grandfather, he died long before I was born, my grandmother, however, was one of the great joys of my childhood. The grandchildren always called her by the Welsh diminutive Gangan; like Queen Mary she had never taken to the modern short skirts, her hats were pure 19th century. She wasn't a cosy grannie, rather a trim handsome woman but like my mother she had a charming smile. She taught me to sew a neat seam, seriously consideri.ng my laboured stitches, she took me on her lap and told me the stories children love to hear all about long ago, she was a confidante and a friend.

We visited Colwyn Bay often, my mother and I, spending long summer holidays there with my father making occasional visits. We were always met at the train station by my Aunt Ada who lived with Gangan and I would insist that we took an open horse drawn carriage rather than one of the taxis drawn up in front. Aunt Ada had never married. The family story was that her sweetheart had been

killed in the war; a plump, comely woman, at that time I suppose in her mid-forties and some ten years older than my mother. Uncle Sid with his wife Ethel and children, Joan and Leslie, lived in Bangor, within easy visiting distance. He operated the three cinemas there, that is he was projectionist for the Plaza, the largest and newest, and general maintenance manager for the other two. Uncle Percy, shortly after WWI, married my grandmother's housemaid and emigrated to Canada. No one seemed to think there was anything peculiar in this, in fact the family was inclined to go on about how beautiful Nan was, especially her long thick hair. Thin hair is the bane of the Thomas women and anyone with a good coiffure is much envied by us all.

These times in Colwyn Bay are as clear to me now as they ever were. The old house was a delight, an enormous kitchen, dining room and drawing room downstairs, three big bedrooms and one small one up. I had the little room at the front, just large enough for a bed and a dressing table—tucked in at night I could hear the occasional hooting of the owls in the woods at the top of the hill. In the morning I would help Aunt Ada prepare breakfast—we took two trays upstairs, for Gangan and my mother, both of whom always breakfasted in bed, and then settled for a leisurely meal of our own in the big kitchen. In those pre-cholesterol days breakfast was crisp fried bacon, sometimes a soft boiled egg, finger toast with lots of butter. The real day started with Mr. Green, the milkman, coming to the front door with his huge can to fill our jugs—Ada had two big ones and I had a gill size, enough for the tea table. I was always allowed to greet his patient horse and sometimes treat it to an apple. I think I was very indulged but I was certainly a happy child.

Evenings were spent in the front drawing room, cards, books, needlework. It sounds now very Jane Austen but it was, I suppose, pre-television typical of the time. I remember the room well—bright chintz covered easy chairs, some small tables, on the mantelpiece a clock and a charming porcelain of the Three Graces, draped delicately in pastel and smiling coquettishly. I played the pretend games that children make up for themselves—there was a little handle on the wall by the fireplace—I would jiggle it vigorously then dash to the kitchen to see the bells, neatly labelled with room numbers, ring-

ing on the wall—then back to the drawing room to see what was wanted. I thought being a housemaid was probably a most delightful occupation.

A few years ago I took my husband to Colwyn Bay and we searched and searched for my grandmother's house. I remembered that you came up from the beach, crossed the main road, stopping sometimes for fresh bread and potted shrimp from the baker's, and then continued up the hill into a sedate area of gracious middle class homes. My grandmother's was large and stood on a corner; it had a big front lawn and was surrounded by a high wall. We walked the whole area but I couldn't find a house that I recognised, although finally by the process of elimination we decided it must have been on the corner of Park Grove West. In fact the place looked a little off. The houses were large, but not *that* large, many of them had notices in the front windows and some of the woodwork was painted the most extraordinary colours. We were staying with my cousin Joan in Bangor, a few miles down the coast and when we told her she laughed and sighed at the same time. "Shame," she said, "Not like Gangan's day." The house was in proportion to my remembering it as a small child and as for the bed and breakfast holiday visitors. Well, I expect there are still children who come up from the beach sandy and sea-logged and expect new bread and potted shrimp for tea. I think my grandmother would entirely approve.

There were some lovely lazy days in my childhood and I was still very definitely centre stage. I remember the beach where to my utter disgust I was only allowed to use a wooden spade to build my sandcastles instead of the metal ones the older children had. There was a fear I suppose that given the latter I would immediately chop off my toes. I have a picture somewhere of my small self dressed in the baggy bathers of the day, straight dark hair cut in bangs but looking all business as I wield the abominable spade. Then the ocean. My mother had been a strong swimmer but I never actually learned to swim. I just went in and paddled off—the result being that to this day, although I have fairly good endurance, my style leaves a lot to be desired. But that was only a beginning.

In those days the seaside towns were filled with a daylong round of amusements. Every afternoon there was a Pierrot show right there on the beach. A stage was set up each afternoon, rows of folding chairs put in place and for a small charge there would be first class variety entertainment. Always four people; the two older, a woman contralto who sang sentimental songs, and a man who told jokes. These two were always referred to as Uncle and Auntie something or other. Then there was a young couple, soubrette soprano and matinee tenor, who provided the romance. The material was lively family stuff with lots of dancing and superb costumes but the performers were good and very professional; many a West End musical comedy actor filled summers with this kind of work.

The other attraction for children on the beach was the Punch and Judy show. How we loved little dog Toby, the only live performer, how we booed the crocodile, how we cheered for Judy, how we applauded the hangman. Punch and Judy really does have everything unsuitable for young children, it's racist, sexist and very violent—it has child battering, wife beating, brutal death, and we loved every minute. Of course Punch gets his just desserts in the end and so the story, centuries old, is by today's standards quite politically correct.

Then there was the pier. A long deck of wooden planks and a row of slot machines of all kinds ranging from "What the Butler Saw," which I wasn't allowed to see (I was quite disappointed when many years later I self-consciously put a penny in the slot and found that he didn't see very much at all), to games where you had to put a ball in the right place or make two tiny teams compete or whatever. At the end of the pier, though, was a big pavilion—in fact a full size theatre, where some of the best performers in the country played a summer stint. This was for the adults, sometimes a musical comedy, sometimes variety acts, sometimes a serious play, always first rate. Britain is lucky in its theatre structure. It is a small country with a good railway network so even in those far off days performers could travel throughout the land easily and quickly and small towns as well as the larger cities got excellent productions.

But not all our time was spent at the beach. Colwyn Bay was my mother's childhood home, she wasn't just a summer visitor. She had been educated at a private girls' school at Old Colwyn, the next little town to Colwyn Bay. She was, I, like to think, a lively sporty girl for as well as being an exceptionally good swimmer she was on the school hockey team. She had a tiny scar over one eyebrow of which she was rather proud. She had been whacked by an opponent's stick while making an advanced play.

The days had a serene routine. Often in a morning there was shopping in town with Aunt Ada, where inevitably we would run into an acquaintance and stop for coffee and bara brith, the rich Welsh fruit cake; and in the afternoons there were many old friends to visit, or who would drop in for afternoon tea. The most frequent visitor was Connie Bevan, my mother's best friend. A large, laughing, beautiful woman. Just as I am with some of my old friends as soon as they met, they were girls again giggling over some past fun. Like Aunt Ada, Connie never married, perhaps there was a story there too—so many British women of that generation had been robbed of their men by that most brutal conflict. She had stories to tell about their young days but her stories were never about herself. She remembered, however, how my parents had met.

It was 1914, the Cardiff City Infantry were stationed outside Colwyn Bay for training and the town was full of young men looking for some amusement before being sent to France. The town, sociable in any event, put on scores of activities for the soldiers—there were canteens and service clubs, dances and garden parties, plays and musicals. There was also the legitimate theatre in the form of West End touring companies. The older women no doubt had a fine hand in all of this and the other day going through some very old family memorabilia I found a visiting card "Mr. And Mrs. Laurence Irving."[1] Gangan, a theatre buff all her life, must have enjoyed and certainly participated in the excitement. Everyone wanted to do something for "the boys" before they left for the front. Connie and Gwen, in their mid-twenties at the time, would have talked and danced and laughed and flirted with

[1] Son of the famous Sir Henry Irving and a reputable actor in his own right.

the young soldiers and somewhere Gwen Thomas and Ernest Trott met and liked one another and one day he was invited to my Grandmother's house for tea. It was a mutual affinity and over the years a strong bond was established with the Thomas family. Although my father got back from France on occasional leave and although their intentions before long were sealed with a ruby engagement ring, they didn't marry until when the war was truly over and they were ready to start a new life together. If this seems remarkable restraint by later standards it was for many the honourable and probably sensible thing to do.

My father's war service is a bit of a jumble to me for, although he sometimes told us stories of his service, I never quite got everything in sequence. I know he served in Flanders—early in the war, I think, for he was one of the men who called Christmas greetings over the trenches to German counterparts. He was never bitter about the German people and often said he no more desire to kill them than he supposed they had to kill him, nevertheless he had volunteered no doubt as young men do with motives a mixture of duty, sentiment and adventure. They were defending Europe from the evils of German imperialism and anyway it was all going to be over by Christmas

But he was also in the Middle East and fought in the battle of Beer Sheba, 31 October 1917. His account of getting there was one of the most harrowing of his war stories for his ship had been torpedoed in the Mediterranean. He was one of the lucky ones; many lives were lost including some of the nurses who had been on board. Clinging to wreckage he and some others had been picked up by an Italian fishing boat and taken to a village on the coast where, unconscious and exhausted on the shore, the villagers had given him red wine as a restorative. When he came to he promptly threw up and on seeing the red fluid thought he was vomiting blood and was convinced he was terribly injured. He always told this as a great joke. Beer Sheba can't have been much fun either but rather than dwell on the horror of that he liked to tell of actually seeing a mirage and how once after marching through desert sand they had come to an oasis where there were melons to be had—the most delicious of all fruits. He had a gourmet story too—once he had somewhere or other found one small

onion. He had taken a can of the despised bully beef removed the top inserted the onion and then gently roasted the can in a camp fire. Although he said it was the best meal he ever had he would never allow bully beef into the house—even for a picnic sandwich—he had had quite enough.

On the other side of the world as the years wore on and the times got darker and darker there was still plenty to occupy a young woman in Colwyn Bay. My grandfather believed in women being trained and capable and both his daughters were taught photography, worked with him in the studio and could take over the business if necessary. His two sons were in the army but his daughters proved to be competent partners.

Colwyn Bay and my mother's family was an important part of my early childhood but of course life wasn't all holidays in North Wales. The rest of the time was spent wherever my father was located. He also had grown in Wales, but South Wales, in what was then the small village of Dinas Powis, now a smart bedroom community of Cardiff. Ernest Trott was the youngest of a family of six children, five boys and a girl. All received a good education for the time but it came in a somewhat different form from today. University meant an academic schooling, for a business training there was a long apprenticeship.

After grammar school, my father was placed with the A & P in Cardiff, not then a grocery chain but the Atlantic and Pacific, one of the largest export/import companies in the world, where he was taught the complexities of international trade. Then came the First World War and after serving his four years without receiving a noticeable scratch he entered the Woolworth Company and in the heady days of post war expansion quickly rose to a fairly senior position. His early A&P training no doubt stood him in good stead and today he would have likely had a descriptive title. He was in fact a store manager but one who was designated to either open new stores (which were appearing with great regularity) or take over a faltering business and put it on its feet. Company policy was to move managers every few years, but with his particular responsibilities we were relocated even oftener than most.

When it was time for my first schooling we were living in Wolverhampton a west midland industrial city. I remember the house on Alexandra Road—I remember my first morning at school. It was quite pleasant. It was a shock to learn I was expected to go back, not just that afternoon but the next day and even the one after that! Even now I can smell the plasticine, see the bright decals, the blackboard with the alphabet. It was 1928 and a good time in Britain for child education; there were all kinds of new theories being advocated and the young teachers were full of enthusiasm. As well as writing and arithmetic there were games and dancing and singing.

I was five, I could already read because my mother read to me every bedtime and explained the words as we went along. I still remember the stories; Peter Pan, Robin Hood but particularly one about a kindly man named Jesus who was killed most horribly. I burst into tears over this one and I think my mother was somewhat nonplussed. I believe she slipped it in as a means of giving me some biblical literacy and then didn't quite know how to explain it wasn't just a "story". As for school, soon I rather liked the daily learning experience—it was the start of a lifelong curiosity.

My parents must have also been in a particularly happy period of their lives. They were still young; my father's career was flourishing, my mother had made friends in Wolverhampton. I think, though, that she was a naturally buoyant person. Little snippets of memory come to me; the radio playing and her dashing to the piano to join in, she was a talented artist and sometimes we would walk through the fields behind the house and I gathered posies while she sketched. Sometimes I would accompany her to visit friends. One was Mollie Pickwell. Mollie's husband managed the shoe shop opposite the Woolworth store and Mollie was a good friend of my mother's. The Pickwells lived in an apartment over the shop. It was quite large and I thought it absolutely fascinating much nicer than our mundane two story home.

When my parents went out at night the young daily maid we had stayed with me. But before they left for a theatre or a party they would say goodnight dressed in their finery, my father in dinner suit with a frilled shirt which I thought particularly grand and my mother in the short skirts of the day

in pretty gaily coloured material. Once she bought blue garters with little bells and asked for my considered opinion on their suitability. I don't think she was conventionally pretty although she had the dark hair and splendid brown eyes of the Welsh, but she had a sparkle that lit her face and I thought her beautiful indeed. I couldn't wait to be grown up too. Once I remember being included in a party. It was the annual store Christmas affair taking place in a dance hall somewhere in the town. All the staff made a fuss of me. My father had coached me a bit beforehand and gravely stepped out with me for the first dance. I was quite enraptured. I didn't stay to the end but was whisked off after a while to the Pickwells' apartment where I was to stay overnight.

I think this must have been a Christmas celebration. About that time there was a nice surprise. A young woman from my father's store arrived at the house with a big box for me. It was a present from the staff, an enormous doll which was promptly named Daisy Woolworth. The young woman's name was Miss Lamsdale. She was my father's assistant, or floor supervisor. She and my mother shared a cup of tea while I admired the doll. A bit player then, "Miss Lamsdale" eventually had a much larger part on stage.

The spring of 1929 found my mother spending a good deal of her time lying on the sofa, she seldom went out but there were still many visits from friends. Also I was given a great new responsibility. I was now allowed to go to the local shop on errands; not the one on the other side of the highway but in the lane behind the house. I came back importantly with bread or eggs or perhaps sardines for tea. I had friends of my own too—three children, a girl and a boy about my age and their older sister, who lived in the big house up the hill, sometimes we explored the new houses being built on the lane, sometimes their mother provided milk and delicious coconut cake afterwards.

One morning the house was silent, my mother and father were both missing. The maid must have given me breakfast and sent me off to school but I don't remember any sense of tragedy. I expect I went off happily enough. I don't remember how the morning went. All I remember is coming home at lunch time and there at the curb was a taxi with Gangan and Aunt Ada getting out. I do re-

member running with outstretched arms, surprised and joyous at this unexpected visit. But I was met with tears and abstraction. I don't really remember anything else of that dreadful day. My mother had died during the night. I only learned later that she had been taken to a nursing home where she was delivered of a stillborn child and didn't survive the following complications. Later still I learned that she had problems with pregnancy and had in fact suffered two previous miscarriages. I believe some of the extended holidays we had in Colwyn Bay were for her convalescence.

My next memories are of being back in Colwyn Bay. I suppose my father could no longer bear to live alone in the house we had shared as a happy family and I never saw Alexandra Road again. Aunt Ada and I went back to Wolverhampton a few weeks later to visit him in a bachelor quarters, but for the next two years he was only an occasional visitor in my life.

At Colwyn Bay the house was bustling with activity, although not the tea parties with laughter and chatter as before. There were visitors with grave faces, for my mother had been a popular woman. Also there was something else going on. Gangan was in bed and before long there were two nurses always in attendance. The day nurse, a pretty young woman who chatted with me on the few occasions she left the sick room and the night nurse an older woman with a severe face. She came on duty early in the evening and I think she must have had a very understanding heart because she would sit me on the kitchen counter and allow me to help her prepare the poultices to combat my grandmother's pneumonia and explain why this had to be done to take away the congestion and help her breathe. It was to no avail, before long Gangan was buried with her much loved daughter.

And so by the end of that summer the old house just held Aunt Ada and me. The young are, however, particularly resilient. I went to the local school where the teachers were as kindly and pleasant as those I had known in Wolverhampton. I suppose I had playground friends but Park Grove was a street of older people—there were no children to play with after school. I don't think I was a lonely child, perhaps it was the start of being able to entertain myself because for all my life, although I enjoy companionship I have never disdained my own company.

First the house was full of reading material—and what a variety. The shelves in the dining room were filled with books—and strangely, one name remains vividly with me, a bound collection of the works of John Bright that took front place in the glass cabinet—it is the only indication I have of my grandfather's political views. He must have been something of a collector for there were old books, calf bound with locks and tiny keys—the text entirely incomprehensible but there was an abundance of children's books too and I practised my new found reading skills on *The Rose and the Ring* sitting up in an evening in the big bed in the front room. It must have been hard going for a five year old and I don't suppose I understood much, but the pictures were lovely. There were bound copies of Chatterbox[2] going back for years and years, full of diversion and there were bound copies of war time magazines—what I don't remember—that were full of horror. Nothing was censored, it was a rich and eclectic learning environment. Then the big walk-in closet under the stairs held boxes of dress up clothes, cartwheel hats with ostrich feathers which I suppose Gangan had worn as a young woman and no one had the heart to throw away, evening dresses with beads and sequins, velvet jackets…. For a child with a vivid imagination the house was a delight.

Sometimes we visited Bangor, only a short train ride away, where there were two cousins: Joan four years older than I, a somewhat bossy little girl, and Leslie, two years younger, a tolerated small boy. The time must have been heart rending for Ada but I only remember her as consistently cheerful, always ready for a game or a cuddle.

That winter was a horribly cold one. When Mr. Green came to the door with his big can there was a crusting of ice on top of the milk and his horse had an extra blanket. I got an ear infection and there were nights of excruciating pain, but eventually all came right again. I liked the school where we had Horlicks every morning and handicrafts every afternoon—one day we were hustled out into the playground to see the R101 floating majestically overhead. It was a glorious sight but the age of the dirigible was short lived.

[2] A well-known children's magazine

Christmas that year was spent at Bangor with Uncle Sid and Aunt Ethel, Joan and Leslie. My father joined us and I received my first bicycle. A child size, of course, but still pretty hard to master. Back in Colwyn Bay, my father took me to the pier for lessons. Not the best choice—the tires kept getting into the cracks between the boards. We would arrange ourselves precisely then he would give me a push and I would wobble along with him shouting words of encouragement before I fell off. Eventually it was mastered and my bumps and bruises became fewer. Then I was allowed to cycle the quiet streets around Park Grove; it added a new dimension to my life.

Even this was not to last. Soon came yet another move. Perhaps Colwyn Bay held too many sad memories for Ada and the big house was certainly an unnecessary expense for a middle-aged woman and small child. There was a branch of the Thomas family in Lancashire. Many people from North Wales had settled in the north of England during the industrial expansion of the early century and a cousin Agnes Thomas had married Edmund Holden from Preston. The couple had no children and ran a successful wholesale haberdashery business. Now Ada decided to relocate there. I learned later it was my father who provided a sizeable down payment on a house on the same road as the Holdens. Here Ada would have family and friends and she could take in a few “lady boarders” to supplement her income. I, of course, would live with her.

There were days and days of sorting and packing. The house was full of pictures. Pictures on walls, in albums, in boxes. Originally the Thomas studio took the ground floor of large house on Colwyn Bay main street with living quarters above. When the studio was closed and the family moved into the house on Park Grove much of the result of many years of photography had gone with them. There were pictures of every member of the extended family and every child had been lovingly portrayed over and over. I saw little of this at the time, except Ada sorting and discarding and tearing up and throwing away a large part of her life. Too much—it is only now that I realise what a traumatic time this must have been for her and I fancy that in her efforts to start a new life just a bit too much

of the old one was discarded, so many pictures disappeared that I was with only one or two snapshots of my mother and only much, much later in life, I found that Joan had a few in Bangor.

Also the furniture had to be culled to fit a much smaller house and she must have found this a heart wrenching task with so many reminders of the happy companionship she had lost. Finally the day came and we took the train to Preston and settled into our new trim quarters. Aunt Ada and I had the front bedroom upstairs and the back sitting room downstairs. Both were quite large and the furniture Ada had chosen to keep fitted in nicely but it was the odds and ends from Colwyn Bay that gave the sitting room an air of familiarity. There were a couple of my mother's water colours on the wall—most of her work had been given away as mementos to family and friends—and on the mantelpiece the lovely little figurine of the Three Graces.

One week-end Sid came with a special present he had made himself. It was a radio, far removed from the latest state of the art we had had in Wolverhampton but a good workable model which did us very well. It ran off two large wet batteries (one in use and one for replacement) which were hidden in a little curtained shelf below the radio but which had to be taken to the local garage to be recharged every so often. Ada was always pleased with any kind of technology. She was fond of saying how lucky she was to be in the generation which saw so many new inventions—the first plane, the first radio, the first of the big liners and so on. Shame really that we children had missed so much for there was really little else to discover. She would have been astonished by the computer age but taken it much in her stride I think. This downstairs room had French doors leading to the small garden, an altogether agreeable arrangement. The ground floor front room and the upstairs back bedroom were furnished nicely and awaited the lady boarders.

From the start Preston was a tremendous success for me. My new home was in a street of modern houses in a not-too-fashionable area within walking distance of downtown. Masefield Road ran off the main thoroughfare going into the city. It was the end of the tramcar line and there the trams stopped, the driver would descend and with much clanging and sparking reverse the pole

which connected to the overhead wires and conveyed electricity to the motor. The tree-lined road bordered the river and over a low wall one could see a wide expanse of water for the Ribble is a businesslike river, muddy at low tide and impressive at high. Following the route in the other direction a footpath ran along the river bank into an extensive city park. Here the river took on a much more sporty aspect. This became a favourite walk; one could watch the scullers, admire the flowers or stroll the green lawns. In all it was a pleasant locality. I fancy the Holdens liked its convenience which would also suit Ada's ladies.

Next door lived a family with two girls about my own age, Olive and Mavis, and next door to that lived their cousin Lena. So I was immediately part of a group. I walked to school with them and on that very first day they initiated me into all the mysteries and pitfalls of their circle. For instance did you know that if you happen to cut the web of skin between thumb and first finger you will drop down dead? And there is a very terrible word that no one must utter or God will administer a dreadful punishment? As the word could not be uttered I never found out what it was and went in much fear of accidentally speaking it. These myths of childhood turn up over and over—where do they come from and what ancient origins do they have…?

At school we had slates to write on and I thought this must be a very modern innovation. After school I became a thorough street child for not only did I have my next door neighbours but there was a host of other children in the area. Ada was no strong disciplinarian and until dusk we played outside—tag, hide and seek or, as children do, just messing around. A farthing at that time was a real coin of exchange and would buy at the corner shop a little bag of what we called sherbet. It was a granular powder which eaten with a stick of liquorice would froth in one's mouth. Disgusting—but we thought it a treat.

At Easter that year I took part in one of England's oldest spring festivals. On a grassy knoll in the park a very ancient ritual takes place. On Sunday morning the children take hard boiled eggs to the top of the mound and roll them down, chasing them all the way to the bottom. A custom, which I

suspect, started long before the Christian Easter; a very ancient ritual, brought perhaps by the Vikings, or before that the Saxons—or perhaps the even older folk who lived here at the dawn of humankind itself. A variety of peoples have invaded the north country—some have stayed and many have their mark. Undoubtedly a fertility rite—eggs and spring usually are—but to what fierce god were we making obeisance? Anyway I took my egg to the top and rolled it down with the others and what, I wonder was the prize for first at the bottom—many healthy children, a fortuitous marriage or perhaps just finding one's heart's desire.

Then there were other excitements. Although Preston is not on the open sea it is a port town for it stands at the head of the River Ribble estuary and has a sizeable harbour. I suppose in the heyday of the cotton trade this is where the ships from America used to bring their cargoes of cotton for the Lancashire mills. Lena's father was a ship's captain, not of one of the sea-going ships but of one of the tiny tugs that nosed the larger vessels into place. Sometimes he would take—us, Mavis, Olive, Lena and me—aboard and we would explore every cranny, watch the engine chugging along, inhale the heady diesel fumes; we thought it the grandest and most important craft on the river and an hour's cruise a very great treat indeed.

Ada's first lady boarder was a Miss Vice, a young woman from South Wales, who had been transferred to the local unemployment office. Sometimes if we were in town we would drop in and say hello. Britain was now in full grip of the Depression, or "Slump" in Britain, and Preston, home of Horricks one of the big British textile mills, was badly affected. There was always a long line of people both men and women standing outside the building waiting to pick up the dole. These were hard times for the whole country but the north was one of the worst areas. Our family was lucky, my father's position was not affected, indeed the Woolworth Company, designed for the working class shopper, mushroomed.

Meanwhile our social life on Masefield Street was much taken up by the Holdens. Now that I look back I can see what thoroughly nice and kindly people they were. They lived a few doors away in

a house a little larger than ours for it accommodated four people—as well as "Aunt Aggie and Uncle Edmund" there was another cousin, a rather dim woman whose name I completely forget, and a live-in maid named Frances who soon became a treasured friend. When there was a dinner party, which was often, because they were sociable people who loved company, I was always included along with Ada. This was the kindliest of acts and indeed I had had nothing but good-natured indulgence since my mother died but being centre stage at all times is a bit too heady for a young child and I wonder if I was not becoming a teeny bit spoilt.

Anyway I do remember the parties there. First the food was always superb and often included some north country specialties. Usually the meat was accompanied by a bowl of the lush Lancashire pickled samphire (you gently tore the flesh from the little twiggy pieces with your teeth) then there would be tomatoes stuffed with mushrooms, and usually the meal would end with fruit and slices of marzipan cake, the delicious plain cake with a thick layer of marzipan in the centre that I've never seen anywhere else. Frances and the shadowy cousin looked the house and the cooking between them for Agnes was, unusual for the time, a career woman who spent her days with Edmund at the business.

They were a merry lot—I don't believe much alcohol was served—only a pre-dinner glass of sherry—but the parties were exuberant. The meal always began with the same ritual. Uncle Edmund would gravely ask the diners to stand and hold hands around the table for a few moments of grace. When everyone was standing in respectful silence he would open his eyes and with a wide grin begin to sing: Oh dem golden slippers, Oh dem golden slippers, Golden slippers I'm gwine to wear to walk the golden streets… If new friends were a bit startled the regulars knew the procedure and soon the whole room was rollicking with song and laughter.

After dinner there was more singing, the piano in the sitting room would be taken over by one or another of the guests, probably someone had brought along a banjo—and the room would sing along with the latest songs, with old favourites, with whatever anyone could play or anyone could sing.

Some I could join in—I can still do a good *Tiptoe Through the Tulips* (latest craze) to *Daisy, Daisy* or *Lily of Laguna* (old favourites). This was the Lancashire side of the family not the Welsh who would have been roaring out something entirely different.

There were a few other characters too—people who emerged from the wings, had a small but interesting role to play and then disappeared off stage. Uncle Austin for instance; what was his relationship for obviously he wasn't a real uncle? It was polite custom then for children to give the courtesy title of "Auntie" or "Uncle" to their parent's friends or distant relatives. I fancy Uncle Austin was a second cousin. He was a dentist and presumably unmarried for I don't remember a corresponding "Auntie". His offices were a part of his home, his constant companion a large bulldog. When we visited he would take us to the surgery where on command the dog would jump onto the dentist's chair and open his mouth to show off a gold tooth.

Then there was Miriam.. She shared a small house with another woman—they were both Girton graduates but what they did for a living I don't remember. Miriam's constant companion was a small car which she loved dearly and often either had apart or could be found lovingly polishing in the front driveway. Aunt Hannah was quite different, from a past more sedate age. I'm a bit vague about her relationship too but she was quite old and I fancy perhaps a sister of Gangan's so she would have been my great aunt. She lived in a large fashionable house on the outskirts of town where sometimes we would be invited for tea. Ada and Aggie used to smile a bit about Hannah—despite her affluence tea in her elegant drawing room consisted of a very skimpy spread indeed—her brown bread and butter was as thin as her eggshell teacups and her tiny slices of plum cake were finger small. Fashionable rather than filling! Even in old age she was a beautiful woman, though, and if her tea was meagre she made up for it by a certain style that made a visit a pleasure.

Although Preston is a grimy industrial town it isn't far from the countryside. Miss Vice for instance belonged to a hiking club. During the week she wore tailored suits and prim blouses—but on a Sunday morning off she would go in shorts, shirt and strong boots. She would return happily in the

evening, exhausted and sun burned, and entertain us with an account of where she had been, who she had met and who had said this and that. These clubs were popular in the thirties and I suppose a way of young people getting together for an inexpensive day out. A popular song of the time went “I’m happy when I’m hiking; ten, twenty, thirty, forty miles , fifty miles a day.” It was a catchy tune and Edmund Holden used to tease her with it if they happened to meet. And so life went on, for me quite smoothly and contentedly, with no thought of the future. The next change in my life, however, came as a complete surprise.

Chapter 2

One day Ada broke the news, quite casually I think, that my father would like me to live with him again. He had remarried and been transferred to Cambridge. It must have been mid-summer. This, she said, was a good time to move back—I could settle down then start a new school in September. ‘‘I think you’ll remember his wife,’’ she said, ‘‘it’s Miss Lamsdale.’’ I hadn’t considered moving anywhere—I thought my life was settled where I was. Indeed, after two years and only occasional visits from my father, I hardly knew him.

A few days later Father arrived in Preston stayed overnight and the next day we travelled to Cambridge. It was in no way a tearful parting from Ada, she promised she would see me soon, dwelled on how much I would like Cambridge and what fun it would be to go to a new school; and indeed to an extent it was so. Evelyn was waiting for us with a nice tea prepared. She was eleven years younger than my father, not a conventionally pretty woman, fair where my mother had been dark and with blue/grey eyes behind gold rimmed glasses; but she had a pleasant, friendly manner and soon she was reminding me of the times we had met in Wolverhampton. Did I still have Daisy Woolworth? Did I remember how I used to lark around the stockroom at the store and play with the kittens that the mouser cat provided with regularity? She reminded me of the store party where I had danced with my father and so on.

The house on Owlston Road was very similar to the one we had lived in Wolverhampton and the middle bedroom had been prepared for me with thoughtfulness. A bed with a pretty blue satin eiderdown, a blue basket chair, a bottle of toilette water on the dressing table and a charming little enamelled box lined with sandalwood that I can actually smell if I close my eyes. But the real treat came a few days later when we all went into town and chose a new bicycle—a real one this time, a junior Raleigh. I soon settled in quite happily—I don’t think that I fully grasped the big change in my life and that I had left my life with Ada for ever.

University towns are always lively, the student atmosphere pervades most corners and Cambridge in l930 was bouncing. There was no sign of the Depression here, the streets were full of students most of whom were on bikes—and as gowns were de rigueur on certain days there were always some swooping along like blackbirds in low flight. Sometimes Evelyn and I would walk into town and have tea at one of the cafés close to the Woolworth store. It was always full of students laughing and chattering while a fat man at the piano pounded out the latest songs. When he got to *Happy Days are Here Again* everyone joined in and the walls quivered. For anyone with enough money they were happy days—the last war was pushed from memory and the next one not yet seriously considered. Not by everyone anyway. Then we would pick up my father at the store and walk back home together. Cambridge is a lovely town with a pleasing mixture of medieval and modern—our route took us through the market place and one evening we stopped and bought a puppy, a little wire-haired terrier which I promptly and inappropriately christened Rover.

Now too my cycling skill was being perfected; my father would send his stockroom boy on his bike to call for me and together we would cycle back to the store. His name was Herbert and I don't think he ever spoke one word as we rode along. He was probably not exactly overjoyed at escorting a small girl through the town. By the time I arrived at the store it was closed and most of the staff gone home. Father would be in the office with his secretary closing off the day's work and I would cycle round and round the counters until he finished whatever he was doing and then we would go home together, he walking and me stopping every now and then so he could catch me up.

In September came a new school. It was one of the progressive schools of the day with a great emphasis on a healthy atmosphere. The windows stretched across the whole wall and could be folded back so that the rooms were open and airy. Ada came to visit and she and Evelyn would sometimes come to pick me up with an ice cream to eat on the way home. I soon made friends—a particular one was a girl whose father kept riding stables; she lived for horses and always brought a quite delicious whiff of the stables with her.

There must have been mixed feelings for Evelyn and my father—a new and happy marriage, a home in a delightful part of the country, no financial troubles for Cambridge, I believe, brought a substantial promotion. I wonder if an eight year old child was just a bit of a fly in the ointment.

Evelyn had grown up in the Midlands, not Wolverhampton but the small town of Tipton an old established part of the Black Country. Her family had gone from solid working class to desperately poor. The Depression had hit this part of England very badly and her father, who had worked in the steel mills, had been unemployed for a long time. She was now married into a completely different life-style and it must have sometimes been difficult to cope with. A largish house, a daily maid who did most of the essential housework, what did she do with her time? She had never had the chance to obtain the education and other advantages that middle class girls took for granted; she had left school at fourteen and been apprenticed to the local pawnbroker. I know now that she had a good mind but this new life must have had its difficulties too and I wonder if she sometimes missed her family and old friends.

As for my father—here in Cambridge I grew to know him much better. He was a rather good-looking man with the Celtic temperament. He enjoyed a laugh and had the quick easy wit of the Welsh. He also had the quick temper that often goes with it. He could blow up quickly but cool down again with a grin. In the morning the house would sound with his voice—he loved to sing in the bath!

There's a bit of a family story here that he liked to tell. When his regiment was posted to France in 1914 he was in hospital with a minor football injury a battered ankle. The hit song that year was *Roses are Blooming in Picardy*—he learned the words and when he rejoined his mates drove them mad with his off-key rendition, for although he loved music he admitted to being no vocalist. He was twenty-two years old at the time. It was always his favourite song and the one we most often heard wafting through the house in a morning. If I hear it now it brings back an immediate picture of my father and the house in Cambridge.

He could be very good company, I think he made friends easily, although at Cambridge there were seldom visitors to the house, probably at this time Evelyn provided enough social life, for they were still essentially newlyweds. His work had always entailed long and uncertain hours but at Cambridge he must have determined to spend more time at home for he was usually there for an early supper. Life in a university town has a good many advantages.

Father loved the theatre in all its aspects and there was much choice in Cambridge; student plays, the legitimate stage, music, dance and of course the cinema. Sometimes we all three went, sometimes Father and Evelyn went together and sometimes there would just be Father and me. The Welsh are addicted to serious music and we had a good collection of classical records which grew over the years and became my musical education. I began piano lessons and although it was soon apparent I had not inherited my mother's talents, I struggled along for some years. All in all I suppose we lived a life quite typical for the middle class of the time.

In the late spring of 1931 it was put to me that I could miss the last few weeks of the school year and go to Preston for a long summer holiday. Apparently there was no problem with the authorities. Maybe education was not as structured as it is now or perhaps Ada undertook to put me in my old school to finish the term I don't remember. If it was the latter it certainly never happened for I well recall a summer of endless pleasure. Father took me on the train, my treasured bicycle was put in the guard's van and I was charged with anticipation. I was not disappointed. There were Olive and Mavis and Lena, and the Masefield Road gang. I was soon in my element. There were all the neighbourhood diversions again, hide and seek until dark, our version of rounders in the back lane, deep conversations while we ate our penny sweets sitting on the front curb.

I renewed my friendship with the Holdens and Frances and I remember once Edmund took me to a music hall performance to see the famous comedienne, Nellie Wallace. It was wonderful Lancashire fun and I loved it. Then my cousin Joan came to stay with us and we found other amusements. She was four years older so obviously much more grown up than I, very keen on theatricals

and taking dancing lessons. She soon had me stage trained and a visit to the Holdens' warehouse provided lots of end bits of ribbons and laces for dressing up. We put on a performance one day inviting the Holdens as well as a few other neighbours and gave a thrilling song and dance show finishing with *All the King's Horses*, one of the day's popular songs, with tea cozies on our heads which was about the closest we could get to military headgear.

Ada was a softy with children and we could persuade her to our whims without much trouble. We had a whole day at Blackpool—which started a pattern for future holidays. First a swim at the enormous pool—although the sea at Blackpool is perfectly adequate for swimming the pool was much more exciting for us. Open air and right on the beach, it had slides and spring boards and the changing rooms had a nice air of luxury (compared to struggling out of one's clothes on the shore). Then came a visit to the amusement park, where we always, in terror, insisted riding the big dipper. Dinner of fish and chips at one of the restaurants on the front, then an evening at the Tower where there was a five star variety show. Finally we staggered to the bus exhausted—Ada must have been dead on her feet.

Then we took Joan back to Bangor and stayed there for the last three weeks. Bangor had its own special delights. It is not a holiday resort like Colwyn Bay but a university town, a very old part of Welsh history with a record going back to pre-Roman times and an unwritten record of long before that. Not that this particularly interested us children at that time. To us the interesting thing was that, through Uncle Sid, we had access to three cinemas, as the programme changed twice a week and as there was always a double bill it meant that with a bit of judicious juggling we could see twelve films a week. Of course we didn't—but it was a nice point to boast about. Also there was a rumour that film star Madeleine Carroll, had something going with the Earl of Anglesea and occasionally they could be seen holding hands in the balcony of the Plaza—this filled quite a lot of seats in the Plaza balcony but we never saw any signs of this romance, if it there was a romance. Actually no one supervised our

movie going. The Bangor family was very easy going, but it probably says something for children in the end monitoring themselves if there are other choices available.

Our favourite other choice was a day at Siliwen. Bangor is on the Menai Straits, the narrow strip of water between the Welsh mainland and the Isle of Anglesea, a very pretty spot but without a beach or good swimming facilities. Siliwen was a public pool at the water's edge, made of concrete, filled by the sea. It combined the best features of sea bathing with those of a well maintained baths. It was, however, an eighth of the size and not nearly as classy as Blackpool. There were changing rooms though and enough space at the tiled forepart for seats and benches and an adjacent grassy area to just throw down a rug and picnic. Aunt Ethel would pack us sandwiches and Joan, Leslie and I with perhaps another child or two would set off in the morning. It was a good half hour's walk and we could dawdle along investigating anything interesting along the way. Siliwen pool was reached by a path going steeply down a wooded hill to the area below and there was always a thoughtfully posted notice at the top reporting the water temperature so that the less hardy could retreat right then. The pool was not artificially heated but we considered anything over 72 degrees to be quite acceptable. In the afternoon Ada and Ethel would join us, admire our aquatic skills, sit for a while and we would walk home together.

I didn't see as much of my Uncle Sid for his work at the three cinemas, despite several assistants, necessarily involved strange hours, but he had been close to my mother and was particularly warm and kindly to me. He was a tinkerer; he loved mechanical gadgets—one of his joys was his Morris Minor and he had the engine out and spread in pieces on the floor of the work shed with great regularity. It was a great little car and responded to his care with devotion. We would pile in at a weekend and rollick up and down the mountains and valleys of North Wales. Sid and Ethel in the front with Leslie on Ethel's knee, Ada and Joan and me in the back—six people in that spunky little car. He always carried a pair of pliers in a special holder hooked on his belt—after all, who knows when one might need a pair of pliers. We did on one occasion, high on a hilltop somewhere, the car came to a

grinding halt with a horrible racket of shattered steel on gravel. Our combined weight had finally broken a spring and the chassis was dragging on the ground. No trouble at all—out came the pliers and from a farmers fence came a length of wire the car was jacked up the spring wired in place in a first aid manoeuvre and we slowly made our way back to Bangor.

Sid was a nice looking man—a bit of a dandy with the Thomas features embellished by a trim waxed moustache. Like most of the family he was also a talented artist but his taste ran more to caricature and he was a great admirer of Heath Robinson. That summer there was an ad in one of the London papers asking for artists to submit sketches of certain specified objects. Sid responded and received an invitation to go to London for an interview. His work must have passed muster for he was offered a job at a nice salary, but unfortunately it was in California. He came back and discussed this with Ethel who was very opposed. America! And what was this job anyway? It sounded very dubious. I expect her reasons were sound enough.

Anyway, he turned down the offer. He had been interviewed in London by a certain Mr. Walt Disney whose name at that time was certainly no household word in Wales—nor in California for that matter. Of course I didn't hear any of these details at the time but it became a cherished family story. Many years later Ed and I were visiting Disney World with our two grandsons and I told them this tale—they staggered around in amazement—to think that I was actually related to someone who had been offered a job by Walt Disney himself and just suppose if...It was a nice bit of reflected glory.

So the summer melted away pleasantly and it was time to return to Cambridge. Ada tried to prepare me for a change—"there's a surprise waiting for you," she said—and I suppose I tried to guess what it might be. It never occurred to me that there could be an addition to the family but that is what it was. My half-sister, June, had been born on 7th August. It was a rather strange way, I think, to introduce a new sibling. Nowadays parents are careful to prepare children for such an event. I don't think that it was a selfish desire to have those last few weeks of Evelyn's pregnancy to themselves—I think they really thought they were giving me a treat to spend the summer with Ada (they

were) and that the surprise would be a delightful bonus when I got back. Parents are inclined to pay more importance to these events than they warrant. I believe they breathed a sigh of relief when I seemed to like the little creature presented to me with a certain anxiety. Of course I liked the baby but eight year old children don't really go into raptures. I held her and cuddled her and knitted her, under Evelyn's supervision, a somewhat lopsided dress and agreed that when she was a little older she would be great fun to play with.

In the meantime we wondered what the next year would bring. The Woolworth Company had a policy of moving their store managers every two or three years to larger enterprises if they had done well or to smaller ones if they hadn't or if it was thought they needed more experience. Salaries were comprised of monthly living allowance with bonuses allotted annually according to the volume of business the store had done. Woolworth's was the first example of this American mode retail marketing. It was an entirely new concept not only in selling style but in the whole environment. The stores had beautifully polished wooden counters, the floors were oiled parquet, and everything was in immaculate condition with the staff in smart rather military looking uniforms. The idea, I believe, was to bring some elegance to the sale of very inexpensive goods to working-class people. Now that this style is commonplace it warrants no comment, but in the 30's the company was considered innovative to an extreme and the business community no doubt waited to see if it would become an accepted and lucrative enterprise. The managers were usually well-educated men who, like my father, saw a bright future in joining such a firm at its inception.

Stocktaking and moves always took place the first week of January—good no doubt for administrative purposes but terribly hard on families. Christmas could be celebrated in the traditional manner but not the New Year—managers were too busy taking inventory or making arrangements for a transfer. Husbands were in either case absent on 31 December, which is why I expect, on the occasion that I remember still vividly, my mother found herself observing the New Year with a sleepy four year old. I had woken up, I didn't want to go back to bed so we ran around the house at midnight be-

cause I had dark hair and, laughing, she said it was good luck for me to let in the New Year. I think she had a talent for celebrating life. There wasn't much good luck in moving in January though; in particular it was difficult for a child to have to settle into a new school at that time. The school year starts in September—this is when friends are made or renewed, groups sorted out alliances formed a not too hard for a newcomer then. But, in January, it is traumatic for a child to be parachuted into a new school. Anyway this was to be the case for late that year we found that our new home was to be Derby. We were only there one year but it was certainly an action-packed year.

This is when I first met Evelyn's mother, another who was destined to play a much larger part in my life a few years later. Grandma Lamsdale came to Cambridge to help with the move. Father and Evelyn and infant June went ahead, to find accommodation. Grandma Lamsdale stayed with me, finished the last of the packing and we went on to Derby a week later. She was a thin, plain woman with a limp, the result of a childhood trauma that had never been corrected. She had a kindly manner and I remember liking her and helping with the last minute jobs. We had to pack the dishes and bedding, arrange for the piano to be moved and buy a muzzle for Rover for the railway would only take dogs that were restrained. He didn't like it very much. Our beautiful black cat was given to a neighbour and so we said good-bye to Cambridge.

We had always lived in furnished houses, not as unusual in Britain as it would have been in Canada or the US. This was the high time of the British Empire and there was always a component of military or business families being commissioned out of the country and anxious to leave their property in good hands. We had lived, as I remember it, in comfortable well-furnished quarters but now my father decided it was time to assemble household belongings of our own. Grandma Lamsdale and I arrived in Derby to find a four bedroom house fully equipped with everything from new furniture to new china and silverware to a classy radio gramophone. I don't think it made much impression on a nine year old child but to Evelyn the shopping expedition must have been an Aladdin's lamp occasion.

In Derby plans had already been made to enroll me in a private school for I believe my parents could see that my academic career was being sadly compromised by so many moves and that a bit of special attention might not hurt. I remember Evelyn taking me to a nice looking establishment just a few minutes' walk from where we lived. The school was called Parkfield Cedars, in a gracious old house fronted by a green lawn and with stately evergreen trees marking the entrance.

The headmistress was friendly but she explained regretfully that the school did not accept juniors, only high school students, which meant an age barrier of twelve. So, I was enrolled in the local public school. Then I contracted an attack of whooping cough which kept me home for some weeks. The doctor came to the house every other day to give me a serum injection; it was a new treatment for the illness. June was too young to take advantage of this innovation—"lucky her," I thought each time the needle was jabbed in my arm.

School, when I finally settled in, was fine, with good teachers and plenty of outdoor activities. I remember there was a large contingent of orphans who lived in a residence and came to school dressed in brown serge dresses overlaid with pink linen pinafores. I believe they were from railway families and the orphanage, I think now, was most probably a union undertaking. They were a jolly lot and rather than being stigmatized were looked upon a bit enviously by some of the other girls. It was hard, though, for a solitary child to fit in and I made no real friends. There was a big family of children around the corner and I became somewhat acquainted with Nancy, who was about my own age. But apart from going to dancing class together once a week our friendship didn't really blossom.

In Derby, however, we had a steady stream of family visitors. In the spring came Evelyn's younger sister, May, who was recovering from a nervous ailment. She was ten years older than I, a young woman who also came front and centre in my life a few years later. I was told to be very kind to her because she had been ill but at that time I don't think we made much of an impression on one another. Then we had Father's sister Alice, a tall, good-looking woman with a cool demeanour and her daughter Olwen, my cousin five years older than I. They lived in Father's old home, Dinas Powis, and

although we had visited occasionally I didn't know them nearly as well as my mother's family. Then at the end of the school term Ada came with Joan and after a brief stay took me back to Preston with them. This became the routine for the next few years. Wherever we were living there would be a summer interlude with the Thomas family; and so I now had three sets of relations in my life.

One of the main characters at Kedleston Road was our daily maid, Mrs. Wharton. She bustled in every morning with a cheerful authority and she and Evelyn formed a friendly bond. Probably the days fell into a domestic routine—there was a young child in the house and I suppose plenty of laundry but bed linen was sent to a commercial laundry. Evelyn was responsible only for the meals. It must have been a settled life if somewhat tedious. Propriety decreed that middle class families should have at least one servant, whether it was really necessary or not. Mrs. Wharton, although working class had a very different view of life to that of the Lamsdales. She was full of chatter and good spirits and would clatter around singing rousing union songs. These would get more spirited if my father was around and I distinctly remember her, with June on her knee, teaching us the Red Flag. June was a bit young but I got the words perfectly.

What was the family's political stance? As a child I suppose I thought Mrs. Wharton simply a nice friendly woman who enjoyed singing catchy tunes and indeed most revolutionary songs are good stirring music; but looking back I can see a background pattern. I don't suppose my father ever voted Labour but he was a strong Liberal—and Welsh Liberals in the thirties were certainly liberal. He often told a story of post WWI Britain. He had gone to London on business—it was during the miner's great march to London to petition for better working conditions. Union funds got them there, but getting back home was, for many, a problem. In the street he found a group singing for the few shillings needed to feed them and get them back to the Valley. They were men from the Cardiff City regiment who had fought beside him in the trenches. His indignation and disgust never diminished—years later he spoke with contempt for a government which required ex-servicemen to beg for a decent living.

Although most of his working life was spent in England he never lost the *hwyl*—that soul stirring gift of impassioned speech that only the Welsh have—not quite English oratory, not quite Irish blarney, but possibly the best of both. I can't quite see him marching through London singing the Red Flag but I'm sure he had the verbal ability to make a good case for social reform. I wish I had known him as an adult. Then my mother's people—well, I only remember that the bookcase in the sitting room held a complete set of John Bright. The volumes had bright red covers—I thought he must have been a bright man with such pretty books. No doubt I was right. As a child I found nothing in them of interest—no stories, no pictures—and skipped them for the dark green covered Chatterboxes. It was a long time before I became acquainted with this indication of my Grandfather's sentiments.

We were in Derby for the big flood of 1933. Derby is a low-lying town on the River Derwent. It must have been the autumn when heavy rains came and the sewers became clogged with fallen leaves and other debris. In only a few hours the centre of town was under several feet of water. All the downtown merchants with their staff worked until they were exhausted salvaging as much merchandise from their stockrooms as possible. There were nights when Father didn't get home until midnight. When the water receded the city streets and pavements were a mess of muddy residue. Evelyn took me downtown and it was a miserable sight. All kinds of goods were laid out for quick sale outside the shops and there must have been a serious loss to many of the businesses. But there was a slight boon for some. Mrs. Wharton came in triumphant the next morning with two evening gowns bought at a shilling each. They were badly damaged but she had the ability to carefully restore and would resell later at a nice profit.

Although we weren't in Derby long enough for Evelyn to make friends and get into some sort of social life there was one family that we got to know rather well. It was a fortuitous happenstance that just a few doors away lived an old comrade of my father's. I don't think they had been close friends but they had both served in the Cardiff City Regiment and that was enough to give them instant affinity. Tommy Peters managed a furniture shop and he and his wife Doris had two children a

bit older than I so we didn't become playmates. We did visit back and forth a bit though for afternoon tea or whatever and I do remember being sent on a quick panic dash to get Doris one morning because June had grabbed a piece of soap and swallowed it. Mrs. Wharton cannot have been there because she was pretty good in crises. Anyway no lasting harm was done and I expect the incident ended with a cup of tea and a visit.

After summer holidays that year I went to still another school. Nothing to do with our family peculiarities this time but rather school boundaries had, for some municipal reason been changed and I was sent to an institute in the opposite direction. It seems to me that this was in a poorer part of town although still within walking distance. I shared a desk with another girl who one day showed me some horrible bruises and quite matter-of-factly told me that her mother often locked her in the broom cupboard. I don't think she told anyone else but I like to believe that if she had something would have been done. Britain was a leader in child welfare legislation and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was powerful; closely followed by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Come November 11th, there were some serious military rituals to be observed. Father and Tommy had been to the Armistice Day ceremony then combed the veteran assembly looking for old Cardiff City warriors. Then, a few beers. By afternoon they were at the house with several others loath to let a good party fade. When I got home from school they had got to the singing stage. What a gorgeous riotous time they were having. Old soldiers never dwell on the bad times but camaraderie forged under duress never dies. They reminisced, they laughed, they sang, they marched around the house, one character disappeared to the back kitchen and reappeared bandaged with towels and using a broom as a crutch. They fell over in a paroxysm of mirth as they directed him to the nearest first aid centre (another drink).

Evelyn and I, partaking of a prim supper in the kitchen, heard the levity, the songs, but didn't join in—they were after all in another world. The party was still going strong when I went to bed, to the

strains of *There's a Long, Long, Trail Awinding*... At breakfast there was a rather disapproving Evelyn and a mumbling Father. His only visible war injury had been a bout of trench mouth, and removal of most of his front teeth. His dentures were perfect and hardly detectable as false. Unfortunately, they had disappeared down the lavatory when the celebrations ended in a well-deserved attack of nausea.

It must have been a good party and was the last of good times at Derby because soon after he became seriously ill. Several bouts of pneumonia during the war had left him with weak lungs. The cold flood waters, the days and nights of exhaustion, and the stress of business losses had taken a brutal toll of his resources. He was in bed for several weeks. There was always a fire in the comfortable front bedroom and visitors were plentiful; his assistant manager from the store, others of the staff who just dropped in to wish him well, Tommy and Doris and no doubt others of the old Cardiff City group. He recovered just in time to learn that our next posting would be to Ipswich where we were expected to appear by 1st January 1932.

This time Mrs. Wharton came with us to help settle in. Father and Evelyn had gone ahead, with June, to find accommodation and had settled on a suitable house on Constable Road. It was in a pleasant suburb, set back from the road a bit and with a sizable garden both back and front. I found it a delight because I could ride my bicycle all around the building without obstacles.

I was enrolled in Ipswich Girls High School just a five minutes' walk away. This was a private school which fortunately did take "juniors"—I was now ten. We wore smart uniforms: gym tunic, shirt with tie, black stockings, red blazer. The girls were friendly and I don't remember having any difficulty with the work. The juniors took most of their lessons in an old house close to the school proper—it was a pleasant place set in a large garden with a lawn, little walks and several trees for climbing. Also once a week we were taken to the public swimming pool. This was great for my ego because despite my poor style I could belt out quite a few lengths and was one of the better swimmers.

At Ipswich father bought his first car—an elegant maroon Lanchester. I don't know why he had not done this sooner for the era of the family car had long arrived. He had never stinted on taxis—I

think he simply had never found time or inclination to learn to drive. Anyway it certainly opened a new door for us. Saturdays were necessarily work days for anyone in the retail business, but on Sundays Evelyn packed a picnic and we would explore the Suffolk coast. This is a part of England that we had never seen before—a gentle land with quiet bucolic beauty very different from Evelyn's crowded Midlands or the craggy loveliness of North Wales. We found swimming beaches at Minsmere, the old fort at Dunwich, Alderburgh long before it became a festival town. There was still a breath of the Saxon settlements here.

We would get lost in the narrow hedgerowed lanes and Father's patience, always on a short fuse, often exploded as we wove through a maze. The local people were as serene as their tranquil territory—some rustic would patiently (and slowly) explain exactly how we should go to get to wherever and off would dash Father only to find ourselves back in exactly the same spot ten minutes later. Eventually we would arrive and there would be an afternoon of bathing and sunning. I was always alone in the sea—Evelyn couldn't swim, June was too young and, although my father always said he was a strong swimmer, I never saw him in the water. The North Sea is icy and he was particularly careful of his health, which I know now must have been precarious. So usually I would lark about on my own. Felixstow was close enough for an evening drive. Here, though, the waters were often fierce and the undertow considerable so a swim often meant I was tumbled about and ended on the shale beach scratched and breathless. Father was always on the jetty and would have come to my rescue had I ever been in real trouble but he had quite liberal ideas about girls not being over protected and I believe these early swimming experiences gave me a respect for the big waters that I have kept all my life.

In those days, Felixstow was a quiet seaside town and we would drive in sometimes on a Saturday to buy the small fish the fishermen had for sale on the wharf side. The Woolworth manager and his wife, Reg and Ann Smith, became family friends and we would often stop at their bungalow on the way home for a cup of tea and a visit. They had a boy a couple of years younger than me and, alt-

hough we were sent into the garden to “play,” we never got past viewing one another with mutual boredom.

That Christmas we spent in Dinas Powis with Aunt Alice and her family. There was Uncle Harry Shellard, who had a local one man window cleaning/chimney sweeping business. Small as it was he probably did alright. He was a well-educated man but almost totally deaf and had chosen work which suited his disability. Then there were my cousins, Olwen, Ronnie and Clifford. Olwen, five years older than I, would have been about fifteen, Ronnie thirteen and Cliff eleven. There was also an older brother, Ernie, who must have been in his late teens. He lived with Harry’s brother Charlie, who had a transport business in Bath. Being childless Charlie had taken Ernie into the business and eventually either through smart enterprise or fortunes of the times they became very prosperous indeed

Dinas Powis showed me yet another way of life. The Shellards lived in the house in which my father had grown up. My grandfather, Walter Trott, with his brother William, both mining engineers, had gone to Burma as young men and spent a good deal of their working lives in the ruby mines at Moguk. They came back for extended leave every two years—just long enough, if one looks at the family spacing, to beget another offspring. Dinas Powis, then, was home base and where my grandmother almost single-handedly brought up her large family. Their home, one in a row of six 19th century doubles, Castlewood Houses, was at the top of Highwalls Road just out of the village centre. This is the road that runs into the golf course and beyond that there is open country so except for a small rocky rise at the end of the back garden there is an unobstructed vista.

And so we had the usual Christmas festivities—presents to open and huge meals in the main room with its roaring fire. Although the houses retained a certain country elegance, there was an abundance of late Victorian inconveniences: plumbing consisted of a lavatory tacked onto the back of the house and baths were taken in a large tub in the back kitchen. Nevertheless, they were sizeable and rather imposing. Two rooms downstairs one on each side of a small entrance hall. The all purpose room, where most of the family living took place, was large with a range kept going by a fire. Big

family table in the middle, an enormous sideboard, a long sofa under the window and several rather daunting chairs by the tire. Behind this room was a small kitchen with a stone flag floor and some very basic accoutrements—an ancient gas stove, a sink for washing, cupboard and shelves.

The other downstairs room, however, was a treasure trove. Somewhat smaller than the family room it held all the memorabilia of my grandfather's exciting life. There were little carved ivory knick knacks, strange masks and small tables, books of pictures.... A piano, of course, for at the time it was a required sign of refinement—but it was seldom used for Alice only played haltingly and there were none of the rollicking sing-alongs of the Thomas family. The room, however, held an allure, a strange whiff of the tropics. It was very different from the rest of the house and altogether enchanting. Upstairs were three quite ordinary bedrooms. Actually, one was reputed to be haunted by an Eastern man in a turban, a Burmese acquaintance perhaps of the two brothers, but I never saw the ghost.

My father had four brothers and perhaps this is the time to bring them on stage, although only one later played an important part in my life. Alfred, the eldest emigrated to Canada when he was twenty, completed his education there and enjoyed a successful career as an electrical engineer; Charles emigrated to South Africa where he had an administrative position with Crown Gold Mines. We were always led to believe that Charlie was the super-successful one in the family. It was only years later that we learned his life had not been one of unmitigated affluence.

Harry was killed in the First World War and Fred settled in four miles away in Cardiff where he worked as an auto mechanic. The family story goes that Fred, the mildest of a somewhat "turbulent brood" enlisted as ambulance driver—until he heard of the death of his brother Harry. Then he transferred to an infantry unit as a fighting man. My father was the youngest and Aunt Alice the only girl. Pictures show my grandmother as a stern faced but not unhandsome woman and myth says she kept her family in control with an iron hand, definitely no velvet glove. But I never knew her and my father remembered her only with love.

Anyway that Christmas was a happy one—the weather was frosty but clear. Olwen took me with her on walks with her group of friends and they nicely accepted me. Their chatter was, naturally, all about the boys they liked or didn't like and one night Olwen kindly explained what is usually referred to as the facts of life. I think she expected me to be impressed but at the time it only seemed rather extraordinary behaviour for grown up people, however it was a group whose behaviour I often found incomprehensible anyway. We strolled around the golf course, where the pro was on their list of desirable men, we lingered in the village square, where the Penarth buses had a short lay over before their return journey and the young bus drivers were always good for a few minutes chat, we hung around after church a not too seriously taken Sunday morning ritual.

Then back to Ipswich. My father had another attack and this time he was in bed much longer. He taught Evelyn to play cribbage and they would spend hours with the game sometimes for high stakes, steak and kidney pie for dinner, versus a new hat, whatever.... There would be a pile of books on the bed. The atmosphere was always cheerful but it must have been a troubled time for both of them. The doctor was such a constant visitor that he became a family friend and eventually it became apparent that my father's health was seriously impaired and a return to the stressful business life that he coped with successfully and certainly enjoyed would be impossible and a new lifestyle had to be found.

How the final decision came about I don't know as of course I didn't hear the discussions, What I record now comes from a later filling in from Evelyn. In the end the outcome was that my father would retire on medical grounds with a small pension from the Woolworth Company. As he had made some shrewd investments our income, although much reduced, would be adequate for a simple life in a small community. Dinas Powis was to be our new home—and perhaps our migrations were over.

So when he was well enough Father and Evelyn went to Dinas Powis to find a house and prepare the way for a move. June and I stayed in Ipswich with Bertha our young maid. They came back

enthusiastic about the house they had bought and with all the pros and cons of those they had looked at and rejected. So it was an exciting time for us all. There was even a chance that with a long rest and healthy country living Father could eventually go back to a business life.

The house turned out to be pleasant indeed. It was at the top of Britway Road, the hill going out of the village towards the Common, as the last house on the road it had fields on two sides and was open to all the fresh sea air blowing in from the Bristol Channel. So we settled down. I went to the local village school just at the bottom of the hill. The schoolmaster was Father's oldest friend. They had gone to school together, enlisted together, gone through a large part of the war together. While my father had been learning business through the A&P Nut Rees had gone to University and taken his teaching certificate. He turned out to be the best teacher I ever had and was soon giving me extra Welsh tuition to bring me into line with his other students. This was the school which my father and his brothers had attended, a solid building with the thick stone walls peculiar to 19th century South Wales. It had started out as a church school and was still referred to as NP, or Non-Provided. I have no idea now what this meant for in most ways it was a perfectly ordinary state school, nevertheless the curriculum still included a stiff portion of Church of England practice, and we were drilled in catechism and started out each day with a prayer.

Meanwhile Father and Evelyn had their own routine. He went out each morning and did the household shopping. In the village he had two cronies: Dr. Miles and the Vicar, whose name I forget. At ten o'clock, opening time, they would meet in the Three Horseshoes for a quick one; sometimes they would be joined by Ivor Hopkins, another war buddy who had a farm at Michaelston and supplied the village with milk. Often as Father walked home he would stop in at Aunt Mary Jane's house—it was at the bottom of Britway hill—and chat with her a few minutes to get his breath to climb to the top of the rise. Mary Jane was Father's cousin—her father had been the other brother who spent his life in Burma with my grandfather.

Dinas Powis is not a village of chocolate box prettiness, but with a pleasant amicable comeliness. The focal point is the *Twyn*, or village green, a low-walled triangular grassy site with, in my day, the school and school house on one side, a row of shops and public house on the other and several houses on the third. From this core three roads lead up to the common or out to the country or down to the Cardiff Road and so to the wider world. The Common is just that, land that belongs to all, the open place where the farmers used to pasture their animals but later became rugger field and cricket club and the place for the annual fair, games days and other village doings. Here you can taste the salt air coming from the Bristol Channel only a few miles away and indeed often feel the wild winds that sweep up from the sea.

At night if there was a sea mist we could hear the mournful call of the fog horns from ships in the channel; in the other direction is gentle protected country. The *cwm*, a small wooded valley was a favourite place for gathering the wild flowers that came in quick and lovely succession each year. First the bluebells casting a thick fragrant carpet, then primroses, small and harder to see, then the violets, tiny, hiding in little clumps. And there was always wild garlic. The sturdy dark green leaves formed a ground cover, compact and surprisingly redolent not sweet and flowery (although I believe garlic is a member of the lily family) but with a peppery smell not at all unpleasant.

If you went right through the cwm you came to farm fields with lambs in the spring and Ivor Hopkins' farm where there was always a glass of fresh milk and a bit of gossip and then on to the tiny hamlet of Michaelston. Then you could make a detour and come back via the golf course and so down to the village again. It made a good walk on a Sunday afternoon or balmy summer evening. There was blackberry and wild strawberry picking at the appropriate times, good for eating and for jam and the hedgerows were full of elder flower in the spring and later elderberries good for home-made wine. Evelyn tried her hand at all of these. The wine in particular turned out rather well. It was supposed to be a mild cordial for all the family but in fact it packed such a wallop, said my father, that it was quickly labelled "adults only."

Going in another direction again, towards the Cardiff Road, there are the remains of a castle—well, you can't go far in Wales without finding a bit of castle. The Dinas Powis ruin is no more than a few crumbled walls with an apple orchard inside. Of course the Romans came this way too but even before that there were people here—in the 1950's, through aerial photographs the outlines of a Neolithic settlement, not far from the castle, were found. It caused great interest in archaeological circles. There is something very comfortable about a region that has been occupied for so long. I go back occasionally, visit old friends and have a look at the changes. Castlewood houses have been modernized—a current owner let me have a look at the improvements. Modern kitchen at the back—all gleaming equipment and trendy copper pots. The small back bedroom replaced by a fully functional four piece bathroom; I wonder what the ghost thinks of that! The school house is gone, replaced by a complex of several modern townhouses but they are designed to fit the general tenor of the village; fifty years of progress really haven't altered the place that much.

So our lives took on a pleasant order. We still had the car and week-ends would bring outings, drives around the beautiful countryside, up the Glamorgan valley, along the Gower peninsular, Mumbles, sometimes a picnic and a swim. Also the Smiths, our friends from Felixstow, were now living in Barry, three miles up the coast, so there were visits back and forth there too. There were two happy uneventful years. I liked the school, I made friends, did well at my lessons and with Uncle Nut's tutoring became one of the better students. We had a Christmas play in which I had a leading role. I only remember the tinsel crown, not what I was supposed to be. Strangely, one never knows when one is happy; it is only afterwards that one can say, "Well, those were happy times."

I believe Evelyn fitted into village life well and despite our changed lifestyle was quite content with life but all was not well with my father. There were visits to specialists, his attacks came more often. They consisted of dreadful bouts of coughing accompanied by a high fever. With the coughing came a surge of thick phlegm—disgusting ropy stuff which was clogging his lungs. Doctor after doctor and specialist after specialist gave opinion after opinion. But none could find a treatment or even a

name for his condition. Finally the consensus was that he had probably been in a gas attack during the war. He didn't remember this happening but in France he had been a machine gunner in a forward position. The gunners had to remain at their posts, sometimes for two or three days and during one of these periods he knew he had had pneumonia and been delirious and only semi-conscious. Could it be that during that time there had been an attack during which he had not been able to put on a gas mask? He thought it entirely probable.

The fact was that the bronchial tubes and lungs were badly damaged and nothing much could be done. After each attack, however, he was able to resume a normal life with one exception: because of the now continual build-up of mucus he was forced to always have handy a large jar, filled with a disinfectant into which he could expectorate after a coughing fit. His social life dwindled for although friends were understanding, he refused to go out carrying this truly horrible utensil with him. It was an experience for a man, still young and only very recently advancing to the peak of a good career, with the expectation of a long and prosperous life ahead.

He could still walk to the village and still had pleasant mornings with his old cronies but his visits with Mary Jane became longer and the walk up the hill became slower. Visitors came to see him, however, and I remember hilarious afternoons when there was a rugger game on the radio. No TV in those days. He would get a thick wad of poster paper from the newsagent and Harry Shellard would come to the house. With a couple of beers they would settle down at the dining room table. As Father listened to the commentator he would draw the plays on the paper for Harry to follow. They would both get rather carried away for when the play was fast Harry, who had the loud voice of the very deaf would bellow, "What's that Ern—what did he do—what did he say?" While Father getting a bit excited himself would lose track of the ball while the paper got more and more covered with red and blue scribbles and scrawls. Until finally they would scrunch it up and start again. Alice too would visit but she was a stiff woman and inclined to dwell on news of doom and disaster so her visits were

gloomy sessions which infuriated Evelyn who had necessarily taken on the attributes of nursing sister and did her best to keep Father cheerful and positive.

Many years later Evelyn used to talk about those days. She and Alice never really hit it off and Alice's sick room manner was a final insult—silly woman used to talk of nothing but the illness and deaths in the village, Evelyn told me. I don't suppose Alice had much else to talk about; her own life can't have been a wildly exciting one. On the other hand, Mary Jane and particularly Mary Jane's married daughter Dorothy became good friends.

Mary Jane had had an interesting experience. As a young woman she had fallen in love with the son of one of the local farmers. For some reason her mother thought this an unsuitable match and sent her off to Burma to be with her father at Moguk. She had an album full of pictures of life in the age of Britain's colonial glory. Garden parties, dressed for a formal ball, standing with friends in front of charming villas, Burmese servants in exotic dress waited in attendance with even more exotic foliage in the background. She stayed for a year and it must have been a revelation for a girl from a quiet Welsh village. Then she came back and married the young farmer. He was a quiet gentle man always known to me as Uncle Henry Williams. Although they lived in the village they ran a prosperous dairy farm, pasturing their cows on the common as the village farmers had done for many hundreds of years. We bought our milk from Ivor Hopkins but butter and eggs always came from Uncle Henry. I believe their life was one of comfortable simplicity. It's a nice love story—but perhaps it's just a family myth. Probably Mary Jane was wisely sent to Moguk just to see a bit of the world before she settled down.

Dinas Powis can't have been a bad place to settle down. Close enough to Cardiff if one wanted more than village entertainment. The Welsh capital is an ancient seat of culture, good theatre, good music of course, fine museums and art galleries, but more.... When I was a child Wales was absolutely addicted to rugby football. In England rugger was the public school and private club game—the working class lads played soccer. In Wales everybody cheered for rugger, school boys from every

class played both for fun and competition, every town, village and school had a club and if the national team didn't sweep everyone else off the field at cup time there was mourning throughout the valleys. I was in Cardiff with Evelyn one Saturday afternoon during the rugby season. We had been shopping and just happened to be on Castle Street when the crowds streamed out of Cardiff Arms Park after a game. The men filled the street singing as only the Welsh can sing. I say men because although the women sing too, in chapel and at *eisteddfods*, it is the men who are magnificent at this kind of singing and there is, in the sound of a host of male voices loud clear and passionate, something reminiscent of the ancient Cymru and long gone days of glory. Had Cardiff won or lost I don't know—but it would have been the same—all occasions are defined by glorious voice.

For me these were exceptionally happy days. I had two special friends: Cynthia Williams (no relation to Uncle Henry), who was always called Kinkie, and Joyce Britton. We were inseparable. Evelyn, however, set the family rules and she had the restricted working class view of the bringing up of girls—decorum is much valued by the poor—and I wasn't allowed nearly as much freedom as the others. There was no larking around after school except to formally approved events, but there were plenty of those. Penarth Swimming Club, dancing class, church activities. The family had never been very consistent church goers but now, going to the parochial school I not only went to Sunday school but became involved in all the C of E activities that were a rich part of village life. The Church of England is (by North American standards) a tolerant body.

There always seemed to be something entirely frivolous in the offing—a bazaar, a social evening, a concert, a sports day or a village fair. The social evenings were tremendous fun. The village community hall was a multi-purpose building right opposite the school. It held the village offices and a small but well-stocked lending library. The main room, however, was ballroom, concert hall, and municipal meeting place. There was a stage at one end for concerts and with the chairs cleared out it was fine for dancing. On dance evenings there was music from a local group and the place bounced. Most of the village went; it was a place for the young people to meet, for married people to have a

night out, children baring, but only barely, babes in arms went, old people who still liked to dance went. For those past dancing or the few who preferred an alternative there was a room at the back where card tables were set up for whist. The church was well represented—the Vicar stayed with the whist group but the young curate was in much demand on the dance floor.

For the adults in those days there was no such thing as sticking with the same partner all evening—it was considered a discourtesy not to dance with everyone one knew. We young girls, of course, mostly danced with one another, the boys of our own age were full of pretended disdain. So it was a very social evening in every respect. Also there was no taboo on taking a drink; there was no bar in the Community Hall but the Three Horseshoes just across the way was quite handy for thirsty dancers to nip in for a quick beer or for a young man to take his girl for a breather over a short one. These were not all night revels; everything was over by eleven o'clock.

I wonder had my father's health been better if he would have joined in these bucolic frolics. Probably sometimes, as most of the village elders did—and he was a sociable man—but his real love was serious music and there is never a lack of that in Wales. To have the time to appreciate it would have delighted him. It never came about; his attacks became so frequent that he was spending more time in bed than up and around. Then one morning Evelyn came into my bedroom, quite composed and said "He's gone—Daddy's gone." He must have died in his sleep, apparently without distress, for she had awakened to find him lifeless beside her. It was a lovely spring day in April, 1935. It must have been a terrible shock—Evelyn said later that only the day before they had been planning a holiday for the coming summer, motoring up the Wye Valley and stopping at the old towns along the way. It was self-delusory for it must have been plain for some time that he was never going to make a full recovery.

I don't much remember the next few days. Father was buried in the churchyard at St. Andrews along with others in the family, his parents, his brother Harry, Great Uncle William whose headstone reads "Died at Moguk". I was not at the funeral, June and I spent the day at the Smiths' place

at Barry, but I do remember Ann's warmth and kindness. Several other players now appeared in my life, however, Evelyn's sister Olive and her husband Wilf; her brother Leslie and his wife Doris who came for the funeral. These were people who much later I got to know and have a real affection for, but at that time they were just more strangers in my life.

Chapter 3

The next events are completely baffling. Evelyn invited Ada to give up her house in Preston and come to live with us in Dinas Powis. They were not particularly close and were so different in background, personality and outlook that from the start the partnership must have been a shaky one. Certainly pooling resources is a good idea if people are compatible and I suppose that was the rationale. Father's Woolworth pension died with him so Evelyn was now entirely dependent on the income derived from his investments. Ada's very small income left by her father was only spasmodically bolstered by her paying guests for her young business women came and went with frequency.

The disposition now of Evelyn's income was complicated. Father had left the capital in the trust of three executors who had sole responsibility for its good investment. They were, Nut Rees, Sidney Thomas and Ernie Shellard. Nut was the chief administrator and every time a decision was made it required the signature of the two others. This often caused unavoidable delays, great frustration on his part and resentment and hostility on Evelyn's.

There was also another money matter which caused even more difficulty in the family. I became the beneficiary of a fairly substantial insurance policy. The capital was to be held in trust until I was twenty one but so arranged that it could be drawn upon for educational purposes. As a twelve year old this was explained to me but it had little impact at the time. No such arrangement had been made for June. Nut Rees told me later, for until I was twenty-one he had control of this also, that the policy had been taken out by my mother when I was born and that in the first place she had most probably paid the premiums herself. She had some money of her own and had her own ideas, I believe, on the advisability of women having some financial independence. Evelyn told me that she and Father had always intended to do the same for June but had simply put it off. She suggested that Daddy would have liked me to share the inheritance with June—and it seemed to me a perfectly reasonable thing to do.

In the meantime Ada arrived. Except for a few personal treasures she had sold everything she owned, including the house on Masefield Road. She had a couple of my mother's water colours, some rather nice silver ware and her clothes. Evelyn sold the car—but with a bit of paring down it seemed that all would be well and we settled down once more to an amiable domestic routine. June, now a bright little girl of four, joined me as an "Infant" in the village school. I think it was quite a pleasant summer, Ada and I went to North Wales for a few weeks—Evelyn took June with her to visit her family in the Midlands. The winter too must have gone by uneventfully—it was the next spring that started a string of events that quite literally changed the course of my life.

It was time to leave the village school. Uncle Nut was a fine teacher, a born educator, who made learning an adventure. His focus was on getting the children past their entrance exams and into secondary school—Barry High School for the girls and Barry Grammar School for the boys. Barry the sea port town a few miles away. These were the days of the dreaded eleven pluses. Children wishing to go on to high school had to sit entrance exams when they were eleven (11+) but not over twelve. Those who did not pass the exams stayed at elementary school until fourteen and then left for work or apprenticeship.

It was a point of honour with Nut Rees to get everyone through who sat—and he invariably did even if it meant hours of extra coaching for the slower ones. That year we all sat our exams and we all passed. As I was going on to a private school I need not have tried the exam but Nut put me in a room by myself and had me try the paper anyway. I had completely forgotten this incident until Kinkie reminded me much, much later. Kinkie and Joyce were bound for Barry High but I was to be sent to Howells in Cardiff as a boarder. Howells was, and still is, a prestigious private girls' school dating back several hundred years. It was my father's choice, he was fully supportive of girls being given the best education possible and a private school background was a distinct advantage. It was taken for granted that I would go on to university and enter a profession.

I started at Howells the following spring. This is not the place to describe a girls' boarding school of the thirties except to say that I loved it. I loved the uniform, the games, the routine. Lessons were taken in the old school building—we lived in private houses close by. There were about fifteen or so girls of all ages in my residence for it was considered a good thing to have the seniors and juniors together. I shared a dormitory room with two other girls my own age, Nina and Marion and we soon became good friends. After lessons each day there would be a games period when we were marched down crocodile file to the games fields for cricket or rounders. After an evening meal we were crocodiled back to our houses. There was homework to be done around the big table in the sitting room and after that free time to play games, read, talk. I had no trouble with the work—I was at least adequate in the usual subjects and Nut Rees had me well grounded in Welsh, I was new to both French and Latin but I took them in my stride. I also took piano lessons and art.

On Sunday mornings those of us who wore Church of England, that is the vast majority, attended services at Llandaff cathedral.[3] It's a beautiful old church and was close enough for us walk, in a crocodile of course, looking uncharacteristically demure with our prayer books in hand.

Our family had been only spasmodic church goers but I enjoyed th.is weekly ritual, the ceremony, the music, the feeling of being a part of this ancient community. I was not only happy but well on the way to becoming a well-balanced, well-educated young person. In view of what came later I have tried hard to remember exactly what my feelings were that spring and, although I might not have used the same wording at that time, I think I have the emotions right.

Something else happened that term to bond me more securely with the school. I contracted chicken pox and was sent to the school sanatorium for three weeks. They were a delightful three weeks. There were five of us: three of us about the same age. Olive King-Davies, one of the seniors, whose younger sister was a particular friend of mine and Pat Edwards, the Head Girl I was in powerful company indeed and we all had a great time. For one thing it was a great morale builder because I

[3] Badly damaged in the later air raids, it has been restored and now contains one of the most controversial church statues: Jacob Epstein's massive and awesome *Christ in Majesty*.

found that the seniors, when we were all in the same boat, were not only approachable but jolly good company. Even the matron, a Miss Lavendar, all starched white and smelling of disinfectant was not only approachable but rather nice. The sanatorium was a delightful dormitory room, bright and cheerful with hospital cots, but easy chairs too for except for afternoon rests, we were not bed patients and could spend our days with reading and talking and generally lazing. Then we had special. food and new books and magazines appeared with regularity. Parents sent fruit and flowers—I had a nice basket from home—and there no suggestion of lessons.

Anyway the term came to an end and I was back in Dinas Powis again to compare notes with Kinkie and Joyce. But only for a week then Ada and I took off for Bangor and the rest of the summer with the Thomas family. I remember that most of my time was spent with Leslie for Joan had taken a summer job at a holiday resort in Anglesea. I think we got along pretty well—he was a high-spirited boy with a witty tongue and always quick with a joke. I didn't know it at the time but this was my last visit to North Wales for years.

The return to Howells was pleasant—Margaret and Nina and I had lots to talk about. The autumn term brought a new aura to the old school. The grounds were mellow with falling leaves, games were hockey and lacrosse rather than cricket and rounders. If it rained on a Saturday something interesting was always found to do—a visit to Cardiff museum, or the castle, or to explore Llandaff Cathedral, where we went every Sunday anyway.

Something peculiar was happening to me though. I can't explain it but I entered a period terrible depression—a perfectly ordinary letter from home would put me in tears. For some reason, I found it impossible to concentrate and my work suffered. A page of Latin verbs was an incomprehensible jumble. I remember sitting at the homework table staring at my assignments without any idea how I should start. There was always help available—our house mistress sat at the table with us and any of the older girls would help with a question. The others noticed my abstraction but I turned away questions, turned down offers of help. I had always been a reasonably bright pupil and the previous term

had been a good one. It wasn't the work as such—just that I somehow couldn't get a grip on it. I fell deeper and deeper into despair. All adolescents are a bit strange anyway, perhaps that was part of it. I just don't know. One morning I got up, dressed, quietly left the house and walked into Cardiff; I had determined to leave school for good and design my own life.

I was almost fourteen, official school leaving age. I could get work. I would find a job in a shop or a factory—I could get a room in a boarding house—I could do exactly as I pleased with no one to answer to—all I wanted was to be on my own. It was a fine Autumn day. I dawdled away the morning sitting in the park but by noon I was both hungry and beginning to feel rather uneasy—by now I realised I had taken a very serious step. I walked along in a daze not thinking clearly at all. I understand perfectly when people say "I didn't know what I was doing"—it was as though someone else was propelling me through a set of actions I was only dimly aware of.

My vague plan to get a job faded—where did one look? My knowledge of the working world was pretty naïve—I think I had visualised something like my Grandmother's parlour maid. By afternoon it dawned on me that I would have been missed and that perhaps someone was looking for me. The entire Cardiff police force was, but I only imagined perhaps a teacher or one of the seniors. To get out of sight I ducked into a cinema—I have no idea what was playing but I sat there until late afternoon and then there seemed to be nothing else to do but to go back to Dinas Powis. I took the bus and when I got off on and started to walk up the hill into the village there was Uncle Nut coming towards me. He only said "Well hello. I'll walk you home."

Tears, questions, more tears. Had I run away from school to be with Ada? Was there something wrong with the teachers, with the other girls? Then I realised something was different: Ada wasn't there. It seems that she and Evelyn had decided that their partnership wasn't entirely satisfactory for either of them. Ada had taken a job as lady's companion to an elderly widow in West Bromwich. She had only left a day or two before. But more was to come. Evelyn had also decided on a move—she was going home to her people in the Midlands. She was in the process of selling the house and would

be in new quarters before Christmas. “We were both going to write to you,” she said, “as soon as everything was settled.” I wonder if I had some premonition that things were so disturbed in Dinas Powis—had I picked up some subconscious signals. Much, much later I found out there had been another influence. Evelyn had been involved in a brief, unhappy love affair. So she too was running away from something and making for the comfort of her old home. She had been married to my father for not quite five years and was only thirty three years old.

Of course I could have gone back to Howells, it was only a case of saying I had been upset—saying I was sorry. The school would have imposed some punishment but it would have blown over and I would have ended something of a curiosity but no more. But by now the thought of going back to school, any school was unthinkable. I said I wanted to go with Evelyn to Tipton. I think she was pleased with that. So once again we were on the move.

Evelyn had already been to the Midlands and bought, or at least put a down payment on a house in Cosely a fifteen minute walk from her parents’ home at Prince’s End. The Black Country is a conglomeration of small towns huddled together with sometimes a larger one as a focal point. For us Dudley was such a one, West Bromwich was another, only a short bus ride away, so Ada was quite close and we would all be within visiting distance. Perhaps everything would work out perfectly well.

I had now come full circle from my very earliest memories. Cosely is a village halfway between Wolverhampton and Dudley. Not quite a village as such but rather one of those areas almost entirely gobbled up in that tremendous Wolverhampton/Birmingham megalopolis but still retaining a good deal of its former rural atmosphere. Not unattractive, not overly built up but not a picturesque: village either, rather one of houses and pubs and short main street, but with some green fields and a park. Our new house, typical English style double with three bedrooms was set on the Wolverhampton New Road—a busy throughway linking Wolverhampton with Dudley. We moved in November in time for Christmas with the Lamsdales, the whole family spent the day with us and it was like all Christmases, presents, food and plenty of good will.

Many new players now came on stage. I had already met most of Evelyn's family briefly; I now got to know them much better. Grandma Lamsdale I knew best, we had shared the moving experience; her husband was a small, quiet man who, before the Depression, had worked, in the steel mills. After two years of unemployment he had been taken on by the municipal council to work on a maintenance crew, repairing outside damage to the local council houses—walls, doors, windows, paths and fences. He was a nice man rather battered by life but he had a twinkle in his eye and could still tell a good story about the men he worked with, the jobs they had done and the odd collection of people they met along the way.

The Lamsdales lived at Prince's End, another small community but without Coseley's lingering country ambience. Here there was only row upon row of dingy little houses, a street of small shops—no fields, not a blade of grass in sight. Well there was one open space. Later I discovered the enormous slag area with its mounds of cinder like rubble from the steel mills. Here scraggy bushes and spindly flowers grew. There were paths through this waste land and sometimes furtive men in caps and neckerchiefs could be seen leading sturdy Staffordshire bull terriers between the mounds—dog fighting had long been illegal and perhaps they were only taking their pets for a stroll—who knows.

The Lamsdales had no part of anything like this. They were solidly respectable working class whose lives had held few pleasures and much hardship. The small house was a typical turn of the century worker's home, one of four grouped around a brick paved yard, each with its own wash house, in Black Country parlance called the brewse, and behind that a lean to flush lavatory. The house had two rooms downstairs; the front one led right on to the street and was seldom used. It was nominally "the parlour" and furnished with a few chairs and side tables—but there was also an immense chest of drawers which served as a repository for many of the family's good clothes, for the two bedrooms upstairs were small and had little space for dressers and wardrobes. Few English houses, modest or not, at that time had built in closets. The back room downstairs was the family room where most of the daily activities took place. A large table and chairs in the centre, a coal fired range,

where virtually all the cooking was done—for there was no other facility except a gas burner which took kettle or saucepan—a horsehair sofa, a couple of basket chairs, a sewing machine. It was a serviceable room, not uncomfortable, which conveniently led to the back yard and the wash house.

The wash house was the working part of the dwelling. It had a large sink with a cold water tap, the only source of water for the house, and a big boiler and mangle with great wooden rollers. There was room too for a work bench and a few shelves for tools or whatever and a coal bin but the main *raison d'être* was its laundry function. On wash days the boiler would be filled early in the morning and a tire lit beneath. The custom was to hand wash everything in the sink and then bed linen and towels were thrown in for a good boil before being rinsed once more and hung on the line to dry. When there were working men in the house work clothes would be given the same treatment. Men working in the steel mills were hard on clothes and Mondays were hard labour for most women. Water had to be bucketed from sink to boiler by hand, work clothes had to be scrubbed on a wash board, or put in a tub and drubbed with a dolly (a wooden three pronged instrument that was pounded up and down to release the dirt). After the boiling came the rinsing, the mangling and finally the hanging out to dry. All similar, I suppose, to how the process was handled by a Canadian prairie farm wife. It was exhausting work.

In this part of England, though, there is an historic reason for the sizeable out building, separated from the house. It is nailer country and only a generation before the Black Country was producing a sizeable part of the country's demand for nails and chains on individual family forges. The small smithy would be worked by the whole family, sometimes as a full time occupation and sometimes to reinforce the wages of the main earner. It was a recognized and approved entrepreneurship. This is an interesting part of Britain, the heart of 19th century industrial expansion where not long ago the working people were prosperous and proud. Even the language is distinctive for the Black Country accent is unique to the region. Street back chat and banter are often in the old dialect—and if you don't know if it could be a foreign language. People now feel uncomfortable with the ancient forms of

speech and try to emulate the south of England BBC accent. It's a pity to see the rich vernacular disappear—but again I speak only from retrospect at the time I don't suppose I paid much attention.

Not far away was a very different 1930s life style. Evelyn's brother, Les and his wife Doris, and her sister Olive and husband Wilf, all lived in Tipton, another small town still within walking distance of both Cosely and Prince's End. The two families had homes only a few houses from one another on Geneva Road, part of the Shrubbery Estate, one of the council house developments appearing all over Britain. Started in the first place as slum clearance, council houses quickly became an integral part of British life and families soon began to vie for tenancy which was allotted by the council on a points system.

The houses were modern and comfortable with three bedrooms, sizeable sitting room, and a kitchen with all the conveniences of the time and large enough for meals, plenty of cupboards, good cookstove, and hot water. Customs linger though—in one corner of the kitchen stood the ubiquitous boiler. There was a modern bathroom upstairs and toilet downstairs, all in all an attractive, substantial residence. There is some kind of North American myth that people won't take care of property that doesn't actually belong to them. This certainly wasn't true of the council houses. The Geneva Road people took real pride in these spiffy new homes and in the summer almost all had flowers in the front gardens and tidy vegetable plots at the back. The soil was good and roses and tomatoes got equal attention. It was, at the time, a community of mostly young families for the system gave attention to family requirement. Olive and Wilf had two small boys, Derrick about June's age and Brian at that time a baby. Les and Doris had no children but Les was a municipal employee which probably gave him a few points. These were all people who showed me nothing but warmth and kindness and I became very fond of them.

There was one more family member who I already knew, May, now quite recovered from her girlhood ailments and working for Woolworths in Walsall. All three sisters had worked for the firm. Socially it was considered to be a cut above the factory work that was the usual occupation for the local

girls but probably no better paid. May lived at home but she and Evelyn, despite a difference in age of about ten years, were close sisters and she spent a lot of time with us.

Now came the problem of what to do with me. If I was bewildered so was Evelyn. It's easy to look back as an adult and see things in perspective. By the time I was fifteen I had gone to nine different schools—I had never had the chance to make lasting friends. Learning suffered through having no continuity and my constantly being dumped into a class that was already halfway through a term's curriculum. Had I had a sibling closer to my own age, someone to share feelings, experiences, even doubts and fears with, I might have taken this strange life better but I was so solitary anything I felt had to be sorted out only in my own mind. I can see now that Howells was my opportunity to put all of these conditions right. I think, though, that I had suffered a mini breakdown and for a time was simply unable to function effectively. What triggered it I don't know, there are theories now that suggest that even one or two upheavals in a short time can cause severe psychological distress and I had had just too many. For a long time it seemed that leaving Howells was a move that altered the whole course of my life; but then who knows—there were events not far off that changed everybody's lives.

Evelyn had become friendly with the local hairdresser. Giving me a solid trade was now the only thing to do—she arranged for me to be taken on for training. She was right—I had made it perfectly clear that I wanted to be finished with formal education and go to work. My schooling was not yet over though—one last school remained. I could not start my training for several months and rather than spending this time hanging around the house Evelyn proposed that I go to the local high school until I could start my adult career. I think she thought that I would change my mind and continue. It was, for the time being, my last chance.

Children of broken homes (and there are many kinds of broken home) are now given much more choice in deciding their own lives. I think at that point had I been given the opportunity to live with Ada, I would have been happy enough to go back to school and would have gained a perfectly ordinary academic background. But the Preston house was gone, and Ada couldn't possibly have

coped with a schoolgirl given her own changed circumstances. The choices I made were my own, but I was, after all still only a child and cannot be entirely blamed for making such bad ones. What was traumatic and remained so for some time was the enormous amount of guilt laid upon me. Evelyn's constant theme was that my father had given her the responsibility of looking after me—a responsibility that she considered almost sacred; she succeeded in making me feel that I had caused her great grief and had to make it up to her. Far from being manipulative though, I think she was quite sincere and really believed this for I see her now as an uncomplicated personality driven by a strong and often misplaced emotionalism.

At this point, now that plans for the immediate future seemed to be settled I couldn't object to one last go at school and in fact it turned out to be fine. Every now and then I had been lucky and had a born teacher, one who made learning a joy and an adventure. Nut Rees was one of these, Miss Hickman was another. She was my home room teacher with an enthusiastic interest in weaving—she taught history and English literature and all her lessons had weaving as a focal point. When she found I was a reader she took me on as a special case—I think I surprised and interested her for despite my many academic ups and downs I was for my age, exceptionally well read. When she asked for a rundown of our recent reading and most of the class acknowledged some mystery stories and *Women's Own* I rattled off a strange medley of Walter Scott, Jerome K. Jerome, Edgar Wallace, George Eliot, Ethel M. Dell, *et al*. She never enquired about my odd upbringing but tried to interest me in poetry. My enthusiasm at the time was mild—only much later did I see her point. She was in and out of my life only briefly but she was an important influence.

My companions were nice uncomplicated girls with Midland voices and friendly dispositions. Some would matriculate and go on to a higher education but many like me would leave school at sixteen or sooner take some specific training or find work in a shop or an office. Most days I was still crushed with despair—some days I didn't even go to school but sat in the park considering my future. What had I done and what was to become of me. The strange thing is I don't recall even thinking

about the inheritance that was to come in a few short years—money that would give me the independence to rearrange my life considerably. I suppose at fifteen or sixteen twenty-one looks an eon away.

Chapter 4

I started my hairdressing career the spring of 1939. I was almost sixteen. I felt the clouds beginning to rise, the future was far from clear but I was embarking on a real working life. Bradley's Hairdressing Salon was five minutes' walk from home, a smallish brick building attached to the side of the family home. There were only two operators, Winnie Bradley the owner and an assistant Linda Whitehouse, always addressed as Miss Bradley and Miss Whitehouse. This was before trade schools and hairdressing was usually learned through a three year apprenticeship. The first few months of training consisted simply of standing and watching and doing some of the simple chores: making shampoo from thick green soap, mixing this and that, picking up towels, handing contraptions to the two operators. I distinguished myself on the first morning by dropping a glass shelf. As I never did become a fully practising hairdresser, I could say now that the next two years were a complete waste of time—on the contrary they were growing years. The pressures were few, except for rush periods pace was relaxed, most of my demons disappeared. Perhaps some others took their place but one must never expect life to be devoid of demons completely.

If I expected a working life to give me some freedom and independence, I was quickly disillusioned. First Evelyn had stern ideas on the raising of girls. Her views were a generation out of date and not at all what I saw in other families. Secondly, I was in disgrace anyway. I was never allowed to forget what distress I had caused. Someone, I think the family doctor, recommended counselling and made an appointment with a psychiatrist in Wolverhampton and I had one session with him. He was an elderly serious man, who on this first occasion only asked me a few simple questions about myself but he annoyed Evelyn by not allowing her in the room during this conversation. Then the Lamsdales were astounded that he only talked to me, they thought it very funny indeed and everyone wanted to know what he had said, what I had said and why he hadn't given me any medicine. I don't think they were quite ready to accept psychiatric counselling. In any case there was no return visit.

What Evelyn wanted was to make me a good member of her own family. With a few exceptions she disliked and distrusted both of my parental forebears—the Thomases she saw as hopelessly frivolous (artists, musicians), the Trotts as having an unstable streak (quick-tempered, impatient). All clever and intelligent, no doubt, but impractical. Therefore for my very best interests she tried her best to cure me of my frivolous instability. No films, no parties—but I had no opportunity to meet other girls anyway—and certainly no excursions without a guardian. I could go to the library by myself but that was about all.

A few times Ada invited me to West Bromwich for a day out and Evelyn cheerfully suggested May would like to go with me. They were not happy occasions. May hardly knew Ada and they had little in common. It was so obvious she had been appointed for the day to keep an eye on me that it was an embarrassment for all of us. We would do some window shopping, go to a movie (special dispensation on this occasion) have tea at a restaurant then May and I would go back to Tipton. There was no opportunity for Ada and me to reestablishment our closeness, our affection, to talk about our own family. Ada was a kindly woman but not very assertive and much too polite to make May the outsider.

Also daily working life in the thirties was quite different from today. We started at nine in the morning, had an hour and a half for lunch, half an hour for tea and finished at seven on Mondays and Saturdays, one on Thursday (half day) and eight every other night, a forty-seven hour week, so there wasn't much spare time. At busy periods it was a killing routine—at other times laced with boredom. There was, though, often time to pick up a book.

That summer Winnie married a car dealer in Wolverhampton and moved from the family home. She continued to come in on busy Fridays and Saturdays, but a new senior operator was engaged. Miss Mayer joined us. She was an older woman passionately devoted to classical music and became very much a part of my continuing education. When there was a good programme on the radio we would ask for the door to the house to be left open and Mrs. Bradley, Winnie's mother, would

tune in so we could enjoy a symphony concert. This only happened when the shop was empty—most customers would probably have preferred a dance band but music was not then considered to be a necessary and unavoidable part of every business place.

Although Cosely in the thirties was no cosmopolitan area its population covered a wide range of people and lifestyles; factory hands, steel workers, shop keepers, office workers, managers, and professional people. I remember the factory girls, from Swallow, where they made mackintoshes and Neweys, where they made pins and needles, a butcher's wife who was a champion ballroom dancer, a charming woman from a monied family who kept riding stables in the close by countryside, a woman J.P., two district midwives. Winnie had done her training at a fashionable salon in Wolverhampton and some of these clients, from a rather more urbane milieu, had faithfully followed her to Cosely when she set up shop some years before. So we got a good cross-section of society in the salon and conversation among the women was brisk and usually interesting. I learned a lot.

Hairdressing was very different then. The permanent wave was the most popular treatment; by today's standards the method was draconian. First the hair was divided into small sections and each strand rolled onto a curler. Each curler was then encased in a little metal tube to be attached to a machine which heated the containers so that the contents (hair) actually cooked. After ten minutes or so of this the machine was disconnected and the tubes and curlers removed. The hair was then in tight ringlets which were rinsed, "set" (styled) and dried. The whole process took about three hours. Later came the chemical permanent which, with refinements, I believe is still used today. The initial preparation is much the same but instead of being hooked to a machine the curlers are swabbed with a solution affecting the hair similarly. Permanents lasted about six months, that is until the treated hair grew out, and had to be washed and re-set every two weeks or so. The same hair must not be treated twice, so while waiting for the tail end of a perm to grow out, customers would resort to a marcel wave. This was done with hot curling irons and involved a tricky twist of the wrist to obtain the rigid parallel waves which were de rigueur.

I wasn't allowed near a curling iron for months but I could help with the permanents, winding hair onto curlers, shampooing, drying At first we had only one hood dryer because some of the older customers disliked sitting under such a contraption so I was charged with the job of standing with a hand drier gently wafting it at a set and netted head until it was dry—a long and tedious task. Sometimes I would get a small tip but not often; sometimes I would get some interesting conversation. The factory girls were good company and told me some truly horrible tales of, for instance, sewing a finger to the garment with the powerful machines that were used on the Swallow raincoats—they viewed it as nothing much to get excited about.

I found out too that patches of superstition can linger long in an age of modernism. Most of the working class women solidly refused to have a permanent done if they were menstruating—"my poorly time" as they put it—because they were convinced "it wouldn't take." Some were timid even to have their hair washed at that time thinking that water would have some mysterious effect on their reproductive organs. Not all, of course. I remember one woman telling us (the whole shop actually) of the wonderful convenience of tampons, which were only just on the market. Many women were very suspicious of such things thinking that: they might get lost "up there," for they had little knowledge of their own anatomy.

The British class system was still pretty much in place but, contrary to what most North Americans believe, it had little to do with snobbishness or feelings of superiority but simply a completely different view of life. The better educated middle class were more open to change, more liberal in attitude. The working class was much more conservative. It has something to do with education but it's also a suspicion of a world that often lays pitfalls and plays cruel tricks on the unwary. After all it would be pretty dreadful if things actually could get lost "up there." This is a vast over generalization and has some glaring exceptions, which I found out later (I had still to get acquainted with the strong, progressive, articulate labour movement) but vast generalizations often have a kernel of truth and I can only try to record what I saw at that time.

Meanwhile our lifestyle at home was exceedingly modest. Because my father's pension had died with him we were entirely dependent on the income from his investments, enough for simple everyday needs but not much left over. Evelyn had few friends, once or twice she invited old work mates for an evening visit but she had been away from her old home for some years and no doubt most had moved on to other places and others had moved to other lives. Perhaps too she was also in a settling down stage and grappling with some difficult adjustments. So most of our socializing was with family. Often on a Sunday there would be a gathering at our house with the whole Lamsdale family to high tea. Occasionally though we would go to Prince's End on a Saturday afternoon, stay overnight and go back to Cosely on Sunday evening. I rather liked these visits. Often there would be fish and chips, which I still consider one of life's gourmet delights, for supper on Saturday, and I would usually be the one delegated to go to the fish shop. Coming home with the hot fragrant newspaper parcel was a treat in itself.

Evelyn, May, June and I would share the front bedroom which, although small, managed a double bed, a single cot and a put down mattress for June. With the house so close to the narrow road the late night double decker buses seemed only feet away (they were) with occupants almost at eye level. There were always street sounds, rather comfortable, a scurrying along if there was rain but a murmur of conversation if the night was balmy and people were straggling home after an evening out. And of course at Saturday night "chucking out time," there was a babble of voice, laughter, shouts and usually song as people left the pub on the next corner and went their way.

The family at the back of the court were always among this lot—and very much disapproved of by Grandma. Not that she minded the pub—and a nice half pint of brown ale was more than welcome in the snug—but she prided herself on her respectability and neighbours who rollicked home half cut were considered quite improper. This didn't prevent her from being on good terms with the family. The thin lively wife often dropped in for a quick chat. She and her husband both looked a rather frayed by life but their children, energetic street kids, seemed a carefree lot. This was the family who

every summer took their brood to Kent for the hop picking; a working holiday which brought them back brown, happy and with a nice nest egg. Hop picking was considered a bit below the Lamsdales' standards.

After a year at the Cosely house Evelyn sold it and bought another in Tipton. Cosely had, no doubt, been chosen in a hurry, now with time to look around she saw its disadvantages. Our next home was on a modern housing development—brand new and although perhaps slightly smaller identical to Cosely in design. It was off the busy main road, better for June to have quiet streets to play, there were other children. She would have to go to another school but it was fairly close. It was also only a short walk to the Shrubbery Council Estate where there was family. I would have a fifteen minute walk to Bradley's or I could take a bus—so all in all it seemed like a good idea and we all thought this was a final move. Being new the house needed some interior decorating and Evelyn and May, who now spent most of her time with us, set to and one week-end wall papered the two downstairs rooms. No pre-prepared paper at that time—the job involved a bucket of paste, paper cut to the right length on the floor, lots of discussion on whether this or that was the right way up and no small mess to clean up afterwards. I was the assistant and between the three of us we accomplished a pretty good, if not exactly professional job. We made friends with the next door neighbours, bought a small dog and thought we were well settled.

This was not to be, however, for within a year Grandpa Lamsdale became very ill. After some weeks of doctors and tests he was admitted to Dudley Hospital—he was diagnosed with inoperable cancer and died within three weeks. Then a decision had to be made as to Grandma. She couldn't handle that awkward, difficult little house at Prince's End alone, and certainly May didn't want to go back. Also the house was on the Municipal condemned list and scheduled for clearance before long anyway. The obvious solution was for both May and Grandma to move in with us permanently. Pooling resources in this way would be an advantage for us all and with this particular cast of characters perhaps prove a more successful enterprise than the partnership with Ada had been. So the new house

was sold and we made our last move this time to a rented house on Dudley Road, Tipton. Evelyn remained there for the next thirty-five years and when I look back now on those tempestuous times it that old house that comes to my mind.

Tipton is a small industrial town, like Cosely somewhere between Dudley and Wolverhampton, but closer to Dudley; actually all the small Black Country towns are almost joined in the great megalopolis, only interrupted by the playing fields and parks that even the smallest community considers necessary. Our new home was on Dudley Road, a main road but a few blocks away from the narrow winding shopping streets. Rather classy on one side with little terrace houses on the other. Our house was on the classy side—a turn of the century double with big rooms, high ceilings and a certain dignity. Dining room and drawing room (this was before British estate agents started saying "lounge") downstairs, a sizeable kitchen, a scullery and big walk-in pantry leading off that. Upstairs were two large bedrooms, a smaller one and a nice sized bathroom. Like all its kind there was a long tiled hall running the entire way from front door to kitchen and upstairs a corresponding corridor. One great joy, however, was the garden—a small courtyard overlooked by an old lilac tree, then a long lawn with flower borders and finally a vegetable garden at the moment filled with a tangle of current bushes. The other side of the double was occupied by a family named Yarsley; Mr. Yarsley owned the two properties so was our landlord.

It was not going to be an easy place to keep in order, that long tiled hall proved to be a torture to scrub and the back scullery was an archaic curiosity but the house was roomy and comfortable and suited us very well. June was now only five minutes' walk from her school, there was a convenient bus for May and I had the choice of a short bus ride or a slightly longer walk to Bradley's. The whole area was pleasant though with an aura of prosperity, on our side of the road anyway, for the houses had undoubtedly been built for turn of the century affluent. Next door, on the other side from the Yarsleys, was an even larger house set in its own grounds and next to that St. Martin's church.

Our living arrangements too seemed to work out quite well. Grandma Lamsdale and Evelyn between them managed the household chores. May and I did our fair share of the cleaning. (It was my job every two weeks, to scrub the long hall.) May, ten years older than me and ten years younger than Evelyn, was never really a part of either of our lives. She and Evelyn had a close and affectionate relationship but they seldom went out together or shared any experiences other than the everyday family ones. May could have been an attractive woman for she had a slim figure, a lively expression and good clothes sense. Unfortunately she had a terrible cast in one eye. Grandma said it was because she had had a bad fall when she was a baby. I know it distressed her and much, much later when public health services covered such things she had it corrected by surgery—this however was far in the future. Nevertheless she had an undeniable attraction and was never without male company.

For some years we had been living in uncertain times and all that summer there had been signs of approaching war. May was going out with a soldier who confidently expected a serious posting soon and the women who came to the salon wondered and waited. On 1 September Germany invaded Poland—on 3 September Britain responded. I expect everyone in the country remembers with great clarity exactly where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news.

It was a beautiful sunny Sunday morning when we listened to Neville Chamberlain's solemn announcement that we were "...now in a state of war with Germany." We were in the sitting room with the French doors open to the fine day, birds sang, flowers were still blooming. It was so normal, almost impossible to believe that soon all this would change—for what? That afternoon the peace was shattered by a wail, our first air-raid warning. Just testing—we had been warned this would happen but it startled us and as we had planned we headed for the cellar. Only the old houses had cellars, ours was small, vaulted and musty. It was never used for any practical purpose but had become a depository for such paraphernalia that we never used but hesitated to get rid of. There were a few shelves piled with discarded crockery and kitchen ware. I leaned against the cold brick wall and found

myself staring at an enormous serving plate that had belonged to my grandmother. How had it arrived here—a relic I suppose of the time Ada spent with us and carried around ever since.

It was the next day that the full impact hit me. I remember sitting on the steps leading from the salon to the house—I had been listening to some music while sorted a tray of gadgets. It was a quiet day and at eleven o'clock we all stopped to listen to the BBC news; we heard the Prime Minister's declaration repeated, the news overview was delivered in the beautiful neutral tones of the announcer but although we were now prepared there was a chilling finality in hearing the words and realising that a sequence of events had been put in motion from which there was no turning back.

We hardly knew what to expect—but for the little group there that morning thoughts must have flown first to their menfolk. The Bradley's two daughters were both married to men too old for call-up but they had a younger son—a pleasant, quiet boy who worked in the local municipal office. Linda was engaged to a man in his twenties. Barbara Meyer was unmarried but she had dearly loved younger cousins. I don't think we visualized a country under attack but thought more of who would be called up for active duty in Europe. Still, as in the first world war, almost everyone believed the action would be swift and decisive—once more "over by Christmas" said the popular press.

Immediately, though, the whole pace and atmosphere of the country changed. The territorial service, that is the "week-end soldiers" were called up, the government set up a Ministry of Information which quickly began to inform us of what steps to take if.... Lady Reading had founded the Women's Voluntary Services the previous year, the organization now went into high gear; young men dashed to join the service of their choice, usually air force, because full conscription was in the offing and we all knew it. But what I remember most is the air of uncertainty laced with a sort of excitement. Convoys of Army trucks filled with soldiers were often to be seen on the roads and we hardly knew whether this was reassuring or distressing. Local centres were organised to provide us with gas masks and demonstrate how to use them, a food rationing system was put in place and we were issued ration/identity cards. One of the first major accomplishments of the war was executed, the evac-

uation of hundreds of children from urban potential danger zones, primarily in the London area, to safer country places… Excited, apprehensive, mischievous, solemn or smiling their faces looked back at us from the daily newspapers.

In general, though, life carried on much as normal. Harking back to WW1 the thing we feared most was a gas attack and we carried our respirators with us everywhere we went. I visited Ada in West Bromwich, by myself this time. Her fragile old lady had died and Ada, giving up trying to supplement her modest income, was now living in a furnished bed-sitting room in a quite nice old house. We had a happy afternoon together and the room held some dear memories; a few of the old well remembered pieces from Colwyn Bay—several pictures, the Royal Doulton figurine of the three Graces that used to stand on the drawing room mantelpiece in Colwyn Bay, some family photographs. Her room was large and comfortable looking down over a sizable nicely groomed garden. One of the other residents, an elderly widower, cared for it and was a bit of a friend. She always liked to tease us with the image of an admirer lurking somewhere in the wings. She was comfortable and seemed satisfied with life.

Another time May and her soldier took me with them for a day's outing to Tamworth. Why Tamworth and why they took me with them I don't know. He had received his posting orders but of course couldn't say where; also it had recently been disclosed that he was married and his Catholic wife had no plans for a divorce, so I suppose what had to be said had been said and they simply wanted a pleasant day together before he left for God knows what, who knows where. I suspect I was the element to keep the day a nice outing with no emotional overtones. He was a minor player in my life, I don't remember his name but he had always been friendly to me and I was glad they had included me in their last good-bye. We explored the old castle, looked around the town, had tea in a small cafe and got home before dark. I don't think she ever saw him again.

This excursion sticks in my mind because we had to change buses in Birmingham and it was the first time since the outbreak of war that I had seen Britain's second largest city preparing for ac-

tion. The streets were busy with people nearly all with gas-mask slung over a shoulder, there were many men in uniform, the City Hall was fronted by a wall of sandbags but most astonishing was the sight of the balloons gently rising above the city like a battalion of fat air-borne sausages. The blimps were designed as a deterrent to low flying enemy planes and soon became a familiar sight over towns and other important targets.

The most immediate and profound effect on our lives, however, was the blackout. It was complete, it was overwhelming, it made any excursion after nightfall a perilous adventure. On moonlight nights it wasn't so bad but going out on a dark night was like being suddenly struck blind. Cars and buses were allowed headlights but they had to be capped with a device that only allowed slotted beams to show up an area of about three feet in advance. Pedestrians also could carry a flashlight but it too had to be capped in the same manner and pointed at the feet. They didn't do much good and people were more inclined to stumble along as best they could—often finding themselves in the embrace of a total stranger with whom they had suddenly come face to face.

Meanwhile in Tipton we were also busy with our own defence preparations. Anderson shelters were being made available to the public. They were designed to accommodate a small family, made of reinforced steel sections, the finished shape a low vault to be set in the ground. The cost was minimal but installation was up to the owners. Wilf and Les came to help with digging the hole and planting the shelter in the garden just past the little yard. This was part of the lawn and although there were no rocks the earth was pretty solid. We dug and dug all one Sunday—the two men, Evelyn, May and I, even eight year old June. It was a mammoth back breaking job but at last it was in position and the earth piled over and around until we pronounced it thoroughly bomb-proof. All over the country others had been doing the same thing. Another day was spent in sticking long strips of paper criss-cross over every window to prevent shattered glass flying during an air-raid and, after that, hanging black curtains to prevent even a glimmer light escaping outside.

At the Shrubbery Estate more preparation. As well as installation of the Andersons, back gardens were dug up, lawns and flower beds disappeared, treasured roses were callously sacrificed and rows of vegetables took their place. Some families constructed wire chicken coops and invested in a few hens—eggs had almost disappeared from the shops and soon even a tough layer wasn't amiss in the stew pot to supplement the meagre meat ration. That first Sunday morning we paid a visit to Geneva Road. There was almost an air of festivity with neighbours back chatting as they worked. Children dashing about falling in the holes being dug for shelters, playing the bang bang games kids love, women making innumerable pots of tea, men calling advice to one another—and everyone setting to with a good deal of energy. Nevertheless despite all this readiness nothing much was happening on the home front and there was still a feeling that it was a bit of game and soon things would be back to normal.

The first bloodshed was at sea—and it was terrible—the German submarine fleet, the "wolf pack" was unleashed and started prowling the oceans in search of Allied vessels. On October 14, only a little over a month after the declaration of war a German U-Boat penetrated the supposedly secure harbour of Scapa Flow, in the Orkneys, and sank the battleship Royal Oak with a devastating loss of life. The Battle of the Atlantic began and scores of Allied merchant vessels were sunk. In December cinema newsreels showed us films Of the first important naval battle the sinking of the Graf Spee but the River Platte was a very long way away and it all seemed a bit unreal. In Britain, for a time, nothing very much happened at all. The newspapers were full of cartoons depicting Hitler as an absurd maniac, the Italian dictator, Mussolini, as his buffoon sidekick, the Nazi regime was still a joke and popular songs, among other banalities, cheerfully proclaimed we were about to "hang out the washing on the Siegfried line."

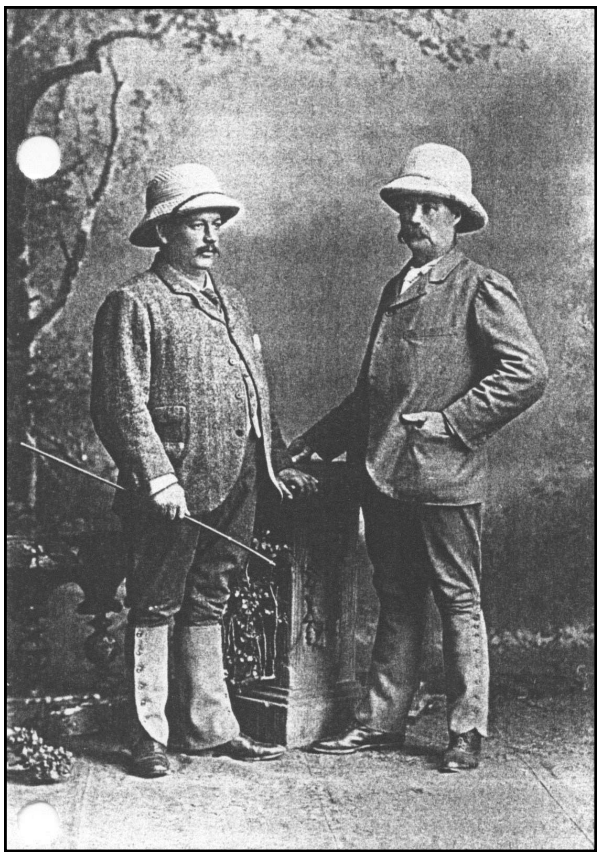
Pictures—Part I

The Thomas Family: Sid, Grandmother (Gangan), Ada, Grandfather John, Gwen, and Percy

Gwen, Gangan, and Me. Outside of No. 10, Park Grove West

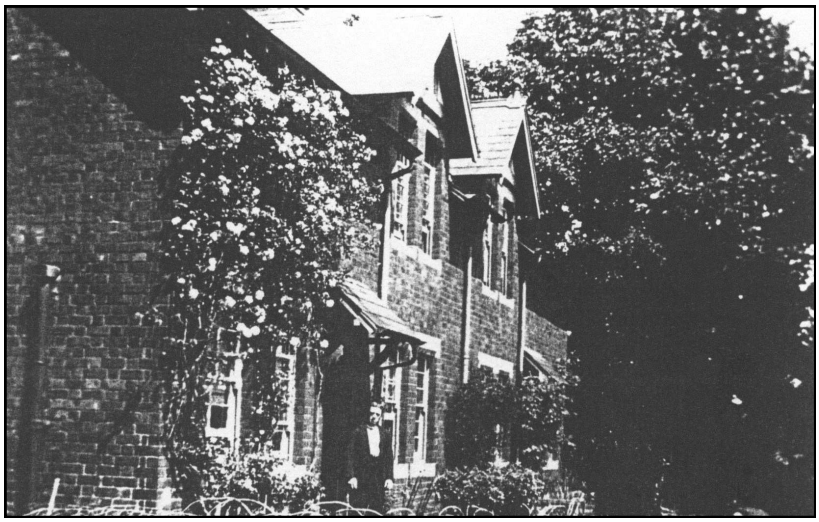
Ernest and Gwen around the time of their marriage

The Trott family: Grandfather Walter, Alice, Ernest?, Grandmother Ellen, and Harry?



Walter Trott, our grandfather, and brother William. Picture taken in Rangoon.

Masefield Road: Lena, Mavis, Olive, Me, and Sheila (Sheila and her parents boarded with Ada briefly while in the process of moving house)



Castlewood House

Ernest, circa 1933

Evelyn around the time of her marriage to Ernest (1930?)

PART II

Chapter 5

The first few months of war began to be called the "phony war." Christmas came and went with the usual, if somewhat diminished, festivities and although sea battles were vicious there was no sign of conflict on the land. So we faced 1940 with uncertainty and looked to the other side of the Channel with perplexity. Here the situation was curiously reminiscent of the First World War—on either side of the entire Franco-German border were two lines of "impregnable fortifications." On the French side the Maginot Line, manned by divisions of the best French troops and on the German the Sigfried Line, the regular troops reinforced by veterans of the Polish campaign. It was essentially a refinement and modernization of the WWI trenches. Behind these fortifications on the French side there was something like 400,000 French troops and also 350,000 men of the BEF (the British Expeditionary Force). The situation was stalemate. The whole world waited for the inevitable conflict but except for a few minor night clashes between opposing patrols the Western Front was quiet.

Among a large part of the British population there continued to be a certain optimism—a feeling that the worst might yet be averted, that Hitler was mostly bluff—that he had gone so far but with such a show of Allied force there would be a quick German retreat, and so on and so on. At the same time the British re-armament programme, initiated in 1937, was stepped up and more and more factories were converted to war work. The girls at the Swallow factory were now making army apparel; even closer at hand the Bean iron works, only a few streets away from Dudley Road, had been on military supplies for some time. In 1938 the Territorial Army, the voluntary part time trained force or "Week-end" soldiers had been strengthened and in 1939 Parliament adopted a Conscription Act establishing a system of peacetime military training. On 3 September a further Act provided for conscription of all males between eighteen and forty-one years of age. As the men were called up for mili-

tary service their places were filled by women or men over call up age. The Depression was over—there was work for all.

All optimism for an early solution, however, soon ended. At dawn on 9 April, claiming they were acting to forestall a British seizure, Germany invaded Norway and Denmark. Small, neutral Denmark was forced to capitulate the same day, but fighting in Norway continued until the middle of May. Although the Allies responded with naval and air support it was not enough. British vessels attempting to attack the German convoys steaming through the narrow Skagerrak straits were driven away by Luftwaffe planes. It was a dirty business, soldiers had been hidden in the holds of German merchant vessels in Norwegian ports to emerge and take their place alongside German airborne troops. As well there was a small but effective fifth column of traitors, some in official places, within the country. Major Vidkun Quisling, Norway's ex Minister of Defence aided and abetted the Nazi invasion and his name has been entrenched in the English language as a permanent synonym for traitors and collaborators.

For Britain this was an important pivotal event in the course of the war for the Allied defeat in the Norwegian campaign caused the fall of the British cabinet of Neville Chamberlain. Winston Churchill succeeded him on 10 May 1940 with a coalition ministry which continued until l945. That very same day German troops started the assault on the Netherlands, Belgium and France and so ended the phoney war and the battle for Western Europe began.

In Britain 1940 was undoubtedly filled with more action than any other period of the whole war, evoking feelings among the people that ran from near despair to indescribable pride and confidence. It is not part of my personal narrative to incorporate an outline of WWII—it is well enough known. Enough to say that for many people destiny was changed and lives that would otherwise have been played out in quiet and unexceptional ways became charged with high drama. The military description of a place of action is the theatre of war—this is entirely appropriate for a war is played out with effects that go from appalling tragedy to daily routine to occasional ludicrous farce.

On 28 May the Belgian Army which had borne the brunt of the German attack capitulated and the entire northern flank of the Allied forces remaining in Belgium was exposed, the Maginot Line was circumvented and the Allies were pushed back to the sea leaving behind virtually all the heavy artillery and tanks they possessed. What followed is well remembered—this terrible defeat was turned into a victory of sorts by the evacuation from Dunkirk. On 4 June six hundred boats, small naval vessels, fishing boats, private yachts, ferries, tugs, barges, plied the English Channel back and forth, under almost continuous fire from the German Luftwaffe, until something like 330,000 fighting men had been rescued. This was a small miracle for the War Office had estimated only a fraction of that number could be evacuated. The weather helped by providing a dense fog over the Channel, enabling the British to win temporary air supremacy. Nevertheless German planes took a terrible toll of the exposed and defenceless men waiting on the beach for passage to England.

How to describe our lives during these happenings. No television in those days—our news came from the frequent radio broadcasts. We became familiar with the strains of Lillibulero, the stirring old martial music, re-cycled over the years which announced each report. The announcer's voice always, no matter how dire the news, keeping the well-controlled pleasant cadence of the BBC. On Sunday nights the 9 o'clock news was preceded by the national anthems of all the Allies. Grandma Lamsdale said solemnly that she thought we should stand up as a gesture of respect. After Poland came Norway, then Holland and Belgium… Eventually we were bobbing up and down like yo-yos. I haven't thought of it for years but it's one of those bits of memory that comes back with clarity—our all -female family in the kitchen of the old house on Dudley Road, smiling a bit at Grandma's emotionalism but feeling perhaps it wasn't such a bad idea.

We had two other news sources, the press with the reporters and photographers who took their place alongside the fighting men and whose accounts came to us via the daily newspapers and periodic magazines—and of course, the cinema newsreels, which for the first time brought films of the actual events to the public in all their horror. We saw the French refugees trailing wretchedly along

the lanes, the German planes strafing, the wounded and the dead, the bewildered, frightened children—the blood, the dirt, the fear. We saw the BEF evacuation, the men arriving in Britain, exhausted, some wounded, but most smiling. These days the sight of human misery is all too common on TV but the Second World War was the first time the public was brought into the live picture to see for themselves at firsthand what was happening.

After the fall of France, Germany set sights on Britain and we feared an immediate invasion. The information would come by one of the oldest methods of communication—the church bells. On 13 June they were silenced across the land only to be rung to warn of an approaching land attack. We were not regular church goers but we missed the friendly sound of St. Martin's bells calling the people to prayer. Thoughts of invasion, however, never fully faced before now had to be confronted. Would it happen? How would it happen? Would the attack come from the air—we had seen pictures of parachutists being dropped in other countries—or would German troops affect a landing on the south coast and villainous storm troopers come marching up the inland roads? Pictures of civilian refugees being gunned and harassed on the Normandy roads were horribly recent—we had heard of atrocities being imposed on people in the conquered countries. I don't remember any outright signs of fear, rather a wary hiatus while we wondered what would come next.

What did happen next was the Battle of Britain, an event as heroic and as defiant as the evacuation of Dunkirk. Hitler had indeed intended to invade the south coast and although it was never spelled out we knew that barges and other craft were assembled at Dutch, Belgium and French ports and that troops were assembled on the French side of the English Channel. The Luftwaffe now started a systemic assault on the British Isles. The RAF response was heroic. From airfields on the south coast young fighter pilots fended off wave after wave of enemy aircraft At first the Luftwaffe would number about 100 planes—building up over the summer to sometimes as many as 21 day. Churchill's comment "Never have so many owed so much to so few" has entered the British lexicon. Newspapers and newsreels showed young men "scrambling" with bright and laughing faces—it all looked ra-

ther an adventure. Although we knew losses were tragic we really didn't realise until much later just how many had died and how many survived but with sometimes terrible injuries.

Our first air raid must have occurred sometime in June. I would have expected the day to be indelibly imprinted on my mind but it isn't. That was the day, however, that we started the routine that was to stay with us daily for the rest of the summer. After a six o'clock meal we would occupy ourselves with normal activities until the sirens sounded—usually shortly after nightfall. Then we would make for the Anderson shelter and settle down for the night. Inside Wilf had set up a sort of platform a foot or so above the dirt floor to keep us off the damp earth and on this we piled a couple of mattresses, blankets and pillows. It was quite cosy and gave us the feeling of great security.

In fact, it was pretty impregnable and apart from a direct hit we were reasonably safe. We arranged ourselves sardine fashion—head toe, head toe—and we only partially undressed. The greatest discomfort for me was the fact that both Evelyn and May were heavy smokers and before long the little refuge was filled with blue fumes and my eyes were streaming. Grandma Lamsdale hated this as much as I did and her constant wail was "I wish they'd put them things up so you couldn't afford to buy them." She thought, ahead of her time, that cigarettes were unhealthy and a waste of good money. Anyway the middle of an air raid is no time to tell addicted smokers to quit cold turkey so we endured.

We were in a particularly vulnerable position, a heavily industrialized region, the Bean Iron works was almost next door and we were uncomfortably close to Birmingham which was one of the biggest manufacturing centres in Britain. It was some time, however, before any bombs actually fell on Tipton although most nights we heard the drone of planes overhead followed sometimes by distant explosions. Almost always sometime during the night Grandma would ask for someone to accompany her to the toilet. At the time I found this a thorough nuisance, now at about the same age I can only offer a belated understanding. Fortunately the house, like most of its vintage, had in addition to the well accoutred upstairs bathroom, an outside lavatory, with a quite respectable flush toilet; it was

attached to shed, a solid brick building but getting there had its hazards. We would grope our way down the stone steps that led to the yard, past the lilac tree, until we found the wall of the potting shed—then round the corner, trying not to bump into the garbage cans or fall over the curb until we reached our objective. In total blackness it wasn't easy.

During a raid the wardens had to make their rounds seeing that everyone was alright. Our warden was Mr. Yarsley, our next door neighbour. He would stop for a minute or two and if Grandma was having a weak spell give her a little brandy to bring her together. After a time the powers that be issued sal volatile[4] instead of brandy and that had an even greater, albeit not quite such a pleasant, restorative effect. The wardens were among the unsung heroes of the time, men and women who, for whatever reason, were excluded from call up to active duty; they often found themselves in front line positions and served as bravely as any of the other services.

The rest of the Yarsley family would be ensconced in their own shelter just over the wall, Mrs. Yarsley with daughter Vera, about twenty and Donald, sixteen or so. If it was perfectly quiet we would sometimes emerge from our cocoons and May and I would sit on the low wall with Vera and Donald for a few minutes chat. This was a strange feeling, the summer night, warm and pleasant, the sweet fragrance of the flowers up the garden and four young people sitting discussing not our lives, our hopes, our loves, but taking a brief respite from the cramped shelter and ready to scoot in at any moment. Nights were always disturbed because eventually the "all clear" would sound and we would go back to the house for the rest of the night.

In the salon things had changed somewhat. Barbara Mayer had left to open a small shop of her own in Dudley, close to her home. Linda Whitehouse had the offer of a job closer to home also. They were replaced by Phyllis Baylis. So there were only two of us, with occasional help from Winnie Bradley. I could now tackle all the usual hairdressing procedures and began to build up a nice little clientele of my own so was finally earning a proper salary plus the occasional tip. I didn't usually get the older more affluent clients but a good many girls from the Swallow and Neweys, not good tippers

[4] Smelling salts

but a friendly lot with a good deal of interesting chatter. The salon now closed at five o'clock every afternoon to enable us to get home before the raids so in a way our working lives were improved. Business was quite brisk, for women do not give up an interest in their appearance just because of a war. The shop talk was well laced with war talk, rumours, and anecdotes. One of my favourite clients was a young woman in her early twenties. She had an untrained but very beautiful voice and sang in the church choir, often as a soloist. Her fiancé was in the Royal Navy and was one of a handful of survivors of sinking. She told me sadly how changed he was. He no longer wanted to get married—seemed a stranger. Eventually they broke up. Emotional wounds are often the most lasting and the young men who had endured such horror often never fully recovered.

Other women spoke of their menfolk. A few had lost sons or husbands in the BEF campaign, either dead or prisoner. Then there was Lord Haw Haw. The infamous William Joyce who broadcast regularly each night from Germany. Anyone with a short wave radio could get the programme and his messages delivered in an exaggerated upper class accent were often witty and amusing. They always contained a grain of truth well wrapped up in propaganda of the most insidious nature. He was addictive and thousands of Britons listened to him every night. I never heard him but there was always someone to pass on his reports, so many planes down, so many lives lost, his narrative well laced with anti-Semitism.

He was often discussed the shop because sometimes there was a local message, "Have you noticed that the clock on the front of the Birmingham Town Hall (or wherever) is five minutes slow?"—it would be found to be true and people would glance nervously over a shoulder. In general I don't think many people took him seriously and he was regarded as a laughing stock by most—however he did get attention and was a small cog in Hitler's strategy of psychological warfare. In fact during the whole of the war urban myths, some frightening some hilarious, were in continual circulation. One such was the story of German paratroops, or perhaps fifth columnists, descending on Belgium during the night, dressed as nuns. They were betrayed by their service boots peeping out from beneath their

habits. There were not many nuns in protestant Britain but the brave sisters who ministered in one way or another during the war I'm afraid had their feet under constant survey.

Life changed for everyone and not necessarily because of the raids. In May Parliament had passed the Emergency Powers Defence Act which called for the total mobilization of the human and industrial resources of the nation. Now all women between the ages of twenty one and sixty without children under fourteen had to register for some duty. Many were already taking the place of servicemen; married middle class women usually joined one of the voluntary organizations, primarily the WVS. Working class women flocked to the factories and for some the war brought a better standard of living for the work was well paid and moreover gave them a personal freedom and financial security that they had not known before, but the greatest change was for thousands of young women who were inducted in the armed forces.

Food rationing which had begun immediately after the outbreak of war was now firmly established. We received a small weekly allotment of meat, butter, sugar; certain categories of people got extra allowances of particular items. Pregnant women, nursing mothers, young babies, children, the sick all got vitamin supplements of one kind or another along with powdered egg, milk and orange juice. Although lacking variety wartime rationing was more than adequate for good nutrition, there were strict controls but everyone got their fair share and, perhaps not surprisingly, given the tenor of the years immediately preceding the war, the general health of the nation was excellent and many poor families had a better diet than in pre-war Britain. By the end, however, not many children under five had seen a real orange and bananas only turned up as pictures in old magazines. A massive bureaucracy was required to undertake the orderly distribution of resources and to do this local Food Offices were set up in each area. Ours appeared on our own street, just a few doors away in a gracious old house commandeered by the government.

Evelyn applied for a job and was immediately taken on. It started a whole new life for her. Her first assignment was handling the babies' orange juice allowance; she was efficient, enjoyed the

work, got on well with young mothers who came in with their children and soon moved to a more senior position. She had had good training, three years with the pawnbroker and several as one of Father's assistants added up to a considerable business education. There must have been a good deal of satisfaction in holding her own in the work world again and she now had colleagues of her own age, some of whom became friends. Of course the extra money didn't hurt either.

As well as the official ration there was other food available. This mostly came on a catch as catch can basic. Merchant ships braving the German U-boats brought canned goods and other provisions from afar and many lives were lost in the process. These products were never advertised but the unofficial telegraph worked well. The housewives would queue up hopefully and usually cheerfully for a couple of eggs and soon the message would come that a greengrocer two streets over had a few oranges, or the CWS[5] had some canned peaches, or someone else had a shipment of bully beef—whatever. They would make the rounds until every possible item had been gleaned, often taking up a good portion of the day. As most British women were now in factories, war work or reserved occupations the shoppers would most likely be older women or those with young children marketing for an extended family. Sometimes the catch was remarkable. Grandma Lamsdale once produced canned cumquats—no one had the least idea what to do with them.

As well people were encouraged to grow as much of their own food as possible and many of the lovely English flower gardens became rows of potatoes, cabbages, carrots, turnips and onions. No quick freeze in those days so storage was a problem and the more perishable produce, lettuce, tomatoes, peas, beans, was eaten quickly or traded with neighbours. Many people who had previously bought everything, without a second thought, learned how to bottle, pickle, preserve. There was also a government information program urging a garnering of the fields and woods and some very strange things started to turn up in salad bowls and vegetable dishes. Dandelion greens were pronounced delicious and full of good minerals. Many people kept a few chickens in a back garden coop and sometimes a few would go together to keep a pig. They didn't actually have the pig in the garden but

[5] Cooperative Wholesale Society — grocery and department store

faithfully delivered kitchen scraps to the farmer who had the animal butchered when the time was ready.

Other shortages gradually appeared in our lives. Coal was still the major source of heating and it soon became informally rationed, that is when there was a good supply everyone got some—when it was short everyone got a share of what there was. First priority went to the armed forces and we became heartily sick of every enquiry being answered by "Well there's a war on." Then water—it wasn't exactly rationed but we were directed to keep baths to no more than five inches of water then do something positive with it afterwards—wash the dog, water the garden, scrub the floor, whatever. Some enthusiasts even advocated washing one's undies along with one's self (removed of course). I think most people did in fact try to keep to the rules.

To everyone's delight May received a promotion. The manager of the Woolworth store where she worked had been called up and his position taken by a woman—previously unthinkable—May became assistant manager. The store got its share of imported goods and employees naturally got first dibs on these (although the manager was scrupulously fair in only allowing one of each item). So every Saturday night May would arrive home with a bag full of goodies—a tin of sardines, a small box of Swiss cheese, some biscuits. She would produce these one at a time while we applauded enthusiastically.

We were now into late summer—raids had been constant but not close. On 25 August, however, came the first heavy raid on Birmingham. Coincidentally the following day the RAF bombed Berlin. All humanitarian feelings were suspended during the war—we only felt a grim satisfaction when retaliation took place. We felt safe enough in the Anderson but the following weeks brought the conflict very close—the noise of explosions was almost continuous, there were no more chats on the wall and even Grandma managed somehow to do without a trip to the toilet.

Tipton High Street got a direct hit one night and on another one of the pubs in Coseley was demolished. Terrible things happened to people one knew. Evelyn had a colleague, Margaret, with

two small children and a husband in the Army. One evening the sirens sounded a little earlier than usual. She stood the children in the hall, always considered the safest place in the house, while she ran to the shelter with blankets, in the few minutes she was out the house got a direct hit. The children were killed instantly and Margaret received a deep shrapnel wound to the forehead. She was in hospital for a week and bore a livid scar for the rest of her life. The next time her husband was home on leave they deliberately started another baby—life went on.

As autumn progressed, though, nights in the shelter became almost impossible. Damp rose from the ground and the walls dripped with condensation. The British have an innate fear of the damp, as well they might, and Grandma blamed it on a variety of ills from "rheumatics" to pneumonia. Each morning we would hang the bedding on the line hoping the pale sun would dry it out—it never did. In the end we began to take our chances in the house. We brought beds downstairs to the sitting room, placing them as close to the inner wall as possible. There was also room to lay a mattress under the solid kitchen table and June and I usually slept there. This was actually the warmest place in that bi g drafty old house. Because the uncertain coal allowance only permitted one fire and as the kitchen stove system heated the hot water tank it had to be the one kept alight, so the kitchen became our all-purpose room. The others, sleeping in the sitting room resorted to the old fashioned practice of heating bricks in the oven, wrapping them in an old flannel, and taking them to bed for at least a couple of hours of warmth.

November 14 was a particularly bad night, although it was not until morning we realized how bad. Birmingham had been bombed once again but the heaviest concentration had been on Coventry. I went into the shop to find Phyllis pale and worried, her only brother lived in Coventry and for a change the morning newscast had done nothing to minimize the horror. We knew there was great loss of life. All formal communication was disrupted but the informal network was working just fine and by lunch time Phyllis knew her brother was unharmed. There was a lot of traffic in and out of the city: ambulances, trucks, doctors, nurses, there was an army of all sorts cleaning up the streets, res-

cuing the trapped, removing the dead. There was always someone who would take a message: “Will you tell my Mum…?” “Will you give my sister …?” “Are you going to Brum…?” and the reply was always “Sure mate…” or “Righto son…” or “Tell me where…” and news, good or had, travelled fast.

In November our lives took on another dimension. One morning very early there was a loud knocking at the back door—June and I came out from under the kitchen table—Evelyn went to the scullery to answer. One’s thought always went first to the blackout—was a light visible? We heard men’s voices and scattered conversation—come from London—travelled all night—train disrupted—bad air raid… Into the kitchen came two large men, army uniform with shoulder flashes—Home Guard?—no Canada. There were brief introductions. Uncle Alfred’s son Edison with his friend Frank had come to pay us a friendly visit. Evelyn offered breakfast and baths but we all had to leave for our day’s duties and it wasn’t until later that we heard the story.

They had come to Britain with the Canadian Second Division mid-August and were stationed in Barking, close to London, on a fitter’s course. There was twenty-three year old Ed, tall and lanky with a sparkly grin and quick laugh, and his friend Frank Bridges, a couple of years older with a more pronounced Canadian accent. By the time all the family were home that evening they had become quite established in the house, had made friends with Grandma and were on teasing terms with June. By some miracle there was no raid that night and we had a good meal, for our new friends had come equipped with army ration cards and later we moved the fire from the kitchen to the sitting room for a good chat. They both seemed to think life a great lark and entertained us with stories, not of the raids and devastation in London but the trials of the course and their unspeakable sergeant.

After this the two became frequent visitors, sometimes accompanied by Frank’s younger brother Gordon. We would get no warning, for telephones were impossible and there was never time for mail, but they would turn up on a Saturday on a thirty-six hour pass, were welcomed heartily by all of us and brought a breath of fresh air to the stuffy old house.

Another Christmas passed—I don't remember it much but I suppose we had a hearty meal because something special could always be found for an occasion We had husbanded our meat coupons, the butcher had miraculously produced a few chickens (poultry not rationed but not plentiful) May had brought a pudding… it must have been something like that.

The New Year came in with a particularly violent raid on London December 29th but Birmingham was spared. In general though the situation was much unchanged. The sirens would sound and we would go into our raid procedure. Evelyn and I had had our differences but during these times I gained a solid respect and admiration for her. She was the strength of the household. A woman who was deathly afraid of thunder storms, she would remain calm throughout the noisiest bombardment. We would sit in the kitchen now, cushions and pillows close to the inside wall, our only light that of the embers from the dying tire, and as the planes throbbed overhead and Grandma began to mutter she would say cheerfully, "It's alright Mother, that's one of ours I can tell…" or "Oh, there go the mobile guns…." She made it sound as if the guns were running briskly up and down our very street potting away at the planes overhead. Of course no such thing was happening and in any case who would want a German bomber brought down on the roof. At times like these though one takes solace where one can.

Strangely I don't remember being really frightened during the raids—I suppose the human system adjusts to almost anything. Mostly we longed for the "all clear" so we could get back to bed and get a good night's sleep for even the young and strong began to get terribly weary. The days also had their fears for sometimes there were unexploded bombs left from the night's raid and then streets would be cordoned off while those largely unsung heroes the bomb squad would arrive to deactivate the explosive.

Eventually the raids became fewer and by May we were getting peaceful nights. Although the air raid sirens would sound we got little actual bombardment and we almost ignored the alerts. Once more the weather was beautiful. The old lilac tree in the yard bloomed and we put flowers in the gar-

den beds. Unlike many we never did dig up the lawn for vegetables. I don't think there was anyone in our household that had the time or energy to spare and in any case vegetables were the one commodity that there was plenty of.

Our Canadian friends came more often and their visits fell into a certain pattern. They would arrive on a Saturday morning and as there was no one but Grandma home would drift over to the nearest pub—the Tipton Arms—a good solid working man's drinking place In fact they became quite accepted as locals and made friends with some of the regulars. Occasionally they would go to Dudley for a Saturday night dance or they would invite May and Evelyn out for a drink until one particularly pleasant spring evening someone said "Isn't Joyce old enough to come along?" And Ed said "You bet she is!" So we walked over to the King Arthur, one of the more elegant establishments, where with a small glass of sherry, I was introduced to that most pleasant British institution the public house—and from then on I was included.

That summer, perhaps because the weather was so nice and perhaps as a reaction to the horrible winter now past, the country seemed rejuvenated, the part I saw anyway. Double summer time had been introduced so it was still light at eleven o'clock at night. The pubs were crowded, although they sometimes ran out of beer, there were dances and concerts and plays. There were so many men in uniform and some of them were unfamiliar—Dutch, French, Polish. There was a certain air of glamour.

People still had summer holidays but of a different kind. There was no petrol for civilian cars many of which had been put on blocks for the duration—but the trains still ran. The seaside was out of the question for most of the coast was prohibited—but country villages were still within reach. Rural inns and the good old B&B houses (often just a country woman who had a spare bedroom) offered a sweet haven where a serviceman with a few days leave could take a young wife. Or a weary mother to go with the kids. No one quite knew what was going to happen next but the prevailing attitude became "live for the day," rather as if people were saying "Well we're still here, might as well enjoy it."

On 1 June we got rather a shock to find the Board of Trade had introduced clothes rationing. It wasn't quite unforeseen but nobody expected it to really happen. Sixty-six coupons for twelve months. There was some hasty calculation; it was I believe seven coupons for a simple summer dress, five for a warm sweater… Prospective brides who were planning a conventional wedding kicked themselves that they hadn't got their bridesmaids kitted out a month ago. Mrs. Yarsley, who had a women's and children's clothing shop in Tipton was dismayed for she saw a radical drop in sales and this probably did happen to many a small shop. Naturally there was a bit of a fiddle here and there, one heard of tailors who weren't above mysteriously finding an order that had been placed before the rationing date.

Then came an even greater surprise on 22 June Germany invaded Russia. Those who had predicted that eventually Germany and Russia would be flying at one another's throats took on an "I told you so" air—but how would it affect Britain? For one thing the threat of an invasion was considerably reduced. There was a bit of uncertainty, however, as how to accept this new ally and some of the questions raised had a Gilbert and Sullivan quality. Did an occasional vicar for instance have some qualms about imploring divine protection for the godless hordes of Soviet Russia? Would the BBC include the Internationale in the Sunday night recital of national anthems? In the end they didn't on the grounds that it was really a revolutionary song rather than a national anthem. (Then how about the Marseillaise said a few irreverent letters to various Editors). In fact the music most people really wanted to hear on a Sunday night was the Star Spangled Banner. The USA still showed no signs of entering the conflict but had begun the Lease Lend program which if not entirely altruistic was a generous move and kept Britain supplied with a lot of vital materiel.

Life in Tipton had become almost normal for with the raids suspended we had adjusted to a war-time routine that was quite dull. My own job in particular seemed trivial indeed and I began to feel very strongly that I wanted an active part in what was going on. Women were being conscripted for war work but unlike the men not necessarily into the forces—there was quite a lot of choice, also

the process was taking place by degrees and at this time twenty one was call up age. There was nothing, though, to stop a younger woman volunteering for duty—most of the local working class girls almost automatically went into well paid factory work right after school, many of the middle class, wanting to choose their own fate rather than waiting to be shunted into some occupation they didn't fancy, joined one of the services. This was much encouraged and newspapers, magazines, government pamphlets, all advocated the value of entering a career that promised good training that would be useful in a later post war Britain: nursing; the Women's Auxiliary Air Force; the Auxiliary Territorial Service (army); the Women's Royal Naval Service; the Land Army. I was seventeen and a half, the minimum age for a volunteer; I decided to enter the ATS.

Although I didn't need official parental approval I did want Evelyn's blessing—I didn't want to just "run away" again. She was solidly opposed—couldn't understand why I would want to do such a thing. What if I were sent to a danger zone? What if I were put on an anti-aircraft gun? She wouldn't have a minute's peace! Daddy wouldn't want me to do this! And over and over "Why do you want to leave...?" I replied that I was sure Daddy would quite understand, he had served four years in the First World War—and so on... In the end May decided she would go with me—to keep an eye one me she said. God knows what they thought I was going to get up to. I think in fact she had seen through my virtuous talk of doing one's duty, taking part in the great conflict, etc., etc., and decided that she too might find it a pleasant change to get away from our very circumscribed lives. So we picked up the necessary forms, filled them in, posted them off and didn't hear anything more for several weeks.

It wasn't a frivolous decision on my part. I really did want to start a new life—drop the curtain on this Act and move on to something new. I had long regretted my stupid departure from formal education. I knew that after the war, if I stayed with the hairdressing business—and why not for it could be a pleasant and lucrative one—it would be in a different style from the Bradley salon, in a different place. I had a real affection for Evelyn and I think as I grew older I understood her better. Her position had not been a happy one. Married the boss, had a few years of happiness and prosperity and then

had it snatched away to find herself with a house full of expensive furniture, little income and a difficult step-daughter to boot.

Worst of all must have been the realization that when I was twenty-one I would have enough money to do the things that she would like to do herself. I know she had a dream of owning her own business—perhaps a combined hairdressing and millinery shop which we could run together. I was fond of her but I don't think we would have made good business partners. On one hand she had tried to give me the best upbringing she could—and her spunk during the raids endeared me to her forever. On the other hand I was often uncomfortable with her views. She leaned heavily on my father's memory. Whatever decision had to be made she would consider it seriously and then say "That's what Ern would want…" Sometimes these little messages from heaven seemed a bit out of character. I appreciated the Lamsdale family's whole-hearted acceptance but nobody seemed to remember that

I did have another family whose memory was dear to me. Evelyn never said anything derogatory of my mother but the picture she built was not completely accurate. "Ern was lucky to have me take care of him," she would say, "Gwen wouldn't have had the strength to look after him as I did." She told people that Gwen was eight years older than Ern, perhaps she believed this—in fact it was four but I didn't find this out until much later. She didn't like me to talk of my mother and as a child I had learned not to do so; children are more attuned to mood than adults think. I can understand this, I think she loved my father and just didn't like to consider his life before she entered it. All this was fifty years ago—how much of this is stated in retrospect? I'm not sure. I don't think, at the time, I would have articulated my feelings in quite the same words I only know I felt uncomfortable and in a way disloyal to my mother always to be referred to as "Evelyn's girl."

May and I had not been forgotten by the Army—in mid-November we got notification to report to Wolverhampton for a medical examination. There in a bleak military clinic, with a dozen or so other hopeful recruits we were poked and prodded by an army surgeon and pronounced fit for active duty. Then came a morning when we woke up to stunning news. On 7 December 1941 the Japanese

bombed Pearl Harbour and the USA was finally in the war. I don't think we really knew where Pearl Harbour was and the full implication didn't strike us immediately. The war had been immeasurably extended—but the Americans had not come to the aid of the Allies, they had a full scale conflict of their own to contend with.

Chapter 6

Late in January May and I finally received our instructions to report for duty. Letters came with enclosed train tickets directing us to Warrington on 15th February. We set off for our military duties full of anticipation and well concealed excitement. At this stage once the protests, the debates, the appeals were over did I have a moment's doubt—of course not—the new Joyce had emerged full of confidence and poise. I settled back, lit a cigarette (I was working on my new image) , stifled a cough and put on my most worldly expression.

Warrington, in February, in wartime, was not exactly benign. The day was cold and sleety. We were met at the station by a brisk ATS Sergeant Major a group of about twenty or more young women—quickly rounded up and put into a couple of waiting trucks. Our home for the next four weeks was to be the old East Lancashire Barracks, 19th century industrial style block houses, rumoured to have been condemned years ago. We through the gates, at this point we certainly didn't march. There were gloomy two story buildings on either side of the roadway—one window had a cluster of heads poking out, "You'll be soooory" they called cheerfully.

The next few days passed in a blur of strangeness. We were assigned dormitories in alphabetical order so May and I were separated immediately, she with the Ls and me with the Ts. The barrack buildings were enormous with cavernous rooms—twenty or so beds, ten to a side in each. No one slept much that first night, it was all so strange. When the bugle sounded reveille at six o'clock I wasn't the only one to tumble out bleary eyed and rather dazed.

Uniform issue first. We were given sturdy but not exactly glamorous underwear, pink cotton bras and suspender belts, khaki bloomers; khaki skirt and tunic, shirts, cotton stockings, good walking shoes—and a greatcoat. This last was appreciated. What the army calls a "British warm," over the next few years in cold war time Britain, it was a comfort indeed keeping out the most piercing weather and occasionally serving as a bedspread. All our clothes buttoned on the men's side, that is, left over

right—it made for fumbled dressing until we got used to it. We also got ground sheets, which could be used as capes in bad weather (they never were), real military gas masks, referred to as respirators, not the smaller civilian type—and a steel helmet (never, never to be called a tin hat).

As well as all this there were the unofficial fashion conventions to be observed. Caps and shoes had to be specially treated (we were told by veterans of two weeks). The cap must be thoroughly wetted and put on a flat surface with some heavy objects around the crown to make it perfectly flat. To have a baggy crown was a great social error and marked one as the greenest of rookies. If shoes were stuffed with wet newspaper at night the morning would find them softer and more malleable. There was one glaring omission. Women carry handbags—soldiers don't. So what to do with all the odds and ends it is impossible to travel even a short distance without; handkerchief, compact and lipstick, change purse, whatever…Soldiers might stuff their odds and ends into pockets—but would we disfigure our uniforms with unsightly bulges? Certainly not! We used our respirator packs. Much, much later it occurred to the military that if respirators were to be kept in their proper place the women had better be issued with shoulder bags—so we were, a year or so later.

Then hair—the cannier had already learned how to roll longish hair, on a ribbon or a shoe lace, making a tidy but not unstylish roll, the required three inches above the collar. The rest of us were shorn. We were allowed make up, as long as it was discreet, that is light lipstick and a dusting of powder, but the only jewellery was one, and only one, ring. The next procedure was the most distressing—our shots! We were inoculated for every ailment imaginable. There were a few fairly severe reactions—sore swollen arms, slight fever, everyone felt discomfort. We got little sympathy. "It wears off in a day or two," our Sergeant Major told us heartlessly, "A few hours on the parade ground will soon get rid of that stiffness." And so we were introduced to square bashing. Sar'nt Major was right though. Our days fell into a quite pleasant routine. Good plain food, good healthy exercise, as well as learning to march we had physical training in the decrepit old gymnasium. Afternoons were devoted to lectures and the day ended with high tea in the mess hall at six and then we were free for the rest of the evening.

I soon made friends with a few others in my dormitory. High spirited girls, for the most part conscripts, who had left satisfying lives behind and grumbled loudly at the discipline. I threw a few grumbles in for effect but actually I had never felt so free. One evening during our first week we dashed into town to take care of a few very necessary purchases: a button stick and a bottle of Brasso (you slipped the metal stick beneath the buttons to protect the cloth from getting soiled while polishing the buttons) boot polish; then a visit to the military tailor to buy dress caps, the wedge shaped headgear we were allowed to wear off duty; and finally, most important, photographs to send home. The little grimy industrial town was filled with these young lively girls, and the atmosphere was almost festive.

Looking back now I try to find the incidents that come back most vividly. We learned how to address officers (Ma'am, pronounced Marm) and how to salute. Our marching improved to the point that we were usually in step and all going in the same direction, we picked up a fair bit of army history and current affairs from our lectures. We were fast becoming a force to be reckoned with! As well as the daily routine, however, we were primed in the ongoing duties we might expect when we were posted to regular units. Guard duty for instance and perhaps extra chores for the officers.

I got a taste of the latter. One morning another rookie and I were detailed to go to the officer's quarters and light fires in the rooms assigned to a new intake expected later that day. The officers were billeted in the old regimental living quarters, little three story row houses, one room to a floor and one woman to a room. What might possibly have been snug homes were now dreary living arrangements for the young officers who were probably feeling as displaced as the rest of us. The rooms were as bare as our barracks with only a bed and a locker but there was also a small stove and a of coke in each. We looked at the stove uncertainly—how do you light a fire in these things? "I think you start with paper and wood," said my companion.

The paper was easy, she dashed back to the mess hall and found some old newspapers. But wood—the cookhouse staff had laughed in her face. Should we look for Sar'nt Major? We quailed at

the thought. Perhaps this is an exercise in self-reliance. Could it be a ploy to test our resourcefulness? We tried twisting the paper into tight sticks, we tried starting with a small amount of coke blowing in turns and praying for it to glow with life. Were we perhaps expected to be resourceful enough to break up a few floor boards or chop the banisters? Alas finding a chopper seemed as unlikely as finding some kindling wood. At last grimy with coke and smoke we gave up—let them light their own fires! We washed and reported back. Duty completed asked. Absolutely we replied blandly. I believe now that this was just a normal military cock-up. I found out later that being asked to make bricks without straw was a regular army exercise—often things were expected to be done but some important ingredient to make it possible was missing. Anyway we heard no more about our "fire duty."

At last our basic training was over and we were ready for posting. Undoubtedly we were very different from the group that had shambled through the gates four weeks ago. Good food, vigorous exercise, regular routine had hardened us up and we were in fine condition. One curious thing, almost nobody had had a menstrual period during this time. Although health lectures had warned us this might be so (dramatic change in lifestyle) there were probably a few moments of panic and hasty finger counting by those who had bid an over exuberant farewell to a boyfriend a few weeks before.

Included in our daily lectures had been some detailed information on the various army categories open to us: clerical, driving, communications, anti-aircraft, some of the technical trades…we had a thorough briefing and were given every opportunity to make our own choice. May opted for communications and was posted to a Signals Corps unit on the south coast. We didn't meet again for over a year. A girl with whom I had been rather friendly chose the provost or military police. She was a peppy, pretty young woman with a lively sense of humour who had gone through the London blitz as a fire-fighter and had actually been on duty during the famous Café de Paris bombing. Her name was Gloria and how she made out with red cap and stern face bossing the other ranks around I can't imagine. With tongue firmly in cheek I should think.

But what of me? I fell into the neither fish nor fowl category. My schooling was such a strange medley ranging from local council schools to a couple of prestigious private—a good enough background for officer's training. Unfortunately my education had horrible gaps—and of course I had not matriculated. I had promised Evelyn I wouldn't go into anything "dangerous" which ruled out ack-ack[6] or driving (which I rather fancied). In the end I said I would like to be trained for office duties, the largest group by far. So one morning in mid-March, along with about fifty others I was shipped out of the old Warrington barracks and transported to a holding unit at High Legh a few miles away in the pretty Cheshire countryside to await an opening for further training; and so began a whole new set of experiences.

High Legh is a pleasant country estate with an 18th century manor house, not large but beautifully proportioned and a charming example of its time. We drove past the gate-house, that morning, along the wide gravel driveway into spacious grounds—all shrubs and trees—with wooden army huts, perhaps ten or so, set occasionally a little back from the road and looking not at all inharmonious, only a little surprising. The house itself, we found out later, served as HQ, with lecture rooms, officers' mess and living quarters for both officers and permanent staff. Each hut had an "ablution" building close by—the showers, however, were in a separate building at the far end of the grounds, close to the playing field—and there was also a mess hall and chapel.

One can expect the first night in a new strange place to be unsettled. Not so here. The huts were furnished this time with two tier bunks, ten to a side, so theoretically could accommodate forty. I was assigned my hut, found an unoccupied lower berth and that night in the quiet of the countryside slept soundly and contentedly. The sunrise came in the morning. I awoke, looked around the woman immediately opposite was just stirring also. "Good morning," I called. She rolled out of bed completely naked except for a pair of enormous leopard skin gauntlet gloves and without a glance at me or anyone else walked out of the door. "It's all right," someone called, "it's only Sylvia."

[6] Anti-aircraft artillery

Sylvia, it seemed, lived her own life. She never used the ablutions, preferring to relieve herself in the bushes. She washed infrequently and had the glazed eyes of the totally unbalanced. She seldom spoke but when she did it was in a cultured upper class accent. Poor Sylvia, or was she a complete fraud looking for a way out?

As for the rest of us, the bathing facilities were OK if bit crude. A brick building with concrete floor containing about twenty toilet cubicles and twenty hand basins. Each morning and evening we trooped across to perform our "ablutions." Mornings were a quick clash with everyone vying for a place—but after the day's duties were over or before bed it became a more leisurely meeting place where we could also wash out underwear and stocking and chat a bit. Of course only sponge baths were possible in the ablution hut—and each responded in her own way, some unselfconsciously stripping off and giving each part a good lather and rinse. Others timidly groping around unveiling only bits and pieces of themselves at a time. In general it was the girls from poorer homes, probably where privacy was to prized and well-guarded, who were the more reticent.

A holding unit holds all sorts, people like me waiting for further training, this group included not only clerical candidates, but women who had asked to be turned into medical orderlies, tradesmen (we had not yet learned to say "person"), cooks, drivers. It also has the hard to place and a few, like Sylvia, who are absolutely unplaceable. All these were represented in my hut and, as I found out, a more interesting mixture would have been hard to find.

Life at High Legh was much more relaxed than Warrington. I soon found friends, girls with whom a real bond was established. Perhaps I shouldn't say friends because people came and went with such frequency that long lasting relationships were rare. Who can I remember now after so many years...? Nan, with a cockney voice and an Italian costermonger family, she came from inner London and had all the fun, wit and resilience of her kind; someone whose name I now forget who had sung with a dance band and had a sweet voice and the dirtiest mouth I have ever encountered; Madeleine, university drop-out; gentle Margaret, who had hoped to be a concert pianist but settled for teaching;

Pat straight from art school, who turned out to have my taste in music; Jane, a tall and striking blonde from a prominent north country family who, when not actually on duty, replaced her cap with a red kerchief.

Others, two Swiss au pair girls who opted to stay in Britain, and Browne, E., who of course soon became known as Brownie. She tried to get out of church parade by telling Sergeant Major she was converting to Islam. "Fine," said S.M., "I'll wake you at five to face Mecca and say your prayers." Neither of them really knew whether this was actually a Moslem requirement or not but Brownie took the hint and re-converted to Christianity.

Then there was Francine. She wasn't in my hut but sometimes shared a table with my group at meal times. She was French with only tentative, heavily accented English. She was young, very attractive and married; definitely very different from the rest of us and although she was friendly, and joined hesitantly in our table talk, she never volunteered much about herself, except that she had married an Englishman. To compound the mystery she didn't sleep on camp but had a permanent sleeping out pass and shared a cottage close by with her husband, an in the RAF. At the time we thought she was probably bound for officers' training but now I wonder. I think it much more likely that she was bound for Bletchley Park, where in the grim Victorian mansion, agents were trained in telegraphy to go back to France and liaise with French underground groups. Anyone with a French background was recruited for this terribly dangerous work and the first step was to complete a basic training course and become a bone tide member of the British Services. I wonder what became of Francine—the survival record was not great and many of these brave people died extremely unpleasant deaths. Of course we knew nothing of this until, after the war was over.

That spring was sublime—all I remember now are sunny days and good companionship. The grounds were full of early rhododendrons, our duties were light, there was an occasional lecture but with such a changeable community there was no motivation to organise anything long lasting. People came and went but for some reason a small group of us remained together for several weeks and

became for that short time the best of friends. There was Jane, Margaret, Madeleine, Pat and me; in various combinations we walked and talked and reorganised the world according to us. Sometimes we hitch hiked into Knutsford for tea; one evening Pat and I. Went into Warrington and heard the well-known pianist, Louis Kentner, give a stunning performance in a hall usually devoted to wrestling; one week-end Pat, Madeleine and I found a lift to North Wales, put up at an inexpensive B&B in Llandudno and spent a marvellous day walking around the Great Orme; Jane adopted a kitten from the kitchen cat's new litter. Some of us formed a hockey team and played against the men. The small male contingent at High Legh was composed of a few cooks, a few drivers, a few office staff...as few of them had played hockey before we usually won. I couldn't have planned a better life had I tried.

Finally it ended. My posting orders came through—I was to report to the Dudley Technical College for a six week clerical course. Dudley is a twenty minute walk from my old home in Tipton! We made our farewells and promised to write—"we'll keep in touch!" we said. Of course, we didn't. And so, some of the nicest people I have ever known left my life.

Dudley was different yet again. I knew the town well and although set in undeniable Black Country is a pleasant and attractive place. A ruined Norman castle set high on a wooded knoll overlooks the town—the grounds contain one of the best zoos in Britain. We arrived by train mid-morning, whisked to the Town Hall by army truck where we were welcomed by the Chief Constable. I don't remember his name, but he was a portly man with a dignified air and twinkly eye. It was a particularly gracious gesture, greeting this gaggle of young women as though we were VIPs. If first impressions are important, this was a perfect example—it set the scene for our entire stay in Dudley.

Again the scenario changed. This time I was billeted with a civilian family, where I had breakfast and dinner. Lectures in the college from 9 am to 12 and again from 2 to 5. We had an allowance for lunch and could spend it in the college cafeteria or take our chances in town. My 'civilian family' consisted of Mrs. Ward, a young woman whose husband was serving in the Middle East, and her six year old son, James; their house a trim semi-detached, five minutes' walk from the college. We hit it

off immediately, I suppose the small allowance she received for billeting service personnel helped to eke out her meagre army pay, but after sending me off with a hearty breakfast each morning and welcoming me to an evening meal with as good a table as wartime rations allowed, she cannot have been much ahead. I think, perhaps, she just liked to have another woman around for company, although apart from sleep and meals I wasn't there very much.

Of all the women in wartime, the lives of Mrs. Ward's age group were the most stressful. A husband, far away with an uncertain future, a child to bring up alone, constant loneliness and anxiety. The years that should have been filled with tenderness and fulfilment were bleak indeed. She was a rather quiet, serene woman and I never heard her complain. James, of course, was full of the devilment of all six year olds—a lively little boy whose well trained politeness sometimes fell by the way to a good romp.

And so, finally, I was back in school. Mornings were devoted to typing, afternoons to lectures. Like any other profession most teachers had been directed either into the services, or into military related jobs. Those not in uniform all had impediments of one kind or another. Our typing teacher was a very pregnant woman who never said a word that wasn't related to our lessons. She put Beethoven's *Turkish March* on an ancient gramophone and we pounded away to the rhythm with varying measures of success. I think she was rather intimidated by her unusual class. One of the lecturers, he taught us procedures, was a young man with a pronounced limp, this combined with his Byronic good looks invited some sidelong glances from several of the girls but he wasn't interested and hurried away each afternoon, no doubt to a home and wife of his own. Our third teacher, however, was a pure delight. An older man with grizzled hair and energetic disposition, he taught military history, a subject entirely new to every one of us. He was a born teacher and brought us stories of ancient wars and political intrigue in a way that held us captivated even on those warm July afternoons.

Our class was small—about twenty young women—an unremarkable lot perhaps, no Sylvias, no concert pianists, no art students, but friendly and compatible. There was a girl with green eyes who

always sat in the first row and closest to the door. Although she was the same age as everyone else she already had a sprinkle of grey in her hair which made her look quite distinguished. Also she had a haughty air and liked to indicate that she was only there under duress. I don't remember speaking to her at this time but we were a bit curious as to what exciting life she lived outside the school. My closest companions were Jessie and Barbara—conscripts but quite happy with their lot. We often had lunch together in the town and sometimes met in the evening for a stroll in the long English double summer time, both from the North of England, like me they found army life not at all unpleasant.

There were also young men taking classes in something or other in the same college and sometimes we would meet at the dance hall in the grounds of the Zoological Gardens, a rather classy place in peacetime. I don't remember much individual dating but our group was a jolly one. The popular dance that year was the palais glide and one night twenty or so of us, reluctant to bring the party to an end glided all through town dropping people off at their billets on the way.

Sundays I spent at Tipton, such a short distance away, and they were good times also. Sometimes there were family get-togethers either at Evelyn's place or occasionally at Olive and Wilf's on Geneva Road. This family was typical of yet another segment of British war time society; for in their case, apart from sitting through the early air raids, the war brought nothing but benefits. Wilf in his late thirties was too old for military call-up; Olive with two children under fourteen was also exempt from any formal service. Wilf's job of maintenance electrician at one of the big motor works was classified as critical to the war effort and he went from advancement to advancement. Olive joined the WVS and did some part time volunteer work. One's age determined so much of one's war time fate. I was fond of both of them—Olive small, attractive, vivacious; Wilf the only one in the family with a firm Labour affiliation, well read and self-educated with a nice dry sense of humour. He was politically astute and though a remarkably silent man when he spoke it was usually with good common sense.

There was a strict war time convention. When people were invited for a meal although nothing was said it was tacitly understood that a contribution would be made to the table. It was seldom a

main meal for meat and other rationed food was eked out with many small devices for family members—so dinner parties were infrequent but tea parties could be accommodated nicely with an unexpected windfall of canned fruit plus a cake baked from an egg free government recipe. Food was always adequate if well managed but rations were treated with great respect and when service people arrived on leave their coupons were always first thing to be handed over to the keeper of the household larder.

Evelyn had now been promoted to a senior position and seemed quite content with her life; June happy at school and Grandma Lamsdale, still complaining, grumbling, surviving. Our differences shelved I remember only pleasant and affectionate visits. Eventually this interlude too came to an end. Six weeks of instruction had undoubtedly turned us into efficient, capable, office staff, well prepared to now put our full force into the war effort!

Posting orders were issued; mine along with five others, were to report to RAOC[7] Record in Leicester. There was no one in the group I knew particularly well—both Jessie and Barbara were going to Liverpool. And so more good-byes, more promises, and another door opened.

[7] Royal Army Ordinance Corps

Chapter 7

Leicester is a town with a long history. It was ceded, along with immense land grants, to Simon de Montfort, one of the avaricious Norman knights who came to England following the Conquest; he strengthened his position by marrying the king's sister and became a very powerful man indeed. The name endures, "de Montfort" turns up over and over again in streets and pubs and halls and clubs. Leicester's more recent history is that of the knitting trade it was, before the war, the flourishing manufacturing centre of stockings, clothing, knitted yard goods.

In 1941 there was a second invasion—that of hundreds of ATS girls for the city had become home to several records and the entire pay corps offices and out of the whole country there must have been a greater concentration of clerical staff, in Leicester, than almost anywhere else.

None of this struck us as we first arrived. We were met at the station by a company Sergeant Major and driven to our quarters by army truck. Once more the living arrangements were different. Street after street of middle class residences had been commandeered by the military to house this great army of clerks. Ever room in each house accommodated so many beds, so many people. One room, the kitchen if it was a comfortable size, was used as a common room; all other daily activities took lace somewhere else. We worked in offices in the town; we ate at a central mess hall.

I found myself, now, in a late Victorian house on Tichborne Street, not far from the town centre. I was to share a room on the third floor with two others of the Dudley intake, one was a plump red head whose name I now forget, the other was the green eyed girl. Her name was Vera and I didn't know it then but we were to become inseparable and fifty years later, although we meet infrequently, regard one another with the affection that only old friends with shared experiences can have….

Settling in was not easy. Life over the past months had been tranquil and unstructured, now we were required to keep long hours and time off duty was strictly regimented. Our days went like

this: awakened at seven by the house Duty Sergeant; wash dress and tidy our room. Our beds were iron cots with “biscuits,” a mattress in three separate pieces which had to be piled neatly at the head of the bed, with blankets, sheets and pillow placed on top. Sweep the floor and see that any personal belongings were out of sight in lockers. Then we formed up outside, had roll call and were paraded to the mess, an old community hall about a ten minute march away. After breakfast we dispersed to our individual offices to start the day’s work. Lunch was from 12:30 to 2:00 and was our main meal of the day, then back to the until 6:00. Tea at 6:30, a fairly substantial if sometimes unconventional meal, after which we were free until 10 pm. We could apply for one late pass a week which allowed us to be out until 11.

Like the civilian population we were well fed, probably better because it is always easier to handle food in quantity. Meals were hearty, nourishing and presented with as much variety as the Messing Officer could devise and the cooks prepare. It must have strained the ingenuity of both. One of the girls composed a long poem around food—too bad I’ve lost it because it was quite funny the refrain alter each verse going: “Asks the orderly officer: ‘Any complaints?’—she tastes the fish and then she faints.” It wasn’t really like that at all, we were young healthy animals. It took a good deal to put us off our food. Nevertheless meal times were sometimes an adventure. We ate at square tables—three people to a side seated on benches—twelve people to a table. At each meal two were designated to fetch the trays of food from the kitchen hatch and two others to serve it at the table. We often got little surprises—breakfast along with porridge and toast usually had some small savoury, like last night’s dinner leftovers cunningly fashioned into rissoles.

As well as these good square meals there was always a snack laid out late in the evening for those who wanted to drop into the mess hall for a bit of light refreshment before bed, good thick sandwiches, more leftovers turned into pasties, sometimes biscuits and always good hot cocoa. Although lunch was the main meal of the day tea also was quite substantial and here rather than the recognisable “meat and two veg” was the one time the cooks could improvise a bit. Once we were

puzzled to pick up messing trays with: slices of toast, a bowl of prunes, some yellow sauce. “What am I supposed to do?” asked the designated server. After some discussion we decided that the prunes were to be divided out and covered with the “custard”—toast and marg on the side. Actually the custard turned out to be cheese sauce. We were supposed to put it on the toast making Welsh Rabbit—then eat the prunes as dessert. Oh well, our youth was such that a little blunder like this didn’t spoil our appetites at all.

The offices, like the billets, were spread throughout the centre of town in an assortment of buildings; houses, community centres, the Masonic Lodge had been commandeered—anywhere, in fact, where room could be found. I was assigned to the Casualty Section, lodged in a house on London Road—halfway between my billet and the mess hall. The RAOC Record Office had originally in Portsmouth but the heavy bombing of 1941 had driven most departments to safer areas. Many of the original employees had moved along with their jobs and so the offices were a mixture of civilian and military staff. I found myself in a small unit of about thirty people whose job it was to record the circumstances of deaths, injuries, illness and prisoners of war, from the reports that came from the different agencies. My specific task was entering hospital admissions on a form which was then put in a loose-leaf log, to be updated as further information on the man’s condition came in. The list would come from the individual hospitals, via the War Office, I had to check the name, rank and other particulars of each one to verify correctness and then. someone else would send a form letter to the next of kin.

At first, although the war in North Africa was developing, there was not yet a lot of heavy military action so most of my entries were for illnesses of one kind or another. VD was taken seriously and had to be reported in detail and supported by a medical questionnaire which asked very personal questions, such as “Where was this contracted?” Sometimes in strange places apparently—one man replied the back row of the local cinema. I was young enough to be both astonished and mystified. The RAOC is not a fighting unit but the facility which handles supplies of every kind, including trans-

porting materiel to the combat areas so these men are in very dangerous places and often handling very dangerous cargo. As action in the Western desert advanced my entries began to be more and more for war wounds.

It was not a demanding job, in fact the greatest trial was boredom—my daily entries only took up a few hours. Hardly the challenging, interesting work I had anticipated. And so I learned my final lesson in good soldiering: how to look brisk and busy while doing absolutely nothing. In fact my days fell into quite a pleasant routine. I had to take my list first to the Masonic Hall where personal records were kept—table after table of immense ledgers with each soldier's family and personal history; then to another building where military records were kept in card index files—again table after table of boxes of 5" X 3" cards. As these buildings were several streets away both from my office and each other it necessitated a stroll through town. Sometimes I met acquaintances from other offices (intake, postings, training, etc.) and we would stop for a coffee and chat somewhere. It was not difficult to dawdle away the time quite agreeably.

Those first few weeks, though, were so filled with new experiences that, apart from the dullness of the job, every day brought some fresh interest. The redhead in our room had friends in another and in order to be with them swopped places with a girl named Olive Jump. She had a brother in the Paratroops and told us quit seriously that he had been required to change his name to Smith for the duration of his service. Olive was a Salvationist with a serene face and a sunny disposition. We all got along fine. Because her interests were so different from ours she never joined Vera and me in an evening, she had already made contact with the Salvation Army in Leicester and had a perfectly satisfying life of her own.

As for our evenings, we soon discovered a jolly pub, just off New Walk, called The de Montfort—or DM—we became regulars. For the price of "half a pint" or a small shandy you could spend a couple of hours in the most congenial company. Then at the entrance to Victoria Park stood the de Montfort Hall, the concert hall which could be converted to a ballroom so there was always a Saturday

night dance—and very often a Sunday afternoon symphony concert. Vera and I shared a love of classical music, in particular the concert orchestra, it was one of our strongest links and Leicester was well served. Sir Malcolm Sargent was a Leicester man and he brought the Liverpool Symphony Orchestra to the de Montfort regularly. If we were flush we would take a good seat in the hall, if we were low on cash sixpence would buy a "promenade ticket"—this meant you could stand on the balcony and promenade in between the pieces. I have kept a few of the programmes: Pianists Benno Moiseiwitsch, Eileen Joyce, Noel Mewton-Wood and again Louis Kentner and Violinist, Henry Holst. War time Britain was home to a respected set of artists of all kinds. There must have been many more whose memory escapes me. The hall would be packed mostly with service people, nearly all young and in the summer, for there was no season and concerts would go on all year, the doors would be opened to the fresh air from the park. Of course there were other concerts too, popular singers and dance bands also performed at the de Montfort on a Sunday afternoon.

Sometimes, though, on a Sunday morning Vera and I would walk to the outskirts of town and hitch a ride anywhere. At that time it was a safe and recognised form of travel. Army vehicles were not allowed to pick up passengers—other traffic on the road, because of strict petrol rationing was confined to transport trucks and people with critical business, doctors, social workers, people on government matters, etc. Most of these were older men, past service age, many probably with daughters or even granddaughters like us. Most were ready give us a lift—I never heard of anyone coming to harm. We would spend the day exploring a village or just walking the countryside—have a beer and a sandwich at a country pub somewhere and get back to Leicester by train in the late afternoon.

Once a month we had a church parade and it was extraordinarily like the Howell's Sunday mornings of six years before. We assembled outside the mess hall, shoes and buttons polished to their brightest, skirts pressed to a line edge. Then as we were marched through town to the Cathedral we were joined by other companies until there was a sizeable military body led by the RAOC band. A

military band is particularly inveigling and even the most dedicated pacifist stepped out with good form.

As I pull out my memories and examine them in the light of retrospect it seems so many of them are centred around having a good time—in the middle of a war? Well the young can always have a good time in whatever circumstances they find themselves just because they are young. Sometime during the summer, however, the quiet life of the records activated considerably. Japanese reports of POW casualties, in the form of long mimeographed sheets began to arrive via the Swiss Red Cross.

The date 15 February 1942 became indelibly inscribed in my memory—the day that Singapore fell and the date under which hundreds of our men were entered into records as captured, injured or dead. To go back a few months—the taking of Singapore by the Japanese was a most terrible disaster for the British. The great port city with its extensive batteries and forts was one of Britain's most prized naval bases. harbour had the largest floating dock in the world. If the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour was a shock to the Americans the Japanese assault on Singapore, was equally surprising for the invasion came not from the sea as might have been expected but from the rear.

Thousands of troops streamed across the causeway joining the island state to the mainland, many on motor bikes. The attacking forces were considerably smaller than the 85,000 strong military complement, including administrative units, in the garrison. The guns of the Singapore fortress, however, could only make a small contribution to the defence because they were trained to the sea from where an attack might be expected. The forces, mostly British and Australian endeavouring to repel the invading forces from the North West fought desperately but on 15th February British General Percival was forced to surrender to Japanese General Yamashita. In retrospect the Malayan campaign has been called the greatest disaster in British history. There wore a good many RAOC prisoners taken for there were ships anchored in Singapore harbour with supplies for the expected successful defence of the island.

They were strange days and the war produced many human misery stories. We had in our a rather sad little woman named Daisy. She had had an unhappy married life with an abusive husband who had been reported missing in the Far East. Life had not treated her kindly and she often regaled us with stories of her teen age daughter with whom she seemed to have endless trouble. With no news for so long she regarded herself as a widow and was lately being courted by an older civilian man who also got on well with her wayward child. She began coming to work relaxed and cheerful and when her husband's name appeared on the Hong Kong POW list she tried hard to look happy.

For the first time since my job began I had to record harrowing and heart-wrenching events—for a girl of eighteen it was a sobering experience. Perhaps the mind has a defence mechanism that is selective in its retention, for the truly terrible accounts that often crossed my desk became routine and come back with less clarity than the details of my personal life. Perhaps it is the only way the human psyche can operate.

Soon the long summer days came to an end and our week ends were spent in more local pursuits, was always something going on. As well as the British Army, Leicester had a good many European political refugees—mostly Jewish, who worked at the small arms factory. On the next street there was a social club which Vera and I visited sometimes. I suppose most, if not all, master of ceremonies for the impromptu concerts that took place at the club and sometimes invited Vera and me to tea. He had one room at the top of an old house—all shabby neatness but from a little cupboard he could always produce a treat. He introduced us to open faced sandwiches: solid wartime bread with fresh tomato slices, a few radishes—the things you could get without a ration book.

His name was Ernest Fuchs but because his English neighbours insisted on mispronouncing it he preferred to be called Mr. Fox! One afternoon I went alone. I was utterly shocked to find he regarded me with more than friendly interest and with the cruelty of youth made it clear. He was bright, clever, loved music and liked to discuss books—he was a delightful companion but to me he was old (at

least thirty) and not at all good looking. Had I known him later in my life I would have found him charming.

But I did go out with other young men—we met in the DM or at a Saturday dance and made dates to see one another again for a movie or a concert or a dance. I remember Guy, from an old and well known county family. He was a corporal, awaiting officer's training school—a good dancer, a pleasant companion, who planned after the war to go back to stock breeding on his north country property. It was, however, a transitional society and the ratio of women to men must have been about three to one. There were some Pay Corps men who were more or less permanent but others who were on courses or special postings for one reason or another came and went with such frequency that few lasting relationships were formed.

Soon, though, a new element was added to my life. I received a letter from my Canadian cousin, Ed saying he was stationed at Northampton and would come and see me when he had the chance. And one day he did—arriving on a Saturday morning putting up at the YMCA and taking me to the de Montford dance that night... He soon became a regular and somewhat unconventional visitor. His latest course in Northampton was mostly a time-filler and one way of filling time was to send the men on cross country runs. Ed would run to the nearest bus stop and arrive in Leicester in sweatshirt and shorts. He was the most congenial company with the happy facility of getting along with just about everyone and before long was a popular part of our little group.

We were now well into the autumn of 1942, days getting chillier and houses draftier but the young are resilient and despite determined grumbling our lives were far from gloomy. One pleasant aspect was the niceness of the civilians with whom I worked. Actually in the whole office there were only a few military—most of our staff had come from Portsmouth and a few had been picked up locally. My office supervisor, Joan Rendle became a friend, a tall girl with a giddy sense of humour, a refined south coast accent and a nonchalant efficiency. Then Mrs. Warner, older, motherly, always terrified her only child would be caught up in the war machine (he was); Eileen, very young, newly married

to a fighter pilot, we heard a lot about her Johnny and when we actually met him he was all she claimed; Ruby, a Leicester girl who had been a receptionist at the city's grandest restaurant; Dorothy with a husband in the Middle East and a small daughter at home; Pauline, with her warm Jewish family all of these at one time or another had me in for an evening meal, not easy with stringent rationing, and a homey visit. The Rendles in fact I got to know well for Joan's mother often invited me in for a cup of tea. She was great fun—a widow whose previous life as a garage owner and left her with a salty vocabulary albeit couched in impeccable upper class voice.

All unencumbered women, that is women with no children under fourteen or elderly or infirm family to care for, were inducted into the labour force and required to work so many hours a day but not necessarily a full week. One job in Casualties had two people, one doing the morning hours and another the afternoon—strangely they were both named Marjorie but of course they never met. They were exceptionally nice women, both were outgoing and friendly and both had a hilarious sense of humour. They came from absolutely different backgrounds. Marjorie One was a working-class woman with twinkly eyes, bit motherly but she always looked as though she had life's foibles pretty well pegged. Marjorie Two was a bit inclined to turn up in a fur coat, several large diamonds twinkled on her fingers and in pre-war circumstances one would have suspected her of being dropped off by a chauffeured car. She could have been putting in her time with the WVS or some other volunteer organization—but here she was roughing it with the troops. Perhaps our orderly lives suited her better.

Despite her decided air of affluence, she too gave the impression that she knew pretty well what life was all about, although it was definitely not the other Marjorie's world. The situation piqued our interest so one day we invited them to lunch, the ATS gathering up what bits and pieces we could and the civilians providing the rest. We had a canteen of sorts which served tea (of sorts) and to no one's great surprise a good time was had by all, the two Marjories hit it off immediately and became rather good friends. Our CO joined us on this occasion. He was a veteran of the BEF, a mild older man who had lost a leg at Dunkirk. Just to complete the Trott, Jump story, his name was Capt. Hopper.

Although our office was almost all female there were a few older or exempt men. I remember Michael Franco (actually he also had a couple of other quite unpronounceable European names) a British born Dutch Jew, who had served a couple of years in the military and then been discharged because of a heart problem. He was a chubby young man prematurely balding but with a splendidly infectious laugh; the office wit—the one with a good story, the latest bit of scandal, recommendations on books and films. He had wealthy diamond merchant uncles in Amsterdam but goodness knows what became of them. If Ed arrived at lunch time on a Saturday Michael would sometimes join us for a friendly quick one in the pub across the road.

We then had a mild disruption in our living arrangements. The company was expecting a new input of ATS and billets were short. It was announced that anyone who could find suitable lodgings in town could do so—and a "living out" allowance would be provided. We were delighted, the thought of being free of restraint, no checking in at ten o'clock each night, sleeping in real beds without ridiculous biscuits, no room inspection each morning…

Vera and I immediately started scouring the town for suitable digs. We examined the ads in the local paper and set off to view the likeliest. As we had to be reasonably close to our offices this defined a fairly small area but because neither we nor our prospects had a telephone it meant a good deal of leg work. Finally we found just the place—an old house, not far from the station, one of a mid-Victorian row. Rather dingy, it belonged to an ex variety performer (although what he actually did we never discovered) who lived two streets away. What we had found was actually a theatrical boarding house, which in normal times catered to the actors who came to the city for short term engagements. We were delighted—it all seemed quite suitable.

Vera and I had one room, Ella and Cathy, two Scottish girls from our old house, had another, both on the third floor. The second floor had a large room with two Irish girls, who as citizens of Eire were not subject to call up and who worked in the town. The attic at the top of the house had a quiet young woman, rather nice looking, who we occasionally met on the stairs, but whom we didn't get to

know for some time. On the ground floor, the front room was rented to an elderly Jewish couple, both ex actors, the middle room was for us to use as a living room and behind that was a back kitchen with stove and sink. That our bedrooms were cramped, that the living room was tatty beyond belief and that the kitchen was a horror with a stove encrusted with the grime of many years didn't distress us one bit, we were enchanted at this opportunity to play house. Our per diem allowance covered the rent but we could still eat at the mess hall. Naturally we determined to do as much of our own cooking as possible from the few items that could be picked up without coupons—but particularly we looked forward to having a place to entertain our friends.

Ed still came to Leicester quite often. Ella was rather taken with a young Welshman who, for some reason was in the Highland Light Infantry (he certainly looked dashing in his kilt). They were both regular visitors to our salon. Also it as very nice to be able to say to our DM acquaintances—"oh do come back to our place for a nightcap!" We would serve bottled beer or the fizzy drinks that were still obtainable. We had some interesting guests, we had some spirited discussions. Three regulars that I remember were RAOC officers, a captain and two young lieutenants, one of whom looked about eighteen; the older man we dubbed "the father," the fresh faced youngster "the son"—obviously the third had to be the holy ghost. Why they preferred our dingy living room to the joys of the officer's mess I don't know.... We didn't pair off in any way but perhaps our company was a refreshing change and I doubt if any mess served such exotic drinks.

Despite the strange and terrible times our lives were full of laughter and good companionship. There always seemed to be interesting people around—interesting things to do. Was it just because we were young and by definition giddy? Probably. But for me there was a new independence and, really for the first time, the pleasure of making compatible friends. And Vera was the ideal. We shared interests, we enjoyed one another company, and we never seemed to run out of conversation. She was witty, lively and had a good sense of humour. She also had a fine disregard for convention and fumed, much more than I, at some of the petty regulations that ruled our lives, (which often made for

spirited interaction with Sarn't Major). She remains one of the nicest, most agreeable people I have ever known.

Our resolve to cater for ourselves didn't come to much. One of the few things, coupon free, was reconstituted egg; another was the sturdy wartime bread. I believe a good cook could do wonders with egg powder, but we didn't have a good cook among us and the stove often didn't work anyway. "Who'll make an omelette?" we would call as we dashed around getting ready to go out for the evening. So usually our dinner consisted of a hurriedly eaten mess of egg supplemented by hunks of bread, filling if not exciting.

One more person entered out lives at that time—Vera's younger brother Gordon. I believe he was about eighteen, had served in the Merchant Navy for a couple of years and been torpedoed at least twice, once in the North Atlantic. He turned up one day, a slight lad in pea jacket and sea boots, his determinedly tough look belied by his downy chin. Like his sister he liked to make an appearance. He also became a regular visitor. When he had been to New Zealand he brought us butter, when he had been to New York he brought us perfume. Once he brought us some real Navy Rum and we concocted delightful cocktails with our fizzy pop.

Naturally this heady life couldn't continue. One of the conditions of our living out was that the premises had to be approved by the Army. One day, while we were all out, Company Sergeant Major came to have a look. She was horrified. Old theatrical digs indeed! What had been intended of course was a horny atmosphere similar to Mrs. Ward's place in Dudley. We wondered later if Sar'nt Major had happened to meet the occupant of the attic on the stairs. We had got to know her slightly. She, like the Irish girls, was exempt from call up, not because of her nationality but because of her business. She often brought visitors home with her and we would hear soft footsteps and even softer whispers going up the stairs at night. She left at about the same time we did our landlord had twigged to her occupation and he prided himself on an orderly house.

So we were back in billets again—and if the truth be told we were not particularly distressed, there is something to be said for a sheltered existence. This time the four of us were found places on Tichbourne Street once more but in a larger and more comfortable house than our previous. We were well settled in by Christmas—our first in the service. There was no leave granted which caused a bit of a grumble but a good holiday spirit prevailed anyway. In the best military tradition the officers served our Christmas dinner with all the usual Yuletide fare. Then there was a dance in the mess hall to which we could invite partners—Ed, of course, managed to wangle a few days off. The sergeants put on some skits, we had a sing song, late passes were automatic and we danced until eleven. It was in fact a pretty good party.

So we were now well launched into 1943 and Leicester took on many of the aspects of a settled home base. I joined the City Library—*Gone With the Wind* was still somewhere near the top of the most popular list. I also subscribed to Foyle's Book of the Month Club.[8] With splendid pragmatism Christina Foyle had devised two, Foyle's Left and Foyle's Right, so there was no mistaking the political thrust. Reading was an important factor in service peoples' lives and an excellent inexpensive diversion for there was always a good, cheap supply of material available. Newsagent and tobacco shops carried racks of pocket editions—I well remember the yellow covered books—and many a writer reached a best seller status list just because of the sheer numbers of purchasers. You could pick up an Agatha Christie at the railway station booth for a shilling and it would be just enough, about three hours reading, to get you from Leicester to London. Then Penguins were just becoming available and popular. Penguin Press published the more highbrow selections—good fiction, non-fiction and poetry. So, one way or another, all tastes were served. There was little opportunity to settle with a book in our billets, though, for apart from a small, dingy common room there was simply nowhere to sit for a few quiet moments. So reading was usually only a few snatched minutes in bed before lights out or those interminable waits on railway stations, bus depots or between occasionally assigned duties.

[8] Foyle's Publishing, a branch of the enormous Foyle's book store on Charing Cross Road

That winter, Vera and I, looking for some mental stimulation, enlisted for night classes in the City's school evening education programme, choosing, for some now long forgotten reason, Business Analysis. All I remember is battling with a lot of Venn circles which failed to forge any lasting impression. I'm not sure we finished the course. Again the problem was no place to quietly work on any project. So we continued a life of pure frivolity—not bad when you are nineteen but poor food for a lasting interest. Certainly there was never a lack of light entertainment in Leicester—apart from the concerts, the dances, the parties, both ad hoc and arranged there were several cinemas in the town and also a theatre which occasionally produced good West End plays or had a visit from a touring ENSA company.

Some months previously Ed had applied for a transfer to the Air Force. In February this was confirmed and he was posted to South Wales for training as air crew. He still found the opportunity for frequent visits to Leicester and whenever I could I took a weekend pass and joined him in London. Actually he had a special reason to visit London. Somewhere along the long trail of frequent postings (courses, short assignments and so on) and also because of this recent transfer he was, for a short time, being paid by three different organizations. Of course the day of reckoning came when it all had to be sorted out and this was done slowly but efficiently by the Canadian Army pay office. This was situated in the upper floors of Harrod's department store. So, on two occasions, while Ed was being divested of his wealth upstairs I could wander around for an hour or so downstairs. It was heavenly—how my khaki-clad body coveted that glamorous clothing, for Harrod's despite the war retained both its high couture fashions and high class clientele. If you had both coupons and money anything was possible.

Somewhere around this time Ed and became lovers or started what is now called a relationship. We merely said love affair and I look back on some of the happiest days of my life. I was, of course, madly in love with Ed and had been ever since I scrambled from under the table to find this gorgeous young man standing in the kitchen. I was in love with Ed but I was also in love with life... I

felt very grown up, independent, sophisticated and excited at embarking on an adult adventure. At that time we had no particular thought of a permanent union—in fact, we hardly gave any thought to the future at all—the times were very the uncertain and I believe we were not unusual in choosing present pleasure over plans for a settled future. It wasn't just sex, although when you are young that is important, it was more just the fun of being together.

Week-ends in London were exciting for several reasons. Service personnel, unless they had official business or family in the capital were barred from the area. There were always red-caps, military police that is, on the stations spot-checking passes and I had heart in throat until I was safely out in the street. What if I'd met my old friend Gloria and instead of greeting one another with cries of delight she had had to put me on a charge! Once in the main stream I was more or less safe, there were so many ATS working in London that it would be impossible to sort out the legitimate ones. Nothing terrible would have happened to me, I would probably have been packed off back to Leicester, deprived of my week-end and had some mild punishment. Anyway it never occurred.

Ed would meet me at the barrier, good looking and trim in his air force uniform, and then we would be off. Even in wartime London was a delight. The spring and summer that year were balmy—we explored the streets, the parks, we walked along the embankment. In the evening there were service clubs for a dance if we felt like it or a friendly pub if we didn't. We stayed at a small private hotel in Russell Square and I felt deliciously grownup and not at all sinful.

That summer I found another cousin—Ed's twin brother Doug arrived from Canada. He was a fighter pilot stationed at Biggan Hill. Sometimes he would meet us in London and the three of us became good companions. He wasn't at all like Ed and seen together they would hardly have been taken for relatives much less twins. Ed was tall, Doug rather short, Ed very outgoing, Doug quite reserved, but we enjoyed one another's company. Small incidents come to mind in wartime basic instincts become muddled, the lines between one's perception of good and bad become strangely elastic. One sunny afternoon the three of us were strolling along the embankment. We found a street ven-

dor with some very strange ice cream (I think it had been fortified with potato) and sat happily consuming this delicacy while we watched a dog fight taking place over the Thames. It was a little way away but we had a clear view as the planes swooped and dived until finally one poured black smoke and fell to earth. We watched with interest—not sure whether it was "ours" or "theirs." Somehow the fact that a young man was dying a horrible death failed to horrify us.

War brings a different morale to society, impossible to describe to someone who has no experience of it. On one hand there is a certain insensitivity. There has to be or people wouldn't survive. Those who have sustained terrible loses or have themselves been scared emotionally or physically only thaw later—to face their anguish when it is more bearable. There is simply too much going on at the time to dwell on the horror. But there is something more—everything becomes sped up, more intense, more concentrated. It is in one way a "here today—we might be gone tomorrow" philosophy which puts a somewhat frantic air over everything, the parties, the quick and easy relationships, the grasping for pleasure It has been well documented, I believe, that people become more passionate, there is more loving, more sexual awareness, and undoubtedly but for sensible restraint, more babies. It is not that social mores have become more relaxed—they have of course but it could also be Mother Nature's sneaky way of getting the population into balance again. I remember those long war time double summer time evenings with the long English dusk, wonderful for couples intent on dalliance and the parks were always scattered with couples, "getting to know one another better."

London was a good meeting place, not only for lovers, but as a rendezvous for any get together, simply because although the battered railway service was still quite good more trains terminated in London than anywhere else in the country. It was also a place where one might accidentally bump into all sorts of past acquaintances. At different times we met one or another of Ed's old friends. Ed's cousin Bill Thomas, Seven Sisters colleague Harold Vadeboncoeur; Bill Lee, we saw several times, he was one of the war's quiet heroes, a ferry pilot, one of the men who flew planes across the Atlantic—

not a combat job but certainly not without peril. Bill had been a school teacher in civvie life—a bit older than Ed, he was already married with two small children.

Because he travelled back and forth so often, he came with current news of safe, prosperous Canada as well as the whereabouts and doings of mutual friends. During one of his absences his wife, Lucy, bought a house—a large residence in one of Winnipeg's more affluent suburbs. It had come on the market at an incredibly low price, she had to snap it up quickly, and she had the good judgment to do so. It all sounded so domestic, so peace time, so Canadian—it brought thoughts of the future, something that didn't often cross our minds, considerably closer. "Lucy's house" was often discussed by Canadian acquaintances—it became rather a symbol of our expectations.

As I began to find more and more Canadian contacts my own family links became fewer. I visited Tipton on the occasional thirty-six hour. pass, it was a quick and easy bus ride but the Bangor family—well Joan was in the WRNS[8] and sadly Leslie had been killed in a motor cycle crash the previous year. Nothing to do with the war just a freak accident on a slippery road. That bright funny boy that I had spent so many happy times with; it was a sad loss. Ada and I corresponded affectionately but like most nineteen year olds I was quite absorbed in my own interesting life.

About this time my office was moved. A new corps was formed, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. REME was split off from RAOC and the records so divided. I was to stay with the RAOC group and we were moved to an old building which had been a children's toy factory, warehouse and showroom. I had a desk close to the window in a huge room decorated with bunny murals. It was a delightful milieu in direct contrast to the truly horrible work we were doing. Because the room was so large the whole of the Casualty Section was now together in one place—reports on prisoners of war, sickness injuries and deaths. Next of kin received first a telegram which was later followed up by a letter of condolence from the Commanding Officer. These were of course form letters but typed individually and signed by the CO.

[9] The women's arm of the Royal Navy

I was now handling Prisoners of War—across the aisle from me was a particularly grisly operation—that of receiving effects, sorting out any that might be distressing to the recipients and then forwarding them on the deceased's family. The two men that handled this were a rather special pair—one a cheerful chap who was also an officer in the St. John's Ambulance Brigade. He was full of fun always with a smile and a quip. The other was a man who had been terribly mutilated in the first world war; he was missing both his left arm and leg. He wore a prosthesis but I fancy his injuries must have been severe for he had none of the jaunty stride of Captain Hopper but could only drag himself slowly along and because of this he came to work half an hour early and also half an hour before the rest of us so he could negotiate the narrow flight of stairs without being caught in the morning and evening scramble. He was a large, quiet man with a gentle smile. Of course with neighbourly desks we became friends, although with the etiquette of the time they were always Mr. Brown and Mr. Smith to me.

One terrible afternoon I heard a murmur from across the aisle, no more than a muted word or two between the two men—then Mr. Smith, his face ashen, pulled himself to his feet, and slowly limped to the door—we all turned and watched. He had unpacked a parcel of bloodstained articles that had belonged to his younger brother. It should never have been—it was unthinkable that the parcel should have arrived before a notification of death—and a tragic circumstance that it should have arrived at that very desk. However, as people used to say, "There's a war on," and Mr. Smith was at his desk as usual the next morning.

The war was now in its third year and records were coming to the Prisoner of War desk fairly regularly. The Germans in their precise and methodical custom sent full and detailed accounts of each and every POW, Camp, health, injuries and what prostheses if any had been furnished. They listed things like dental care and eye glasses. Nazi abominations in other areas have been well documented, and certainly POW escapees were treated with swift and terrible penalty; but in general where British POWS were concerned the Geneva Convention was adhered to.

The Japanese, however, had a different philosophy regarding prisoners. The men were put into camps with little or no medical attention, food was awful, Red Cross parcels including medical supplies were withheld. If there happened to be a doctor in camp he was allowed to provide what care he could otherwise men died from ailments which would have been minor with proper treatment, or simply not have occurred at all with a good diet. Most of this was not fully realised until much later but after a while the mimeographed lists began to reveal the truth and next of kin had to be notified of their loved ones dying, not in battle, but succumbing to beri-beri, acute dysentery, cholera or simply neglect, ill treatment and starvation.

Life on the home front went on more or less peacefully. During the spring of '43, perhaps to counteract the awful dissipation discovered in the ranks (for our group of four were not the only ones found in unsuitable surroundings) we were introduced to some healthy outdoor exercise. This consisted, at first, of parading us before breakfast and having us run for half an hour through New Walk and into Victoria Park—in our khaki shirts and bloomers. Then back to billets for a quick wash up and complete our uniform. I don't know if it improved our health, it certainly caused some diversion for the early morning civilians on their way to work. If Michael Franco happened upon us on his way to the office he shouted a cheerful "Hi de hi"—"Ho de ho" we would respond a bit breathlessly, not quite to Sarn't Major's approval. It was several weeks before we were issued with shorts and running shoes.

Then the old city saw one more invasion. This one was more peculiar and certainly more startling than that of the ATS girls. One day, to our astonishment, Leicester was filled with large swaggering men in combat boots and strange uniforms. They were the American 82 Airborne troops. Of course we were used to the sight of foreign servicemen, there were Polish, French, Czech, Dutch, who had somehow managed to escape their homelands and reform units in Britain—there were also the Commonwealth men, Canadian, New Zealand and Australian, but we had never seen so many en masse before. What a horde, they filled the pubs, the restaurants, the dance halls, the streets. They

didn't actually live in the town but had a camp with its own huts, mess and other services just outside, but their leisure time was spent in Leicester and they changed our social lives considerably.

The story was that the flat land in this part of Britain is excellent for parachute training and these men would be part of the spearhead landing when a second front in Europe finally came about. It was tacitly understood that at the right time the Allies would retake Nazi occupied countries and we all knew that when the time came it would be bloody. But now the town was alive with young vigorous men and, as in all wars, when not in combat most of them wanted a good time.

The Saturday night dances at the de Montford Hall took on a new atmosphere. Here I should explain some of the war time conventions concerning dances. It was quite customary and acceptable for women to go to a dance in a group—or even alone. They danced with one another until approached by a man, and even then it was permissible to say no thanks, for a whirl around the floor with a good dancer of either sex was a pleasure. One would say politely, "would you care to lead?" Then off we would go with good deal of panache. Of course being asked out on a conventional "date" was another matter but the DM Saturday dances had more the atmosphere of a Dinas Powis village hop than a formal dance.

When the Americans came to town there was a bit of a shift for now certainly there was no shortage of partners and a group of girls going together were soon snapped up by these dashing men. A lot of the popular music was American anyway and how the men jived. The British style dancing was quite different and perhaps more complex. A good male dancer guided his partner through some quite intricate manoeuvres—we would glide and whirl and quickstep with style—the Americans jumped and bounced and cavorted with energy. No more palais glide—we learned to jitterbug. It was good fun and we soon caught on. Sometimes we would even have an American band for there were several American Army dance bands who could easily rival the big band names of the time and who came to Leicester quite regularly. Soon the 82nds became an integral part of the community, we chatted with

them in pubs and parks, and we learned an enormous amount about the US—not all of it completely accurate.

They intrigued and sometimes mystified us. Although they spoke the same language, it had a different twist. They loved to hear the differences like “What does it mean to be knocked up?” “Well woken in the morning of course”—they would roar with laughter. They had a different way of eating, in a restaurant or canteen we would glance surreptitiously at the (to us) cumbersome way of changing knives and forks from hand to hand in order to get one morsel of food to the mouth—and actually eating marmalade on the same plate as one’s sausages—goodness! Many years later an American friend told me they considered the European way of loading food up with a fork in the left hand quite uncouth.

We referred to “the Americans” but of course like all armies they covered a wide spectrum of backgrounds, but also like all armies they liked to consider themselves different from the locals and carefully nurtured the image of the Airborne as being intrepid reckless warriors. Once in the upstairs lounge at the White Swan (colloquially known as the Dirty Duck) we heard laughter at a table of GIs and British girls—then one of the men walked to the window, flung it open and jumped out. There were screams and shouts, we were a good twenty feet above ground level—but minutes later he walked back in grinning widely. I suppose twenty feet is nothing to a trained paratrooper. It certainly impressed the girls!

Some of our company dated American soldiers and were invited to Sunday dinner at the camp. They came back with wide eyed stories of roast chicken, ice cream and fresh fruit and real coffee for the Americans had their food brought over from the States and didn’t impose on the British rationing system. Once I went to the camp myself. In an admirable gesture of international harmony our whole company was invited en masse, I suppose about two hundred of us. We were picked up at the mess hall and transported to the base by US Army trucks. It was a jolly evening in a large hall with a good floor and a very nice dance band—the 82nd’s own. The men were most hospitable and ex-

tremely polite—we were never short of partners. Drinks were lemonade and at ten or so we were regaled with hearty sandwiches and mugs of cocoa. The extraordinary thing, though, was that we were locked in. The doors were closed and not opened again until we left. I suppose the army brass had no intention of letting anyone "wander out into the bushes." It all seemed a bit contrived though and rather lacked the joie de vivre of the DM.

Vera found a steady admirer, Pat Murphy, who had been a New York policeman. He was a big cheerful man and he and Ed hit it off very well—so if they were both in town at the same time we would make up a foursome for a dance, a drink in the DM—good company, good talk. I only once remember a difference of opinion. Ed was now beginning to think about a post-war career and was leaning towards agriculture—agricultural economy or agricultural engineering. One evening the talk drifted to artificial insemination of livestock. Pat became indignant to the point of explosion—such things were against God's will! He was a staunch Catholic but I was surprised, in an almost solidly Protestant country his objections seemed a bit extreme. Later, though, as we began to know the Americans better I began to see some very different philosophical differences between the British and the American outlook.

My crowd was determinedly left wing; to the Americans anything left of centre was communism and anathema. Once in a pub I said something to the effect that a post war Britain would be socialist—my neighbour didn't exactly clap his hand over my mouth but he quickly shushed me while glancing nervously around to see who was listening to my abhorrent remarks Anecdotal information is suspect but the free and easy outpouring of ideas, some quite radical, a feature of any good pub talk with the British was, with a few exceptions, curiously absent in the Americans I met. I believe the American troops had been well briefed on keeping good relations in Britain and were careful not to get involved in political debate. In any case our discussions could not have taken us much farther than where we stood on the left/right spectrum for we knew as little about the American political system as they did about the British.

There was a further aspect to the Leicester military mix, though, the US forces were still firmly segregationist and this caused some problems. There was a company of black soldiers stationed somewhere in the vicinity. I don't know what their duties were but they would often be seen in town in their own groups—they looked rather exotic to our eyes and certainly had no trouble mixing with the local girls. American Service rules, however, decreed that there would be no social mingling of black and white troops, so some of the pubs and clubs were declared out of bounds to the blacks, while others were designated for their use only. Certainly we never saw any in the De Montford but the implications of this didn't strike us at the time.

I don't think the publicans had been consulted—if so they took little notice of it and some of the incidents were farcical. On one occasion when a publican asked a couple of blacks to leave the entire public bar walked out with them in a gesture of solidarity. Then, in those bars designated for blacks only, the publican could hardly ask the rest of his (white) customers to leave. It got complicated—once a black serviceman was asked to leave a pub but he wasn't an American, he was an RAF officer who also happened to be Jamaican. That certainly caused some embarrassment in high places.

In the end it was left to the Americans themselves to sort it out as best they could—which they did with patrols of military police—and a grimmer looking lot of toughs it would be hard to find. They paraded the town in pairs, immaculate from their helmets to their blanched spats, swinging Billie clubs and looking very businesslike. I suppose they had other duties as well as keeping the races apart—but we never learnt what they were. Except, well once I saw a sorry looking lot of men. They were standing in the back of an military truck dressed in army fatigues each with a large red circle on the back. They were military prisoners, deserters or offenders of some kind, from the infamous camp at Lincoln, being taken goodness knows where. The red circle was a target and the MPs carried guns. It would require a lot of courage to try to escape from whatever justice was about to be meted out. I only found out these details when I asked an American friend but I have no reason to think he was

misinformed. Of course the military police might well have been charming fellows off duty. War brings out some very strange personal conflicts.

I make it sound as though there was little or no racial discrimination in Britain at the time and in general I believe this was so. There were many reasons—importantly the war had a tremendously levelling effect but also Britain did not have the United States' long history of black slavery and second the problems of adjusting or at least trying to adjust to its aftermath. Usually, before the war, there were few black faces to be seen in Britain. The black troops in Leicester, therefore, created some curiosity. They were so, well, different, and as most people had little opportunity to get to know them the curiosity was never resolved.

A bizarre urban myth began to circulate. It went like this: a black soldier and a white girl were discovered co-joined (discovered by whom?) the surprise caused a muscle spasm that prevented the couple parting and they had to be taken to hospital to be separated. Although it was arrant nonsense it circulated for some weeks. Who started the story—with its disquieting overtones? (blacks are just animals—white girls beware). Or did it actually further the (exciting?) notion that black men are superlative, though forbidden, lovers? A psychologist could make quite a bit of this episode and it might indeed have found its way into the anthology of urban mythology. Like all such it finally disappeared.

There was another small group of foreign servicemen sometimes seen in Leicester. A few miles away, close to Market Harborough, was a camp for Italian prisoners of war. Ed and I had cycled that way and seen the senior officer, with scarlet-lined cloak and melancholy face walking along the country lane. We exchanged murmurs of greeting as we passed; he looked a sad and lonely figure. The POWS were taken out each day on work detail, most of them to the local farms where they did agricultural labour. Then the powers that be decided to send some of the men to Leicester to work in the government offices as cleaners and orderlies. We had several in our building and although at first they were reticent soon they became accepted as a part of the regular day to day staff.

We had a small canteen where we could take our tea break and here the Italians would try out their tentative English, show us pictures of their families and try to flirt a bit. They seemed nice chaps and confirmed our suspicions that the Italians were not as firmly committed to the Axis as the Germans. All was not well though. The men that went to the farms had a good meal and satisfying work; those that came to the city brought a packed sandwich and spent their days polishing floors, cleaning latrines and washing windows. So they went on strike! We thought it hilarious, but they got their way. I suppose a group of sulky men reluctantly doing work they hated would have been, in today's parlance, counter-productive. The Italians disappeared from the and their place taken by elderly, or service exempt, local cleaners.

Sometimes on a short pass I would spend a day in Tipton. Evelyn now had a quite senior position in the Food Office and her willingness to help the local merchants with their coupons resulted in many a little treat. She had a good head for figures and the system was necessarily tiresome and bureaucratic, so she would spend an hour occasionally with some bewildered shopkeeper and return home with a chop or two or half a dozen eggs. This wasn't quite black marketing, it was only the time honoured barter system that made the bureaucratic wheels turn a little more easily. I believe such small happenings were fully recognised and tolerated by the authorities; Evelyn certainly earned her small presents. There was, of course, a real black market—a different thing entirely.

When I went to Tipton I would take the bus, change at Coventry and have half an hour or so to put in. In the year since the big raid the town had taken on an almost jaunty look. Small prefabricated buildings had sprung up on the devastated streets each one about the size of an army hut (undoubtedly not by accident) accommodating shops and sometimes departments of the large stores. I remember seeing "Lewis's Lingerie" in one place and "Lewis's Hats" in another, both of course displaying the ubiquitous war-time sign "Business as Usual." There were many people on the streets, though, still bearing the signs of the raid—missing limbs, scarred faces, some in wheelchairs, or on crutches.

Usually on my way back the following day I would take the bus that went via Birmingham. I don't remember why except that probably the time and connections were better. I mention this to put on record that the best canteen and service club that I ever knew was the Birmingham Jewish Women's centre. There was always time to stop for a coffee, a sandwich and a quick turn around the dance floor (plenty of willing partners here too) before dashing off to New Street for my bus.

Ed and I had another pleasant social connection. Ed's Aunt Helen, in Winnipeg, was married to a man whose sister and her husband lived in Uppingham, a twenty minute bus ride from Leicester. Letters had been exchanged and Ed had a warm invitation to visit—so a trip to Uppingham became a frequent Sunday afternoon pleasure for us. Horace Veasey was part owner of a knitting mill, which for the duration of the war was managed by his partner, a middle-aged woman, while he served as Major in the Service Corps. He was stationed in Leicester so his military duties took the form of a routine nine to five job. His wife, Muriel was a charming woman, warm and kindly. Their only child, Mary, had been evacuated at the start of the war and was living with Ed's aunt and uncle in Winnipeg. So visits with the Veaseys brought Ed a good deal of cheerful chit chat, for Mary's letters were full of the trivial happenings that bind a family together. Although Ed had grown up in Winnipeg, his parents were now living in Valleyfield where his father was working for a munitions supply plant so Winnipeg happenings from a schoolgirl's point of view were interesting and often amusing.

Visits to Uppingham were a delight also because although the Veaseys were unpretentious and informal in bearing they were certainly upper middle class affluent and their home had the gracious well maintained comfort of its kind. The house, set in an acre of grounds was named The Pines and there were several of these tall and stately trees bordering the driveway; but there were flowers too and in the spring the front lawn was bright with daffodils. Naturally the back garden was devoted to vegetables. Muriel with the help of an old man from the village looked after all of this and considered it her war service. She had a line hand in the kitchen too and there were always fresh baked scones served for tea when we arrived. We revelled in the luxury. Although for me army life was such

a free and easy experience—the camaraderie of friends and work mates, even the strange living arrangements and peculiar meals—it was a definite treat to visit the other world where convention and order and grace were the norm. A pleasant diversion, also, to put experiences like this in that special mental department we all kept for what life might be like “after the war.”

Chapter 8

Early that Spring we had a wedding in our group: Ella and her HLI boyfriend. Bill Shaw was a couple of years younger than Ella an extremely good-looking lad of nineteen. His parents lived in Leicester and would sometimes join us for a companionable drink at the DM so we got to know the family quite well. Wartime weddings were a delight or a bother according to one's point of view. If a couple wanted a traditional wedding family and friends rallied around, gave up precious clothing coupons, sewed, borrowed, improvised. Some couples confronted with a sudden posting opted for a quick and quiet registry office ceremony. Others thought the whole wedding thing passé and got hitched in whatever fashion was easiest in their particular circumstances.

Ella, however, wanted to do things in style and the house became instantly supportive. All our clothing was army issue but we did get a few coupons every year (about ten I believe) which we usually splurged on underwear, however, I think everyone in the house that had any left donated one or two to Ella's wedding campaign. Her parents and sister arrived from Scotland bearing presents from friends and the Shaws organized a modest reception. The two sisters, Ella's and Bill's were the traditional bridesmaids in pink.

It all went off very well. Vera and I getting into the spirit of the thing decided to dress in civvies. had my old black coat sent from home and made myself a smart little hat out of fake astrakhan. I was a trifle uncertain about my sturdy brown army shoes but in general felt pretty swish. I obviously needed flowers but the only posy I could find in the market was a bunch of violets. Vera said, rather unkindly, that I looked as though I was bound for a funeral. She had her old tweed suit and looked as though she was bound for a tramp on the moors. Nevertheless, at the time it seemed a joy to get out of uniform. I still have the wedding picture of the couple coming out of church—the girls made an honour guard which because of our unconventional dress Vera and I were no part of, maybe we should have stuck to uniform after all.

Perhaps it was this event that made us take a serious look at ourselves. Vera discovered a tailor in town who made ladies suits. He was an elderly Jewish refugee who from long European experience had created quite a flourishing business. We visited his little shop and pored over a rather dog eared catalogue of styles. The price was modest and coupon requirement a trifle less than legal (with a nod and a wink). We had just enough of each and after much agonizing chose two outfits—simple skirt and jacket—Vera's in navy and mine in brown. It took two weeks and our costumes turned out to be well and finely made. We were delighted and when Ed next came to visit he was so impressed he completed my new look by presenting me with a matching blouse. We hardly knew ourselves!

But what to do with our finery? We were longing to try our new elegance and glamour on the world in general but of course we couldn't wear civvies in Leicester where we would have been picked up pretty quickly. Civilian clothes were allowed on long leaves only. We applied for a thirty-six hour pass, Saturday afternoon to Sunday night and decided on Matlock as our destination.

After work Saturday lunch time we met at the station each with a small case and quickly changed our clothes in the Ladies—we had civvie stockings and our army oxfords were quite OK. We assured each other that we looked absolutely stunning and I expect we did. A little to our consternation the first person we saw as we emerged onto the platform was a pay sergeant who we knew quite well (also in civvies). We all studiously avoided one another and soon we were on the train for a revitalising week end in the country.

I honestly don't recall why we chose Matlock—probably because it wasn't too far and there was a convenient train. It's a charming little town in Derbyshire, a beauty spot in the Peak District. Peak District is a bit of a misnomer because there aren't any real peaks; around Matlock are lovely rolling hills which eventually give way to more rugged moorland country. In peace time it's a starting point for hikers, bikers and people seeking a quiet week-end in the country. We weren't looking for any tremendous excitement, just the chance to feel like two well-dressed young women enjoying a

cultivated break from the daily routine a good meal, an overnight stay in a modest (but elegant) hotel. We would not, of course, have been averse to some admiring glances cast at our new image.

The one hotel was elegant enough and provided a nice relaxed lunch but had no rooms. The desk clerk suggested a couple of Bed and Breakfast establishments close by but they too proved to be filled. We explored the town, admired the view from various aspects, made a few more enquiries but as the afternoon wore on began to feel a trifle apprehensive. The town appeared to be quiet and sleepy but there were no rooms to be had. We were astonished—it seemed that Matlock the resort had closed for the duration but Matlock the country retreat was bursting at the seams. Who were all these people? It wasn't difficult to work out. There was a tremendous floating population in Britain—bombed out families, evacuated children, the elderly, the infirm, so many who for one reason or another had fled the cities. There were, however, no troops stationed close by so no service club—not even a canteen. "We'll go to the police station," Vera said firmly. "They'll have to give us a cell." The Sergeant on duty thought it a great joke. He firmly refused a cell, but said he had an Auntie with a spare room who he thought might accommodate us. Auntie, just a few streets away proved to be a motherly soul who provided a room with two beds, gave us a nice family meal and a good deal of chatty conversation.

Yes, indeed, the town was filled with strangers but it was a warm and friendly flag that welcomed the displaced—no bombs here! Well it wasn't quite what we had in mind but it was a break and we always enjoyed one another's company. We had an evening stroll, half a pint at the local, went to bed giggling and in the morning took the first train back to Leicester. I think our jaunt demonstrated that being in uniform was a tremendous advantage. It was a distinguishing sign of membership in a large and respected assembly—a society which shared common experiences, common language, common gripes for that matter. Out of uniform there was rather a loss of identity. We were inclined to be a bit sniffy about our civilian thinking that they lacked our wider experiences and outlook on the world. We put our snazzy new clothes away only to be brought out again at the next long leave.

So we settled for an unrelieved army life and certainly our daily routine was not at all demanding but was often filled with annoying trivialities. I often longed, for instance, for a good long bath. With about twenty young women to a house with only two bathrooms a relaxed soak was only possible in an evening or weekend and indeed with the wartime restriction of only five inches to a tub a relaxed soak was a near impossibility anyway. So mornings meant a quick sponge over and hasty tooth cleaning while someone else was hanging on the door with frantic pleadings to hurry up please. Mornings were always a bit of a scramble. The final chore before leaving was that last tidy up the room and sweep the floor and leave the place in acceptable daily regs condition, before being marched to the mess hall for breakfast.

Although army life was, for me, an escape from an overly regulated home life it also had its constraints Most days passed uneventfully but sometimes the pettiness of the regulations directing our every movement provoked either a tooth grinding frustration or positive hilarity. It happened one morning and it was that final room tidy before breakfast. We had two brooms and two dustpans for the whole house and they had a distressing proclivity for becoming separated—you could find the broom but not the pan or vice versa. One morning Vera swept up a tidy little pile of dust and when the call came to fall in, that is to march off to the mess hall for breakfast, in desperation she swept it under the (army issue) hearth rug. We just might have heard no more about it because there wasn't a room inspection every day. By bad luck however this was one of the days. I didn't see the delicious outcome—Vera filled me in that evening. Apparently she had had an injunction to go back to the house after lunch to explain our disgusting room to the duty officer. Vera had taken the opportunity, however, to dash back after breakfast and dispose of the dust so that when the duty officer dramatically lifted the rug demanding an explanation it was pristine clean underneath. We rolled around laughing.

I am pleased to report that both Vera and I eventually took pleasure in well kept, pleasing homes, at that time though the pettiness of army procedure brought out the worst in us. In many

ways our lives were those of a girls' upper class boarding school. We were protected from the outside world and restrictions put on our freedom of movement by a series of tiny interlocking regulations. The same code required from us a series of, often meaningless, small duties. In this context the officers were the school teachers and naturally like schoolgirls we tried to make life as difficult as possible for them.

Around this time we made a rather unconventional friend. Did we meet him at the DM or somewhere else I don't quite remember? He was a Major in the RAOC and had a nice little flat above a butcher's shop in one of the side streets and occasionally he used to invite us up for a nightcap. He was a bit older than the norm but still considerably under forty and quite nice looking. He had, however, not the slightest romantic interest in either of us but seemed merely to like a good chat. I don't think he preferred boys; perhaps he was lonely and simply enjoyed the company of a couple of giddy young women with no further complications. He liked to hear all about our lives (perhaps he was writing a book) and thought our account of the rug episode very funny indeed.

He listened to our complaints and told us that we should apply for commissions. If we thought an officer's life was preferable, well try it. He said that we lacked one and only one requirement that would make our applications a certainty for acceptance and that was a double barrelled name. After much deliberation we decided on Vera Harrington-Howden and Joyce Trumper-Trott they both had a nice ring we thought and the next day asked Company Office for application forms. It was a nice tease and naturally it didn't come to anything; Sergeant Major didn't quite say (in approved school ma'am manner) now girls stop being so silly but she certainly gave us that look.

The autumn wore on and days became cooler. One week-end a very curious incident occurred. Ed had been visiting me in Leicester and for some reason was taking a train back to York, not from the main station on London Road, but the secondary station in the east end, a few blocks away from the city centre. As usual I went along to see him off. It was a miserable Sunday evening—not late for I had to be back in quarters by ten o'clock. This was a part of town that had been severely dam-

aged in an early air raid and the narrow streets were lined with damaged houses—some vacant, some patched up and livable. There was, however, no shelter in sight. Not a canteen, not a pub, nowhere to escape the shocking weather except the gloomy station waiting room.

The houses were typical working class homes opening right onto the pavement and as we walked by we noticed that one window bore a small sign—"Séance—Everyone Welcome." It seemed a good place to shelter for half an hour and we went in. There was no hall or entrance way—we found ourselves immediately in the front room, fairly large, brightly lit and looking very cosy with a brisk fire burning in the fireplace. It seemed a refuge indeed. I recall a small harmonium in one corner, twenty or so chairs placed in semicircular rows facing a lectern. Two smiling middle-aged women greeted us warmly and the room started to fill with people. There was a mixture of men and women, old and young, several like us in uniform. Probably some, also like us, merely curious and sceptical.

Then one of the women seated herself at the harmonium and as she played softly the other faced us and gave us a little talk. She was a plump and motherly looking person with a rolling Irish brogue but her voice was friendly and direct. To the newcomers she explained that, despite the odd setting, this was a serious religious service, that she could help bring comfort to those in distress and hoped that by putting our hearts and minds in harmony we would help her. I don't remember her exact words but I think this was the gist of her message. She invited us to first join together in a hymn and her companion at the harmonium led us into one of the more cheerful Moodie and Sankeys.[10]

Then we stood and joined hands along each row, closed our eyes and waited for the messages. They came quickly as our mentor walked slowly along the lines stopping before each person and saying a few words: "Your loved one has passed over but is with you in spirit…." "Your son is safe and will return…." Things like that. The little organ peeled away softly—I felt both amused and repelled, it seemed that people unhappy and desperately searching for comfort were being taken advantage of. Again this is in retrospect; at the time I suppose I felt only a slight discomfort.

[10] The collection of evangelistic hymns favoured by the English non-conformist churches

Then the woman stepped away to the side and I remember her exact words quite clearly, "I have a message for someone here. It is for a non-believer and he is having great difficulty coming through. I see a young man in uniform—it is an old uniform, he's from the last war. He has fair hair and blue eyes, he's singing…" Then her Irish accent disappeared, she closed her eyes and in my father's off key tenor and Welsh accent she started to sing "Roses are Blooming in Picardy." I felt a cold shock. She asked again for whom the message was intended and I said weakly I thought it was for me. I was… startled, bewildered.

But what came next was a complete anti-climax. "Well, your father is always with you," she said briskly, "He loves you and is watching over you." I was quite dazed, she stopped in front of Ed and said something to him too but I didn't hear. I was too engrossed in my own mixed feelings. The meeting ended soon after, we filed out—the organist stood at the door with a bowl and as we left we each put in a modest coin or two.

Outside Ed and I compared notes. His message had been equally compelling—it referred to his grandfather and was something that the medium could not possibly have known. For me… to this day I am puzzled. I don't for a moment believe that my father was in the room—if he was he would surely have found something a bit more interesting to say to me. And yet only I knew the implication of the song. His appearance was something that I don't think she could have plucked from my subconscious because I had never seen my father in uniform—the young soldier she described was long before my time. *And yet* much later I came across a little photo of my father looking just as she described him: WWI uniform, fair hair, smiling into the camera. Had I seen it as a child and somehow processed the memory? Well it's still a mystery.

We walked to the station puzzling over our strange experience a bit quiet, a bit confused. We did not become spiritualists; we have never been to a séance since. Nevertheless there was something about the episode that touched me deeply—I felt a strong affirmation of the link between my

real family and myself and could easily believe that there was indeed something of my father in the room that evening even if it was only my own deep seated psyche.

The autumn of 1943 went by. Ed finished his air force training and was posted to an aerodrome in Yorkshire as an air-gunner. He was able to get to Leicester fairly frequently, dropping in at odd times for he would get a day or so off after returning from a raid rather than a fixed leave. Coming to Leicester he made a pleasant train acquaintance with my CO. Captain Enns was a plain, pleasant young woman, not much older than we, who wore her Captain's pips with unassuming confidence—she was popular while still keeping the necessary distance military decorum necessitated.

She must have lived in Yorkshire because if Ed was coming to Leicester on a Sunday afternoon he would sometimes find her returning from a week end leave and they would sham a companionable jar of tea at one of the stations on the way. Yes, jar, no Styrofoam cups then and even the standard railway station thick china mugs were becoming scarce. Ed would leap out of the train at one of the stops push his way to the platform canteen and be back again in good time for departure. They became quite friendly for she had no reason to be wary of military decorum with a Canadian air force officer—particularly when (he said) he spoke rather glowingly of one of her "other ranks."

When I could get a thirty-six hour pass, I would meet him in York instead of London, taking the Scottish Express from Leicester at noon and returning on Sunday night. Our relationship had taken on a new perspective; it had become much more important, and without either of us putting it into words it was tacitly understood that we wanted our union to become permanent. As soon as Ed could get leave we resolved to marry.

It wasn't until December that this came about. Ed arrived in Leicester one blustery Friday afternoon. I met him at the railway station and as we stood on the crowded platform he said he had two weeks' leave—"Will you marry me on Monday?" For the times it was a perfectly acceptable proposal and I accepted happily.

I hadn't the slightest desire to follow Ella's style and we looked for quickest, least stressful method possible. Ed put at the YMCA and we started planning. I definitely wanted to be married in uniform, I didn't even want to wear my new civvie suit, both of us in service dress seemed to me to be a fitting and memorable way to mark the occasion. We could get a special licence, and although we rather favoured a civil ceremony for some reason which I now completely forget, it was simpler to have a church wedding.

I had to get my CO's permission, which she gave only reluctantly. "You're so young," she said, "Are you really sure you want to do this?" Of course I was sure. I had just turned twenty and naturally was quite sure about everything. Perhaps the fact that she knew the man I was proposing to wed and had agreeable memories of his masterful way on a crowded train station had something to do with it, anyway, I walked away with the required permission on the appropriate form, as well as a pass for two week's marriage leave.

I was also quite sure that I didn't want to tell Evelyn until it was fait accompli. I knew she would disapprove, for the best of reasons. I was young and to date hadn't shown any great signs of maturity. She would feel it her duty to point out the likely pitfalls ahead, tell me that Daddy would certainly be against it—I wanted to spare both of us the long, emotional discussions that would ensue. So we got our special licence for 7s.6d and a war time utility ring for l0s.6d (or it may have been the other way around), made arrangements with the vicar of St. Peter's Church for a ceremony to take place at eleven o'clock the following Tuesday morning. Our future was settled.

Shouldn't we have a best man? "I'll ask the first Canadian soldier I see at the Y," Ed said. It was a lovely cold sunny morning and we were walking through town after seeing the Vicar. A man in civilian clothes came towards us and as we passed, he and Ed both turned to take another look at one another. It was one of those amazing coincidences. His name was Ken Davidson and he was an old school friend of one of Ed's older brothers. We turned into the nearest pub to gather our wits and

for the two men to exchange news. Ken had completed medical school at McGill University and was interning at Leicester Infirmary before going into the Canadian Navy.

"Where is so and so? And what happened to...? How about the Edmondsons?" asked Ed. Don and Irene had been close friends of his in Winnipeg; Don Edmondson had left depressed Canada for England in 1938, joined the RAF and was stationed in Singapore when war was declared.

"They're in Great Glen," said Ken. Apparently Irene had escaped Singapore on one of the last ships to leave before the Japanese invasion. Don had "walked out" through Java. Irene got safely to Canada but it was months before she knew whether Don was dead or alive. Her little girl was born in Winnipeg and eventually Don was able to join them. Now they were all in the UK again and living in a small village only a few miles from Leicester. We met the following evening for dinner at the Grand Hotel.

Irene, small, pixie-faced, exquisitely dressed, seemed extraordinarily glamorous. She was also unaffectedly friendly. Don was on crutches, not due to his many adventures, but because he had had a bad fall and broken an ankle which refused to heal properly. They both greeted Ed with exuberant affection. They simply couldn't get over the extraordinary twist of fate that had thrown us all together like this, and in time for the great occasion of the wedding. There was more "Do you remember...? Where is...? Did you know...?" They were nice people; they tried to include me, but it didn't matter. I was pleased to sit back and listen. This was, after all, my first encounter with the kind of Canadians with whom I was likely to be spending the rest of my life. We left with Ken inviting us all to a small party in his room at the hospital the following evening. A pre-wedding party he said.

The Rendles had kindly invited me to stay with them for the night preceding the wedding so that I could get a good night's sleep, a family breakfast and then walk to the church which was just around the corner from their apartment. We spent the Monday arranging for our honeymoon. We found a room in an old house in downtown Leicester. It was the top floor, one large room with a fireplace and meagre furnishings. A double bed, a couple of easy chairs, a table, in fact all we needed. In

the afternoon we had tea with the Rendles and then on to the Infirmary for Ken's party. It was unconventional, to say the least.

Ken had received a food parcel from home which he graciously donated; we all brought whatever drinks we could get. The room which was about twelve feet square and we had to be very quiet because, "Duty sister is a real tartar." The warning was crucial because as the evening wore on the room became more and more crowded. The Infirmary had a number of war wounded and Ken had invited all the Canadians on that floor to join us. So in they slipped a couple at a time, in blue hospital dress and various stages of recovery. One fellow with both arms in casts sat happily on the bed while Irene fed him fruitcake. Most had a bottle to donate; all wanted to toast past and future occasions; few wanted to leave to make room for new arrivals. Even the tartar sister turned up (well, by this time the festivity was rollicking and far from silent) but instead of ordering us all out, merely told us to "turn it down," escorted the man with the arm casts back to the ward and rather wistfully declined a drink. It was a pretty good party. Finally Ed walked me back to the Rendles, who had provided me with a door key. I crept in quietly and instantly asleep.

The morning came bright and pleasant. Joan had taken the day off and breakfast with her and her mother was relaxed and cheerful. Rendle, always good company, was at her best; Joan convinced, like me that this was a perfect way to get married made me a hasty present of her very best nightdress, no small sacrifice. There would be no other friends at the church. Vera was on leave and, as for the rest of the house, it was a case of all or none. I really didn't regard the formalization of my relationship with Ed as any big deal and was truly surprised when Vera returned furious with me for not calling her back from leave. She said she was devastated and would have dropped everything to be with me. As I had no idea where she was, it would have taken the combined efforts of the military police and Scotland Yard to find her, but I was rather pleased at her feelings anyway.

I get ahead of myself. At a quarter to eleven we walked to St. Peter's. The morning was lovely, a crisp December day with a few flowers still lingering in the gardens. The wedding party was waiting

for us. Ken had arrived in an ambulance, the Edmondsons had stayed in Leicester overnight and found a taxi. Don's crutches worked wonders when looking for transportation. Ed was waiting at the altar and I honestly don't remember much of what followed. The Church of England service is simple and impressive. I must have made the right responses because the register was signed and the young curate who had done the job congratulated us. Everybody kissed everybody else and we were well and truly joined as one.

We had our wedding luncheon at the Grand Hotel. The Rendles, the Edmonsdons, Ed and me. A feast of war-time sausages and a very nice dessert because there was always a little something in reserve for a wedding. But no cake! We didn't mind. Actually we were quite anxious for the group to break up so we could go back to our little room and start serious housekeeping.

Of course I now had to tell Evelyn and afraid I handled this very badly. Ed, who in Canadian style used the telephone extensively, thought it was the kindest way to communicate our happy news. For him it would have been for he is outgoing, cheerfully talkative and refuses ever to be snubbed. In Britain, however, at that time, the telephone was not nearly so popular, nor for that matter so necessary. Let me digress for a moment; in Britain before the war, a telegram had been the accepted mode of quick communication. The telegraph boy would come to the door by bicycle and after reading the message you could scribble a reply and he rode off with it— the whole thing was accomplished speedily—and the message got to its destination in a couple of hours. If the matter was not urgent, however, most people usually wrote letters. The mail was excellent, even during the war, and a letter posted before about five o'clock one day would get to its destination, except for the outer reaches of Britain, the next. I didn't feel comfortable with the telephone but in the end I acceded to Ed. I see now it was an unkind and clumsy act.

I had to use a public phone booth and got Evelyn at the office. I mumbled that Ed and I had been married. There was a shocked silence then she enquired if I was pregnant—or as she put it did I "have to get married." I was insulted beyond words and the conversation ended awkwardly. A short,

cheerful written message would have got there the next day would have given us both a little space to prepare for a meeting. Still it was done and I learnt my first lesson in marriage nuances. Though you might be deliriously happy, and think your partner topnotch in making wise decisions, if you have any hesitancy always stick to your own gut feelings, a dictum I have kept quite firmly for the past sixty years. What would have been quite right for Ed was wrong for me. Anyway we went to Tipton in person two weeks later and after some appropriate agonising all was forgiven.

Pictures—Part II

Me, Ella, and Vera.
Spring, 1943.

Evelyn, June, and Me
On the same (windy) day.

Ed, Me, and Doug. London, Summer 1942. This was the day we watched the dog fight over the Thames.

Ella's Wedding

Joan Rendle, Peter Rendle, and Peter's fiancée Myrtle. 1942.

Ed, Me, and Doug in Ken Davdison's room in the Leicester Infirmary. Spring, 1944.

Me

Ed

Ed and I

PART III

Chapter 9

At first being married had little impact on my daily life in the ATS. The house in which we were billeted had a small dreary and not very comfortable sitting room which was rarely occupied except by the duty officer who had to sign us in each evening. Whatever one's interests they took place somewhere else, so instead of settling down as a young married woman, doing whatever young married women do, I continued much as usual. An evening visit with Vera to the DM (pub) where the ambience and the conversation was always good, Sunday afternoon symphony concerts in the DM (concert hall) sometimes a movie or play, an occasional lecture. I remember particularly a Russian woman fighter pilot who toured Britain about this time and impressed us with an account of a military life very different from ours.

My visits to York became more frequent, more relaxed and always enjoyable. I would arrive, every two weeks or so, on a Saturday afternoon, book into a small hotel just behind the Minster, have a relaxed bath, take a nap then sit with a book waiting for Ed. 432 Squadron was now mostly on daylight bombing raids and it was almost like a regular job. I would expect him back by about five o'clock and never for a moment did I visualize him not returning. I suppose I closed my mind to such a possibility—and even got a little impatient if he were late. Then he would come bounding up the stairs and everything was well with our world. We would often meet the rest of the crew for dinner and then go our separate ways for an evening's amusement, a dance, a movie, whatever. The crew was a mixed British/Canadian and I remember them with much affection.

Once, and only once, did we meet in a village close to the airfield. It was a planned treat—Ed had found us a B&B room with a promise of home-cooked meals and a nice family atmosphere. His letter said he probably would not be able to meet me but he explained carefully how to get there. I

had to take a bus from York, get off at Wombleton and walk only a few yards to the main street and then it was—well I forget just where but only a short way to the house. All went well until I got off the bus. I was the only one to alight and I was deposited in the most complete darkness I had ever known. In the city the blackout was never completely black—there was always a little glow—enough usually to see the pavement or find some reference point. Two steps one way would bring you to a curb, two steps another would bring you to a wall—there was really no way of getting completely lost.

Now I was plunged into absolute dark—it was a moonless night and not a star showed. It was like being in a black velvet bag. It was the one and only time during the war years that I experienced this although for country people it must have been quite ordinary. I groped a few steps either way—absolutely nothing. I couldn't even find the gravel road. It must have been only five minutes until I heard a car approaching, although it seemed much longer. To my great relief it pulled up and the driver addressed me politely—I could see the car also contained four very drunken airmen—could I tell him if they were on the right way to the village? "Sorry," I said, "I'm lost too." The driver considered this gravely then, with a gracious "Good night," they drove on. Too late I called "How about me!"—but never mind the car showed just enough light to see the road and five minutes' walk brought me to my destination. I was met by a smiling landlady, Ed arrived shortly after and we did indeed have a good week-end. The village was charming; the air was clean but terribly cold. Breakfast in the morning, however, was almost pre-war vintage. Still it was another bit of war time Britain I hadn't seen before, in many ways I had been quite protected.

Then of course Ed visited Leicester often for after a raid he would get a couple of days leave and sometimes turned up in the middle of the week. Being married certainly had practical advantages for I was able to ask for a sleeping out pass and we would hurry to our makeshift home for a bit of ad hoc domesticity.

We had been able to find a fairly large room, taking most of the top floor of an old boarding house not far from my office. We could take it for two or three days at a time and our landlady kept it

free for us, probably charging a bit more than the going rate for our visits to even things out. On the other hand it might have been just a bit difficult to rent on a permanent basis for it wasn't exactly either classy or convenient.

The room was large enough for a modest party but it was three steep flights up from the kitchen which meant a long climb to boil a kettle for a cup of tea and seriously discouraged any further culinary efforts—of course there was the open fire but that had its limitations. The shared bathroom was one flight down. There was, however, a decent fireplace; we didn't have to provide our own coal but we did have to lug it up from the back shed. It also had a reasonably comfortable double bed, a table with two chairs and an old armchair which could, at a pinch, take two people. We did wonders with this retreat, Ed made pots of truly horrible coffee and I introduced him to the delights of bread toasted over an open fire. As our rations were infinitesimal it wasn't quite the rich dripping with butter afternoon tea delight that the British love. I have some very happy memories of this clingy old room for we were young and full of love and optimism.

In March we both got seven days leave and decided to embark on a delayed honeymoon. We settled on Bristol, Ed's choice. I think he wanted to see something of the West Country, one of the few areas in Britain he wasn't familiar with. He was to join me in Leicester on the Friday evening and we planned to take the afternoon train to Bristol the next day, not a complicated journey although we did have to change in London. We took the precaution of making a reservation in a Bristol hotel and looked forward to our first real holiday together.

It started very well and we reached London by late afternoon. The train service in Britain has always been good—the railways have been the mainstay of public travel for a hundred years or more; the network of tracks covered the whole of the British Isles and the smallest village had its station. Businessmen went to work by train, children went to school by train, people went to the next town to shop, to visit, to party, by train. During the war, however, troop movement took priority over everything else and timetables became questionable to say the least. You took the train when it came—ours

came and went without so much as a pause. Well there was another “before long” so we settled in the station restaurant and revived ourselves with stewed tea and stale buns for a couple of hours.

When it arrived, our train was almost as crowded as the previous one, but we did manage to get a place in the guard’s van and spent the rest of the way to Bristol sitting on mail bags. It was not a troop train but a local which stopped at every small station along the way and as the time went on we became more and more weary. When we finally arrived in Bristol it was past eleven o’clock. Fortunately our hotel was only a few streets from the station and we dashed there only to find the doors locked and although we pounded and pounded we could get no response. This wasn’t very unusual; apart from the large establishments in London and the big cities, most hotels liked their guests in before eleven. The situation was defendable, made necessary by the many problems of a war disrupted management, including no night staff. It meant, though, that guests who didn’t arrive before lock up (usually for good reasons), had to fend for themselves. So we turned to the YMCA which had no such rules, remained open twenty-four hours a day and always had a pot of tea and a sandwich for frustrated travellers. Ed was found a bed there and I was directed to the YW around the corner. Ed walked me to my digs, we bade one another a chaste good night on the doorstep and that’s how we spent the first night of our “honeymoon.”

The following morning opened bright and sunny, Ed arrived early, we breakfasted at the Y and then made our way to our hotel, now open and bustling, with a sympathetic clerk at the counter. “We would have had someone wait up for you if you had let us know you’d be late,” she said. Oh well, one of those things, it was impossible to be put out on such a glorious day.

Bristol is one of Britain’s oldest and most important ports. It is accessible to large ocean going vessels but some of the wharfs and quays come right into the city centre and there were fishing boats bobbing at anchor across from the shops and offices. This is where the ships sailed for the New World, where John Cabot left on the voyage that took him to Newfoundland, it is also where fortunes in slaves, spices and sugar were made and no doubt lost. We had a wonderful day just wandering

around at our own pace. We explored the town with its old-fashioned buildings, relishing the feeling, despite the horrendous bomb damage, of ancient history and adventure. As well as the fishing boats there were other important craft in port and the town was full of American sailors. Although we were familiar with the US troops we had never met the Navy before and in the evening we spent a jolly hour in a local pub with some pretty jolly American sailors, before returning to our hotel for the night.

Our hotel room was a minor luxury—charming furnishings, a comfortable bed—it was on the top floor and the window looked down on a quaint, quiet street below. We were well settled in but far from asleep when the sirens sounded. Although Bristol, had suffered terrible bombardment in there hadn't been a raid in months. We decided it was a false alarm, or a lone raider, or.... Anyway we ignored it, also the knock on the door and a shouted instruction to go down to the cellar. Then came the noise which was uncomfortably close. When the building actually shook we reluctantly put our more interesting activities on hold and groped our way down three flights of stairs in pitch dark to the basement shelter. We opened the door on a scene that was positively festive. The cellar was actually a cheerful brightly lit room well prepared for such emergencies where our host was serving brandy or coffee. "Come on in," he called, as if welcoming us to a party and soon we were exchanging raid stories with our fellow guests. It was certainly an improvement on a back garden Anderson.

There can't be any more surprises, we thought, and there weren't. We spent the rest of our short leave with no further annoyances. We took a bus to Bath, we explored the old town and visited the ancient spa, we took another bus out of Bristol and spent a day just walking the downs, we slept and ate and made love and acted as if we were on a real carefree honeymoon. All too soon it was over and we were back to our normal duties but we had done what honeymoons are supposed to do; sealed our alliance, confirmed the fact that we were compatible company, had a deep friendship and affection for one another—and in all probability would be quite content to spend the rest of our lives together—and by and large this has been so.

Back at Leicester everything looked much the same and I settled into a work routine that still was far from engrossing. We did enjoy the attic though and on our fairly frequent weekends there, tried our hand at a little entertaining. There wasn't much furniture but we found exactly how many people could sit on the bed before it collapsed in defeat. Being on the top floor had some disadvantages. Joan Rendle came to a party one night with a particularly elegant American officer. His "pinks" were immaculate, he was utterly charming and his honeyed southern accent intrigued us. I wonder if his drinking preference was mint juleps....Whatever we gave him had a profound effect and as the evening wore on he became more and more cheerfully loquacious. As he was leaving he turned to thank us for such a great party, his feet missed the top step and he shot down the entire flight to the small landing below, he turned to give us a reassuring wave, missed the top step of the next flight down. From there, the descent to the street was inevitable. We peered out of the window horrified at what we might see—he was standing happily upright on the pavement still finding the right words to assure us he had had a swell time. He was a nice man and Joan saw quite a bit of him during the next few weeks.

I believe it was in May that the 82nd Airborne disappeared from Leicester. The place appeared semi-evacuated, we hardly realised what a large portion of the town had been occupied by those larger than life men. Some months earlier a detachment of soldiers from the British 9th army had been posted to the town—the Desert Rats—tough warriors who had fought and survived so the city still had a large contingent of the military. They hadn't been too pleased to see the, as yet unseasoned, Americans dating "their" girls. A good many of the girls had not only dated but formed deep attachments with Americans and there were some anxious hearts for we all knew what was coming next.

All my war memories seem to have a back-drop of bright and sunny days. Certainly the sixth of June was no exception. I sat at my desk by an open window and enjoyed the warmth of an early summer sun. There seemed to be a lot of air activity for that morning group after group of planes went

over. By noon we had heard that the first landings had taken place shortly after midnight when our friends of the 82nd along with other American and British paratroops had been dropped in Normandy, that land forces had been disembarked on the French shores and that severe fighting was taking place as they pushed their way inland. The planes that we saw over Leicester were British air support on their way to the scene of action. Someone had a radio and we waited for each news broadcast with both excitement and apprehension. for it was clear that the war had moved into its most critical stage.

I don't think even the most optimistic expected a quick and easy victory, by now no one underestimated the German opposition. Certainly for the first few days there was little to go on—the information we received was reassuring only to the extent that the landings had been "successful." It was only much later that we learnt of the terrible bloodshed, the men dropped off target, the incidence of unexpected resistance, the problems encountered by the ground troops whose landing craft were bedevilled by rough seas—and we tried not to think of Dunkirk and we tried not to think of Dieppe and sometimes we held our breath but generally we clung stubbornly to the hope that it was the beginning of the end and were heartened. Fortunately I had no personal fears, for Ed was not immediately involved in the operation—Bomber Command was engaged in daylight raids intended to destroy the German manufacturing and communications capability in other words factories and railroads inland—and with the enemy seriously engaged in other problems the danger to British was somewhat reduced.

Soon though the American casualty news began to trickle in, not officially but individuals received letters and although heavily censored it was possible to glean enough information to learn sadly that so many of the light-hearted young men that we had laughed, danced and flirted with would never return. Vera's Pat was safe, but others in our house lost men with whom they had had a serious relationship.

Sometimes the war completely wrecked people's better judgement, or blinded them by love, depending on one's point of view. Shortly after Ella's happy wedding to Bill Shaw he was posted to the Middle East. As things went in those days, marriage, particularly one barely consummated and with a quickly-departed husband, didn't very much change a service person's life style. We were still in billets, still part of the round of army work and social life. I was lucky that Ed and I were able to meet frequently and our marriage was cemented from the beginning by good companionship. Ella was left alone and the almost inevitable happened: she fell in love with an American officer.

The rather sad thing was that much as we liked Bill Shaw, we liked Bill Adams just as much. He was an older man, an 82nd Air Borne captain who wooed Ella with (I suspect) a more sophisticated ardour than the young Welshman barely out of school. Ed and I had sometimes gone out with them as a foursome, just a drink at the DM or the Black Boy. Bill the second was a very nice man, good company in a quiet way, and so obviously captivated by the attractive Scottish girl that it was difficult to condemn their relationship. He didn't return from Normandy and Ella, being pregnant, was demobbed from the ATS. We heard later, from the Shaws, who kept in touch and were extraordinarily kind to her, that she had gone to London, had an abortion, and was working in a children's crèche. Bill Shaw returned safely from Africa but what happened after that we never heard.

Later in the month I had other matters on my mind for I discovered, with no surprise, that I was pregnant. After our marriage we had taken no further contraceptive precautions for I wanted my family to arrive while I was young and I was pleased with the idea of having my first child born in Britain in a familiar setting and among friends. My interesting condition entailed a visit to the company medical officer, who was also young, female and once she ascertained that I was married congratulated me cheerfully. I don't think she had too many unmarried pregnancies on her hands for Britain is a Protestant country with no taboos, either legal or social, against birth control. In fact it was the reverse, contraception was accepted, unplanned pregnancies (married or unmarried) frowned upon. On the other hand abortion was not only taboo but illegal with a severe penalty.

I look around me now and consider the mores of our time to have been much more sensible than they are in Canada today. Certainly there were unplanned pregnancies, humankind being what it is there were mistakes, people were careless, got carried away by their emotions, whatever, but no one in Britain could say they didn't know what to do or were denied access to the best methods known at the time. There were health clinics in even the smallest communities and although not specifically oriented towards family planning the information was there for the asking, doctors prescribed diaphragms (but they did like to be told that you had marriage in mind and young women would flash an "engagement ring") condoms and suppositories were on the chemists shelves and indeed servicemen could request condoms from company stores.

Over and above all of this the commercial companies had tactful advertisements in newspapers and magazines offering clinical advice "of a discreet nature" to interested people and the women's magazines particularly always had a feature on female problems. Questions were answered by mail by Mrs. Comfort or Aunt Faith or whoever and could be anything from how to deal with a poor complexion to the best contraceptive method to use. The whole point was people were conditioned to consider pregnancy an important decision—to be made by adults. It was not trendy for schoolgirls to have babies and indeed unexpected pregnancies were inclined to be treated with derision by friends and workmates. Many of us were not exactly mature in many ways but we did choose our own time to become mothers.

I now prepared to leave the ATS with as much eagerness as I had to join up. The girls in the house viewed me with interest, made a bit of a fuss of me and in general considered it a great joke. To their considerable envy I was put on light duties and could leave the office at three o'clock each afternoon. This was totally unwarranted for I had never felt better. Anyway the wheels were put in motion to remove me from the "active list." I had to be issued with an identity card, a green ration book for expectant mums and some clothes coupons. I spent a friendly week-end at Tipton; Evelyn wanted me to return, stay there and have the baby at the fashionable Wolverhampton nursing home that was

favoured by the young married women that she knew. There was plenty of room in the house, I could have the front bedroom and Ed could visit me quite easily. It was a kindly thought but not at all to my fancy. I clearly valued my independence and planned to find rooms in Leicester, where I had so many friends, and go to the public hospital there.

Looking for a small apartment was rather different from the hectic experience that Vera and I had had the previous year. I was now actually quite well off for the Canadian marriage allowance was liberal—I believe £5 a week—which was worth a lot more then than it is now and was twice as much as that of a British serviceman of the same rank. So my house hunting was done with considerable confidence. The first ad I answered in the local paper turned out to be suitable and I knew that I could spend the next few months there perfectly happily. It was a pleasant modern, semi-detached house on a quiet street a short way from the city centre. It belonged to a middle aged businesswoman whose firm was being moved to another town. She met me at 23 Chesterfield Road, a briskly friendly woman and we quickly came to an understanding. I could have the rooms she normally used herself, the front sitting room and the front bedroom, virtually half the house, for the princely sum of thirty shillings a week. I would share the bathroom and the kitchen with the other occupants. I was introduced to the other family, an elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. Flint and their daughter Nan, who had the back of the house and the third bedroom.

Ed arrived that week-end, we went to have a look at the apartment together and he was fully approving of my choice. Our landlady whose name I don't remember had come from a military family and the sitting room was furnished with memories of service in India—a carved corner cupboard, which would serve as my pantry, a table, just large enough for two, an Oriental rug covered most of the floor, there were easy chairs and a chintz covered sofa, there were brass plates on the wall and an immense china vase. It was a gracious room and we were to spend some happy hours there. The bedroom, however, left something to be desired; it had the usual appurtenances; a wardrobe, dressing table with a good mirror, chest of drawers but only a small single bed. So our first purchase as a

married couple was a good double bed. This taught us something of wartime utility products. I already had a utility wedding ring, now we looked at utility furniture. Utility was a British wartime innovation which produced some very solid bargains. Government subsidies kept the prices low—some of the best designers in the country devised products of good quality and attractive style. So we got our bed and began our first real housekeeping.

In the meantime I had to go through the process of departing from the army. The curtain had come down on one more act in life's drama and as in all the big steps in life I felt both excitement and a certain regret. The almost three years in the ATS had been happy ones. The friendships, the camaraderie, the laughs, the groans...I knew I would miss the life tremendously. The new scenario looked so good though that I also felt a great exhilaration—a whole new life was just waiting to be lived and I was positive it was going to be a splendid one. So one day at the end of July, dressed in my odds and ends of civvie clothes, I handed in my uniform to stores. I was allowed to keep my underwear, shoes and stockings. I took the bus to my new home quite eager to start the next performance.

Chapter 10

Ed came that week-end and we made friends with the Flints who turned out to be the perfect neighbours. Mr. Flint a retired wine merchant, now a semi-invalid, spent a good deal of his time in bed, his wife a large comfortable woman with a gracious manner; friendly middle-aged Nan worked as receptionist, book-keeper and general factotum for a dentist. They had been bombed out of London and were more or less camping in Leicester until life returned to normal. They were congenial cultivated people and over the following weeks unfailingly kind to me. Their sitting room had an agreeable mixture of books, records, family pictures and the advantage of being at the back of the house was the French doors which opened onto a small garden. It wasn't particularly attractive, just grass surrounded by a privet hedge but it was a place for Mr. Flint, on warm days, to sit in the sun and also for their big Persian tom to stroll out and survey his territory. Like all cats, he stubbornly refused to acknowledge the fact he had been neutered and kept a firm paw on the local feline population. When Ed came he would always pay a little visit to Mr. Flint and I think the old gentleman enjoyed his company and looked forward to their chats.

This was my first home as a married woman and I delighted in it. My two rooms were pleasant and I had use of the kitchen and bathroom, both modern and well equipped. Flint and I quickly came to an agreement as to who did what with the common elements, very little really because we agreed to share the expense of her cleaning woman who came in once a week to look after the serious work. I explored the neighbourhood—I was a ten minute walk the city with a bus stop right across the road if I preferred to ride. It was not necessary, though, to go to town for my everyday needs, there was a row of shops not far away with butcher, grocer and greengrocer, sub-post office and to my delight a penny lending library.

These little libraries had been popular in Britain for many years. They were essentially private collections where for a small charge you got quite a good selection, mostly fiction, on the same princi-

ple as video stores today. I retained my card for the City library but it was nice not to have to lug books on the bus and made a welcome addition to my reading material. It was a real joy to me to be, for the first time in my life, absolutely independent. There was no one to tell me what to do next! Well except for the little creature every day making its presence more detectable. Once out of the ATS I was on my own as far as medical services were concerned so I had to find a doctor. My ATS medical officer had, however, suggested a local obstetrician who would take me on as a patient. I paid him a visit, had an examination, discussed the formalities. It turned out to be the one and only time I saw him.

In Britain at that time there were several ways to have a baby. Most popular, with middle class women and most expensive, were the private nursing homes. These were usually elegant establishments run either by an obstetrician or quite frequently a qualified nurse with an arrangement with a doctor or group of doctors. They were sometimes old houses, beautifully maintained where each woman could have her own nicely furnished bedroom. It was much like being in a well-managed hotel and of course like a hotel prices ranged from expensive to very expensive. At the other end there were the home deliveries accomplished by a visiting midwife with the local doctor if required. The midwives are a solid part of British history and in early times acted as respected village wise women. By this time they had become a well-trained and valuable part of the medical community making home visits to ensure proper pre-natal attention, following up with post-natal information and advice. Every village, every neighbourhood had its team of hospitals which, many thought, combined the best features of both. The woman attended the hospital for regular pre-natal visits, the delivery was in hospital assisted by a staff midwife, there was a doctor on call and the most sophisticated equipment on hand if required. There was a small charge. I thought the hospital route the best way to go—and my doctor made the necessary arrangements to book me into the Leicester General Hospital for pre-natal visits and eventual delivery.

The hospital visits became a regular part of my routine—at first once a month, later weekly. The pregnant mums would sit in the waiting room, chat amiably while waiting their turn. Then an examination, blood pressure taken, a few prods and pokes and few questions about lifestyle. We were advised not to smoke, I seldom did anyway, keep drinking to a minimum. My life became very prosaic indeed and it wasn't the slightest hardship. Occasionally I would invite friends for a cup of tea, occasionally friends would drop in unannounced. Vera came often, others from the house sometimes, office colleagues now and again. I was far from lonely. Mrs. Flint was a dear, we chatted in the kitchen but we didn't intrude on one another's lives. She made it clear that she was there if I needed her. Nan too was a friendly soul; she was another whose hopes had been dashed by the war for her fiancé was one who had not come back from Dunkirk. Ed came to Leicester as often as he could and then I concocted some dubious delicacy and we supped in fine style with our table drawn up in front of the fire. I was no great chef but was anxious that he enjoy our sanctuary as much as I did. The time passed quickly.

Another character now entered my life—and played a big part in the happenings of the next few months. The Edmondsons had left Great Glen and settled in an apartment only two or three streets away. They felt they should be in town for the very good reason that Irene was also pregnant and wanted to be closer to the hospital. She had opted, like me to have a hospital delivery but had chosen the other big hospital, Leicester Infirmary, for her confinement. So here we were with a good deal in common and we became great friends. Don was seldom home for, although still on crutches, he was now back on full (ground) duty at Great Glen and only came to Leicester on week-ends. Irene and I met most mornings to do our shopping together, walk Jill in the park, come back to either her place or mine for lunch. Occasionally we were joined by one or another acquaintance.

I remember particularly the great curry competition. Mary was a young woman Irene had met at Great Glen. She had been brought up in India and had a good hand with a Madras curry. Irene favoured Singapore curry. Curry was a good meal because it was almost ration free, it needed little

meat used a variety of vegetables and was usually delicious. When Mary came lunch we always had curry. Sometimes Irene would make it and sometimes Mary would bring a pot of her own. Irene favoured adding dried peaches Mary liked raisins (as well as a good many other ingredients of course). They looked to me anxiously for comments. On these days I would absolutely gorge, make some serious observations then stagger back home for a long afternoon nap. Mary was another player that came briefly on stage then left for I don't know where. She was a remarkably beautiful woman, at twenty-two married for the third time. Her first two husbands had been fighter pilots. I hope her third survived and they moved serenely into peace time—she deserved a happy ending.

Irene was a good companion, an easy talker, we chatted about our lives and hopes and I learnt a lot about Winnipeg, Ed's family which she knew well, and Canada in general. The Edmondsons had no intention of going back to Canada after the war, not for a time anyway. The months Irene had spent in Winnipeg after her escape from Singapore had not been happy. She loved her parents but after years in the East had found Winnipeg insular and stuffy. Her mother allowed no alcohol in the house and even an occasional cigarette was frowned upon. Irene without an evening highball was unimaginable. I made allowances, she had been under great stress, she was a cherished only child of elderly parents, her mother probably with good reason had been over protective. After the trauma of a long sea voyage, a missing husband, a new baby, no wonder she had been depressed. In my heart I refused to believe that Canada would be anything but perfect.

I got the opportunity to meet quite a few Canadians for the Edmondsons flat became a small salon for old friends, new friends and a variety of relatives. At various times Don's younger brother, a cousin and a brother-in-law turned up. They were all quite different and probably represented a cross section of at least a part of middle class Canadian life. The brother had come to Britain with a supply of Canadian rye whisky, so would arrive for a week-end with one of his precious bottles; the cousin was a farm boy and would bring a couple of jars of preserved grouse. His mother had done this herself and the little birds caught on the prairie were delicious. The brother in law brought only himself

but he was the best company—an urbane man whose family owned Winnipeg's oldest and most distinguished funeral parlour ("undertakers" to the British). He was a big man with a spirited sense of humour and always good company. Other old friends from Canada turned up from time to time—I don't even remember their names but I do remember some good times.

The flat was the second and third floors of an old house, modified to wartime usage. The second floor had a big siting room, a bedroom and a kitchen. The upper floor a little bedroom for Jill and a guest room. It was all quite nicely furnished but had one peculiarity. There had apparently been no bathroom on this floor, only a toilet and hand basin, so a bath tub had been installed at one end of the enormous kitchen. It was covered with a panel of wood when not in use so made and extra table. There were many little adjustments like this to accommodate ad hoc war time lodgings. Irene would always say guilelessly, to prospective guests, "Oh don't hurry in the morning, you can have a nice bath while I get breakfast." Well the joke was good for once around anyway.

If Ed was home we would go over for a Saturday evening. One night a group taught me a cut throat poker game and were surprisingly patient with my pathetic card sense. Another time I remember discussing our after the war aspirations. The Edmondsons were hoping to go back to Singapore in one capacity or another. Ed had done a year at Manitoba University in a general arts course and planned to take advantage of a proposed veteran's education plan and return. His ideas had changed though and he leaned now towards agriculture—either agricultural economics or agricultural engineering. He was enthusiastic about an article he had been reading on fast freezing. We knew about the procedure of course, that was the way much food had crossed the Atlantic especially the American's rations. Now it seemed that freezing would come to the average home. He could see the time, he said, when much of our daily food would be quick frozen even, he thought, to the extent of individual meals being frozen and then heated and served. It would be an excellent storage method and retain all the original nutrients. We all thought the idea bizarre we hooted with laughter at such a farfetched notion. Ed was always a charmer Irene said fondly.

Ed would shortly finish his tour of duty and be sent back to Canada for demobilization. I would, of course, have liked to go with him—or failing that have him in Britain for the arrival of our firstborn. The military saw otherwise, he would have to leave as directed. My pregnancy was now too far advanced for the Canadian forces to take a chance on transporting me so I would have to wait until after the birth. Although Ed asked for compassionate leave, and his power of persuasion is usually good, there was no swaying the authorities.

I was sorry but not too upset by this. I was a healthy young woman rather enjoying my pregnancy, so to arrive in Canada with the baby *fait accompli* seemed quite an acceptable scenario. Somewhere around this time I remember a visit to West Bromwich where Ed was introduced to Aunt Ada. She was aging and seemed smaller and more frail than remembered. We had a pleasant afternoon; her room was comfortable and homey with the Three Graces still standing sublimely on the mantelpiece Ed was his usual congenial self, trim and good looking in uniform and Ada made it obvious that she liked my choice of partner. "You'll come to Canada one day," he said. She laughed, "perhaps I'll find a husband yet."

In October I had my twenty-first birthday. I made arrangements for my inheritance to be divided equally between June and myself. Nut Rees who handled this too suggested a split of one third to two thirds—he pointed out that there was an eight year difference in our ages and one third to June would, if invested wisely, grow to about the same amount by the time she was twenty-one. I don't think I'm overly magnanimous but we knew that peacetime Britain would have a long recovery period and times would be difficult for some years yet, whereas I would soon be off to a new and affluent country with opportunities for all and absolutely no financial problems! Anyway I had done "What Daddy would have wanted" and also affected a final accord with Evelyn. I visited Tipton and we agreed that after the baby was born I would spend those last few weeks there, before departing the country.

In late November Ed completed his tour of duty and received his embarkation notice; he would leave for Canada in two weeks' time. He spent two days in Leicester and we made a perfectly

cheerful farewell. I expected my next letter to come from Canada, but no, the following week I had a letter from Warrington saying he would probably be there for another couple of weeks. Despite my airy vows of being perfectly able to stand on my own feet I suddenly realised how much I would miss him and how much I didn't want him to leave. It would be nice to see him just once more so in a completely uncharacteristic display of sentiment I took the train to Warrington, booked into the first hotel I saw and telephoned his company office. A nice Canadian voice answered and I left a message for Pilot Officer Trott to the effect that his wife was in town and would meet him at the Commercial Hotel. I expect the clerk thought, "Oh yes," and put me down as a determined camp follower.

Perhaps, also, I felt drawn to Warrington. This is where the great adventure had started, it seemed fitting that this is where I should see this part of it end. It was almost three years since May and I had arrived here with me particularly as a very green rookie. I had the feeling that one important part of my life had come full circle. I had come a long way and the girl I had been had changed a lot. Still the girl I had been was still there glancing, I believe approvingly, over my shoulder. She hadn't left me; in fact, even now she turns up from time to time.

Anyway Ed got the message and we had a nice evening together. The Norton Arms was no five star inn, but it had a cheerful bar, a not bad dining room and our room had a fireplace with a fire burning cosily. I think I had some vision of waving the troop train off in the time honoured manner of brave forsaken women but instead, in the morning, we breakfasted happily said goodbye once more and I went back to Leicester. Ed stayed in Warrington for another few days and the next letter I had really did come from Canada.

In the meantime Britain was, we thought, winding down the war. The Allies were pushing their way through France, often bloodily, but tenaciously. We began to hear, however, disquieting rumours from the south. Since late summer London and the south-east counties had been getting regular doodlebugs raids. With sighs of resignation Londoners once again adjusted to air raid sirens. These atrocious contraptions, the V-1s, were automated missiles, the first, I suppose, "smart bombs." The raids

were not like the earlier blitzkrieg, the missiles chugged overhead one at a time, and people almost ignored them until the noise stopped—that was the signal to take immediate cover for that was when they dropped. Security was tight, we knew people were being killed but we didn't get the morning by morning newscasts of the 1940-41 raids. The papers gave passing notice but our news came mostly by word of mouth and the war years always had a dependable grapevine. In November, however, Irene went to London to visit friends and came back visibly shaken. We had been expecting a V-2 weapon, now apparently it was upon us. The V-2s were the most terrifying. They were swift, silent and deadly. People said philosophically that either you heard the bang and you were safe or you didn't and you were dead. There was some cold comfort there, the one thing that people during the blitz had dreaded most was not death so much as being trapped, injured but conscious For the first time in months we heard air raid sirens in Leicester but the bombs never got that far inland.

My own life went on with a tranquillity that I had never experienced before and not often since, for it is only with first babies that mothers get the pleasant unhampered, rather pampered existence. I read a lot, I went for walks, I bought baby clothes for which I had an extra coupon allowance. I went to Tipton for Christmas and spent three or four days with the family but I was glad to get back to my own mini-home.

Susan arrived mid-February. It happened like this (for no woman can resist describing her first delivery): it was a cold, sleety night and I had a good fire going. The room looked particularly cosy and inviting. At about eight o'clock I had a drop in visitor, my ex-colleague from Records, Michael Franco. He was always a welcome guest because he was funny, brought gossip from the office and had an affectionate but never more than brotherly regard for me. So we chatted while he removed his soaking wet socks, impaled them on the toasting fork to dry over the tire. He was full of ideas for life after the war which I remember included a hotel on the Isle of Wight. I was at the table pouring a cup of tea when I felt the slightest little twitch and suddenly found myself standing in a pool of water. "Oh dear," I said and Michael, thinking that the last stages of pregnancy produced a weak bladder made sooth-

ing and reassuring sounds. “No, no, it’s not that,” I said. He offered to call Mrs. Flint, the doctor, the ambulance, pour the tea, whatever.

In the end he tactfully left leaving me to gather my wits, change my underwear and retire to bed. I felt fine, there seemed to be no immediate need for panic. I think I had a reasonably good night but in the morning a consultation with Mrs. Flint convinced me it was time to go to the hospital. Nan telephoned and the ambulance was there within minutes; one of the perks of a hospital delivery was a free ride when the time arrived. So off I went with my little bag and lots of good wishes from the Flints.

Now I was certainly front stage and centre. Susan took her good time about making her debut but she was finally persuaded on the 15th. I’d been in the delivery room most of the day and was getting a bit discouraged. It was late in the afternoon and my pleasant floor sister was due to go off duty in an hour or two. “Come on,” she said, “Let’s see what we can do before I leave.” Her assistant was an Irish probationer with a sharp sense of fun, who said she grew up on a farm and knew all about delivering little creatures when she was only a small girl and so with lots of encouragement some laughs and gasps it was indeed accomplished and by six-thirty I was sitting up on the delivery table eating toast and drinking tea while they cleaned up the baby and showered me with congratulations.

Today, husbands are there as part of the support team. I expect that’s a fine experience for the husband but I still think that being surrounded by caring, friendly, laughing women is rather nice. In those far off days new mothers were kept in bed for seven days and then allowed only gentle exercise for five before being discharged. I was in a ward with beds on either side and curtains between each two beds so actually it was like being in a semi-private room with four beds except that there was a wide middle aisle and if the curtains were drawn back a view of everyone else. It was a good workable arrangement and I became quite friendly with the other three women in my enclave. At my side, an older woman just delivered of her second child, opposite me a young working class woman

with a jolly laugh and next to her a professional opera singer who sometimes entertained us with an aria or two.

We were an eclectic bunch. Rules were antiquated, only husbands and mothers were allowed to visit which left quite a few of us without welcome afternoon company. Still, messages arrived promptly I was deluged with cards, little gifts, hard to come by fruit; no one had forgotten me, Vera and the other girls in my old ATS billet, people from the office, the Flints, Irene, Michael (apparently everyone thought his account of my start of labour very funny indeed and I'm sure he made a good story of it); a cable from Ed. Mrs. Rendle even got in one afternoon vowing she was my mother and defying anyone to say otherwise. I was touched beyond measure. The best little visitor, of course, was the small creature who arrived from the nursery every three hours for a meal and a cuddle and who looked at me with her astonishingly large eyes and brought out all the latent maternal instincts which I never suspected I had.

Chapter 11

As planned, when I was ready to leave the hospital, Evelyn arrived with rented car and driver and we left for Tipton. The next few weeks were filled with anticipation and excitement. We knew now that the war was all but over—but the death throes of the Nazi beast were still fierce.

Of all my up and down relationship with Evelyn this time was the best. Most people love a baby and Susan played her part to perfection. She was a good little thing and Evelyn, Grandma and June formed an immediate admiration society, but Evelyn most of all. She would come home for lunch and sit by the kitchen fire with the baby on her lap saying all those foolish loving little things that adults shower on infants. Then she would vow that Susan had smiled—perhaps she had. We shared the big bed in the back bedroom and after Susan's last eleven o'clock feed Evelyn and I would prop the baby up between us while we chatted over a bedtime cup of hot milk. Then after giving Susan a final burp I would settle her in her cot at my side of the bed. Our nights were quiet, no raids, no disturbances…

It was a lovely spring that year, by early March the days were balmy and the old lilac tree in the back yard had once more blossomed. I was able to put Susan out in her basket and hearing her satisfied burbling was a delight. I found, though, that looking after a baby in war time Britain was certainly a "labour intensive" job. Grandma Lamsdale was a good coach. No washing machines, nappies were hand washed in the back kitchen, rinsed and then boiled before being lugged up to the back lawn to be hung on the line there. At that time even young babies wore little washable outfits—dresses for girls, "rompers" for boys—that were laundered and ironed daily. We used flat irons, heated on a rack in front of the kitchen fire. This was war time; we had had good electrical appliances before the war but as they aged and because factories were on war work neither parts for repair nor new items were readily available and old methods were resorted to. The vacuum cleaner had disappeared even before I left home, carpets were brushed occasionally by first scattering bits of wet newspaper over the surface to "lay the dust" then giving it a brisk brushing with a hand brush, on one's hands

and knees of course. Because of the warm weather we were not confined to the kitchen with its necessary fire and the other rooms were well used but the old house was beginning to take on a decidedly tatty look. Grandma Lamsdale looked after the cooking and a bit of dusting, Evelyn took on the rest—I suppose June helped but she was only thirteen. There was still paid help available, commercial laundries and cleaning ladies (in England char women) as I had had in Leicester but most of the latter had long since disappeared into well paid factory work. In general most women soldiered on as best they could.

I began to realise that in the army I had led a very pampered life. During those few weeks in Tipton I took my share and once more tackled the long tiled hall as well as making a few well delivered swipes at the downstairs carpets. I don't remember feeling anything but pleasure in the daily round of chores; I was twenty one and had energy to spare. Once or twice a week I went to the local swimming baths and acquitted myself so well that I was noticed by the coach and asked if I would like to take part in the Tipton Women's swim team—not a word about my deplorable style. I knew, however, that I would be leaving soon and declined. Like most new mothers, though, I had that wonderful feeling of being back in charge of my body again.

My preparations for the big move began to accelerate; one day June and I took Susan to Dudley and had her photographed—the pictures turned out to be terrible but I sent one to Ed anyway. Evelyn wanted to buy a memorable present to take with us to Canada so together we chose a large extravagant English pram, maroon with high wheels. I bought myself two suits, one with tiny yellow and red cheeks, very classy indeed, the other suit a plain dark green for everyday wear, serviceable but smart; then there was a camel hair coat and a saucy brown hat, several blouses, some underwear. I had saved my army discharge coupons for this post pregnancy splurge and it felt marvellous to have a smart new wardrobe. I was determined to arrive in Canada looking my best.

June came with me to Leicester to close up the flat, pack my belongings and say goodbye to friends. It turned out to be more of an undertaking than we had thought. We took the train, putting

the indispensable pram in the guard's van, but I had never dreamed that coping with a baby could be so complicated. The Flints were kindness itself and generously interested in my little dear. The flat, though, had more paraphernalia than I dreamed possible for in a short six months I seemed to have accumulated a variety of odds and ends. Also I had to find some suitable luggage. We found a cabin trunk advertised in the local paper, persuaded a neighbour boy, recommended by Flint, to trundle it over on a hand cart and started sorting. June and I became friends. We scarcely knew one another as grownups—she was ten when I left Tipton. Now a leggy mature thirteen, we got along fine. She was a wonderful help, cheerfully trotted off on little errands, minded Susan while I tied up loose ends.

I closed my bank account and my Post Office Savings, returned a long overdue library book, coped with some mail. There was a parcel waiting for me from Ed's mother. What a nice surprise; it contained cubed sugar, canned ham (not Spam), tomato juice and joy of joys a large carton of tea. The tea was all done up in little bags—we decided that Canadians liked their tea pre-measured and each one probably contained a teaspoonful, so each time we made tea we carefully opened a couple of bags and deposit the tea leaves in the pot. One evening we had a modest party—Vera and some of the other girls from my old Company and one morning Joan and Mrs. Rendle came for coffee. I didn't see the Edmondsons, but I had heard from Irene. She had a baby boy but they had been posted out of Great Glen and she and Don were now somewhere south also awaiting transportation to Canada. I called in the and said goodbye to old friends and we all promised to write and keep in touch and for a time we did. Pauline was seriously interested in an American officer—perhaps we'll meet somewhere in North America we said. A week went by very quickly, June and I packed the trunk, made our farewells to the Flints and with many goodwill wishes we returned to Tipton.

There was one more farewell to make and Evelyn came with me to West Bromwich to see Ada. She was delighted with Susan. We promised to write often—"I'll be back in a year or two," I said. We hugged and kissed but I never saw her again. It was now early April, my letter of instruction arrived from the Canadian Military and I was given directions on how to prepare myself for embarkation.

Procure passport for myself and infant, both of us to report to a certain doctor in Dudley for a medical examination, enclosed voucher to send "luggage not needed on voyage" on ahead (my trunk and Susan's pram) and a railway pass for our transportation from Wolverhampton to Liverpool on April 28th. It was almost like joining up again!

All was done. I already had the passport and the medico in Dudley pronounced both of us in excellent health. I repacked my trunk and bought a suitcase for travel needs. Hanging in the upstairs landing were two water colours painted by my mother. I reluctantly left them—I was afraid they would get damaged in my already overloaded trunk. "I'll be back," I said. "Two years at the most," I said. It was, in fact, twelve years before I returned.

We had a family evening, Les and Doris, Olive and Wilf. May was unable to get leave but sent a cheery note. On the morning of the 28th, Evelyn, Susan and I took a taxi to Wolverhampton and I boarded the train, a new adventure was starting and once more I was striking out into unknown territory. Not just another scene in my life drama but a whole new play in a different theatre. It is only a two hour journey on the express train. I remember that I shared a compartment with several businessmen bound for a conference in Liverpool. They smiled kindly at my bundle and when we arrived asked considerately if I required any help. I said I was being met and indeed I was. Like Warrington three years previously there were efficient looking soldiers on the platform calling for "the wives for embarkation," and with several other women I was escorted to a waiting bus and thence to a barracks building in the city.

Over lunch in a familiar looking mess hall I met some of the others, some with infants like Sue, a few with toddlers, most alone. I discovered, not really for the first time, how convenient it was to have a breast fed baby. Several other mothers were scurrying around looking for hot water to prepare formulas or a way to warm already prepared bottles—it was a hassle I was pleased to miss. Sitting nursing a contented baby while chatting with other friendly women is one of the most amiable aspects of motherhood. So while we drank our after dinner tea we exchanged stories. Some of the

unattached went out later to have a look at Liverpool but most of us retired to our sleeping quarters, a long room with army beds reminiscent of those first days in Warrington, where I wrote a letter to Ed and attended to my little girl, who so far was taking the whole thing with remarkable aplomb.

Travelling with a baby does require some forethought. Although feeding was no problem there was still the matter of nappies (diapers to Canadians) in those antiquated days before disposables. Grandma Lamsdale had the foresight to suggest taking a dozen or so squares of soft old sheeting that could be rinsed and then thrown away, while my stock of "good ones," which filled a good portion of my suitcase could be saved for the voyage where she thought there were bound to be laundry facilities. What a wise arrangement it was. Later there was a light meal in the mess hall and after that most of us were ready to turn in for a good night's sleep—the next day was to be a busy and exciting one.

We awoke in the morning to a cold drizzly day with grey north country skies but by now we were all feeling a bit more acclimatized and breakfast was a cheerful affair with women, children and babies all adding to a general clamour. Then, again with plenty of help, we were bussed to the dock to board ship for the next stage of our journey. The Athlone Castle was one of the pre-war luxury Union Castle ships, now a troop carrier stripped to its most efficient elements. I had been assigned a cabin with two bunks, a tiny cupboard, a hand basin and in a little closet a W.C.

My cabin mate was already settling in but she cheerfully to take the top bunk, or take turns, or toss for it—whatever. Her name was Maureen and she had a little boy a bit older than Susan, five or six months old I believe. I don't mind the top so we settled that matter and began taking stock of our surroundings. Maureen was one of the few Canadian women on board. Her family had been in Britain before the war, her father in some kind of business. They had remained. Maureen had finished her schooling in England, worked in a London and eventually married a Canadian pilot. Dick was also on board, a boyish twenty-four year old who soon dropped in to our cramped quarters to visit

with his little family and delighted me by not only being particularly nice to me but made an agreeable fuss of Susan too.

Women with children had cabins albeit a bit crowded for we had to settle the babies somehow at the foot of the bunks. Fortunately most of the children were infants I only saw a couple of toddlers who must have been much more difficult to contend with. Women without children slept in the swimming pool! This emptied and filled with bunks made an acceptable dormitory. The wives, however, were only a small part of the ship's complement for most of the passengers were returning servicemen and they were dispersed throughout the ship from the lowest deck up. I don't know what the actual count was but the vessel seemed filled to every nook. Then there was the dining room. There was no war time utility here—the waiters were all white starched attention and it was marvellous to be so indulged again. Where the men ate I don't know for the dining room seemed to be only women and the more senior officers. I have a suspicion that they had some miserable mess arrangement somewhere in the bowels of the ship and I'm sorry to say I had not one twinge of guilt.

The food! Every meal a treat, dinner that night was four course and the following; morning the menu included fresh fruit with oranges and bananas, Maureen and I had been assigned different meal sittings, one going for first and the other for second so one of us could stay with the babies. This had been arranged before we boarded for much detailed planning had obviously taken place, our only choice was who went when. We were on board one more day then the morning of 1 May opened with a good portent—it was still chilly but the sun shone and the air was fresh and invigorating. We sailed grandly out of Liverpool harbour and joined the rest of the convoy for our voyage to the New World.

It took twelve days to cross the Atlantic for we only travelled as fast as the slowest ship but days were far from tedious. We were all RCAF wives, all with different experiences most like me in their early twenties. One exception, an older very attractive women, probably in her mid-thirties, smartly dressed with an impeccable upper class accent and a slightly aloof aspect. It was only surface, Monica was actually a warm and friendly woman. She was accompanied by two sons of a previ-

ous marriage and the boys, always known as The Boys, became a marvellous source of shipboard information. They were about ten and twelve and within the first few hours of our embarkation had the whole ship pretty well sussed out. We shared the same table and became most compatible ship mates.

The days fell into a certain routine—each morning down to the hold where there was a laundry. The term was honorary, it described a collection of deep tubs, where we could wash out nappies and other baby clothes, and some lines strung across where we could hang them to dry. On the first morning out we had lifeboat drill, much to the delight of The Boys who were sure there were still U-Boats lurking in the Atlantic (actually they were right) and foresaw an exciting battle with dramatic rescue (fortunately they were wrong). Afternoons were spent lounging on deck—again the weather was warm and sunny. I made the acquaintance of several Canadian Army women on their way home and we exchanged notes on military experiences. They had been stationed in London and had a few hair raisers to tell. They were not only friendly but practical, liked to fuss with the baby and volunteered to mind her in an evening if I wanted to spend an hour in the lounge.

The lounge and dining room were about the only places on board that hadn't been pre-emptied for bunks. The lounge, which had a bar, retained some of its pre-war elegance, it was however off bounds for women unless they had a male escort. Several times Maureen and Dick invited me to join them for a chat and a night cap and it was a welcome bit of adult company. The women and escort thing seemed a bit peculiar but we put it down to some archaic naval superstition about women on a troop ship.

We knew now that the war was within days of being over—the BBC news was broadcast over loud speakers all over the ship. Then on 8th of May the great news came that it was finally achieved. It was VE Day at last! On the ship's radio we heard the cheers, the songs, the rejoicing; King George spoke, Winston Churchill spoke and President Truman spoke—Vera Lynne sang—but what stirred us most was the sound of merry-making on both sides of the Atlantic. In a tremendous surge or happi-

ness people were dancing in the streets, in Trafalgar Square, in Times Square, probably in Confederation Square, in towns large and small the Allies were rejoicing in the end of the horrible conflict and most of us on the Athlone Castle would dearly have liked to be joining in. It was rather an anti-climax to be in the middle of the Atlantic and I believe we rather expected a small but tasteful celebration to be arranged. We were not disappointed, with commendable largesse the women were each presented with a bottle of beer, which it was suggested we quaff decorously in the privacy of our cabins. Maureen and I solemnly toasted peace sitting on our bunks!

Now we were all only anxious to reach Canadian shores and re-enter the real world. The Boys kept us in suspense—there were more seagulls we were bound to be close to land, they thought they saw an island, Newfoundland for sure, and so on. It wasn't until the 12th that they rushed down to breakfast with the news that there really was land on the horizon. They could see smoke (must he Indians we said) and we spent the morning between crowding the upper deck gazing into the distance where land became more and more visible and sorting and packing our belongings for disembarkation.

Halifax was the end of the line for Dick and Maureen who were being met there by relatives. Rumour had it that those going on would spend one or two days in Halifax before boarding the train that would drop us off on points all the way across the country. Maureen urged me to accompany them to Petikodiac and spend a day with them there—better than some gloomy barracks in the city she said. Dick agreed, just one day they said and you may not be back this way for years. They promised to put me on the train when it went through Moncton only a short drive away from their home. I was a bit vague about Moncton, it certainly looked a long way from Petikodiac on the map—I had yet to understand the North American concept of distance which is a bit different from the British. I had become fond of my shipmates and it was a tempting thought.

Before we could get the idea off the ground, however, there was an announcement informing us that there would be no stopover in Halifax and that the train would be waiting dockside to take us

away as soon as we disembarked. So we made our farewells and agreed, as one always does, to write, to keep in touch. There were other good-byes, Monica and The Boys, the who had been such good baby-sitters, other women who had shared the laundry, chatted on deck, exchanged a few thoughts. Cables to husbands, announcing times of arrival were handed to the pursers office all was finalized.

Finally we berthed. We staggered down the gangplank clutching babies and luggage and were met by servicemen waiting on the wharf to help us. Welcome to Canada, I handed Sue over to a young man who escorted us to the quay side customs building where we were put through the landing formalities with great speed. Almost before we had time to catch breath we were hustled out again, quickly boarded onto the train waiting at the siding close to the docks and within an hour we were off and away west. And so began the last lap of the journey.

We didn't know it at the time but Halifax was sweeping up after a short but determined riot. The town was full of sailors, who on VE Day, considered it appropriate to celebrate in the time honoured naval fashion of getting roaring drunk. Not easy in a dry Canadian town. So the government controlled liquor stores were broken into and what followed got completely out of hand, not only the liquor stores but other shops were vandalised and looted and for a time there was general mayhem. Of course we knew nothing of this until we saw the newspapers the next day. According to reports both insults and accusations were being flung by both factions—the merchants had gouged the sailors during the entire period of conflict, costs were unconscionably high and family accommodation either absent or priced out of range—on the other hand the sailors had been a wild disruptive element in the quiet (!?) town. In the meantime we women were settling down in this most unique transport and placidly chugging our way into yet another scene of our life dramas.

My first encounter with a North American train—it seemed enormous and I finally understood why the Americans had been so charmed by our "cute little trains." A smiling ebony faced porter helped us find our seats, and we settled down and took stock of our surroundings. The train was a

special, filled with war brides a term I was to become tediously familiar with. My immediate neighbours were women I hadn't met before probably because they were without children and had crossed the Atlantic in the swimming pool dormitory but we soon formed a friendly group exchanging our stories and sharing our excitement. Husbands waiting, a new life shortly to begin, the day had gone by with such speed I think we were all a trifle dazed.

The train would go from coast to coast dropping passengers off at predetermined destinations. Some, like me, only going as far as Montreal, others heading farther west and one woman on the opposite side of the aisle going all the way to Nelson. Someone had a map of Canada and we pointed out our various new homes with interest. Dinner in the diner, back to find our seats gone and bunks opened up in their place, a pleasant RCAF woman. came down the aisle making sure that all was well—did we have any questions? We settled in our bunks. The motion of the train with its racketing wheel rhythms was different from the ship's dignified roll and for very first time in our many wanderings Susan was restless. Poor mite tucked away at the foot of the upper berth, perhaps she too could feel something of the ambience surrounding us—a mixture of excitement, uncertainty, hope and just plain butterflies in the tummy. I spent a good part of the night cuddling her to sleep and finally drowsing off myself.

Chapter 12

Morning brought new scenes—it was very early when we went through Québec City and the sight of the Château Frontenac rising through an early mist looked quite English. Breakfast, a quick wash and tidy up and we were in Montréal. I didn't even have time to gather my belongings and get off the train and there was Ed striding up the aisle, finding us with a shout and a big grin and gathering both Susan and me up with a great hug. We were home and I knew everything was alright. His father was on the platform and more hugs more welcomes, laughs, even tears. Uncle Alf, now "Dad," had driven into Montréal from Valleyfield where he was working (and where Ed had spent the past several months). He had business to do in town and Ed had reserved a room at a hotel in the city where we could spend a few quiet hours before going back to Valleyfield that afternoon.

So much to say, so much to catch up—a new daughter to get to know. I'm glad to say she responded beautifully and did about all she could, except actually saying "Hello, Daddy," to win his heart. Their relationship hasn't altered much in almost fifty years. I too had things to adjust to. I had never seen Ed in civvies before. He looked great—tall and trim in a smart new suit. He seemed to think I was OK too. He hadn't seen me in civvies except as a pre-ATS young girl, and the odds and ends accumulated when I left the ATS were hardly high couture. So we spent an entirely agreeable time and when Dad picked us up at four in the afternoon I was an acclimatised Canadian. Well almost.

Valleyfield is a small town about an hour's drive from Montréal. On the outskirts, was the munitions plant company town of Nitro. This is where Ed's father, an electrical engineer, had spent most of the war years. Neat streets, well-kept houses with green lawns still too early in Canada for many flowers but a nice looking place laid out by the side of the works. As a company officer Dad had one of the larger houses and there was Ed's mother on the doorstep to greet us. What a warm and loving reception. What a debut for Susan who received a lot of attention. Ed's only sister, Julie, was there

too, nineteen just graduated from high school and taking a breather before getting a job. It was a great family evening, such food, such a lot of talk, so much to catch up on, to fill in, to just start getting to know one another a little.

Nitro was a marvellous introduction to Canada but in a way it gave me an entirely erroneous view of the country. We spent a wonderful three weeks there. Ed had taken a part time job in the plant office, mostly to fill in the time until my arrival in Canada so he and Dad left each morning for a conventional nine to five work day. Mother and I had the day to ourselves and I was introduced to the lifestyle of the young married middle class women of the time. First, of course, the morning tasks. Susan to be bathed and fed and then the wash piled into the washing machine. What a treat. If nothing else I would have loved the New World for its laundry facilities. A little lunch and perhaps an hour's rest, then we would embark on an afternoon of socializing.

First Mother gave a tea party to introduce me to the young women of Nitro, it was held in the back garden with Susan in her basket under the large shady willow tree. To my eyes, after the years of war, the years in uniform, the coupon constrictions the women looked incredibly well groomed. They were also charming, urbane, educated and uniformly friendly. I was the first war bride they had met and they wanted to know about Britain and speculated on what the aftermath of the war would be. Husbands at Nitro in well paid positions their personal involvement in the recent conflicts had been marginal but their interest was sincere. Then everyone wanted to have a return party—I'm surprised I didn't double my weight. The afternoon goodies were very good indeed, I gorged on fancy sandwiches, rich and luscious cakes and cookies (don't call them biscuits—the things Canadians call biscuits are what the British call scones) then we would go back to an evening meal which by my recent standards was heavenly. Also because Mother thought nursing mothers needed a bit of extra nourishment there was always a glass of milk at my place.

Ed's mother was something of the community matriarch, she and a close friend Mrs. Crossley were the oldest members of this friendly clique, viewed I believe with an affectionate respect by the

younger women. I think I held my own—Julie and I made a foray into Valleyfield where I purchased nylons and a couple of blouses but my two simple dresses and my two smart suits were not only adequate but drew comments. I believe it was a bit of a surprise that I wasn't pale, wan and dressed in patched clothing and that I was accompanied by a baby, chubby and brown and obviously in the best of well-fed health.

In the evening Ed and I would take a walk out of the township and down the lane—the trees were in new leaf, the freshly turned fields looked rich and the air was warm and fragrant. At the dairy farm we would pause and if we saw the farmer exchange friendly greetings. He spoke only a little English, for we were in rural French-speaking Québec—and his small son wearing a sailor tam with red pom-pom stood shyly by. I was enchanted, it was so different and at the same time so very familiar. One night we went with some office friends to a small night club a few miles away. Off we sped around the narrow country roads making up a foursome with the couple next door and going in their car. it was my first outing with Ed in something like six months and my first dance in much longer—I had a wonderful time.

It was a mixed crowd—some of the men were returned servicemen, some only a few years older had been working in the Nitro plant. One and all we shared a belief in a bright and prosperous future. A particularly lively young man was still wearing the airman's silkworm pin. It indicated a parachute drop. He had bailed out over Germany, lost a leg, been a prisoner of war for a year but was back and obviously having a good time. He had not yet been fitted with a permanent prosthesis and stumped around on the wooden leg, provided by the Germans, with great poise. His handicap didn't stop him dancing and he established a style of his own. He would stand still twirling his partner round and round and occasionally doing a twirl himself on his peg leg until everybody clapped and the girls lined up to partner him. His name was Stuart Vallier and he and his sister, Joyce, became for a short time good friends of ours. I wonder where they are now...

They were particularly happy days. Three weeks sped by and then it was time to move on again. Ed was going to the University of Manitoba in September. He had finally settled on Agriculture with probably an emphasis on statistics, and had registered, applied for the appropriate veterans' grants and got the go ahead to start in the fall. In the meantime we had a whole summer to put in and he had been offered his old job with the Winnipeg Electric Company for that time. So we left Nitro with a good many well wishes and in June headed for Seven Sisters.

We spent a couple of weeks in Winnipeg, just time to meet the family there. They enter full stage later. At this point I barely had time to get them sorted out. Eldest brother Jack and his wife Lila with two small children David, four, and Jocelyn, two. They met us at the station. Second brother Bill and his wife, Margaret, with two small boys, eighteen months and three years, and Margaret's daughter by a previous marriage, Linda, eight. We spent a week with Bill and Margaret and a week with Jack and Lila. Margaret took me on a shopping expedition—she had excellent taste and together we chose a stunning outfit: a dressy navy frock topped by a wide brimmed red hat. Lila taught me how to make good pastry, but I never did reach her perfection. I was also introduced to some of sisters, always known collectively as "the Aunts." There were seven sisters and one brother and three of the Aunts lived in Winnipeg: Helen, Ollie and Ruth. The Aunts gave me a shower, a very nice custom dating to pioneer days which I had never seen before, and Susan got a respectable hoard of baby clothes and nursery knickknacks. They were all pleasant, friendly people who did their best to make me feel at home.

There was only a small cloud during those warm and happy days. Ed and I were window shopping in Winnipeg when who should we run into but Ed's old pilot, Tobias. What a great reunion—had we been in Britain we would have turned into the nearest pub for a good chat. No pubs in Winnipeg but we talked on the pavement for a few minutes. Toby was staying with his parents in a small town just outside of Winnipeg also putting in a summer before going to university in the fall. He was spending a couple of days in town shopping and attending to a little business. The following evening we

were going with Bill and Margaret to the Winnipeg Canoe Club for dinner and dancing. Well—a perfect place to talk in a relaxed atmosphere so Ed invited Toby to join us there and really catch up. When we told Bill, however, of our invitation there was a short embarrassed silence. He explained awkwardly that people with names like Tobias were not accepted at the posh WCC. What excuses were made I don't remember—I think Ed had to call Toby with some story of there being no tickets or something. It struck me as very odd that a returned flier who had put his life on the line many times over was not allowed entry to one of Winnipeg's oldest and supposedly most cultured establishments. Then we left for our summer in the country.

Seven Sisters is the power plant that provides electricity to the city of Winnipeg. It is about eighty miles north east of Winnipeg, a company town by the side of the enormous dam on the White-mouth River; it takes the waters of Lake Winnipeg and directs them into the turbines which produce the light and power. Ed had worked here before the war, after a year of university, a decision to change direction; an interim period which ended with enlistment. His father had also worked for the Winnipeg Electric Company for many years and but for the war perhaps Ed too would have made engi-neering a lifelong career. He was going back now with different ideas.

Bill drove us out one morning, by now late June, a beautiful drive that took us through the fer-tile farm country of Eastern Manitoba. We went through small towns with strange names, French, Ukrainian, and Polish; through tiny settlements, some dominated by gilded onion domed churches, by a Mennonite community where men and women were working in the rich fields. It was so strange and exotic. Finally we were there. We had lunch in the staff house, part hotel, part club, where the unmar-ried men of the company boarded. Ed was met with much warmth by the manageress but it was early afternoon and there were no other diners. Plenty of time to meet old friends; and so after a very nice meal Bill deposited us and our various belongings at our temporary home, not one of the township houses but a cottage reached by a rutted lane through a couple of fields and looking, to our rather weary eyes, most fetching and welcoming. We said goodbye to Bill, promising picnics and other sun-

dry hospitality to any who cared to visit over the summer and for the first time in our up and down married life settled in to true domesticity.

And it was a true delight. The little bungalow, one of two identical, belonged to one of the Winnipeg Electric Company officers who, working in the city had built it as a summer home for his family. It had a big living room, two bedrooms, sizeable kitchen, adequate bathroom and was plainly but comfortably furnished. Although only ten minutes' walk from the township the two cottages had the air of being quite isolated and secluded. My days quickly fell into an easy routine. Ed left early in the morning and after Susan had been washed, dressed and fed and I had done a bit of routine housework there were whole lazy days to explore, to relax, to contemplate.

Seven Sisters was a company town not unlike Nitro, only here I was not a pampered visitor but a real live part of the community. The town itself consisted of one pleasant main street with white clapboard houses fronted by well-kept flower gardens. The important buildings were halfway along: the staff house, the school, the company store. The last was new to me. The procedure was to buy on credit and the cost would be deducted from the worker's (husband's mostly) pay check. It was a system used extensive in the isolated company towns of North America—and most likely other places too—I had simply not run into it before. It was a workable arrangement but I can see that one could get carried away.

The well-stacked shelves held an abundance of delights not just food but all kinds of items from clothes to household devices. I bought meat, though, from the travelling butcher who arrived at my doorstep twice a week and sold good fresh produce from the back of his van. Surprisingly, fresh vegetables were a problem because everyone grew their own and there was no call for the store to stock more than the canned variety. When we visited friends I was usually sent away with a gift of whatever they had on hand so we did rather lurch from feast to famine on that one.

We were in fact a quite self-contained community with little need to go outside our own boundaries for any but nonessential items. The only other settlement within a large area was Tintown,

about a mile down the road, too small to even be called a village, and I think its name was only a local label, with a few scattered houses and a lack lustre general store. Its *raison d'être* was the small hotel which served passing travellers and was run by the local bootlegger.

Everything, those first few weeks, charmed me. There was a wren nesting in the creepers over the front porch, she looked so English, but close to the back door one morning I found a few porcupine quills, I picked up one and enclosed it in a letter to June. Much later in life, when we lived in another part of the country, I became disenchanted with porcupines (they are inclined to regard one with a brazen eye while chewing the tires off the car quite secure in the knowledge that they won't be interrupted) but at that time I thought to have a porcupine visitor was fascinating. One morning we actually saw a moose swimming in the dam—taking a leisurely short cut to a greener side. This was a rare sight even for the local people So many new and interesting creatures—the only ones that were unwelcome that summer were the mosquitoes—nasty little horrors forcing their way through the tiniest cracks and ten times as large, so it seemed than the English midges. I had yet to build up a resistance and soon scratched my legs into an unsightly mess.

Then there were old friends for Ed to catch up with and in an evening we would make the rounds until I had been introduced to just about everyone in Seven Sisters. Who was in our closest circle? Probably first the Ducharmes; Wilf, like Ed had worked for the company, come back and would also enter the University of Manitoba later that year. His wife, Phyllis was the daughter of the plant manager and they were living temporarily with her parents, the Carrs. Phyllis and I soon became almost daily companions for she had a baby only a few weeks older than Sue and we had much in common. A quiet girl, a good foil for her vivacious French Canadian husband, she would call me often in a morning and we would take the babies to the dam, put them on blankets under a shade tree and go for a swim. I hadn't realised that dams were so like natural lakes, one could swim, canoe, fish or just lounge at the side of Seven Sisters waters. Then there was the Oxholm family. A somewhat older couple with a Swedish background and a large family of children ranging from an eight year old to a cou-

ple of teen age boys. Ed had been particularly friendly with Olga and Sven and their rollicking household welcomed him back with enthusiasm. Sven was a calm quiet man, Olga (who Ed said rather fancied herself as a Greta Garbo look alike) was full of European dash. The school teacher and his wife, Greg and Mary, young, literate, witty people whose house was always good for conversation and laughter.

One night we went to a barn dance. We got one of the high school girls to sit with Susan and with the Ducharmes walked over two fields to the gathering. Phyllis had on flimsy party slippers and the men with a good deal of pretended and had to transport her over the muddy places with an arm lift. I had more substantial shoes and could hurdle the puddles. It was a real barn and a big one—the lower floor still had the cow stalls—but when we climbed the rickety stairs to the upper story it was definitely gala time. Three players, fiddler, accordion and piano provided the music. The dancers were already warming up when we arrived and before long the place was jumping. It was another new experience—a dance nothing like the DM, the Dinas Powis village dances or even the night club in Valleyfield but it was certainly one of the liveliest. It had been organised by the Tintown bootlegger who had a vested interest in the revels. Down below, by the side of the barn he was doing a brisk business in liquor sales.

I still had to understand Manitoba drinking laws. The province was not “dry” but all alcoholic drinks had to be bought from government depots. There was a ration, only so much spirits, wine, beer could be bought per month an only so much of each at one time. As I remember the allowance was quite generous but the nuisance was in going to the official store, reading the list of available drinks, filling out the required form and having the bottle handed out at the counter. After that one could either drink it at home or take the bottle to a friend’s. But there was another catch here: an open bottle must not be transported so one took had to be disposed of on the spot. Alcoholic drinks could not be served in public places. Well, there was one exception—in Winnipeg there were “beer parlours” for men only!

Western Canadians probably consumed just as much alcohol than their British counterparts—the difference, it seems to me, was that Canadians were required to feel guilty about it. It was all very paternalistic. In most places in the civilized world one could meet friends and sit over a drink in a favourite establishment without government supervision and certainly without causing a public annoyance. So people often sidestepped this quaint ordinance and if there wasn't a government outlet handy would patronize the bootleggers who could supply the market demand—at a price of course—and don't ask where the goods came from.

Anyway we had a good time that night and when we left the moon was high and we strolled back contentedly over the fields, by this time never mind the mud. The walls of the fiddler followed us into the night; it was warm and still with that indefinable country fragrance, a mixture of animals and blossoms and a hundred other things.

The summer drifted along nicely. We had a few visitors: Jack and Lila and the children; Julie, who was spending a few weeks in Winnipeg; Doug, who had decided to go to chiropractic college in Toronto in the fall. There were picnics by the side of the dam and I got to know my new family a little better. We had to make serious plans for the future though and Jack and Lila invited us to stay with them while we did some house hunting and so one Monday morning in early August I took Susan on the bus to Winnipeg to do a little recce. Ed was to follow us at the weekend and we hoped, in a week, to put as much into place as possible. Susan, now a lively six month old, was a good and happy baby but the ride was a long and tiring one for us both. When we reached Winnipeg I staggered off thankfully and only half saw the placards with the morning news: US DROPS ATOMIC BOMB. It was August 6—the day which heralded a new and terrible era. I use the word terrible because the "cold war" which followed was filled with fear; at the time our only thought was that at last surely the final and absolute end of fighting was at hand.

At Lila's home all was bright and cheerful, she had kindly and generously offered to take over the baby, now weaned, and the children thought Sue a delightful little creature to be played with,

dressed up and taken for walks, not in my big English pram, wisely left in Seven Sisters but propped up in their play wagon. Susan seemed to like the situation as much as I, so I was free to look over Winnipeg. Actually we had a place in mind—Ed had been given a contact by someone he knew—a small house but convenient for university buses and close to town. I had been able to get a little money from Britain, enough to make a down payment. Ed would get a decent, though not lavish allowance while he was in university so we would have no financial worries.

It was rather ironic, however, that the fuss over my inheritance had been so misplaced. Immediately after the war ended Britain imposed two financial restrictions, first the pound was devalued so that when I had expected to get about $5 for every £1 got less than $3 only a little over half. Second there were constraints on allowing money out of the country so I only got my legacy in dribs and drabs over the next ten years. So June was the chief beneficiary and well that is another story.

The little house on Carlaw Ave. looked fine to me and I spent the next few days doing some household shopping, dishes, cookware, bedding and just visiting with Lila. She has been not just a sister-in-law but a good friend over the past fifty years and remains so. The tiny cloud I had observed before was, however, still there. There was a letter waiting for me in Winnipeg for I had given Jack's address to several friends as a contact. My old friend from Leicester, Pauline Levy had married her American serviceman; she was now Pauline Goldberg and settled in New York. She wrote warmly—we were at least on the same continent, perhaps we could meet one of these days and she extended an invitation for Ed and me to visit whenever we could.

I was delighted and happily reported this pleasant bit of news to everyone. I was surprised when a man close to the family said in the kindliest manner, "But Joyce, we don't accept people with names like that. You must forget your friend—she wouldn't be welcome here." The papers and newsreels had so recently displayed all the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps, decent people throughout the world had been repelled yet here was someone who apparently thought that although Hitler had perhaps gone a bit far he certainly had the right idea. I wasn't shocked by such blatant anti-

Semitism it only seemed to me that the man was probably quite mad, like Hitler, and his attitude an aberration in democratic, liberal Canada. I wasn't quite right for there was an ugly streak of racism in the country that surfaced from time to time in surprising places.

When Ed arrived on the Friday we did the last few things: bought some minimal furniture, washing machine, cook stove. On the Monday morning we finalized the legal requirements and so found ourselves first-time home owners. Back to Seven Sisters to clear up and pack personal belongings then back to Carlaw Ave. to start another new phase of living. Ed was looking forward to university—so was I. I foresaw a new stimulating life, a group of lively intellectual friends, small dinner parties with good food, witty stimulating conversation with drinks by a cosy fire (well Canadian houses don't have fireplaces but I skipped over that), events on campus, perhaps lectures for me too. I was anxious to find out much more about my new country—I was hopelessly ignorant about so many things. How did Canadian politics work? What did the women do with their time? And so on and so on and...

I was once again pregnant for I thought it an excellent idea to have my family while Ed was going to university. Thereby we would both get these pleasant but somewhat demanding family commitments out of the way while we were young and have the rest of our lives to devote to the less exacting aspects of enjoying the good life... I fear I was still a bit naïve. I liked children—we were enchanted with our little daughter and the spectre of overpopulation had not yet entered the world. I thought four children would be about right and with Ed in university for four years a baby a year would work out just fine. I think Ed was a bit doubtful about all this but he went along for the time being anyway.

The snow comes early to Winnipeg and by mid-November the streets were white. I was delighted but I had to learn how to dress for cold such as I had never before encountered. First Ed bought me a fur coat. Every Canadian woman had one, he said, it was an absolute necessity. We chose mouton and although even then I had qualms about furs—well, trapped animals, anyway—mouton seemed acceptable. One cannot eat meat and then get fussy about wearing a sheepskin

coat. It was heavy but very warm. Then woollen gloves and a hat that covered my ears. Lila showed me the rest. When going out first one pulled on overpants—warm things that reached down to the knees—then over stockings which covered from the ankles up. We all wore shoes with heels and for outside wear these were encased in overshoes. Smart little suede jobs laced up the front and with fur around the ankle. Although in the summer sporty pant suits were worn it had not yet occurred to anyone that slacks and flat heels would be more suitable for a winter outfit. There were elegant suitable clothes for winter sports, of course, but in the city women were expected to look feminine at all cost. At an evening gathering the women would be taken to a bedroom where they could discard these various garments and when we left there were always a few giggles as we sorted out whose were whose. Mother, that first Christmas, sent me a pair of bright red overpants that were declared ideal by all who saw them. But we were warm.

Lila had introduced me to her group of women friends; we called it the Knitting Club, although it was not in the least necessary to knit. They were nice women and made me feel very welcome; we met in one another's homes every two weeks and we always went by street-car. Usually the journeys were not far, for most of us lived within a few blocks of one another, but I do remember once or twice going to the other side of the city, changing cars at Portage and Main, one of the world's most famous intersections where the wind blew furiously sending up little swirls of snow and the temperature was 20 below. Wrapped warmly in my cocoon I didn't even feel a chill.

With the snow Canadian life takes on a completely different aspect and the sporty people prepare for winter activities. Winnipeg was too flat for alpine skiing but enthusiasts could find trails along the river banks or on the frozen river itself. Skaters, though, were well served for many neighbourhoods had outdoor rinks and there was one in fact just a block or two from our house. It was simply an empty corner lot, allowed to freeze, then carefully tended by the Municipality—cleared after a snow fall, swept and watered. There were lights and music and it was a joy sometimes in an evening to

walk down and watch the young and not-so-young skaters, red checked and bright faced, swirling around.

Then one week-end we were invited to a sleigh ride organised by some old Seven Sisters friends. A bit of a celebration—we had all started a new direction in life and so far so good! As for the sleigh ride (it's a real Canadian institution I was told), you get pushed off and have to run to catch up, which keeps you warm. I didn't know how much to believe but. Lila lent me suitable clothing—a ski suit and mittens—we got a baby sitter for Susan and set out for a jolly new experience.

It was a truly Canadian evening. First we had to take a half hour's tram ride to the other side of the city. At that time some of the older street cars were still equipped each winter with coal stoves up front close to the driver and it was his job as well as taking fares and operating the car to stoke the little stove when necessary. I believe these were used mainly at night and usually to the outer reaches of the city. It matched the occasion perfectly to set out in one of these. Then the night club, a small place with a rustic air, set back a little from the road, with its festoon of coloured lights reflecting off the snowy background it was a very Canadian scene.

It was not a large party, just the Ducharmes, Harold Vadebonceur and his girlfriend, a few others. We were told the ride would be ready in about an hour so we played the juke box, danced. In deference to Manitoban custom we had, of course, brought our own drinks with us. Then another delay, profuse apologies from the club manager but the last group wasn't back yet. So we danced some more and it turned into a very nice party. Every so often the manager would appear with an excuse, the last ride was back but the horses had to be fed, then the sleigh had to be cleaned, then the horses were tired. Soon we were hooting with laughter—had there ever been a sleigh, horses? A buffet supper was set out about eleven o'clock. We had a final dance then went home on the last street car. It was a truly great evening but I still haven't been on a sleigh ride. In a way, though, it was a winter equivalent of the barn dance I had been to in Seven Sisters the previous summer, something new and very Canadian.

Christmas that year was a joy. Ed had survived three months of lectures; we had much to rejoice over. We were invited to Bill and Margaret's home for Christmas Eve cocktails, had Christmas dinner with Jack and Lila and the two children and on Boxing Day invited a few of Ed's classmates for an evening. But the lights! All through the war we had celebrated Christmas with as much cheer as we possibly could but we had groped our way to friends and festivities through the blackout. Here, it seemed the whole city was ablaze with light. Not only was the town illuminated but private houses were decorated with absolute abandon. We wrapped Susan up in her snowsuit, bundled her into the sleigh that was the popular form of transport for children and trudged off around the streets of Fort Rouge. The baby's eyes widened and so, I expect, did mine. Strings of coloured lights outlined the bungalows, lights around the eves and balconies of the bigger houses, trees with lights strung from every bough—all glistening on the snow to make a fairyland indeed. Back home for hot drinks and a peaceful night in our little house, it was on the happiest Christmases ever.

In point of fact we only stayed in the Carlaw house for a few weeks, just after Christmas we saw another we liked better; a little bigger, on a quiet tree lined street with wide grassy boulevards and set in a large well enclosed garden. It cost a little more but we turned a few dollars on the sale and felt we could afford it. It had a familiar plan, on the ground floor two large rooms divided by an archway with sliding doors so the two rooms could be separated if necessary, a small study, big kitchen; then below a roomy basement with big coal burning furnace. Basements had not yet been made over into "family rooms," that didn't happen until the arrival of oil and later electric heating with the smaller equipment that allowed the demise of the enormous furnaces. Upstairs were two big and one small bedroom and as a bonus a large sun porch over the kitchen. It also had a sizeable garden which backed on to a service lane and a sturdy garage, which we had no occasion to use for during the Winnipeg years as our finances didn't run to a car.

We were there just in time for the arrival of my next baby on February 25 a dear little boy who we called Christopher. The procedure was very different to that in Leicester—much more scheduled

and very impersonal. I had a nice family doctor but he was all business. When I met him at the hospital he said briskly that he had an appendectomy to perform but he'd give me an inducement and I should be ready in two hours when he returned. I was indeed but although I had the best of medical attention I missed the kindly women who assisted at Susan's debut. We lived on Rosedale Avenue for the next four years and it contains my best memories of Winnipeg.

Chapter 13

So our lives settled into a comfortable routine. Every morning Ed would be picked up by a classmate who came chugging along in an old model T Ford and my morning quickly filled with the little chores that two small children demand. Spring arrived and the high leafy hedge at the front of the house was revealed as being lilac—the blossoms were huge and fragrant. Shades of Tipton, although Canadians always pronounce it lilock. There were climbing roses on the archway that led to the back garden where there was a scraggly lawn just right for children to play in safety.

Mother came to visit for a few weeks. Dad had left Nitro for with the war over the plant was closing down and the staff dispersing in all directions. He had been offered a job with the federal government in Ottawa and while he was in the capital settling in and looking for accommodation it seemed a good time for Mother to come to Winnipeg. It was a particularly happy thought—she was wonderful with the baby and coddled him splendidly. I would take a breakfast of cream of wheat and finger toast up in the morning along with little Chris. Propped up by her side she would feed him spoons full of the gruel and like Susan with Evelyn he responded with the gummy smiles and chortles of a happy baby. Julie also spent a few weeks with us before leaving for a job in Montréal. We cemented the friendship we had started in Nitro which has remained fast ever since.

I was now able to settle into some real domesticity. My cooking skills had to be honed for I had no great experience in the kitchen. I was reminiscing with an old friend recently and we agreed that we had kept house on about $10 a week. In my case not due to a fine hand with the household budget but in 1946 that was about standard for a small family. There was a small Safe-Way supermarket one street over, quite a new experience because this compact, self-service way of shopping hadn't yet entered Britain; there was a corner store across the road, nice Mr. Schecter whose cluttered little shop looked more familiar; but my favourite was the meat shop on Osborne where I became quite chummy with the butcher. "How about a nice joint?" he would say, and then roar with

laughter... Joint? What the Canadians call a "roast," not what a later generation called a loaded cigarette. So what with one place and another I was surrounded by such opulence it was dizzying. I had to get used to meals' names, though. Winnipeggers had breakfast, lunch and supper. I was used to breakfast, lunch and dinner—or perhaps breakfast lunch and tea—but supper was always a late night meal after the theatre, or perhaps a sandwich and drink in the late evening, or for the children biscuits and milk before bed. But supper at six in the evening threw me completely. Mother asked me once how the British managed so many meals in one day breakfast, lunch, tea, dinner and supper. My efforts to explain there were only three meals in most people's day only confused the question.

I learned another way of shopping from Mother. Every day the Eaton's van would come down the street. A smart horse-drawn rig, both the animal and the vehicle gleaming and spotless and with a schedule as regular as that of the mailman. All over the city this delivery was happening as a matter of daily routine and the Eaton Company was famous all over North America for their splendid livery stables. I was used to local stores providing efficient house delivery—in pre-war Britain one could telephone the local grocery or butcher with an order and in a short time a boy with a bicycle would arrive with the day's provisions and of course any of the big stores delivered purchases. But I had never seen anything like the Eaton's service. Mother, who undertook some household mending, wanted a reel of thread one day. She called the store and the next morning the delivery van stopped at the house and the driver handed in the tiny package with as much aplomb as if it had been a $50 order. The milkman and the baker also came along daily with horse drawn delivery vans but none was as magnificent as Eaton's.

Then Mother left to join Dad in Ottawa and I was on my own to sort out the very different ways of keeping house in Canada. My domestic skills were minimal to say the least but I was keen to make a good job of it. Although at Tipton we had all taken a part in keeping the place decent I had never really had to organize daily chores. Even at Leicester, Mrs. Flint and I had had our basic cleaning done for us. The Rosedale house, circa about 1920, had hardwood floors downstairs and soft wood up-

stairs. Ed thought that to cover the whole of the second floor with battleship linoleum would be a great idea, easy to keep clean he said, and lasts for ever. I had no idea what battleship linoleum was but it turned out to be very durable brown stuff which looked line but showed every tiny footmark and needed a good dry mopping every other day to keep it shipshape. As for the hardwood downstairs—well, polished floors are rare in wood poor Britain and wasn't at all sure what to do with it. Should I scrub it, polish it, mop it? Ed was vague and had more important things to think of anyway. I was reluctant to show my ignorance to neighbours. But help was at hand! One day that wonderful North American institution, the travelling salesman, arrived at the door in the form of the Watkins Man.

He came with a case packed with such a variety of items it was impossible not to succumb to at least one temptation. There were little kitchen gadgets, packaged puddings and sauces and all kinds of cleaning products. He was a nice elderly man who set me up with polish and good advice and reassured me that the floor only need an occasional treatment and no you didn't come near it with water you cleaned it first with some special cleaning fluid, Watkins naturally, and then applied Watkins floor polish. People debate on modern innovations, the safety pin, Kleenex tissues, sliced bread—I would put polyethylene finish on hardwood floors high on the list. The Watkins Man even then was an anachronism, left over from the days when farm wives had no recourse to the corner store. I fancy he has long gone the way of the Eaton's daily delivery service.

One more strange and unfamiliar thing happened in the spring. The storm windows which had kept the house draft free and retained the heat over the winter had to be replaced with fine mesh screens to keep out the summer mosquitoes. This semi-annual chore was a major undertaking in Canada which over the next few years I came to know well. The procedure was quite simple and supposed to go like this: every fall, the screens were removed, washed, neatly identified (dining room #1, #2, and #3, bathroom, kitchen, etc., etc.), and then stored in the basement. They were replaced by the storm windows. Then the following spring the procedure was reversed, the storms were taken down and the screens went up again. A pleasant Saturday afternoon job one would think. In actuality

it went rather like this: first you had to get the storms windows off which after a whole winter of lashing snow and up and down temperatures, were now firmly cemented into place.

This was bad enough on the ground floor but the upstairs was murder. You were supposed to wiggle them loose, unhook the side latches, then pull them into the room. This seldom happened so Ed would teeter on a ladder outside "loosening" the frames with a hammer. Unfortunately he is not at all nervous of heights and would sway about perfectly sure he wasn't going to fall. Down below I was occupied in washing the storms and "neatly identifying" each one before they were put in the basement and then looking over the screens and making sure the right ones were going into the right places. I had to make important decisions like "does this 'B' mean bathroom or is it the small bedroom?" Occasionally, I stopped to shriek as Ed once more with bashed finger teetered precariously. This of course didn't help either of us. It was all very nerve wracking and before the job was completed we were usually either exchanging elaborate insults or reduced to scathing silence. If a Canadian marriage can survive this it can survive just about anything and fortunately ours did. We were young and if our failings out were spectacular so were our makings up.

The street had many young families and soon I was into several groups. Nellie Thom, older sister of Lucy Lee, lived in the next block. She was a nurse by training and often dropped in with bits of sensible advice, and chat over a cup of coffee. Nellie was a staunch Anglican and I sometimes went to a Mother's Union meeting at her house. Like in Britain, the Mother's Meetings were a place for young mothers to gather to discuss life in general, their families in particular and socialize a bit—it was by no means preachy. Tommie, next door introduced me to her group, which like Lila's knitting club met every two weeks. Then there were two other British wives in the neighbourhood (we were usually referred to as "the little war brides"). Young women much like me, we would often meet at the park, sharing a bench while we watched our small children at the wading pool and exchange thoughts on our past, present and future. All of this helped me to adjust to a different and sometimes startling lifestyle.

Most of my women friends and neighbours, except for the two British wives, were a little older and saw the war, of course, from a different perspective. “You were so brave,” they would say uncomfortably. How to explain that most people were not brave—bravery is when someone goes willingly into a dangerous place. The British civilians under war conditions simply went on as best they could. But how to explain, as well, the camaraderie, the laughs as well as the fears, the good times as well as the bad. Then sometimes they would tell me about life in Canada. “We were rationed too,” they told me. “Sometimes we could only get a pound of butter (or meat or sugar or whatever) a week.” So we weren’t exactly on the same wave length.

Often it seemed that there were two communities living side by side which only touched in the most superficial ways—and at times I felt totally isolated from the people around me. Attitudes to women on the part of the older generation in particular were pre-war—pre-WWI, that is—with a lot of emphasis placed on being sweetly charming, running a good kitchen and deferring to men’s opinions in about everything else. The women I made friends with really were nice people, often very well-educated, and although their power was limited our “all girl” gatherings usually revealed a pretty shrewd assessment of what was going on—and the foibles of husbands, families and men in general were not spared some, usually good natured, amusement.

Then the unacceptable words—those quite innocently included in my vocabulary that were not considered decent in the Canadian lexicon. Babies were nursed never breast-fed, there were no bitches, only female dogs and to some even the lower appendages were referred to as “limbs.” It seemed so silly that I refused at first to indulge in this euphemistic exercise. Someone gave us a puppy which I openly referred to as a darling little terrier bitch which caused some startled looks. To nurse a small creature, in Britain, merely means to dandle it on one’s knee—so I could understand nervous giggles at “The little boy sat by the fire nursing the kitten.” It was funny for a while and good for a bit of a tease just to see people’s faces but in the end gave up and conformed.

There was another difference in outlook that wasn't at all amusing: the xenophobia I had noticed was not only anti-Semitic. One sunny afternoon I was drinking tea at one or another of my neighbourhood friends when our conversation turned to school. One of the mothers, with an older child in kindergarten, told us about a PTA meeting she had been to. Her five-year-old girl had shared a desk with a black child—a little boy with whom she was friendly. The teacher had separated the children putting the boy with another boy. When the mother asked why, and said she saw no reason for doing this, the teacher replied, "Well it's alright now Mrs. Smith but you wouldn't want them sitting together when they are teen aged would you? Better not to let them get used to it." The mother agreed that perhaps the teacher was right.

In fact there were very few of what we now call a visible minority in Winnipeg but it was a rail centre with big marshalling yards, where the train crews changed shifts and where some of them had homes. The sleeping car attendants were customarily black so there was a small community in the city. It is interesting these many years later to ponder the fact that these placid suburban mothers had youngsters many of whom grew up to be the flower children of the '60s, who not only sat next to black, yellow and brown friends but who sometimes married them—or didn't marry them. Who went to "happenings," and smoked strange cigarettes and danced to bizarre music under flashing strobe lights. Daughters with long hair and short skirts, or sometimes long skirts and granny glasses and sons who grew beards and wore sandals and love beads. In short a generation which opened a good many doors, which in general made my British liberalism of the '40s look rather prosaic, but with which I felt a certain affinity.

The veterans, or vets, as the returned servicemen were now called, were an entirely different sort. The University of Manitoba had a lot of ex-servicemen, like Ed, who were taking advantage of the government rehabilitation program, to go back to school to complete an interrupted education, to change direction, to embark on a different vocation. Men and a few women who had weathered experiences well out of the range of those who had never left Canada. They were usually tolerant people,

somewhat left-leaning, whose main object now was complete a good education and settle down to a second chance at living. There were a few, like us, with a young family, others eager to start a normal married life as quickly as possible. Being so much older than the usual university intake and with such a gap between high school and advanced learning there were many adjustments to be made, there was much work to be done and mostly they stuck it with determination.

But it wasn't all work and we soon had a select group of friends. Because we actually had a house, while so many lived with parents or in the campus married quarters, our home became a meeting place for many an informal gathering. On a Saturday night Bob Oldham (the friend with the Model T) and his girlfriend Madeleine would usually drop in for a game of whist (we didn't aspire to bridge) and a beer or two. Sometimes others would arrive and occasionally we would organise a real party inviting all Ed's colleagues from the Aggie course. Then the little house would quiver with chatter and laughter. It was here we exchanged political views, debated the cold war, deplored the stupidity often seen in high places, alas not at all ended with the war—if it wasn't quite the salon I had envisaged it wasn't a bad approximation.

Again my memories seem to be centred around having a good time. Well, why not? I was only twenty-three and life was full of adventure and optimism. The term ended in May and we had to face a new challenge. Although our government allowance was adequate it was only paid during term time so there was the problem of finding work for the summer. For this particular group of students a three semester year, with year-long grants, would undoubtedly have been a better arrangement, but the academic year was firmly established and would probably have been difficult to rearrange.

In any case, finding a summer job is a long-standing custom for North American students. For one thing it is tied to the requirements of an agrarian economy. It had been necessary for young men to go back to work on the farm for the summer months and return to university when the heaviest season was over. Later, urban students were required to work during the summer to pay for the com-

ing terms. Also it was deemed a good character-building experience for young people to join the work force and find out at firsthand how demanding some of the more menial jobs were.

In Britain the year was divided up in a similar way, with slightly different historical underpinnings, but the attitude was slightly different too. It wasn't considered quite so worthy for students to work during the holidays. There was an uncomfortable feeling that this was taking a job away from "an honest working-class lad." It was more usual for students to pack a knapsack and go off on a walking holiday to Scotland, Wales or Europe. Parents who could afford it might subsidize this a bit but they considered it character building for their offspring to see something of the world on a shoestring. In any case then there was always a bit of casual work to be found, tutoring or coaching or haying or fruit picking or something so it wasn't difficult to make ends meet. On both continents young people certainly got a good whack at character building one way or another.

For the married vets, though, getting through the summer months was a more serious business. That first summer Ed and Bill Tobias got a brainwave. They went into the garden spraying business. DDT had just been made available commercially and it seemed to be a glorious answer to garden weeds. Remember, this is sixty years ago—we thought the atom bomb was a godsend too. It was only later that we realized that not all modern discoveries were blessings from heaven.

First step in the grand enterprise was to design the contraption. There were days of telephone consultations, strange objects appeared in the garage along with strange sounds. I suppose Toby designed the vehicle, he was the engineer. Ed, the agriculturist, made up the mixture. They finally wheeled the machine out for my admiration. It was a solid tank (oil drum I think) mounted on a chassis with bicycle wheels. Two long handles to push the thing along and a hose and nozzle attached to the tank. Now all we needed were customers. I saw them regarding me thoughtfully. It wasn't that difficult, I got one of the neighbourhood girls to stay with the children and went as the advance guard knocking on doors and enquiring if the resident would be interested in a dandelion free lawn. After I got a few orders I would leave the men to spray. It worked alright and we did pretty well for a while.

Unfortunately it wasn't possible to be absolutely precise with the equipment and rather too many flower borders were sacrificed before they got it just right. By the time they got it just right it was apparent that we weren't making the living we expected and reluctantly wrote if off to experience. Ed got a night job cleaning out railway cars at the marshalling yards and I forget what happened to Toby.

So the summer went by quite happily and I don't remember any hardships. Work was easy to find if one didn't mind character-building menial work. The following year Ed accepted a summer job with the federal department of agriculture in Ottawa—it was good experience and paid well—and when he was invited to go back for the final summer of the university program he did so. I was alone with the children for those two periods but life was easy and I coped without any trouble.

My one difficulty with summers for those first few years in Canada was the heat. Just as the Canadian winters are much more severe than the British the summers are that much hotter. I don't stand extreme heat well and my energy dropped so much so that I paid a visit to my doctor. Heat and a risk of dehydration he said and prescribed salt pills. Apparently my reaction was common and the remedy simple. Not that I needed much high energy, my days were tranquil and undemanding. Fort Rouge was a pleasant suburban area and I liked to explore—I think I was something of a local curiosity walking the children in the high English pram.

We now had a comfortable circle of friends both old and new, then one day came a telephone call from Irene Edmondson. Don had been offered a job in Singapore with the Manufacturer's Life Insurance Company. He had been interviewed in London, accepted promptly, and taken the next flight out. Irene had come to Canada to visit her parents before joining him. What a reunion! We fell upon one another with whoops of delight and what a lot of catching up to do. Jill was now a sturdy four year old and Irene's little boy, Wayne, just a few weeks younger than Susan. Wayne's debut had been about as dramatic as Susan's. Irene was alone in the Leicester house when she knew it was definitely time to get to the hospital. With Don at Great Glen and no phone in the house she had mustered assistance from the ATS girls next door and arrived at the hospital with something like a military

escort for two of them had insisted on accompanying her in the ambulance while another two stayed with Jill. We laughed—it was so unlike the orderly way in which Canadian babies arrived. She was as charming and vivacious as ever, with a new wardrobe and a trim figure to go with it she was a joy to see. With Irene we caught up again with Ken Davidson who after a stint with the Royal Canadian Navy was now a fully-fledged with a growing dermatology practice in Winnipeg. Then there was an evening with Irene's parents, a rather faded elderly couple who seemed a little bemused by their cosmopolitan daughter.

Irene was delighted at the thought of returning to the Far East and, like us, full of plans for a peace time life. We contemplated all kinds of ridiculous schemes—I would start a gift shop and she would keep me supplied with exotic items, which I would sell at a nice profit. We actually looked into this and gave it some serious consideration, but in the end wisely, I suppose, let it drop. It was a bit too soon after the DDT episode. It was a sign of the times, though: there seemed to be opportunities abounding for anyone with a little capital and a lot of enterprise and we were all eager to make up for the time lost to the war years.

There was one other bit of (quite unsolicited) help I undertook that summer. Ed was supposed to assemble a collection of various bugs and insects to submit to his entomology professor in September. Working most of the night and sleeping most of the morning didn't give him much time for combing the fields and hedges for interesting specimens. By now I was on good terms with a whole gaggle of local children. There were a couple of brothers down the street, about ton and eight who had taken a fancy to Susan—they would often trot her off for a ride in their wagon and then stop and chat with me—then a nine-year-old girl from across the way who liked to occasionally help me with my housework and had a fine, if somewhat exuberant, hand with mop and broom. They all had friends and siblings so it was easy to organise a work force. I offered the princely sum of 1¢ for every little beastie they could find. Soon I had kids dashing in and out with jars of flies, spiders, ants—an occasional beetle but alas no strange and remarkable creatures that could be written up in an A+ paper.

Their cries of enthusiasm, though, as they traipsed through the kitchen that morning were enough to have Ed begging For a bit of peace and quiet so I finally paid them off at 10¢ each. It didn't matter much for Ed was able to rent a collection from a former student, it had gone the rounds a bit and was somewhat tattered but it passed muster.

In September Irene left for Singapore and I saw her leave with regret. She had been a big part of my life in Leicester, one of the few people that played an important part in that particular piece of my existence. A new term was starting at U of M. and life again fell into an organised pattern. With second year Ed, self-confident and well-settled in his studies, took more part in student/vet association activities and this brought us into some of the more formal aspects of university social life. I forget what our first function was but I do remember it was a dinner dance, took place at the Fort Garry Hotel and we were at the head table. The Fort Garry was where nearly all of the university's traditional social functions took place: the year end ball, the Christmas formal dance, convocation celebrations and so on. I bought a long black skirt, made myself a black velvet top with some sequin appliques (about which I felt a trifle doubtful), got a neighbourhood girl to baby sit and prepared to enjoy myself.

The procedure for this kind of function was new me, the ritual was this: a little group of friends would rent a room between them, this was where the women could leave their wraps and where a bar was set up, for although no alcohol was available in the ballroom or any other of the hotel's public areas it was perfectly legal to drink in one's own quarters. So we each brought a bottle, ordered mixes from room service and people between dances or speeches or whenever they felt like it, would nip back to the room for a drink and before long we were bouncing up and down in the elevators like yo-yos. I was becoming used to the bizarre Canadian drinking regulations which, it seemed to me, discouraged a responsible attitude to alcohol, and indeed were counter-productive, for rather than imposing an air of pious self-denial on the occasion the strictures only made some of the young people, just to prove they were up to it, drink to "get feelin' good" which often meant smashed stupid.

There was another way to party though and this was probably the most fun of all. Several times during the year a group would rent one of the little night clubs on the Pembina Highway, hire a band and for a modest price we would have a cheerful evening of dancing. Again we all took our own bottles, which were placed under the table and bought soft drinks for mixers, which were placed on top of the tables. Always at midnight the RCMP would come in just to see we weren't up to any mischief. They were an understanding lot and made sure to keep their eyes well above table level. After the dance someone would say, "let's go for a 'bi-teat,'" and we would drive to one of the all night coffee shops on the highway for hamburgers and hot dogs and chips (called "fries") or enormous sandwiches and roll home very satisfied with life.

As well as neighbourhood, family and university there were other familiar faces. Bill and Lucy Lee would occasionally have a dinner party for old Seven Sister friends, where again we had good conversation—and admired "Lucy's house," an investment that we all envied for its war time worth quickly tripled and it was finally pronounced an excellent venture. The four years we spent in Winnipeg were an intensive learning time for me and during our second year there I had one more interesting experience: that of the annual vacation.

It was the end of the summer and Ed was back from his Ottawa job; we were invited to spend a few days with the Lees at Lucy's parents' cottage at Grand Beach, north of the city on Lake Winnipeg. This was where her family had spent summers during their young years and Lucy spoke of it lovingly. One of the great British institutions is the summer holiday. Before the war the wealthy took a few weeks "on the Continent" or went to an exclusive and expensive resort somewhere in Britain, the poor went hop picking but the great majority took a week at the seaside. This usually meant packing up the kids and driving (or taking bus or train) to any one of hundreds of coastal towns. They went to Margate or Blackpool or Scarborough or Torquay—wherever. And, although there was some variance in level of grandeur, according to one's pocket, there was a general similarity of form. There would be the promenade, the pier, the town usually not too big, the beach and the sea. Families went for a

week or perhaps two, not so much to rest and recuperate as to have a jolly good time. There was something for everyone: pubs, restaurants, a dance hall, the pier with probably a theatre, afternoons on the sands, dips in the icy water. There were evenings of strolling the prom, dropping in for a night cap, quick love affairs for the young, sometimes new friends for the older. I looked forward to the Canadian equivalent with interest.

So I was introduced to the great Canadian getaway the summer cottage. I didn't know what to expect except everyone told me what a beautiful place it was. Lucy and I went mid-week, taking the train with our assorted five between us. The men were to join us later. It was a two hour train ride and we staggered up from the country railway station, with our bags and bundles, to a little community of sandy trails meandering through the lakeside bush with cottages set back from the path and overshadowed by tall pines. It was a hot late August day and the place was cool shady and fragrant; the ground soft with pine needles. The cabin, a simple square, with a largish room serving as living room/kitchen and two curtained off bedrooms. It was quite primitive and, because of the trees, rather dark. We had to get drinking water by bucket from a roadside tap, shared by several other cottagers. Cooking was done on a gas stove (the gas came in a cylinder) and the one light came from a battery powered electric lantern set on the table. Toilet facilities consisted of a tin bowl in a nook off the kitchen for washing and an outside backhouse. We had brought some basic supplies and there was a general store two roads over so we weren't entirely without resources.

Our sandy lane led directly to the lake and Lake Winnipeg was everything promised—clear, clean water, shallow and inviting and perfectly safe for the children to frolic around without danger. There was even a narrow beach of nice sand for digging. Lucy's elder daughter, a girl of seven or so, was a sensible child good with the little ones—a boy of five and small Mary about Chris's age. Chris was now two and Susan three. I don't remember any bother with the kids—they had a fine time messing about with sand and water—and Lucy and I for two days lounged around in amiable companionship while we watched the children at play and took turns in going in for a dip ourselves. There were

other mothers and youngsters on the beach but not too many for it was the end of the season and before long the whole place would be boarded up for the winter. Meals were sandwiches or hot dogs, and at night we got the children to bed and after an hour or so with a coffee and a chat were ready to turn in ourselves. On Saturday morning the men arrived with fresh supplies and were greeted with enthusiasm by all.

Now the cabin was simple and comfortable with bunks in the two bedrooms to accommodate everyone—but it didn't allow for much privacy. "I think we'll go for a little stroll," said Bill casually before we turned in that night. It was a balmy evening. I suppose there was a moon—I forget, but if not there should have been. After the Lees returned looking nicely complacent Ed and I took our own walk. We made love amid the sand dunes (which is pleasant but I wouldn't want to make a habit of it) and returned to the cottage for a night cap and good sleep. As I remember it we spent the next day swimming, playing with the kids gorging on hamburgers and beer and then took the evening train back to Winnipeg.

I didn't realise it at the time but "going to the cottage" fifty years ago was as much of an institution with Canadians as going to the seaside was for the British, but it had different underpinnings. I think many Canadians got a buzz out of "roughing it in the bush," remembering a pioneer life of not so long ago and firmly resisting any signs of modernization. In many families it had been the habit for the mother to pack the children up as soon as school was out, depart for the summer home and not come back until Labour Day—Father would come down for week-ends. I imagine neighbourhood friendships formed and continued. There would be barbecues (over a pit not on an expensive commercial contraption) with the adults lingering no doubt over a last beer and the children who would remember those relaxed summers long into adulthood. There were no pubs, dance halls or concerts on the beach but undoubtedly young people found many an opportunity to meet and do all the things that young people do. There were, of course, some who had comfortable well equipped places by the lake, complete with such niceties as indoor plumbing, and over the years these increased in populari-

ty. They also, as more and more amenities crept in, became expensive second homes and the whole roughing it mystique diminished. I enjoyed our weekend at Lake Winnipeg—it was a nice a change of pace—but as I anointed my mosquito bites the next day I had a sneaking feeling that I hadn't yet got the true Canadian pioneer spirit.

That fall our family doctor recommended that Chris, who had had several bouts of infected throat, should have his tonsils removed. It was a much more common practice than it is today. It only required an overnight stay in hospital but regulations were very strict then and as his mother I was only allowed to drop him off one day and return the next to take him home. Although we tried to explain to him just what was going to happen, he was too young to really grasp it. So Nellie Thom, who often did private nursing in the Winnipeg General, with infinite kindness went to the hospital, as a private nurse, dressed in her hospital garb just so that when Chris came out of the anaesthetic he would have a familiar face. It was an act of grace and thoughtfulness that I will never forget.

In the meantime I was getting to know my new family better and like all families they were a disparate group. The few weeks that Ed's mother spent with us were happy ones and we forged an amiable relationship. Much, much later in life we became good friends, but at that time I knew her as a cheerful person, with an immense capacity for not interfering. It must have required a lot of restraint for she came from a background quite different from any of my other "families," although later I recognised it as being typical of a certain Canadian upbringing. She had grown up in a small Manitoban town where life revolved around the church. Not the liberal minded Church of England or even the Methodist as I had seen it in Britain with its emphasis on education and self-development, but a stricter, colder faith that abhorred any kind of frivolity and certainly considered alcohol and tobacco a sure way to hell. But she loved poetry, was well-read in the more inspiring literature, and had a sunny guileless sense of humour. She sometimes asked me about my mother for, although they had never met, they had corresponded. I was circumspect in my memories—what would she have made of Gwen who enjoyed a glass of sherry and an occasional cigarette, who loved to dance, wore short skirts and

sometimes pretty blue garters? I think had they met they would have got along very well, for Ed's Mother too had a giddy streak (later in life she developed a penchant for flighty hats, but never, never uttered the word "leg") but how to bring my mother into recognisable focus…

As for others in the Thomas ménage, well Uncle Edmund and his light hearted pseudo grace I fear would have been entirely persona non grata. The bulldog with the gold tooth? And how about the girl who had gone to Girton and had a little car and a woman companion? Even Grandma Lamsdale who liked half a pint of the best brown (ale) and popped up and down to the Allied forces anthems—all this was so alien to a proper Canadian framework that I knew to even try to explain them and bring them to life with the warmth, humour and affection that they deserved was beyond me so I said little.

So there were adjustments to be made particularly as it was generally assumed that the little war brides were delighted to be in such a free and open country—far away from the ravages of war—and so different from "stuffy old England." I suspect much Canadian opinion was based on American movies and I fear few of the British wives lived up to the accepted Mrs. Miniver image. I received incredibly mixed messages during the Winnipeg years; what a rum business as my Lancashire relatives would say.

As Ed's two older brothers lived in Winnipeg we saw them quite often. Jack a senior member of the Canadian Pacific Investigation Department and Bill a professional engineer, with his own successful and fast expanding business. They moved in different social circles, both from us and from each other, but we met at various times during the year and maintained a good relationship. Nevertheless they too were a new experience for me. They treated me with a kindly and quite good natured patriarchal condescension. They were both conservative to a far degree and my liberal views were regarded with much suspicion. Any slightest bend to the left was looked upon as total communism (of which they actually seemed to know little), this included any support for health care, government pensions, family allowances, unions, unemployment insurance (all uniformly castigated) and the idea of a married woman working out of the home was quite unthinkable. Both had wives, well-educated and

intelligent who, although involved in community work and worthy organizations, were careful not to do anything for money. Perhaps there was a lingering aura of the unhappy thirties for they were children of the Depression when it was considered unethical for two people in one marriage to be bringing in money—it was a victory for even one to be in paid employment and that was nearly always the man.

Jack was the more dogmatic of the two; Bill had the urbane businessman's approach. Bill would a cigarette in a long holder and regard me with a quizzical smile; Jack merely hammered away with little finesse. I wasn't always the soul of diplomacy, particularly with Jack, for I wasn't very good at concealing my exasperation and eventually, usually after a long impassioned argument, I would say coldly "How strange—in Britain that would be considered a very working class attitude." It usually closed the discussion for he was a bit of a snob. If this was an unsporting attack on my part it wasn't entirely fallacious as there is indeed a section of the British working class with a strong streak of conservatism—the old attitude that those who work hard and don't complain will somehow survive all odds. On the other hand, the British left has good support, not only from labour, but also from the middle and intellectual classes. Simplistic generalisations perhaps, but with the usual kernel of truth.

Canada has a different history—a young country, in terms of European settlement, and not far removed from its agrarian foundations. When I was asked where on earth did I get such radical (!) ideas—particularly coming from a middle-class family—like other bits of my background I found any reference to my father, and his passionate empathy with the Rhondda Valley, impossible to put into relevant terms. Any mention of Welsh miners would have had little impact on a rational discussion. There were good arguments to be made for the left in Canada—I wasn't yet familiar enough to propound them.

Nevertheless my brothers-in-law always treated me with the utmost patience and good humour hopeful, I suppose, that eventually I would learn to be a good Canadian wife. They were both

fond of telling me that I was a fuzzy thinker, excusable because I was young and had seen so little of life. A few years in Canada would bring me to a better frame of mind. It was not the first time someone had tried to make me over into a more acceptable image and certainly in each case it was with the kindest intentions and entirely for my own good. Actually after a few years in Canada, when the novelty of keeping house waned and my children were old enough not to need my twenty-four a day attention, I got a job and remained in the labour force for the next twenty-five years. Ed must have been very embarrassed—I was told, after all, you don't have to work.

One person who never criticised my choosing a career over full time domesticity was my mother in law. Mother, in fact, had been a career woman herself and her story went like this: She was the eldest in a family of six sisters and one brother living in the small Manitoban town of Portage la Prairie. Her father was an educated man, an insurance agent, and much ahead of his time as far as his eldest daughter was concerned. When she was eighteen he said, and I quote a story often told by Mother herself: "Maudie, if you stay here you'll only become a household drudge." So he sent her to a Winnipeg Stenographic school where she got a first-rate office education. She became private secretary to one of the senior Canadian Pacific executive officers. Of course she gave up her job when she married and put on the other mantle of good wife, but she always retained a pride in her professional accomplishments and well into old age could remember and sometimes her Pitman's shorthand.

Dad didn't really come into my life until later for at this time he was settling into Ottawa and we didn't become close until we too moved to the capital city. He had the reputation of being a bit difficult with the quick Welsh temper, a trait I was perfectly comfortable with, but he must have mellowed by the time I knew him for he was never anything other than charming with me. Strangely, I never thought of him as my uncle, always as my father-in-law for although at the back of my mind, of course, I acknowledged our relationship, the Canadian branch of the Trott family was so completely different from the British that there seemed to be no resemblance at all. Ed's father had come to

Canada as a young man, finished his education here, spent his entire working life here, married and brought up a large family here and ties to Britain, except for some boyhood memories, had long disappeared.

He was a handsome man, in his day a respectable athlete—he had played football in Wales and tennis and badminton in Canada. His sons liked to tease him about his last badminton game: he lost badly to a younger man and in a fury had broken his racquet over his knee and never played again. Nevertheless he was much more of a traditionalist than my father; we are all products, and sometimes victims, of our life experience and the two brothers as well as twelve years difference in age, had had very different conditioning. I had a strong and affectionate bond with Dad, though, and this was our recollections of Dinas Powis. He liked to tell me of things he had done as a boy—when the remnants of his Cardiff accent would become more pronounced—and have me describe the village as had known it thirty years later.

Doug and Ed were both representative of “the others," the ones who had been away, seen a different world and come back ready not only to accept but to promote social change. As the years went by and I grew to understand Canada better, I did indeed come to view it in a different light. It became home and a very good home at that. I also came to recognise that it wasn’t a country without problems—and many of the problems not dissimilar to those occurring in Britain.

Canada, like Britain, is a complex mixture of people and attitudes but of course it is a different mixture. Later in life I came to recognise that I had gone through the classic pattern of acculturation. People arrive in a new country full of enthusiasm, certain that everything in this fortunate land will be absolutely splendid. Stage two is when the awful truth dawns that there are discrepancies between expectation and reality—the period of culture shock. Then stage three is a sorting out process when one accepts some things and rejects others and stage four when one is either assimilated into the culture or at least adapted to it. Some get stuck in stage two far too long, only partially discarding it for the rest of their lives.

Or to it another way, there was a certain continuum in my feelings. At one end, a pure delight in so many things: the kindly people who wished me nothing but well, a beautiful country, a place of opportunity. At the other end a serious dislike of some elements: the stifling prudery, the narrow-mindedness, the sexism and sometimes racism. In between these two, and indeed the largest portion, a general satisfaction and conviction that all would eventually be well. It is a very different today and if I try to explain to my children, and particularly my grandchildren, what Canada was like fifty years ago they don't even understand what I am talking about.

We were in Winnipeg for four years and long before the end of that time I had found an entirely comfortable niche. I discovered, a bit at a time, the rich composite society with so many different threads that made up the city. It is a city that loves the arts. Nellie, Lucy and I took two season tickets to the symphony concerts and then mixed them between the three of us so we attended each time with a different partner and got to visit and catch up on family news at the same time. I enjoyed an evening out with either one of these kindly sisters for we made an occasion of it and usually went for a companionable coffee afterwards before a streetcar ride home. Each spring there was a music festival. It had originated with the Ukrainian community and continued to contain an extensive Ukrainian element. There were entries in every imaginable voice and instrument class and the winning performances were broadcast to an appreciative radio audience. The Winnipeg Ballet was only a few years old, started by a couple of young Englishwomen it swiftly grew to a world class company. Ed and I treated ourselves when time and budget allowed—and now these many years later, we attend a performance with both nostalgia and enthusiasm whenever the company comes to Ottawa. The Walker Theatre offered good stage productions from American musicals to serious theatre. Winnipeg was well served by the arts and we had a lot of choice.

I finally discovered, with some surprise, that Winnipeg, far from being the dull, ultra conservative community that it first appeared, had a respectable history of liberal socialism. The Winnipeg General Strike of stands internationally as one of the great landmarks in the annals of democra-

cy. The North End was a grand and glorious potpourri of immigrant proletariat—it was also the main location of left wing politics in the form of the Canadian Commonwealth Federation. I had yet to understand the CCF, with aims and aspirations much like the British Labour Party but with a very different history. There was, in its founders, a strong religious element and platform advocated a moderate reformist model of socialism, closely aligned to Fabianism, anti-Communism, wholly admirable and fought for with passion. It was an attitude I recognised.

In 1948 I had my third and last baby. A placid happy boy who entered the world with a smile and continues life with a fine optimism. I named him Trevor, a small tribute to our Welsh heritage. I wanted to use the Welsh spelling Trefor, but Ed said he doubted if a Canadian kid could live with that! How can I describe my children in just a few words—they have been such major players in my life. Susan, the dear little companion who crossed the Atlantic with me so long ago grew into a fine woman and became a treasured friend as well as a daughter. Chris the fey one, with a bizarre sense of humour, who could always make me laugh even when I was scolding him, lives in Australia, much too far away. But, his letters are frequent and full of wit and good spirits. Trevor, well mothers always keep a bit of a special place for their youngest, he too is far away, although not as far as Sydney, but the phone is handy and we talk to one another every week. They have all had their own lives and loves but those stories are theirs.

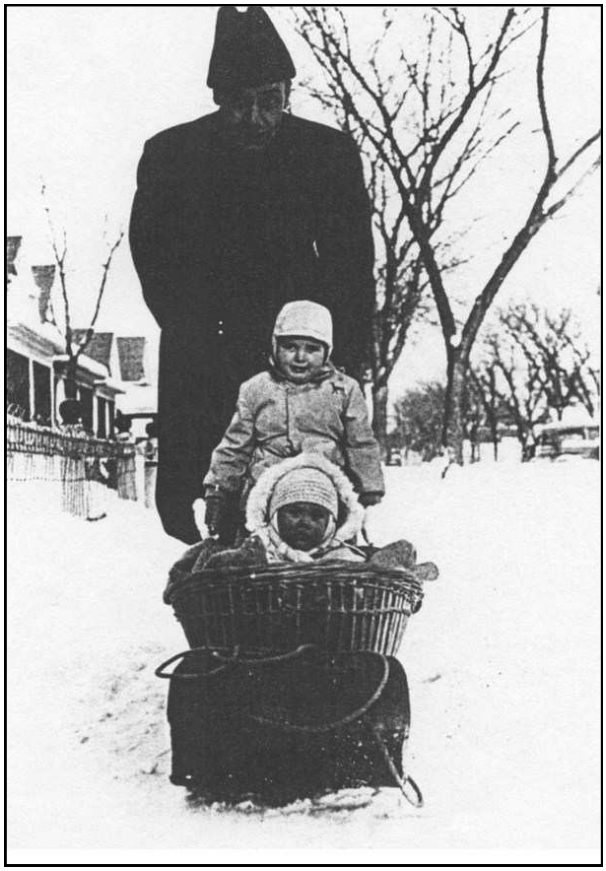
The final act of this production has yet to come. It has been both drama and comedy; there have been times of great happiness and times of tremendous sorrow. So many of those dear to us have left, so many adjustments have had to be made, nevertheless Ed and I still remain a few remnants of the girl who came from under the table and met the young man who was standing in the kitchen. We still enjoy each other's company, but we still feel comfortable to disagree, sometimes with appropriate vigour. Still front and centre? Certainly!

Pictures — Part III

Susan, Me, and Ed. Seven Sisters, Summer of 1945. Notice my mosquito bitten legs!

Me, Rosedale Avenue, standing in front of the lilacs

The bug collectors. Summer, 1946.



Ed, Susan, and Chris outside of the Rosedale house. Winter, 1947.

Just before we left for Ottawa. Spring, 1949.