

# FARTHING FROM HEAVEN



Bernard Houser

### **Thirteen Farthings.**

I'm on my way from home back to school after dinner. Berger Road Elementary School. Mrs Price's shop is on the corner – about halfway. She's not very nice, is Mrs Price. Very stern. Always tells you off if you touch anything. Or even to point. And seeing as how it's a sweet shop with rows of glass jars full of everything you can ever imagine, that's not easy. We're all a bit scared of Mrs Price.

When I come into her shop she's standing behind the counter. Chatting to a man in a suit and bow tie. Never seen him before. I ask her if I could look at the farthing box. It's an upturned lid of a cardboard box spread out with sweets that cost a farthing. Bullseyes, liquorice bootlaces, sherbet dabs, sugar cigarettes, lolly-on-a-stick, bubblegum...

I look carefully at each of the sweets. It's crucial to make the right choice. Mrs Price says, "Come on, we haven't got all day – you'll be late for school!" So I choose a little chocolate rabbit wrapped in silver paper. It's wearing a blue coat with red trousers and has a lop-sided grin. It's looks as if it won't mind being eaten. I hand Mrs Price my farthing. The one Mum gave me as I left. "Sorry it's not more" she'd laughed, "It's all I've got left in my purse". She's like that, my Mum – does everything with a smile. Even for the smallest things.

The man says "Is that all you've got, son?" Which I think is a bit of a cheek. It's enough isn't it? Why should I need any more? Then, as though he's read my thoughts, puts his hand in his jacket pocket and pulls out a fistful of coins. Drops them onto the counter with a jingling clatter. Brass farthings! "Count them" he says. I do. One at a time. Counting aloud to make sure I don't miss any. Thirteen! They come to *thirteen* ! I've never, ever seen so many. I doubt if anyone ever has! "There you are", he says, "They're all yours – if you spend them with Mrs Price here."

I can hardly speak. My heart in my throat. Legs gone weak. She says "Must be your lucky day, sonny. Say 'thank you' to this gentleman! Lost your tongue have you?" I look up at him. A kind, smiling face. Gentle eyes. Who is he? He's watching me closely. Amused? Pity? Or just curious over what might be going on inside my head? And what I might do next.? Not that I have much choice. Mrs Price thrusts thirteen of the sweets into a paper bag. Sweeps the farthings into her till.

When I get to the playground, Miss Patterson is already ringing the bell. So, as quick as I can, I hand the sweets around to my classmates. Disbelieving looks. Grabbing fingers. Bulging cheeks. And even before our line has gone inside, crossed the hall and reached our classroom, all the sweets have disappeared. Even my chocolate rabbit, which had somehow got mixed up with all the others in the rush. But I don't mind. I still have the memory of those thirteen farthings in my head.

## One

My name is Bernard Houser I was born on 29<sup>th</sup> January 1928 into a working class family living in a working class district of East London. In those days 'working class' was not thought to be derogatory in any way. For practically everyone was working class. The Middle and Upper classes lived in a world totally separate from ours. We never mixed with them or even saw them. We did all the work. Took all the knocks. And the blame. Never any money. No one gave us a second's thought. But we never complained. Didn't hanker after that which we didn't have. Didn't feel inferior to anyone. Just got on with our lives. We were proud of being working class. Salt of the earth. And, as that was how our parents saw it. So, therefore, did I. A Cockney Kid through and through.

Everyone knew number 69 Digby Road because it was right by the railway line. The last house in the terrace squeezed up tight together. But because we had nothing but the railway next to us, our garden ran right along the embankment, making it four times bigger than anyone else's. Only a slatted wooden fence separated us from the lines and the huge iron wheels of the trains as they rumbled past, morning and night.

It was a branch line that looped around inner London, providing a link between the main lines coming in from the North and those running East down the Thames Estuary to the coast. So although it was quite a modest little line, it got more than a fair share of traffic. Plenty of goods trains, biff-banging their buffers together as the brakes go on; The regular passenger service that stopped at Homerton Station just around the corner; And, in the summer, excursion trains to Southend full of shrieking children and red-faced grown ups holding bottles of beer, waving and yelling to us kids as we waved and yelled back. We felt it only right to do so. The railway, and everything about it, was a part of number 69. We, a part of it. So when people passed by along it – passengers, engine drivers, wheel tappers, and the man who saw to the signal's paraffin lamps – it was only natural to treat them like guests in our own front room.

But not only did we have a railway, we had a piano as well. That made us special. Especially special. Number 69 was well known for its parties. Then all our aunts and uncles turned up. Dad and all the uncles first went to The Duke of York on the corner. Mum and the aunties all go into the kitchen. Talk a lot. Laugh a lot. Make piles of sandwiches for later. Me and my sisters helped with filling up the bowls with salted peanuts, liquorice allsorts, cheese straws, jelly babies – just about anything that people could pop into their mouth between choruses. It's our job to hand them around every so often. Not that people really wanted them – it's the offering that's important. 'Looking after people' Mum called it. Then when the men got back and glasses filled, Auntie May sat down at the piano. And suddenly our front room seemed to erupt.

It's always something lively to begin with. 'Nobody's Sweetheart Now' or perhaps 'Here we are, here we are, here we are again'. That sort of thing. Anything that comes into her head. To get everybody going. And it does. Always. Like magic The piano seems to have a life of its own. Playing a non-stop string of tunes one after the other. Everyone knows the words. Singing fit to bust. Its as though they drive Auntie May on and on. Her inspiration and energy taking them through the endless maze of songs that they've all grown up with. Love songs, war songs, sad songs. 'If you were the only girl in the world' ... 'It's a long way to Tipperary' ... 'My old Dutch' ... People get up and dance in the tiny space between the chairs set around the walls. Then, every now and again, just as

things go a bit slow and quiet, Auntie May wakes us all up with a knees-up. `Mother Brown`, `Boiled beef and carrots`...Everyone joins in. Make a circle. Arms around one another. Legs and knees up and down like pistons. Auntie May's left hand thumping out the chords like a steam hammer. The floor squeaking and groaning as it tries to keep up with the pounding bodies. Till we sit down, exhausted. That's a good time to take round our bowls. And help ourselves to one or two things. `Think of it as your wages`, smiles Mum.

Parties were usually at Christmas and the New Year. Coming when things were cold and wet, money scarce and our week's summer holiday a long, long way off. But the party I remember most of all was not in winter, but mid-summer The day when Auntie May herself got married. To Uncle Fred.

Everyone's come. Everyone. Even people I'd never seen before. Their friends, workmates, the people from next door. And of course all of our family. All becoming one big family for this big day. So many, the party's being held in the garden. Trestle tables and benches borrowed from the church hall. Plates and plates and plates of food. A big barrel of beer on upturned crates. Bottles with strange labels. Gallons of lemonade.

The piano has been moved to outside the back door. It was quite a job. Must weigh a ton. All the men lifted and shoved. Out of the front room, through the front door, down the steps onto the street, along the pavement, through the side gate by the railway arch, up the side path and onto the patch of concrete behind the scullery. Where Mum usually hangs out the washing.

Uncle John is at the piano. Some say he can play even better than Auntie May, so it isn't long before all the old songs are rolling out across Dad's garden in the sunshine. Scents of lilac, carnations and rambling roses wafting in with the sausage rolls, pickled onions and best bitter.

A train crowded with holidaymakers stops at the signal right over the garden. Driver toots his whistle. Everybody shouting and waving. Uncle John strikes up `Oh I do like to be beside the seaside` They all hang out of the carriage windows. Like the Gallery of the Hackney Empire looking down at us on stage. Singing and clapping. Auntie May and Auntie Rose are dancing a sort of highland fling.. The chickens start clucking. Next door's dog is barking its head off. The engine joining in with hissing and puffing clouds of steam. Mum laughs so much, tears run down her face

When the light begins to fade, the men push and shove the piano back into the front room. Then, after a quick visit to the Duke of York, the party starts all over again. Someone's heard to say that he'd never enjoyed himself so much. And has never been to a house so well off. Not only having all that food and drink – but **two pianos!** That's rich! Seeing how hard up we really are! Just goes to show how easy it is to get taken in. And, like Dad says, "Money's not everything there is in life". Now I know what he means.

It was perhaps because of the railway that I invented my new game. I'd been so used to the trains going this way, then the other, that I took it all for granted. All part of my

everyday life in Digby Road. But then I started wondering more and more about where they were heading. Where they'd come from. Where was The City? Come to that, where was Southend? Were there Digby Roads all up and down the line? If so, who lived there? Did they all have parties like us? If not, what else did they do? And as I thought about it, more and more it dawned on me that there were lots of things I didn't know about, lots of places I'd never been to. So I decided to find out for myself.

My two main problems were having no money for fares, and fear of getting lost. To have the first might well have landed me in the second. So it had to be using just my own two legs, and to do it without anybody else knowing. For as soon as you started to ask other people "Where's this? Where's that? How do I get to?..." they start asking why you want to know, and telling you where they think you ought to go. No – I wanted to find out for myself. It had to be an adventure.

The rules of the game are very simple. I start from where I am. Stand at the front door. Facing the street. Have to choose between Left and Right. Choose Left. Start walking. When I get to the first road on the Right, I turn down there. Then walk until I reach the next road on the Left. Turn. Then the next Right. Then Left...Right...Left...Right...Amazing! In no time at all I'm finding places I'd never been to before! All within walking distance! Every corner opening up a new surprise. Like parcels at Christmas.

There's a man with his mouth stuffed full of nails, making wooden crates. He positions each piece of wood, plucks a nail from his mouth, and hammers it home, so fast he seems to have at least two pairs of hands. Turns a pile of wood into a box almost before you know it. Immediately starts on another. And another. Does he never stop? Then there's a donkey attached to a harness that it pulls slowly up and down this long garden. At one end is a shed. In the shed, big spools of string on spindles, feeding into a drum arrangement. As the donkey pulls, the strings go tight, the drum spins – and out comes a rope! Thick, white, shining. The most perfect rope I'd ever seen! Then some men in a fire station, in their shirtsleeves, hitting coloured balls with sticks. Rolling them gently across a green-topped table. Trying to get them to drop into little sacks of net in the corners. A blacksmith shoeing horses. The red hot shoe plucked out of the fire with tongs, then placed on the wooden hoof held between his knees in a hiss of acrid smoke. And a tailor, sitting cross-legged on a table under the light coming dimly in through a basement window. Crouched over his work. Stitching away as though his life depended on it. And a shop piled up with birds in cages. Brilliant blues, reds, greens, yellows. Pecking half heartedly at their cuttle fish. Trying to forget where they are.

The beauty of the game is that when your legs get tired, and you feel its time to go home, you just go back the way you came. Right, then Left, Right again, and so on. Then next time you play the game, you stand at the front door, but this time start by going to the Right rather than Left. The first Left, next Right and so on. And a whole new world opens up. The following week you take the first Left then the *second* Right. The permutations are endless. And although I didn't know if I was in Upper Clapton or Hackney Downs, it didn't matter. Not where it was, but what it was. Not the names of the side streets, main roads and alleyways, but the hundreds of anonymous faces I saw. All strangers, but somehow not. In getting to know where they lived, what they did, it seemed as if I was getting to know them as well.

The experience changes my mind about walking everywhere. So I save up the odd ha'pennies I get from running errands, and when I get to a shilling I catch a number 38 bus from Mare Street. It says `Victoria'. I go upstairs. Sit right at the front. Nose to the window. The conductor grumbles at having to come up all this way for a half fare. Asks where I want to go. I don't know. Hand over half of my pile of coins. He grumbles again. Tells me my ticket will take me to Shaftesbury Avenue. Is that where I want to go? I nod my head up and down, tongue tied. The roads get wider, busier. The buildings taller, grander. From up on my perch there's so much to see, so much going on, I hardly know where to look, anxious not to miss the slightest thing. So taken up with everything I don't hear him shouting out "Shaftesbury Avenue". When I do, the bus is already moving off and I make a jump for it. Just catching the tail end of his parting grumble.

People. Shops. Restaurants. And Theatres - I'd never seen so many. One after the other. Black and white photographs pinned up outside. Of men with sleek hair, in dinner jackets and bow ties. The ladies hair in crisp, tight waves. Wearing glittering dresses, thick makeup. `Binnie Hale' `Noel Coward' `Jack Hulbert' `Cicely Courtnidge'. Dozens and dozens of names I'd only heard of. People I'd only seen on cigarette cards. And they're all here! Then I turn a corner and I'm in Trafalgar Square! My neck aches from twisting and straining up at the columns, fountains, steeples. Finally, exhausted and punch drunk from force-fed experiences, I find a bus stop and wait for a 38 bus to take me home.

Sitting up again at the top, I start noticing things I'd not seen before. Glimpses of parks and flower beds. Avenues of trees. A stretch of water like a lake. With ducks and rowing boats. Some people riding horses. Marching guardsmen in busbies and red jackets. Flags flying from tall poles. By the time I caught sight of Buckingham Palace I didn't need the conductor to tell me I was on a bus going in the wrong direction. But he still charged me the fare for how far I'd come. And after I'd caught one going the other way, my last few coppers still left me with a long walk home. Mum was just getting tea. She didn't ask where I'd been. I think she guessed something had changed in me. I had just realised that before you can find yourself, you first have to lose yourself.

*(Highpoint of I)*

My fingers are so cold I can hardly grip the pen. Even the ink has frozen solid in the inkwell. Miss Patterson has to get it thawed before I can start. She says they'll probably make an allowance for my handwriting, considering. I'm the only one there. She asked me to come in specially - seeing as how it's Saturday morning. I'd rather be out with my mates, playing football, but Dad said I ought to give it a try, even if it came to nothing. 'You've got take any chance that comes along' he said. Seems it's a scholarship exam, whatever that means. There's the usual sort of questions about two men carrying a ladder; or how long does it take two taps, one hot, one cold, to fill a bath with warm water. Which is a bit of a laugh considering that there's no room for bathrooms in Digby Road. The only bath we've ever seen, is the tin one in front of the kitchen fire on Friday night! But I like questions like these. The trick is to imagine in your head what the problem is, and how to go about solving it. Then working out all the figures with long division,

adding up, multiplying, seems to fall into place. I hope. More questions about 'General Knowledge': 'What's the capital of India?' or, 'How long did Queen Victoria reign?' A lot of these I don't know the answers. Guessing most of them from the list of questions they print in Hotspur every week, with the answers upside down. Then the last part is writing a composition on 'A day's outing'. That's really easy. I write about the 38 bus. There's so much to say I run out of paper. Miss Patterson says time's up. I blot the wet ink. Hand it over to her. She smiles. Nods her head. I go home. Mum makes me a cup of hot cocoa. Funnily enough, I'd forgotten about feeling cold.

So it was, a few weeks later, on another of my precious Saturday mornings, that I made my way across Well Street Common, then Victoria Park, and so to Approach Road. A part I'd never been to. Deer in the park. Large houses. Tree-lined avenues. And here it was – Parmiters Grammar School for Boys. For an interview with the Headmaster. To see whether or not they might have me.

A few of us sit perched on the edge of our chairs waiting to go into the lions den. When it's my turn, I'm peering into a thick bank of tobacco smoke. Through it, I can just make out the belching pipe and a pair of glasses. Over their rims, a pair of eyes, like gimlets, drilling into the back of my head. He asks a few questions. What subject did I like the most? Did I play any sport? What did my father do for a living? Then, totally out of the blue, 'What make of car will you choose when you grow up?' For a moment I'm quite stunned. I'd never, ever thought of having a motor car. I haven't the faintest idea what makes there are. Let alone choose one. He waits for an answer. I think of Uncle Fred. His van's a Ford. What could be better than that? I blurt out – 'A Ford!' There's a great guffaw of laughter. 'Why on earth would you choose a Ford?' I couldn't tell him about the hard boiled egg sandwiches, so I say it's because I like Fords. I think he accepted me on the spot. 'Lets see if we can't get you to do a little better than that!'

I started at my new school in April 1939. Full of the hope and excitements of my eleven years and two months. Wearing my new Parmiters uniform I walk along Digby Road. Blue blazer with a red badge; Blue cap with red hoop; Red and blue striped tie; Grey shirt and trousers, held up with a blue and red belt that has a special fastening in thick leather; Socks topped with red and blue bands; New leather satchel with my name written inside. It must have all cost Mum and Dad a small fortune. But they say not to worry, they're very proud of me. I don't exactly feel proud – more a bit of a show-off, all dressed up like this. And in Digby Road, to be thought a show-off is asking for trouble.

Which is what I get as soon as I walk into my new school. Set upon by some bigger boys in the playground. Cap snatched off my head and hurled up in the air. Tie pulled out. Satchel tugged off my shoulder. All jeering, screaming and shouting like a bunch of drunken lunatics. So I clench my fists. Square up. More than ready to give someone a punch on the nose. My blood's up. I'm going to fight to the death. But then they hand me back my cap and say I shouldn't take it so seriously – it's just an old school tradition that new boys should be ragged by way of a greeting. Funny way of showing it. In our house people get offered a chair and a cup of tea. Wonder what other daft ideas they've got here? Anyway, that cap cost my Mum and Dad eight and sixpence of hard-earned money. What right do they have to treat it like dirt?

I didn't really get on at Parmiters. Didn't really have a chance. Everything was so different. Needed time to get used to. The teachers are scary. Big men. Black mortarboard and tassel caps on their heads. Great black gowns that billowed behind them as they swept along the corridors and we shrunk out of their way. When your teacher came into the classroom, we all had to stand. There was one who brought down his cane with a loud thwack on the table, pointed it at some poor devil, and shouted: "You boy, what are eight times twenty four!?" or, "Spell, 'unnecessarily' ". If he didn't know he got a swish on the hand. Then another boy. Then another. Until someone comes up with the right answer, and we are allowed to sit. Latin had to be learnt. And algebra. And passages from Shakespeare. Things I'd never even heard of. I felt myself drowning in my own incomprehension. Ridiculed for my lack of understanding. Punished for my own ignorance. But I was determined to stick it out. Fight my way through every day as it came. Hoping things would get better. And I daren't tell Mum and Dad in case they felt I was somehow letting them down. Anyway, there was nothing they could do to help.

Ironically, it all came to a head over the one thing I really enjoyed – cricket. Every Wednesday afternoon was for sports. We all caught the bus to Walthamstow. To the school's sports ground. Acres of manicured green grass. Practice nets. A pavilion. The first thing that I notice when I go inside is the floor. Wooden, but patterned all over with little round impressions in random designs. Why on earth would it be like that? Curious, I asked one of the bigger boys that I vaguely knew. He stares at me. Not sure if I'm joking or not. Then, seeing that it's a genuine question, lifts up the sole of his white boot. Smirks. Walks off with his friends, laughing. For all the cricket I'd ever played, in the street, on the common, I'd always worn white canvas, rubber soled, gym slippers. I thought everybody did. It had never occurred to me that real cricketers had metal spikes screwed into the leather soles of their boots. And if I didn't know that about one of my favourite things, how about all those things that weren't? I feel the warm flush of humiliation and inadequacy rise up in me. Thank heavens it's nearly the end of term. Then holidays. Time to take a deep breath before starting again. But I never did. New term was due to start on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1939. War was declared two days before. As for my uniform, I put it away as soon as I got home. And never saw it again.

## Two

*I didn't like to admit it, because everyone was saying how terrible it was, but all the goings on were more exciting than I'd ever imagined. Everything was changing. Some men came along and cut down all the iron railings in front of the houses in Digby Road (to make tanks they said); Boy scouts collected old aluminium saucepans (to make Spitfires); Machines came and dug huge holes in the Common right where we used to play football (to make sandbags); Everyone was given a gas mask (which I hated) that had to be carried wherever you went; An air raid shelter made from sheets of corrugated iron, was put up at the end of our garden, where the chickens used to be; Our trains were full of soldiers, waving and cheering, all going one way – towards the seaside; Silver barrage balloons floated over the rooftops; Policemen wore tin hats painted blue, with the letter P on the front; Fire engines were painted grey; At night it was pitch dark outside because of the blackout; Dad dug up most of his flower beds to plant potatoes and runner beans; And, best of all, I watched it all happening, day by day, almost on my own. That is, without all my school chums getting in the way and having to have their say. For they'd all been evacuated into the country somewhere or other, but our family were still at number 69, just as usual. For when the letters first came from our schools – the girls to go to Wales, me to Norfolk – Mum would have none of it. "Your not going anywhere" she said "We're all staying together". So we did. But it was never again the same as it used to be. Even though, as the weeks went by, and nothing happened, it was easy enough to forget that there was a war on at all.*

Which is why, when it got to the first week of June 1940, it seemed only natural that, as usual, we went on our weeks summer holiday to Bognor Regis on the South coast, as usual. The fact that only the week before, our army had escaped from the Germans by the skin of its teeth by being ferried across the Channel from Dunkirk by almost anything that floated, was hardly remarked about. We had of course watched the endless trains rumble their way back from the direction of the seaside, silent and with the carriage blinds drawn, but that didn't interfere with our plans. Mum and Dad had worked hard, saved hard, for their holiday and they weren't having them upset by other people's problems.

But for my Dad it meant a great deal more than that. During the first world war, as a young man of eighteen, he'd fought in the mud and blood of the trenches at Ypres, Passchendel and Vimy Ridge. He came back with the certain knowledge that all war is wrong. It may mean glory, fame and fortune to the handful who relish it, but for the great majority of ordinary men and their families it brings only hardship, pain and tears. His way of expressing it was to ignore it. To show the strength of his feelings by refusing to take part. Our family holiday to the very centre of the conflict, in the darkest days of our darkest hour, was one man's public demonstration of his private beliefs

It started off just like any other Saturday afternoon: Dad in the garden, Mum in the kitchen, the two girls gone to the pictures, me just mucking about. Warm sunshine, clear blue skies. The air raid siren had just been sounded, but even that was normal. We'd got used to it by now. Just had to wait for the wailing and moaning to go quiet and, before you knew it, the cheerful high-pitched note of the all clear started up. But this time it didn't. Instead, there comes the drone of aeroplane engines. Lots of them. High up. And

the boom, boom, boom of anti-aircraft guns. The sound gets louder and louder until the air seems to quiver. And only then, when it seems almost overhead, can you see the tiny black dots against the deep, empty blue of the sky. Dozens and dozens of them. Neatly arranged in V shaped patterns, so high, so slow, they hardly seem to move. Then other, single dots, dropping down through them from above. The faint chatter of machine guns. A thin, black thread of smoke unravelling towards the ground. Is it one of theirs or one of ours? Clusters of tiny puffs of white, drifting along together like dandelion seeds. Then one, larger than the rest, gently parachuting towards the ground. And another. And another. Everything happening in the slowest of slow motions. Seeming to hang there in the sky, too lazy to get a move on. But still the black dots go on and on.

Dad goes off to meet the girls. Mum makes the tea. I can't take my eyes off what's going on. Great clouds of white and grey smoke billowing up into the sky way over beyond the school. People come out into the street to watch. The word goes round that "The poor old Docks have copped it". By the time the sun goes down the planes have gone, the all clear sounded, and the smoke towers right across the horizon. Then as the light fades, a red fiery glow shines brighter and brighter. Even from this far away we can see it flicker and flash on the clouds above like some gigantic furnace. Everyone seems remarkably calm. As though not quite believing what they see. Then one of our neighbours, a man who always kept to himself, runs up and down the street shouting "Isleworth! Isleworth! It's alright at Isleworth! Come on, we've all got to go to Isleworth! That's where I'm going – Isleworth!" But no one takes any notice of him. And we can't all go to Isleworth – wherever that is. Then where can we go? What can we do? And by way of an ironic answer, the siren starts it's wailing again.

We spend that night in the shelter at the end of the garden. Listening to the crump of bombs in the distance. Thinking about the poor devils underneath it all. Among them are probably one of Dad's close friends from work, George Nesbitt, a driver, his wife Iris, and their twelve-year-old daughter, Eileen. They live at Stepney, right by the docks. We'd once been there for tea. A block of flats with narrow stone stairs and tiny little rooms. From an iron balcony you could see over the high dock's wall at the forest of cranes and painted funnels of the ships. Mr Nesbitt knew all about them. "The red one with the yellow and black bands and the letter W is The West Indies Company. Came in on Wednesday with bananas, sugar, and I daresay a few crates of rum. She's due to be loaded with flour, apples and tinned vegetables – and that one next to it..." He also knows a lot about birds. Every corner of their flat with a birdcage of chirping, flashing, brightly coloured feathers and bright, winking eyes. In the kitchen a tame parrot that coos and squawks in private conversation with Mrs Nesbitt. Eileen is a quiet girl who reads a lot and, like her mother, is quick to see the funny side of things. We'd once spent a holiday with them at Bognor. One of the best we'd ever had. Sitting here, in the chilly dankness of our shelter, it's best not to think what might have happened to them. But difficult not to.

The next night is the same. Only worse. And the next. Ditto. We seem to have hardly slept. And it's getting closer. More widely spread. Mum and Dad seem to take it in their stride. Unruffled by it all. Almost as though it wasn't really happening. Anxious only to see that we're not going cold or hungry. Then one night, after about a week of this, it suddenly landed on our doorstep.

At the end of our garden is a brick wall. On the other side, a short row of terraced houses. Then another, much higher, wall. And on the other side of that, the Berger paint factory. One of the largest in London. A place so inflammable that even the smallest fire there had always bought out the fire engines like a swarm of bees. Now the whole place is alight. Tanks exploding. Flames shooting high up in the air. Bright enough to read a newspaper if anyone was so daft. Firemen come rushing up through the garden. Rolling out hoses to train over the wall. Flattening out Dad's delphiniums on the way. They're astonished to find us sitting quietly sitting in our hole in the ground. "Get out!" they urge "It's about to go up! Make a run for it!" So we all troop off, trying to look as if we're not in a hurry, to the public shelters on Hackney Marshes. Underground trenches, dripping with moisture, crammed with people on hard wooden planks, crying, arguing, trying to doze off. It was the longest night of my life. And at first light, after the all-clear, we walk back along Homerton High Street. So sure am I that our house had been burnt to a cinder, I can hardly bear to turn the corner into Digby Road. But it's still there! Untouched! Unbowed! Firemen and hoses all gone. Everything remarkably normal. I feel a pang of guilt at running away and leaving it to its fate all by itself. Make it a silent promise that I won't do it again. A promise that lasts for just two more nights of the blitz.

I hear it coming from a long way off. Through the din of gunfire and the clanging of fire engine and ambulance bells, a small, piercing, screeching sound. Rapidly getting louder and louder. Rising to a shriek. Cramming itself into our tiny shelter where we crouch. Reaching a crescendo of screaming violence that vibrates inside my head. To be obliterated by something even worse. A gigantic explosion that lifts the whole shelter...the whole garden...the whole of Digby Road, a foot into the air. When the shuddering stops, and a blanket of silence comes down, Dad says, calm as you like, "That was close!". He clambers out into the darkness. I join him. He thinks it must have been on the other side of the railway. The glue factory perhaps. Or the box factory at the end of the road. And then, in the faintest of twilights, I just make out a jagged black shape where our house used to be.

When dawn breaks, we pick our way silently over the rubble of bricks and splintered wood that once was our home. None of it means a thing. It could have been anybody's home, anywhere. We walk away. Away from Digby Road. I never even look back. I can't. The heavy lead weight inside of me sees to that.

*(Low point of 2)*

Just a few days before, one of the van drivers where Dad works had handed him a piece of paper. On it was written the name and address of one of Dad's distant cousins. Someone he hadn't seen for years. May Pelling. She had spotted the driver delivering in her High Street and had asked if he happened to know George Houser. "Of course – everyone knows good old George!". So she scribbles down her address, asks him to give it to him and tell him that if ever he needs help in these terrible times, to contact her. That

piece of paper was in his wallet, in the shelter, the night before. One of the few things we still had to our name. The address is 102 Osidge Lane, Southgate.

What are we doing here? Why here? Where is here? It's certainly not Isleworth - but might just as well be. The tube station we got off said 'Southgate'. Yet Dad said this is North London. Or should it be North of London? Because, going by the map of the tube line in the carriage, which I've been studying, Southgate is only two stops from the end of the line. It's just about falling off the edge of London altogether! And why 'Piccadilly Line'? This is about as far from Piccadilly as the North Pole. Perhaps that's the reason why we've come. No signs of bombs here. Come to that, not much of the war at all. Not country, not town. Not a place to be evacuated to, or from. Everything new. And clean. And tidy. Ornamental trees, laden with red berries, their leaves turning gold, line the pavements. A garden in front of every house. With a gate, a path, a lawn, and flowers. Everything staked, labelled, trimmed. Nothing out of place. Except us. I've still got my pyjama trousers tucked into my socks. The girls are wearing raincoats and headscarves. Dad has a muffler where his clean white collar usually is. Mum's got on her old winter coat, the one she never goes out in. And carries a tied up bundle of bits and pieces we had in the shelter. Now and again I notice people giving us a sideways glance, then looking quickly away in case you might catch their eye. Are they shocked? embarrassed? shy, even? No one seems at all interested in asking if they can help this gaggle of strangers in a strange land. Not even the road sweeper when Dad asks him the way to Osidge Lane.

The door opens. A woman's face. Dark eyes, dark hair, rosy cheeks. Her smile checked in mid air at the sight of us on her doorstep. Intake of breath. Eyes widen with shock. Her simple words brimming with concern. "George! Nell! What's the matter?" Mum says: "We've just lost everything we had" An answer hardly audible through the choking sob in her throat. Biting her lip to keep back the tears. It was the first time I'd ever seen my mother cry.

We are immediately swept inside on a wave of compassion. Kind words, helping hands, sympathy, hot food and cups of tea. Aunt May lives here with her husband, Uncle Ernie and their ten-year-old daughter, Pam. And two single ladies sheltering from the blitz. Five people in a small three-bedroom house. Now the five of us turn up, unannounced, out of the blue. With nothing but our ration books and what we are wearing. Taken in and cared for by people I'd never even seen before.

In every way Osidge Lane is different from Digby Road. Yet it is just like coming home. We are safe. They are family. For this is a Houser house.

My new school is what I should have expected in somewhere like Southgate. Set in avenues of neat suburban houses, it too is neat and suburban. So too are the children that come here to be taught. Also too the ones that teach them. Conformity par excellence. And here am I, a cockney boy from Hackney, a year behind with my schooling, living in a small house at the very bottom of the hill that Dad had managed to rent cheaply. It belonged to a chemist who had fled back to Wales with his wife and child for fear of the bombing, leaving his dream house and hopeful ambitions behind. It had a bathroom, inside lavatory, fitted sink in the kitchen, a small garden at the back and a smaller one in front. But no railway or piano. It, like my school, had everything to recommend it. The only thing that was missing was the sense of belonging.

So we settled into a sort of routine, trying to pretend that it was all for the best. The two girls had found jobs locally; Dad had to struggle into London and back every day; Mum, missing her friends and street markets, with next nothing to feed and clothe us, did wonders making do; I got myself a newspaper round which meant getting up at half-past five every morning and walking through the dark streets with pieces of hot shrapnel pinging off the roofs and four shillings and sixpence at the end of the week.

I realised early on that I'd never make my mark as a scholar. French verbs and chemical formulae did little to lessen my inner sense of marking time. Worse, it relegated me to being just an also ran when I really felt that I was different and better than most. Was this confidence in myself the birth pains of unrequited ambition? Or simply an antidote to the gnawing doubts of inferiority I felt in this company? I had to find out.

Len Walsh, Captain of Games, sixth former and big for his age, stops me in the corridor and asks if I play football. "Just a bit" I reply. Which, considering that there was no school teams left in Hackney because they'd all been evacuated, and the Common had been dug up to fill sandbags, and not even enough mates for a kick about in the street, more or less summed up my last twelve months of football famine. Although not quite... With not much else to do during those twelve months of not going to school, I had taken to playing on my own under the railway bridge in Digby Road. Just kicking a tennis ball against the wall and banging it back again, time after time. Hour after hour, day after day. At first I could only do it three or four times in a row, but as time went on I could reach ten, twelve, fifteen times without stopping. The bridge was a perfect place for it – dry when it rained, shaded when hot. Through that first winter and the long summer months, the ball, the wall and me were constant companions. By the time of the bomb I was quick on my feet, light on my toes, balanced like a dancer, and, from the middle of the road, could place the ball within two brick lengths of the target.

Which is why, when Walsh gives me a trial in the third team, I soon found I could run rings round them all. The next week I'm on the team sheet for the second team. And two weeks later there it is: HOUSER in the right half position for the first team pinned up on the school notice board. Who's he? Which, considering I'd been there only a few weeks, still a mere third former and an inconspicuous sort of boy, was a very relevant question. But they all soon got to know me. Very average when it came to all those subjects they all seemed good at, but something special when it came to kicking a ball around. I was now a somebody. That was good enough for me.

### Three

*Within a year I was made Form Captain, Captain of Games for my House, and Vice Captain of the first eleven football team. In the summer I'd even started playing cricket for the school. The proud owner of a pair of second hand white boots with metal studs in the leather soles. At lesson time I would gaze out of the window onto the playing field, watching the weather, highlights of the last match running through my head, thinking of those yet to be played. This was the only school I'd been to where the grass on where you played came right up to the walls of where you worked. And as I'd always rather be out side than inside, that was where my mind spent much of its time. A perfect arrangement that suited me down to the ground. But there was a price to pay.*

With the war still going on, everyone struggled to still do the things they used to. Including having a summer holiday. To go away to the seaside was of course impossible so, putting a brave face on it, the government found another way of getting families to recharge their batteries and, at the same time, keeping children off the streets and out of mischief. They invented the thrilling concept of 'Holidays at Home'. For added glamour and interest they organised special events for every locality throughout the country. Including Southgate. And there, among the list of things to do – from a swimming gala to sack races – is a football match to be played one evening in the local park. But the thing that caught my eye was “To be refereed by George Ludford of Tottenham Hotspurs”.

There were two professional football clubs in North London – Spurs and Arsenal. Dad had taken me for rare visits to both grounds. The first was the nearest but only reached by two changes of buses. Highbury was easiest as it was on the Piccadilly Line. Of the two I preferred Arsenal, not so much for that, but because they were a more glamorous club. I could tell because more cigarette cards carried photos of their stars than any other team in the country – Bastin, Hapgood, Drake...and of course Dennis Compton who represented England in both football and cricket. A hero. Crowd puller. And what's more, whose face and carefully groomed hair shone out from newspapers, magazines and billboards wherever you went. Advertising Brylcreem. Whilst Spurs on the other hand seemed to shy away from publicity. Just as good, but without all the fuss. Perhaps that's why Dad supported them and I favoured Arsenal. But as I had once seen him play at White Hart Lane, and had never been up close to a famous footballer, I go along to the park that summer evening, not for the match, but because of George Ludford.

As was not uncommon, arrangements for the event had somehow fell apart. The pitch was there. A crowd was there. George Ludford was there. But not the two teams. The dates and the venues had got mixed up. The two teams were kicking their heels some ten miles away, waiting for Mr Ludford. Or is he waiting for them? No, he decided. So he waded into the crowd asking if anyone would like a game. Grabbing youngsters by the arm and ushering them onto the pitch. When he'd collected about thirty he waves his arm to divide them and shouts: “You lot attack this goal – this lot the other one.” Drops the ball between them and blows his whistle. I of course didn't mind which side I was on. Just to make sure I was on the pitch was enough for me. We battled it out, ding-dong, as if it were Wembley Stadium. At the half-time whistle we change ends and start all over again. I've got grass stains all over my best trousers, a button's off my shirt, socks round my ankles, and the sole of one of my shoes has started to come off. But I wasn't thinking what Mum might say, just determined to win the game. Which we did. Mr Ludford blows

his whistle. We all collapse in happy exhaustion. Then, even before I'd got my breath, he comes over to me and asks my name and how old I am. I tell him. Others gather round. Then says, "How would you like a trial for Tottenham Hotspur Juniors son?"

We get off the bus, Dad and me, and join the crowd walking up the approach road to the ground. The great bulk of the main grandstand towers over us. To one side of the public turnstiles is another gate marked "Players and Staff only". I show my letter to the man keeping guard. It's for an appointment with a Mr James Joyce, Junior's Coach, for that Saturday afternoon at 2.30pm. We are ushered through into a private yard and politely asked to wait while Mr Joyce is fetched. He greets us – a short square man with a wide smile and twinkling eyes. Handshakes and introductions. He seems pleased that I've brought Dad with me, especially when he discovers that he's been an avid supporter of the Spurs most of his life. Cups of tea. Dad and Mr Joyce chat away about some of the club's great players of the past. They seem to forget I'm here. Except that I'm conscious now and then of Mr Joyce ("everyone calls me Dodger") taking sidelong glances at me. He looks at his watch. "Almost kick off time" Directs us up a private staircase to the grandstand. Tells us to go to J Block. Anywhere in the first two rows of seats. Specially reserved for Club members. "Oh, Bernie, I've put you in the team for next Saturday. Right half. Just bring some shorts and socks. We'll provide the shirt. I'll send you a card to tell you how to get there. You're of course welcome to come too Mr Houser. Enjoy the game."

The view is breathtaking. We're on the tier of seats just above the Directors Box. The bright green of the pitch spread out below us. Immaculate. Mowed in light and dark stripes. The Salvation Army brass band briskly marches up and down. The terraces crowded. Thickest behind the home goal where we normally stand. Now look at us! Then a great cheer as the Spurs come trotting up the steps from the tunnel. Look, there's George Ludford!...and Willie Hall! One of the greatest players ever, according to Dad. And soon after they kick off, Willie's mesmerising opponents and crowd alike as he juggles with the ball as though it's tied to his laces. Then in the middle of all the excitement, a cold chill suddenly runs up my spine. What if all this is just a five-minute wonder? My new found fame just a flash in the pan? They've just taken George Ludford's word for it. Never even seen me kick a ball. Supposing my run out next week is a big flop? What would Dad think of me then? I watch him cheering his heroes on the edge of his seat. All this attention has been a tonic for him after the sea of troubles we've been through. I can't let him down now. And what, until then, I took as just another game of football, now takes on a darker shadow. I resolve to give it my damndest.

By the middle of that week it became clear that it wasn't only my father I had to worry about. There was Eileen's too. Eileen Dodds was a girl in my class at school. Slim, long black hair, brown eyes. Good at hockey. Like all co-ed schools, boys and girls at a certain age start looking at one another. We became sort of chums in an innocent Jack and Jill sort of way. After a time she takes me home to meet her Mum and Dad. He eyes me up and down. Gets interested when he learns I'm a bit of a footballer. And when Eileen tells him about my meeting with George Ludford he virtually glows in the reflected glory. Born in Tottenham, he's been a Spurs man all his life. Follows them in the papers but hasn't been to White Hart Lane since becoming marooned in suburbia when Eileen was a

baby. Now look what she's brought home! A real life Spur! True I was only fourteen and a half, under five feet tall and hadn't yet played a game for them – but that would come and he could see this golden future ahead of me. And him. So of course I had to report on my visit to the ground on Saturday. Who we saw, what was said, where we sat. Eileen seemed rather bored with it all, but even so I had to warn her not to mention it at school for the fear of my fame turning to ashes at the weekend.

My shirt is already hanging on my peg in the dressing room. White, with a large 4 on the back and blue cockerel badge on the chest. My new team mates are quietly spoken, confident, modest, friendly. Straight away I feel at home. And they play a type of football that suits me. Not the gung-ho, get-into-the-thick-of-it-and-give-it-a-boot sort of thing of the school team, but the measured passing-to-one-another of the professionals. When you haven't got the ball you run into a space near the team mate who does. Then call his name to let him know where you are. He can slip it to you and, straight away, others are calling your name. You too would pass it to one of them – and so on. Just helping one another. Sounds easy. Sounds dull. But it isn't. It's the most exhilarating, efficient and artistic form of team game ever invented. We won and I did all right. And it wasn't nearly as difficult as I'd feared. Dodger comes up to me afterwards and asks me to come training at White Hart Lane on Tuesday night. I'm in the team for next Saturday. I've passed! I'm a Hotspur!

On the Tuesday I go on my bike to Tottenham as I'm not sure of the buses that time of night and I'm determined to get there come hell or high water. I've never seen such dressing rooms! Huge, airy, white tiled walls, massage table in the centre, a bath the size of a small swimming pool filled to the brim with steaming hot water, showers, and piles of warm white towels. Around the room are benches with hooks for your clothes. A baggy woollen jersey, grey, roll collar, hangs waiting for every player. I start getting changed. Conscious of someone sitting down next to me, I'm too nervous to look up. A voice calls "Evening Willie!" My neighbour replies. I turn, and there, an arms length away is Willie Hall! Looking just like someone you might see in the street. He catches me looking at him wide-eyed and gives a little friendly nod in return. Hoping he wouldn't notice, I take my time, waiting for him to get ready, then follow him out. Down a narrow flight of steps, along a long, low passage, up more steps at the far end and onto the pitch. The famous tunnel! Through here have come some of the greatest players of the day. No cheers of greeting this time, but the darkness of wartime White Hart Lane in the blackout couldn't dim the vividness of my thrill at just being there.

When I reported back to Mr Dodds he almost self-ignited with delight. How hard did I have to train? For how long? How exhausted was I afterwards? Truth was, not very. We all just jogged around the perimeter track, with an occasional sprint thrown in, until, steaming slightly, we went back to the dressing room and into the communal bath. The real purpose of coming to training it seemed, was not so much to exercise the muscles in your legs as to strengthen your sense of belonging to the club. A bit like going to church.

We won again that Saturday, and on the Tuesday the card arrived from Dodger with details of next Saturday's game. It seems I'm now a regular in the side. When I get to school there's the team sheet on the notice board. The first match of the new season. Against a local school. Kick off 11am. And I'm right half. Two matches in one day. Within four hours of each other! Had the Spurs game been first, I'd have done it. But how could I give them of my best if I'd already run my legs off earlier? I had to pull out of one team or the other. And the choice was obvious. When I told Mr Bannister, the games master, he merely nodded, accompanied by a non-committal grunt. At mid-morning I was summoned to the Headmaster's room. I thought perhaps he might be about to congratulate me on behalf of the school for the prestige attached to rising to these dizzy heights. Instead of which he curtly asked me if I intended to take up professional football as a career when I left school. I'd never even thought of it! Very much doubt if I'd ever be good enough! That's what I told him. It was the truth. I'm dismissed to go back to my classroom. Why does he seem so ill tempered? What is it I've done to offend him?

I was to find out when I get to the Spurs for training that night. Even before I got to the dressing room I'm told to report to the Manager – Mr Jimmy Anderson. The Boss that I'd heard about but never seen. He too seems cross with me in a red-faced Scots sort of way. He's had a phone call from my headmaster. I can only guess what was said between my Oxford academic and this football Napoleon from Glasgow, but I was told to leave the club straight away and never to return. That was that.

I didn't talk about it very much. There was nothing that I could do. Resentment doesn't help wounds to heal. And I still couldn't understand how the one thing that I was really good at should cause my downfall. What it did teach me was never to trust the judgement of others about yourself. They see you only from their point of view. Mr Anderson didn't want a troublesome schoolboy on his books: The headmaster didn't want one of his pupils achieving fame other than through passing exams. The fact that I was doing what I could do best in the very best way I could, didn't occur to either of them. So I had to try and forget the past. Return to mediocrity. Bide my time till I could make my own way in my own way. And the chance came sooner than I'd expected.

It was the day after my fifteenth birthday. Miss Bennett, the school secretary and far too nice for the headmaster, stops me in the corridor and wishes me a happy birthday. How on earth did she know about such an insignificant event? Because, it seems, any pupil reaching this milestone has passed the compulsory leaving age and is free to leave school if they so wish. She had sensed my bitterness over the Spurs affair and thought it right to let me know where I stood. For months I'd felt bad about it and knew I was wasting my time there but, because of losing a year's schooling at the outbreak of war, was still only in the fourth form with a long way to go before I could sit for my School Cert. "When could I leave?"..."Whenever you like"..."Today?"..."If that's what you want to do"..."I do!" So I put my books back in my desk. Get my bike from out of the shed. And ride off. Without looking back. Free! As free as anyone with no qualifications, no job, no prospects, no plans, no particular ambitions, ever could be. But my elation was rooted in a belief in myself. I knew I had the ability to get on. Had a burning ambition to do something with my life. But what? How? Where? Now it was all up to me

## Four

I rather fancied joining the navy. I'd just seen the film 'In Which We Serve' and could see myself commanding a warship from the bridge, just like Noel Coward. With four rings of gold braid on my sleeve as he had. Trouble was I didn't know how to set about getting there. But time was on my side – I'm still only fifteen. Then there was the question of how much I'd like to earn. Although a bit on the tall side, I thought twenty pounds a week might be possible if I tried really hard. But what could I do in the meantime? Printing was one possibility. There were one or two composers among my uncles, and it was always regarded as being more skilful and better paid than the more run-of-the-mill jobs. So I boldly marched into a local printer and asked if they could fit me in. Only as a pound-a-week-seven-year-apprentice, if they wanted one, which they don't. Not until after the war and all their skilled men return to their benches. Well I couldn't wait that long, so I started to look through the ads. in the papers. I'm halfway through an application for a police cadet in Northern Rhodesia when there's a knock on the door. It's Eileen. I hadn't seen her since the day I'd walked out of school. She'd heard about my problems and had mentioned it to her father. He'd been very upset over the Spurs business at the time – even threatening to tackle the headmaster himself – and had promised to do whatever he could to help me. So now he does. She hands me a piece of paper. On it is an address: 'Regent Advertising Club, 19 Buckingham Street, Strand'. Mr Dodds instructs me to go along there at 2pm the following afternoon and meet a Mr Dobbs. An acquaintance of his. A copywriter (whatever that is) at the place where they both work, Odhams Press (wherever that is). Mr Dobbs has been told all about me by Mr Dodds and has heard of a job going at an advertising agency called Royds (who?).

Dead on time I present myself at the Regent Advertising Club. It's a tall Georgian house near Charing Cross station, in a narrow street leading down to the Thames. Inside, its quiet elegance is mirrored in the person of Mr Dobbs. Well dressed, well groomed, well spoken. It seems he is giving a series of lectures to budding young people in the advertising industry. He will talk to me after it is over and invites me to sit in and listen while I'm waiting, if I wish. I do. I learn that a copywriter writes the words and slogans for advertisements: has a central, responsible role in the success of business: and earns a lot of money. Mr Dobbs, for example, himself a copywriter, was one day, suddenly stuck by an idea while in the tube on the way to work. It is a slogan for a sparking plug. "Too good to miss". So he sends it to the Chairman of Lodge Sparking Plugs Ltd, who, recognising a good thing when he sees it, and knowing that if he didn't take it then one of his competitors probably would, promptly sends him a cheque for £200 and another £50 a year for as long as they use the slogan in their advertising. And that was ten years ago. That's £700 for just four words! There and then I gave up my plan to become a Captain in the Royal Navy and take up copywriting instead.

And it wasn't only Mr Dobbs who captured my imagination. So too did the young ladies who made up most of his audience. Tall, slender, sophisticated. Twin sets, tailored skirts, crocodile handbags with shoes to match, imitation pearls, cultured accents, gently scented. With names like Jenny, Jill and Becky. They all seemed a

long way from the gymslips and woollen stockings of Form 4A. So did I. Even more when, an hour or so later, I make my entrance at G.S.Royds Ltd, Advertising Agents, Wellington House, Strand, as arranged by Mr Dobbs. Polished rosewood panelling, thick royal blue carpets, framed copies of their client's advertisements on the walls: Ballito stockings, Birds custard, Bulmers cider, Beechams pills, DuMaurier cigarettes, Celanese lingerie, Bush Radio, Hercules Cycles, Brylcreem...Brylcreem!!! And there's Dennis Compton gazing out at me! This is *his* agency! I just can't believe my luck. And even before Miss Franklin, the Accountant, has made me an offer, I'd already accepted it. Junior messenger boy in the Voucher Department for thirty shillings a week, starting on Monday. On one month's trial. She'd been curious why a boy with a grammar school background should have no school certificate or leaving report. I told her about losing a year when war started, but didn't mention the Spurs business. It seemed totally irrelevant now. Except when I remembered how I'd got here. And when I walked back to the tube, along the Strand, past the Lyceum, Savoy Hotel, Strand Palace, Adelphi, Criterion - at the very centre of the most exciting place in the world - I thought of the debt I owed to Eileen. And her Dad. Not forgetting my Headmaster without whom none of this could have happened.

He would have been pleased too, I'm sure, to know that after a month, with my job confirmed with a half-a-crown pay rise, that I was back playing for the Spurs Juniors once more. When a local club heard I'd left school and didn't have a team to play for, they invited me to turn out for them every Saturday. We got to the final of a hospital cup for which, as it was a charity, Tottenham Hotspur had offered them the use of White Hart Lane. It was like coming home. True there were just a handful of spectators, but I played my heart out as if my life depended on it. And after, in the dressing room, Mr Anderson hands me a form to sign ("Thought we hadn't seen the last of you"). I'm now a fully registered amateur with the Spurs. There must be a moral in this somewhere.

Miss Franklin ran the accounts department of G.S.Royds. The voucher department was part of the accounts department. Mr Wesson was its manager. Ferguson his assistant. Rawlins under him. Me at the very bottom. Under everyone. None of whom I particularly liked. Not that I minded in the very least, for most of the time I wasn't even there. As the messenger boy, I was always out and about somewhere. It's what I like best - doing things for others, yet being on my own. And being in the centre of London, in the middle of the war, couldn't have been better.

My main task was to go to Fleet Street, twice a day, morning and afternoon. To get there I crossed over the junction between Waterloo Bridge, The Strand, Wellington Street and The Aldwych. Walk along The Strand past Bush House on one side and Somerset House on the other. Then the Law Courts, Middle Temple and the monument at Temple Bar that marks the boundary where Central London meets The City of London, and the beginning of Fleet Street. Off to the left is Fetter Lane, to the right Whitefriars Street. Between them a rabbit warren of narrow streets, alleyways, courts and yards that make up 'Fleet Street'. At the bottom of the hill is Ludgate Circus and, up the other side, Ludgate Hill. Towering above it all is the great dome of

St Pauls Cathedral. This then, was my hunting ground, every day for the next twelve months.

Mr Wesson would give me a list of newspapers, their Fleet Street address, dates of publication and those of our advertisements that might be found in its pages. I say 'might' because the rationing of newsprint had played havoc with schedules. Advertisements booked for a certain day might be put back or even not go in at all. This was common for many advertisers but Royds clients seem to live a charmed life. Newspapers went out of their way to fit us in somewhere or other, sometime or other. It was my job to find them. Then bring back a copy as proof of its appearance. This was used as evidence to support the invoice charged to the client. And, as we could keep ten per cent of the amount as commission for our trouble, was the financial fountainhead for the agency. No wonder that every single insertion of every single advertisement had to be hunted down with ruthless efficiency. Seeing myself as somewhere between Sherlock Holmes and Tarzan, I nimbly traverse the thickets of Fleet Street, reading glass at the ready.

Accrington Observer, Bacup Times, Dursley Gazette, Oswestry Times, Lakes Falmouth Packet, Runcorn Examiner, Wolverhampton Express, Widnes Examiner, Andover Times, Alnwick Gazette, Arbroath Courier, Louth Lincolnshire Express, Tunbridge Wells Kent & Sussex Courier, Monmouth Times, Middleton Observer, Melton Mowbray Gazette,

Neath Times, Oban Times, Merthyr Express, Oswestry Times,

Oldham Chronicle, Outhwaite Express, Petersfield Times,

Peterborough Gazette, Cambridge Herald, Pudsey Echo,

Stourbridge Express, Ripley South Yorkshire Gazette, Suffield Times, Truro Gazette, Axminster Times, Trowbridge Wiltshire Gazette, Ashton under Lyne Reporter, Congleton Chronicle,

Droitwich Courier, Doncaster Gazette, Andover Times,

Faversham Express, Croydon Times, Eccles Reporter,

Redditch Examiner, Orpington Gazette, Bath & Wilts Chronicle, Hinckley Times, Nuneaton Gazette, Maidstone Kent Messenger...

I'd no idea there were so many newspapers. It must run into hundreds! At least that's what it feels like it, up and down all these stairs. Good thing I've a strong pair of legs! All the provincial papers have a London representative. The bigger ones handle groups under the same ownership and boast a carpet on the floor; the local weeklies of small, unheard of towns are crammed into cramped, difficult-to-find pokey offices smelling of mice and boiled cabbage. The odd thing is that comparing the newspapers themselves, one with another, there's little to choose between them. The same summer fetes, council meetings, reader's letters, cricket matches, dinner dances, cookery tips, and puffed-up editorials. That's also true of the adverts: carpet sales, shoe shops, painters and decorators, bicycle

repairs It's as though you could move from one town to another and find it much the same as the last. Any differences between Land's End and John O'Groats, a mere nothing compared to the things we have in common. Perhaps it goes even further than that. Much further. Here am I, someone who'd never been further north than Southgate, or south to Bognor Regis, walking back along the Strand, rubbing shoulders with men and women from all over the world. Their uniforms, badges and buttons displaying their unique differences, but all of them behaving as it was the most natural thing in the world to be together.

English. Scots. Irish. Welsh. Czechs. Australians. Dutch. South Africans.  
Norwegians. Canadians. New Zealanders. Poles. French. Belgians. Americans.  
Danes. Jamaicans. Indians...

That summer, at lunchtimes, there would be an entertainment laid on at Lincoln's Inn Fields, just off the Strand. Then all of these uniforms would stretch out on the lawns in the sunshine, listening to the likes of The Glenn Miller Army Airforce Band. The music thumping and bouncing around the trees and elegant buildings as though London was throwing a great big party. Anxious to give everyone a good time. Wanting to make them feel at home. Showing them our gratitude. But we were all deluding ourselves. Most of them didn't want to be here, away from their homes, families, friends and loved ones. It hadn't been their choice to give it all up, not knowing when they might get back or how it all might end. Not a party of celebration then, but a way of taking their mind off things.

It's what I was also trying to do for myself. At weekends I would get my bike out of the shed, tuck a half-inch map, a couple of spanners a screwdriver and a packet of Mum's sandwiches into the saddle bag, and set off up the road. Or down. Come to that, it really didn't matter which way. I just wanted to get away for a bit. Away from the sirens, sandbags, blackout and the lurking ache at the back of the brain, waiting for the all-clear to sound. The air raids were now getting worse, particularly at night. They are now dropping huge land mines, suspended by a parachute, to float silently down in the dark, that were ten times more devastating than an ordinary bomb. Twice, within a few weeks, our own house had been blasted, leaving holes in the roof, shattered windows and ceilings stripped of plaster, from explosions nearly half a mile away.

Auntie Rose and Uncle Will are standing at the front door. Gaunt, white faces, eyes drained of life. All they have with them are two small suitcases. Billy, their only son, isn't with them. For little Billy is dead. Killed in the air raid that demolished their house, leaving the pair of them buried alive for eight hours. Their bodies pinned fast with tons of masonry pressing into their flesh, heads held, face down, into brick dust, hardly able to breathe. And, worst of all, through those long agonising hours, not knowing what had happened to their little boy who'd they'd left tucked up safely in his bed.

I remember cousin Billy for the game we once played when we went to visit them just before the war. He was probably about three years old; fair, curly hair, dimpled cheeks and a quick smile. At the end of the garden of their new house was a low picket fence giving onto a narrow lane. In the fence was a wide, heavy gate with the property of slowly turning on its hinges until shutting itself with a clang on the post latch. I stood on the gate's lower strut, both feet off the ground, being slowly carried by its own momentum until it struck the post, when I would pretend to fall off. The whole effect depended on the total absorption of my character in his affairs until, with a shuddering crash he ends up on the ground, arms and legs waving in the air with the suddenness of his downfall. Billy thought it so hilarious that I had to do it again and again. The actor in me demanding that each time I should play a new variation. I was, in turn; a policeman directing traffic; a ship's captain scanning the horizon; a bus conductor collecting fares; an orchestral conductor conducting; a bird watcher scanning the sky through binoculars; and a balancing artist rehearsing his act. Billy would watch each pantomime intently. He, knowing what was going to happen, but knowing that my role depended on me not knowing what was going to happen. As the gate slowly swung, his eyes would widen with apprehension, his jaw gaping with the disaster that lay ahead. And when it did, he would instantly erupt with gushing laughter that left him red-faced and breathless. So, when he implored me "'gain!... 'gain!... 'gain!" I of course did it all over again. Only better. How else to repay such an appreciative audience?

And, even though there can be no 'gain again, I'll not forget you Billy.

*(Low point of 4)*

One weekend, for a change, instead of cycling north into Hertfordshire, I went south, through London, and into Sussex. Partly because it held happy memories of our seaside holidays before the war, but also because this was where (it was rumoured) the Allied forces were building up for our invasion of France. A day that couldn't come soon enough because surely it signalled that the end of the war was in sight.

On the face of it, nothing had changed very much. They'd been no bombing here and people went about their everyday rural lives as usual. The same half-timbered houses, small ancient churches, cricket on the village green. But it was as though the whole thing had been picked up, like a film set, and put down again in the middle of Aldershot. There were soldiers everywhere. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of them. Some stacking ammunition into neat piles as big as a cottage, covered in camouflage netting, that lined the roadsides for mile after mile; Others servicing tanks and bren gun carriers ; Convoys of army lorries, loaded with supplies, driving nose to tail in never ending lines; Despatch riders on motor bikes weaving their way through the traffic as though their life depended on it; Humber Super Snipe saloons with big fat tyres and identification pennants fluttering on the bonnet, taking high-ranking Staff Officers from one high-level meeting to another. All so busy that nobody takes the slightest notice of me peddling past.

I booked in for bed and breakfast at Petworth, the picture postcard of a small English market town. For one night in a single room over the fish and chip shop of the owner and his wife. After a delicious supper of – yes, you've guessed it – I went for a stroll.

In the summer twilight everywhere was peaceful and quiet. Few people about. No sign of all the clamour of the day. Feeling thirsty after my supper, and hoping to find someone to chat to, I decided to chance my arm and get a half pint glass of cider in a pub, even though I was still under the age limit. 'The Saddlers Arms' was tucked away in a side street, suitably quiet and out of the limelight for my law-breaking escapade.

I'm astonished to find the place is packed. Crammed with soldiers. Large men with tanned faces, softly talking to one another between sips of beer. Heads turn towards me. Stares of curiosity as they try to make out what I'm doing there. And I them. But it's too late to turn and go out again. It could be read as an admission that I'm too young to drink with real men or, worse still, seen as an insult. So I order my cider. The barman takes a long hard look at my youthful face and corduroy shorts and goes to open his mouth as if to ask me the dreaded question about my age. My answer would make me either a liar or the cause to shrink with embarrassment. I feel a blush rising up. But he changes his mind. Pours me my drink. I creep away into a corner trying to look as though I'm an old hand at drinking in a bar with half the Canadian army. Their shoulder tabs say it all:

Calgary Regiment...Royal Hamilton Light Infantry...Regina Rifles...Saskatchewan Light Infantry...Royal Winnipeg Rifles...8<sup>th</sup> Princess Louise's Fusiliers...Royal Canadian Regiment...

Could these be the same Canadian troops who were landed at Dieppe one day last summer? Some of the survivors of one of the bloodiest days of the war? From the six thousand who were landed, less than half returned. It was reported the action was to test how tough were the enemy defences on the French coast as part of the preparations for D-day. Well they certainly found that out. And now D-day itself is just around the corner. Now they're going to have to go through it all once again. No wonder the bar is so subdued. Not a time for jollity and high jinks, but for sober reflection. The atmosphere reminds me of the dressing room just before a big match. Everyone locked in his own thoughts of the game ahead. Wanting to play his very best. Not to let down his teammates. To give the crowds of spectators something to cheer about. And above all, to be a credit to himself. What wouldn't they give, I wonder, to change places with me? To jump on a bike and cycle home to their own family and climb into their own bed? As I walk back through the silent streets I reflect on my own good fortune and, on their behalf, offer a prayer for their safe return.

I'd just had my lunch and Mr Wesson gives me the list for the Fleet Street calls I was to make that afternoon. As usual I cross the junction with the Aldwych, and head towards the Law Courts. The Strand was busy with traffic and people strolling in the warmth of the June sunshine. I was passing the short row of shops just before Somerset House, thinking of the cricket match I'm playing in tomorrow...

Suddenly, without the slightest warning, there's a deafening scream from the sky right above me. Instinctively I throw myself on the ground, towards the shelter of the wall. Arms over my head. As I fall I glance over my shoulder. And, in that fraction of a

second, see the blur of a large grey object disappear over the rooftops. There is a huge explosion. I scramble to my feet. Start running towards it. Across the Strand. Through the gates of Bush House. Into the wide terrace that cuts through its multi-storey bulk. Up the wide flight of steps that come out at the Aldwych. Right opposite where the flying bomb has dropped.

And even as I'm running I feel the strangeness of it all. It's very quiet. No sounds but for the musical tinkling of glass, like Chinese wind chimes, as showers of it drop to the ground. And no people either. I seem to be all alone. Then, on the steps, coming down towards me, is a man. Not running or walking, but briskly hurrying as though late for an appointment. His face expressionless. His eyes fixed on something somewhere over my shoulder. Well-dressed but hatless, tailored suit, collar and tie. Perfectly ordinary except for having his trouser legs ripped completely off at the knees. He hurries past without noticing me.

On the Aldwych pavement, opposite where I am, is a pile of twisted metal. Flickering with licks of flame. And, what looks like bundles of old clothing, lying shapeless and still on the ground. No people. No traffic. No sound. Just by me, a lady lies on the ground, her back propped up against the great iron gates of the colonnade. As though she's resting. She stirs. I go to her. Lean down. Ask if I can do anything for her. She opens her eyes. Dazed. Then says she seems to have lost her handbag. "D'you think you might find it for me?" Incredibly, by the wall of the opposite gate, my eye catches the gleam of shining metal. It's a handbag. Totally empty. It's bottom ripped out. The lining dangling through the hole like the ragged hem of a skirt. I show it to her. The hint of a grateful smile. She murmurs a 'thank-you'. I lay it gently by her side. Her limbs loose like a rag doll. I think she's very badly injured. Hurlled by the blast against the ornamental ironwork. The extreme shock of the trauma acting like a momentary anaesthetic. I daren't touch her. Feel totally helpless. As I look around the carnage, I become aware of distant running feet. Whistles blowing. Bells ringing. I bend low over her. Tell her to hang on. Help is on the way. I don't know if she can hear me. Her eyes are closed. I think she's past all help. There's nothing more I can do. I feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the dreadful tragedy that surrounds me. So I turn and walk away. Carrying the lady's handbag in my memory for the rest of my life.

One day, on my return to the office, Mr Wesson tells me that he's been offered a better job as London manager for a group of Middle East newspapers. He doesn't understand a word of Arabic, but that doesn't seem to worry him. Ferguson is to take his place as manager. After two weeks in the post, Ferguson gets his call up papers. Now Rawlings is in charge. Then he leaves to join the Merchant Navy. Miss Franklin offers me the job as Manager of the Voucher Department. Not that she's got much choice. So I accept. From messenger to manager in less than eighteen months. To help me I have Alan Pavey, a boy of my own age. Dashing, full of beans. Between the two of us we run the whole affair better than it's ever been.

After D-day, London suddenly becomes empty. All those uniforms, foreign tongues and American accents gone like magic. We still see them of course up there on the

screen at the pictures: parachuting down over France; their tanks crashing through enemy defences; dropping depth charges out at sea; flying their formations of B17's deep into German skies. Difficult to imagine they're the same young weather beaten faces that once populated the Strand, chewing gum, eyeing the girls. Later on there are pictures of what they've set free: the contoured ranges of rubble where people once lived; pinched, hungry faces, almost too tired to raise a smile; the living skeletons of Belsen, so awful you must turn your head away in shame.

Victory took so long to arrive that we'd already taken it for granted. In the meantime we'd had to cope with the usual bombs, rockets, blackout, no sweets, no coal. So when the news went round that the war was at last over, people just shrugged their shoulders, gave a sigh, and carried on as usual. At least they did at G.S.Royds. I go to the window in the hope of seeing cheering crowds delirious with happiness. But there wasn't. They weren't. Then, with a vivid flash of memory, I see the newsreels of New York in presidential triumph: cavalcade of open topped cars, outriders of motor cycle cops; a sea of waving arms and banners; a snow storm of white ticker tape drifting down from the sky scrapers. Inspired, I pull out all the bottom copies of the newspaper files, from Ashby-de-la-Zouch Courier to Yeovil Gazette. Frantically rip them into little pieces. Stack them up into a heap two feet high. Stagger with it up eight flights of stairs to the roof. Rest it on the stone balustrade. Look over. Down onto the buses, taxis, people walking past, just as if this were like any other old day. Why isn't everyone doing whatever they're supposed to do after six years of misery? Releasing those feelings that everyone must be having, yet too reserved to show? Well I'm going to do my bit. Give a signal that it's time to rejoice. Release a symbolic shower of paper to flutter gently down from the skies. So I push my pile of torn up voucher copies over the edge. It stays in a solid lump. Drops eighty feet, straight down. Hits the pavement like a sack of potatoes. Missing a man, just walking along, by inches. If it had struck him on the head, it would have broken his neck. So much for war – and peace.

## Five

It isn't just how she looks, but the way she walks. Sort of glides along. With a little lift at the end of each pace as though the toes of each foot are softly sprung. Her back is straight, shoulders held square, head precisely balanced. My eyes hold onto her as she moves through the scattering of people watching the cricket match. Our side is batting. I've already been in – and out. Now I'm waiting for the innings to close. Then we'll have tea. Then go out again and field. I'm sitting on the grass in front of the pavilion with some of the team and their girl friends. The usual lot. But who's this girl? I've never seen her before. She's wearing a plain, simple cotton dress. Turquoise. High necked. Round collar. Long sleeves. Perfectly cut to fit her slim figure. Hem of the skirt exactly right. The rhythm of her stride neither unhindered nor distracted by it. She meets two other girls. Standing close. Chatting. Laughing. Even at this distance, she dominates the trio by her attractiveness and vivacity. Her friends move off. She's coming this way. She carries herself with unconscious dignity. Not seeking the pleasure of others, but solely to please herself. Her hair neatly waved. Smart, sensible shoes. A few more yards and I'll be able to make out her features more clearly. A sudden ripple of applause. Cries of 'well-done!' It's the end of the innings. Everyone gets to their feet. Milling around. We troop inside for tea. I lose sight of her. But don't forget.

Our wicket keeper Roy and his elder brother sit together on the veranda. Roy is about my age, his brother some years older. Oddly enough he's known in his family as 'Boy'. But they're easy enough to tell apart. Roy, with the ruddy complexion of the open air, Boy's skin a bright yellow from anti-malaria drugs. He's just come back from the Far East. A Captain in the army, he was taken prisoner by the Japanese at the start of the war, and has been there ever since. They seem to have little to say to one another. The gulf opened up by those few years, too wide, too deep, too dark for even two brothers to cross.

The same was true everywhere. Reunions for which all had waited, somehow not living up to their promise. The threads of lives torn apart, often too ragged, too fragile, to stitch back the same as they once were. My sister Rene married Charlie within weeks of him coming home from the RAF. They'd been childhood sweethearts since the days of Digby Road. He was trained as a fighter pilot in South Africa, posted to Australia, and saw out the war in the skies over Borneo. Now he had to start all over again as a minor civil servant in a small market town in the heart of Welsh-speaking Mid-Wales. At Royds the pre-war manager of the Voucher department had been with the Montgomery's army in the deserts of North Africa; his under-manager, a rear gunner in Stirling bombers in night raids over Germany. Both come back to turning over endless pages of newsprint for a living. For weeks the place rings with cries of recognition of faces not seen for five years and look three times older than that. Pavey and me bow out gracefully, not wanting to be in the way, leaving them to do things the way they want. Become messengers again. Spending most of our time at corner tables in seedy Fleet Street cafes or listening to Benny Goodman records in a booth in Foyle's record department. The rest of the world shutting its doors to people like us. Under educated. Under qualified. Under aged. With no future beyond our eighteenth birthday, when we're conscripted to fight a war that's already been won. In the

meantime we cling together, all those in the same boat, hoping our youth and vitality will keep us afloat until we can feel firm ground under our feet.

As soon as she comes around the corner I know it's her. Even though she's on a bike and wearing shorts, open-necked shirt and scarf over her head, I can't mistake the girl in the turquoise dress. She's with Pat, a girl I know slightly. They must be friends. They stop where we're all standing with our bikes. Ready to go. About a dozen or more of us. All the usual crowd. Too old for school trips, too young for charabancs. Using the strength of our own legs to get away from kids and grown-ups. Today, as it's a Sunday and the sun is shining, we're off to the river Lea at Broxbourne, twenty or so miles away. And she's coming with us! My heart gives a jump. The mystery's about to be solved. I start to ask some of the others about her.

By the time we get to Bounds Green I discover her name is Jean. Jean White. Lives in Hampden Way. Just five minutes walk away from me. Coming through Palmers Green, I learn that she works behind the counter at a local chemist's. At Stirling Corner roundabout, that she's about sixteen-and-a-bit. And, somewhere between Bushill Park and Ponders End, after several cautious enquiries to the girls who tend to know about such things, that she doesn't have a regular boy friend. So, on the road from Cheshunt to Broxbourne, now fully briefed on the facts, I find I can't take my eyes off her.

During a long afternoon splashing about in the water, eating our sandwiches, feeding the ducks and talking about other people behind their backs – both those we like and those we don't – there's plenty of time for a closer look: Quick to laugh at others jokes; Frowns at things she doesn't understand; Listens closely to what others have to say; Shies away when offered the chance to have hers; Gets on with everyone, and they her. A face both handsome and pretty: oval, high cheekbones, arched eyebrows, perfect nose, dimples, and laughter lines at the corners of grey-green eyes.

Then its time to face the long ride home. The energetic ones shoot off ahead. Us lazy ones take our time. A few lag behind. Jean is one of them. I can see why. Her borrowed bike is too large and heavy. Saddle too high. Handlebars too low. And it isn't fitted with gears. Totally wrong for her. Making it hard work. She doesn't complain, but from the determined set of her face, grimly fixed on the road a few feet in front of her wheel, and the laboured pumping of her legs, I know that she's in trouble. I drop back alongside her. Lean over, put my hand on the back of her saddle. Push as hard as I can. We pick up speed. She smiles. Then concentrates on her peddling until we get home. On parting, she thanks me. Gives me a look that says 'I'm-grateful-for-your-help-but-I-could-have-done-it-on-my-own-if-I-had-to-for-I'm-used-to-looking-after-myself-and-ask-no-favours-from-anyone-and-whilst-you-have-been-extremely-kind-you-must-not-think-that-I-am-beholden-to-you-in-anyway-but-thank-you-again' All this, and more besides, in a long, steady gaze eye that lasts all of ten seconds. But long enough for the arrow to reach its target.

I get my call-up papers soon after my eighteenth birthday. I have to report to Warrington in Lancashire. I'd never been further North than St Albans before, and it's the middle of winter. It lives up to its reputation. Bleak, cold and grey. I'm surrounded by boys with dialects so strong I can hardly understand them. And corporals prone to shouting so loudly at everyone that the veins stand out from their neck. The Strand, Benny Goodman and Jean White suddenly seem a very long way away.

I'm now AC2 HOUSER 3081620. Aircraftsman Second Class. The lowest form of life in the Royal Air Force. My first choice had been the Royal Navy (to follow in the footsteps of Noel Coward) but you had to sign on for twelve years. I felt I couldn't spare the time, and would miss my football out there in the middle of the Atlantic. Whereas if I joined the Airforce, like Denis Compton, life would be full of games, girls and Brylcreem. In reality it didn't turn out quite like that. At least not at first.

We do our square-bashing at Melton Mowbray. Except it wasn't a square but a disused runway. Only eighteen months ago it would have been kept clear for bombers to take-off and land. High, wide and open. Now they've gone and we've taken their place. Trying to keep in step to the sergeant's commands being blown away in the howling wind. "Ready to turn about....About...Turn!" Check pace. Swivel. Step off smartly with the right foot. At least that's the idea. Half don't hear properly and turn right. Others forget to check and crash into the one in front. The rest try to do as asked. Three corporals, like berserk collies, snap and bark at our heels. "Heads up! Pick your feet up! Swing your arms!". "You there!...third one down in the second rank!...are you dancing with the one in front – or breast feeding him?!" We try. Do our best. Hour after punishing hour. It seems we'll never get it right. Yet slowly we improve. Not quite ready for Horse Guards Parade, but getting there. Only another six weeks to go!

I stand to attention facing my Commanding Officer. A Squadron Leader with pilot's wings and D.F.C medal ribbon. He looks at me in the way of those used to being obeyed. My mind is racing. What am I doing here? What have I done? Why me? Ten minutes ago I was marching happily up and down with my Flight. An orderly cycled up to the sergeant. Gave him a message. We're called to a halt. I'm ordered out of the ranks. Sergeant inspects every inch of me. Pulls my cap straight. Tells me to report immediately to the C.O's office at the double. ("What 'av you been up to laddie?")

Now here I am and haven't the faintest idea what this is about. But about to find out. He picks up a letter from his desk. To my relief and amazement I spot the blue and white cockerel badge printed on the heading. He says he's just received it from a Mr. Anderson of Tottenham Hotspur football club. He's asking if the Royal Air Force can release AC2 Houser for a few hours this coming week end to take part in a crucial cup final for the club's junior side. He asks me what I think about that? I say I'm very surprised. Am I something of a star player then? Definitely not - good enough, but not better than. How long have I played for them? Over two years. With the same team? More or less. Same players in the same positions as when we started. You realise that such requests are rare, and almost always refused?

He crosses to the window. Looks out over the parade ground, reflecting. Tells me that in my case he'll make an exception. Tells the sergeant to arrange a seventy-two

hour pass, with travel warrant to London. I thank him. He says that it's not for my benefit but for the sake of the rest of my team. Just make sure I don't let them down. Or him. I salute. About turn. March out. "Lucky bugger" mutters the sergeant under his breath.

That weekend I saw Jean again. Briefly. At a local dance. There she was being whirled around in other boy's arms while all I could do was to sit and watch. I may have been good at football but hopeless at this dance game. I'd always thought of it as a bit of a sissy thing. But now, watching everyone else having a good time, I suffer the pangs of envy, jealousy and frustration. She dances with ease. Me, not at all. I resolve, through clenched teeth, to learn. To become better than any of them. I'll show them! I'll give her dance!

I saw Jean hardly at all over the next twelve months. I'd finished square-bashing and been posted to Stafford in the Midlands. Where I suffered the most boring twelve months of my life. Doing the paperwork for supplying spare parts for everything that flew and practically anything else that didn't. A huge open barn of an office fitted with rows of desks. All you ever saw all day were mountains of forms to be filled in, and the back of the head of whoever it was sitting at the desk in front. Where was Dennis Compton now? The only thing that kept me sane were my visits to the records archive. This was another huge room, as large as the main office, linked to it by a single, plain wood door. In it were kept the records of every cotter pin or wireless valve supplied to the RAF over the last ten years. Millions of them. Boxed files were racked on shelves reaching from floor to ceiling. The shelves were fitted in continuous units that ran the length of the room. Between each row, an access aisle, some eight feet wide, with a floor of smooth cement, painted a dirty blood red. Silent and spooky, the place had the air of a graveyard. Perfect!

I'd bought a copy of the book 'Ballroom dancing for beginners by Victor Sylvester'. Page after page of diagrams of two pairs of feet: the right ones black, the left ones white; the larger ones the man's, the smaller, his lady partner; linked by arrows and numbers to show the sequence that had to be performed for each figure. It starts with the simplest, progresses to the more advanced. Through Waltz, Quickstep, Foxtrot, Tango. To learn them requires that you stand, open book in hand, then move your feet as per diagram. It looks faintly ridiculous, especially so in the wisecracking camaraderie of a billet you're sharing with twenty others. So the records cemetery was perfect. I wouldn't be disturbed because no one ever went there if it could be avoided – it was cold, lonely and you could never find what you were looking for anyway. So I kept nipping out of the office, through the brown door, and into a fantasy of bright lights, lively, strict-tempo music and lissom young girls.

Started with Page 1, a flatfooted Natural Turn. Humming a Benny Goodman number in my head to its Slow/Slow/Quick/Quick/Slow timing. After three days of frequent, assiduous visits to track down a file on tap washers, missing since 1942, I was getting quite good at it. As winter moved into spring I mastered the Reverse Turn. Feather. Fishtail. Telemark...and was up to Page 60. No one seemed to notice that I spent more time away from my desk than at it; The Royal Air Force was still fully operational;

and my secret was safe. Except for one uncomfortable moment. I was halfway through a dazzling run of linked variations incorporating The Wave, Slide, and Reverse Jump Turn, performed to Gene Krupa belting his way through Opus 1, when I happened to look up and saw a WAAF Corporal staring at me from the end of the aisle. Her face blank with astonishment. I stopped in mid air. My mind racing. What should I say? But she turned away. Hurried off. She probably thought that the mind-sapping boredom of the place had finally broken my spirit and I was having a nervous breakdown.

Then, in the nick of time, just before my charade of life and death played out on either side of a door comes to a messy end, I'm told that I've been posted. My heart sinks. No more studying the footsteps of Mr Sylvester. No more dreams of daring and delight, dancing with invisible partners to a silent band. And I'm still a good twelve months away from my demob. "Where to" I groan. "Headquarters Radar Command". "And where might that be" I sigh. "Henley on Thames. Down near London. Right by the river." I'm stunned with disbelief. This stretch of the Thames Valley is one of the most beautiful in the whole country. I'd often been there on my bike. Images flash through my mind:

A stone bridge over placid water; Swans and teashops; Gliding punts with girls in summer dresses. But never a hint of the high fences and marching sentries of the usual air force camp. Was this then some kind of sick joke? A trumped up mirage of the perfect posting?

When I get there it was both wasn't, and it was. A beautiful rambling country house well away from the road. Terraced gardens down to the river. Fountains and fishponds. True, most of it was out of bounds and we all had to make do with the usual nissen huts, cookhouse and camp cinema. But it was as near to paradise as you could reasonably expect. And only thirty miles from London. And Miss Jean White.

*(HIGHPOINT OF 5)*

This is it. The moment of truth. My mouth's gone dry. My legs weak. "May I have this next dance?" I mutter through parched lips. "Of course" she smiles, "I'd be delighted." I'd gambled on finding her here, and now I have. Royalty Dance Hall, Southgate, on a Saturday night. Live band. Bar. Soft lights. The place is full of people, laughing and relaxed. But not me. We walk to the edge of the dance floor. Smooth and sprung. She turns to face me. Arms held out. Her lips smiling. Her eyes questioning, searching into mine. "Didn't know you could dance" they ask, " why haven't you told me before?" I put my right arm round her, hand just under her left shoulder blade. Just like the book said. My left arm held high, her hand in mine. Remember golden rule number one. Always start, left foot first. Take a deep breath. Count up to three. Close my eyes and plunge over the cliff edge. To my astonishment I haven't yet trodden on her toes. Our

knees aren't bumping into one another. Think I'll attempt a Natural Turn. Focus on black and white footsteps on the page. Yes! It works! We've got round! Start hearing the music for the first time. Until now just a background noise, now the rhythm and brass begin pumping life into my legs. Up into my body. Into both our bodies. She's a wonderful dancer. Legs and shoulders swinging as naturally as walking. Her whole weight balanced on her feet so lightly, I hardly know she's there. Our bodies close. Bellies and thighs gently pressed together. Moving as if we were one. It's as though I've been trying to learn an instrument by pressing the right keys, and suddenly the music's coming back up through my fingertips into my very soul. By the time it gets to the last waltz we know we were meant to be partners:

Who's taking you home tonight  
After the dance is through?  
Who's going to hold you tight  
And say darling I love you I do?  
Who's the lucky boy who's going your way  
To kiss you goodnight in your doorway?  
Who's taking you home tonight?  
Darling it's plain to see  
I'm pleading please let it be me.

Crooning the words into her ear, holding her close, her perfume stealing my senses, I give a fleeting thought to Victor Sylvester - the one who help shape her answer in my favour.

*After two years I'd come out of the RAF and gone back to Royds as a trainee in the production department. For a wage not much more than I'd been getting as an airman - all found - that came in a brown paper envelope every Friday. They were now in Piccadilly, next to the Ritz. Jean had landed a prestige job on the cosmetic counter of Swan & Edgar's in Piccadilly Circus. Both of us working at either end of one of the world's richest thoroughfares yet we hardly had a spare penny between us. But what did that matter? We saw a lot of one another. Danced a lot together. Went to the pictures together. Cycled together - on a bicycle made for two. Enjoyed life as it should be lived when you're in your early twenties. We never did get engaged. No proposal. No ring. No money. No need for any of that. Just knew in our heart of hearts that we wanted to be together for the rest of our lives.*

*The Chancellor of the Exchequer fixed the date of our wedding. He had decided, in his wisdom, that newly married couples should get a rebate on the income tax they'd paid*

*during that financial year. With the next financial year starting on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1952, we decided to make the most of his kind offer and set the date for Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> April.*

A sunny day. But a chilly wind. I'm in a smart grey suit specially borrowed for the occasion. Jean in a mustard coloured barathea two-piece with a cheeky little hat to match. She looks fabulous. We pose for photos outside the largest, grandest church in Southgate. About two dozen or so of us all told. Mums, Dads, Uncles, Aunts, Sisters, Brothers, and my mate Alan Pavey as best man. Trying hard to make our modest little affair look like the social event of the year. Then all back to 52 Whitehouse Way - where we'd lived ever since we were bombed out of Digby Road. And suddenly, by some divine resetting of the almanac, we're back to those happy, pre-war days. Perhaps it was because of our old piano. It had been recovered from under the rubble of No.69 and put into storage in an empty cinema along with the pathetic remains of hundreds of other blasted homes. Then the cinema was set alight and it was drenched with hoses. Later still it turned up at a greyhound stadium, under the grandstand, waiting for the racing to start again. After several other adventures it was returned to where it belonged. Repolished, retuned, reunited. Once again Auntie May sits down. Opens the lid. Runs her fingers over the keys. After ten years of enforced separation, the affection of these two old lovers is undimmed. She plays better than ever. Everyone joins in. Singing. Dancing. Laughing. Eating. Drinking. Just like times past. The war is now truly over. Now we are all back together again. For a few heart lifting, happy hours. The last and the best. Then suddenly it's all over. A knock on the door. The car is outside waiting to take us away. Mum sheds a few tears - only the second time I'd ever seen her cry. Aunt Rose consoles her, telling her not to be so soft - that I'll always be coming back to see her. But Mum knows the real score. She's losing her one and only son to another woman.

*We'd spent months trying to find somewhere to live. So, it seems, were a hundred thousand other people. Small, miserable rooms, high rents, no security. It wasn't the way we wanted to start a new life together. So we worked out the income tax we would get back, sold the tandem, stopped going out, and finished up with just enough for a deposit on a brand new 18ft caravan. The rest over the next three years. It had a fold down double bed; settee; two tiny wardrobes; anthracite stove with hot water tank; separate kitchen at one end, with small sink, larder to scale and bottled gas cooker. A chemical toilet just inside the door completed our dream home. Could anyone ask for more? We fitted it out with carpet, loose covers, curtains and a battery powered radio. All we needed now was somewhere to put it. Then I remembered my happy days at Henley, and a small caravan site on a farm just outside the town. Trains ran from the station to Paddington and I worked out that if I caught the 7.50 every morning I could be at my desk by 9.30 with a bit to spare. So we had our lovely caravan set up at Swiss Farm, Henley-on-Thames a week before we were married. Thick snow and freezing cold. Rural bliss. Now, with the party in full swing, the driver calls to take us there in the hire-car. Kisses, handshakes, hugs, best wishes for the future. As we make our fond farewells I read in their faces that same mixture of chronic doubt and light-headed elation that I'm feeling myself.*

I've lit the stove and filled the water tank. Already it's feeling warm and snug inside. Jean has boiled a kettle, made a cup of tea. Both of us tired out. What a day! I go outside

for a last look. Just to make sure I'm not dreaming and we really are here. Soft darkness. Soft peace. Sky full of stars. A new moon. Tender mooing from the cow shed. Dog barking faintly in the distance. Then, totally unexpected, but dead on cue, the season's first nightingale trilling at full volume from the woods above Hambleton.

I go back inside to fetch Jean. But already she's in bed. I slowly get undressed by the red glow of the stove. Hot water tank quietly singing to itself. Turn out the gaslight. Slip between the sheets. The final secrets about to be revealed. Two innocents about to bite into the sweetness of the apple.

## Six

Even down in the Underground you can feel the sun is shining. Everyone in their best clothes. Spick and span. Brown, jolly, excited faces. All packed together like children off for a day at the seaside. Piccadilly has turned into a Promenade. Arm in arm we all stroll along the middle of the road. Flags, bunting and pictures of the Queen and Prince Phillip mark the route they'll be coming down in two hours time. It seems only natural that the headlines on the news stands read: hillary conquers everest! Perfect timing for a perfect day. His success capturing what we all feel. Being on top of everything. The world at our feet. Looking down at what we've been through. The dark, terrifying years of war behind us. Looking out to the golden horizons in the distance. A future waiting for us with open arms. I couldn't have had a better day to bring Jean to Royds for the first time. It's offices face right onto Piccadilly. Second and third floors. Grandstand view of a once-in-a-lifetime event. Wines and eats from Fortnum's. The usual faces in their usual places. Transformed by a quivering in the air. They all want to meet my new wife. I'm proud to make the introductions. She radiates in their company. Glowing cheeks, sparkling eyes. And when it's all over – with a lump in our throat and tears in our eyes, we wave our last goodbyes to the bands, carriages and uniforms of the glorious spectacle as it disappears towards Hyde Park Corner – John Barmas, a senior executive, turns to me and says: “She's very beautiful, isn't she?” I reply that, yes, we're very fortunate that our new Queen is so young and attractive. Startled, he counters: “No! No! Not the Queen! Your wife – I think she's very beautiful...”

I was taught a lot at Royds. Enough to grow out of my messenger boy cocoon into a fully formed advertising man. The task of teaching me fell to the lot of Harold Gibbens (Gibbie) a senior and highly respected producer on some of the agency's top accounts. As his assistant I had to help convert the ideas, pictures, words and layout designs of the creative people into printing blocks that fit into pages of newspapers and magazines – alongside the news and photos – and so be multiplied a million times or more. The wave of a magic wand made from the inventions and hard-nosed disciplines of the art of printing, practiced for over four centuries. It was my task to learn some of them. And after weeks and months of visits to typesetters, engravers, foundries and printing works, Gibby judged that I was good enough to produce my first ad. on my own.

It was for a top-of-the-range vacuum cleaner that was to appear in the News Chronicle. The space booked measured six inches by three and five eighths, and cost three hundred and eighty pounds. It was my job to see that it was filled with the right copy, to the right size, on the right day. I hardly slept the night before. In my mind's eye, the great rotary presses of Fleet Street spin out newspapers in a blur. Vans rush them to the stations. Trains, shrouded in steam, speed through the darkness. The News Chronicle pushed through letterboxes and opened to breakfast table yawns. Had I remembered to check the address in the coupon? Was there enough space left in the margin? Is the engraving of the illustration too fine? Will it be blocked up or worn down by the rollers of those brutal presses? There was only one way to find out.

The news kiosk at the tube station is busy with the usual morning rush. I wait my turn. Pick up a paper. Hand over my coppers. Join the herd traipsing down the stairs. But

I can't wait. Stop half way. Grunts, moans and shoves as they all push past me. Turn the pages. Scan the columns. And, yes! There it is! Halfway down page seven! Opposite the City page! My ad. side by side with an article on the rise in interest rates! Wonderful! Perfect! Mine must have been the only smiling face in the panorama of national gloom

I finished my football career as captain of Henley Town Football Club. Oddly enough I didn't really miss it. All the high excitements of the early days, and later with Finchley in the Athenian League, had evaporated in two seasons of knockabout Saturday afternoon matches. Jean was working on Saturdays in the Reading branch of Boots the Chemist's. We were trying to save up to put down as a deposit on a house. But we weren't earning much. There were our fares, food and clothes to pay for, as well as the monthly repayments on the caravan. And new houses, on which we'd set our mind, were scarce. Our resolute determination was turning into an elusive hope.

That is until one day Jean tells me she's seen an ad. in a local paper for three new bungalows for sale near Farnborough, some twenty odd miles away. Already she's arranged a day off from work, looked at train and bus timetables, and rang the builder. All I had to do was to speak to the office and put my coat on. So I did. They were identical inside – two bedrooms, living room, bathroom and kitchen – but I preferred the one at the end because it had a larger front garden, space for a garage (if ever we could afford a car), a big old apple tree at the back and, in the front, a smaller, but more desirable, walnut tree. We could call it 'The Walnuts'. Jean didn't seem to mind what we called it. She had other things on her mind.

So within two weeks I found myself waiting on the steps of St.Pauls for a man I'd never seen before. It had all been arranged over the telephone. We'd put our caravan in the small ads.; he'd rang to say he was interested; haggled over the price; said he'd pay by cash, there and then; I said I'd think about it; Jean gave me a kick on the shin; so I accepted his offer. And here he was handing me an envelope stuffed with three hundred pounds worth of crinkly, white, five-pound notes. Most of it went as a deposit on the bungalow; the rest - along with the bit we'd managed to save – as a down payment on a new bed, two armchairs, fireside rug, electric cooker and a refrigerator. We were in heaven. Two months later Jean tells me she is pregnant. Later still, in labour.

I'm in the living room. Watching cricket on television. Middlesex at Lords. Compton and a tail ender at the crease. Touch and go. Very tense. So am I, but for a different reason. One ear half cocked for any sounds from the back bedroom. All very quiet. Molly, the midwife, last put her head around the door over an hour ago to say that "it 's coming along nicely – shouldn't be much longer". The minutes tick past. Tail ender is dropped at first slip. The knot in my stomach gets tighter. In my head an image keeps repeating itself over and over again:

*Southgate. About five years ago. I'm walking past a row of front gardens. In one of them stands a high-sided pram. Hood up. A young man comes sweeping down the path towards it. Puts his head inside, murmuring, talking softly. Pulls out a baby. Looks into its face, laughing. Baby chuckles back. Thrusts out his arms, holding baby high in air. Baby wriggles arms and legs with pleasure. Man holds baby close to his chest. Baby puts arms round his neck. They go back towards the house.*

*Gurgling and whispering to one another. A scene of mutual love and affection that lasts for all of thirty seconds. That leaves me yearning for the time when I can do the same to my own.*

*It's the last over before tea. Six runs to win. Compton to take strike.*

Molly's flushed face appears round the door: "Come on! Just about here! Hurry – you don't want to miss it do you? I go into the bedroom. Jean asplaw on a mountain of pillows and white sheets. Eyes and jaw clenched tight with determination. Hair and brow wet with perspiration. Molly tells me to sit on the edge of the bed and hold Jean's hand. A grunt. A push. And a wet, glistening bundle suddenly appears in the pit between Jean's legs.

I am instantly pulverised by a shaft of terror. So great is the shock, so dreadful the sight, a pain shoots through my head and I gulp for breath. For instead of the chubby pink form that I'd been expecting, this is a bright, purple-blue colour. The features of the face screwed up into a handful of wrinkled flesh. Lifeless. Horrible. The cause of its distress is obvious. Around its neck is wrapped a shining, slithery rope. Pulled tight like a snake choking the life from its prey. Something has gone terribly wrong. I am witnessing the death of my only child at the very moment of its birth. I hear a voice praying aloud. A man's voice. My voice. Then find myself on the floor. On my back. Looking up at the bed. Then Molly's voice sternly ordering me not to move and to stay where I am. ("I've got enough to do up here, thank you very much!") Confused, full of despair, I want the ground to open up and swallow me. It didn't. So I drag myself upright and slowly walk out of the room, averting my eyes away from the bed. Back to the television. They're coming off for tea. The scoreboard. Voice of the commentator. All totally meaningless. My whole life wrecked in the time it takes to bowl an over.

Suddenly, the cry of a baby. Is it my fevered imagination? And another. What can it mean? I must find out. Knock tentatively on the bedroom door. "Come in" says Molly, "everybody's waiting for you!"

There is Jean, sitting up, smiling. Cuddling a small bundle. The tiny features, now several shades of pink and red, reposed in sleep. Jean asks me what do I think of my new son? I can't answer. Holding back an avalanche of tears. My heart full. Attempting to erase the shame of my weakness by an offer to put the kettle on.

We had given him his name almost straight away. No need for a discussion - weighing up the pros and cons of this name or that. No trying to guess whether it'll suit him through the years to come. Or be the butt of jokes behind his back.

A name on which we both agreed. Predestined for him through a chance meeting two summers before:

*It was our first proper holiday together since we were married. A sort of belated honeymoon. At the small resort of Ventnor on the Isle of Wight. A private hotel on the slopes of a steep wooded valley leading down to the beach. Rhododendrons in bloom. Scent of pine needles and sea under the warm sun. The sparkle of rippling waves below our feet. Arcadia-on-sea.*

*At the table next to ours in the dining room sit a young family. A couple and their child – a small boy of about three years old. They come from Strawberry Hill in London. Professional people. Well behaved. Quietly happy. Close and content in each other's company. I can hardly take my eyes off the little boy. He has a striking resemblance – in both looks and manner – to my late young cousin, Billy. Golden curls. Blue eyes. Quick to laugh. Full of life. Both Jean and I fall in love with him. His name is Grenville.*

Now there are three of us, I must give some serious thought about our future. Where do I go from here? On the face of it, nowhere. I'm doing well at Royds. Now a fully fledged production man, my own desk, own phone, handling my own account, well thought of, responsible, etc, etc. But there's something nagging away at the back of my mind. In fact, three things. The first is money. My wages are fixed proportionally to the others. We all get a rise at Christmas. Also fixed. My only hope of more depends on being promoted another rung up the ladder. Some hope! All those above me are full occupied, with no sign of anyone falling off. They're more senior, more experienced, more firmly nailed down than me. Indeed, for anyone even to think of leaving this paragon of firms would be considered treacherous. And stupid. The name of Royds stands like a rock above the shifting tides of the huckster business. But I'm not so sure. Perhaps not so much a rock as a ship. With a hole in it. We haven't had a new account since the war. No cars. No detergents. No airlines. Still stuck with Bicycles, Beecham's Pills and Brylcreem. Why? No mystery about it. It's a business that lives on new ideas. The sort that young people, daring people, quick-witted people, have. New people. Not the sort of people who plan to stay on the same spot for the rest of their lives. Royds is sinking under the weight of the very loyalty that has kept it afloat for twenty years.

My next concern is what I want to be. What I want to do. I still have no qualifications, no job title, no professional standing. If I left Royds, I'd simply be Ex-Royds. Then what? Where lies the road after that? So I sit down at my desk and think seriously about my future. For all of thirty seconds. The answer lies directly in front of me! It's a door that leads out of the general production department into the art studio. A not very big room, with tubes of paint, jars of water, and pots filled with brushes of every size. Five artists sit at their easels, hard at work drawing shapes, painting fancy lettering, filling in designs with colour, retouching photographs with air brush and razor sharp scalpels. No phones. No order books. No ledgers. No calendars. Just Art. That's for me. That's what I'm cut out to do. But how? Never been to Art College. Far too old to start now, even if they'd have me. Have I already missed the boat? The one glimmer of hope is my skill at one thing: Typography. In the narrowest sense it's the business of specifying the type a printer is to use. As an architect is to a builder. As it happens, I'm rather good at it. I can make metal perform like rubber. But in the much wider sense, typography is the art of printing. So there it is, the perfect answer. Printing on one side of the door – Art on the other. On the threshold between them sits the Typographer. That's what I have to be.

And lastly there's the question of being twenty-five and being British. The confidence of youth looking right into the eyes of his nation, faltering with old age, tiredness and blank incomprehension. When we'd won the war, everyone thought we'd

just pick up where we left off, and assume our rightful position above all others. Morally. Intellectually. Economically. They'd be no stopping us now. Except the fact that we never really were on top. And now never could be. Everything is changing too fast. We're going to have our work cut out just keeping up with all the others.

*The 1948 Olympics were held in London. Threadbare and impoverished, it was a job even to fit everybody in. RAF Uxbridge was used as makeshift accommodation for the hundreds of athletes that arrived from all over the world. And, to help with their preparation for team events, the RAF was also to provide the competition. I was one of those chosen to play in games against the top footballers of foreign countries.*

*The first was Korea. None of us had even heard of it. Somewhere near China they say. The thought of them sending a football team all this way! What a joke! Until they started playing. A team of eleven short, puny-looking, pasty-faced, narrow-shouldered players with razor-sharp minds, lightning reactions and ball-juggling skills who never muttered a word yet passed to one another by some strange telepathic instinct. They beat us 4-0*

*And would have been a lot more if we hadn't defended ourselves with back-to-the-wall desperation.*

*The next game was against the United States of America. We knew where that was, but had no idea they'd ever heard of Association, as distinct from American, Football. Did they know we played with a round ball? They did. All thirty of them. Eleven on the pitch. As many as substitutes. Almost as many coaches, managers and medics. And all of them shouting to one another at the top of their voices. Non-stop. Instructions and invective are sprayed like a fire hose all over the pitch. When they score, there's a roar of triumphant jubilation that sends the pigeons fluttering up in fright. When we equalise, they all squabble between themselves, blaming everyone else for the disaster. At the end it was a draw, 2 – 2. For a scratch side we did pretty well. My only disappointment was not seeing Korea v. The USA. That was yet to come. But not on the playing field. The killing field.*

I managed to meet all three concerns in a single stroke. I answered an ad in the Advertiser's Weekly for a Typographer, at almost twice my present salary, placed by an up-and-coming young agency with Madison Avenue leanings and a rapidly growing list of clients which included a leading make of car tyres; a Hollywood film studio; and a High Street fashion chain. I apply. Have an interview. Am offered the job.

When I tell my old mentor, Gibby, he advises me, to my surprise, that I should take it. Says the best days at Royds are over. They all know it, but no one talks about it. Wishes me luck. I hardly know how to thank him for lifting the burden of guilt I feel. For I owe a great deal to both Royds and himself. Miss Franklin on the other hand, did her best to make me see sense. Took me to lunch at her prestigious club, The English Speaking Union, where we had Brown Windsor soup, Roast beef and Apple crumble. Over which, she told me I was throwing away a promising future, and that if persisted in following a more creative path, warned me I'd finish up like all those people in the studio! At my farewell do in the Blue Posts, just behind the Ritz, they gave me a glass

brimming with a fizzy drink that tasted vaguely of cider. It was champagne. The first I'd ever had. Everyone drank to my future success. I, quietly, to theirs.

*(End of Downturn)*

Robert Freeman's were in a large, elegant Georgian town house in Hill Street, Mayfair; Berkeley Square at one end, Shepherd's Market the other. Once built for rakish aristocrats. Now perfect for this sort of agency. Inside the imposing front door is a large hall with chandeliers and tiled floor. From it rises a circular marble staircase that climbs to the top floor of the house. There is a strong theatrical feel about the place. Sounds of voices, laughter, phones ringing, echo up through the space like noises-off. People appear and disappear as though it were a stage set. All you have to do is to guess the plot, and who might be in the cast. Not all that fanciful. Robert Freeman himself is married to Polly Ward, a West End leading lady; one of the company directors is Paddy Gray, son of Monsieur Eddie Gray of the Palladium's Crazy Gang; Big Mo in the studio is engaged to Shirley Eaton, top pin-up girl; and Ginger Baker, studio boy, drives everybody mad by relentlessly drumming on drawing boards, chair backs and water pots with the largest size paint brushes. It's all a lot more fun than at Royds. Especially now that I sit in the Art Studio on the top floor with the real artists. They're all young, lively and talented. Get asked for my opinion about a headline, pack design or illustration and then listened to anything I might have to contribute. I feel part of it all.

But for me, it wasn't enough. I'd always felt I could have done better at school and resented the lack of any yardstick in my professional career. For a typographer the only one that counted was the City & Guilds Certificate of Typographic Design. In the advertising game not many bothered with it. The only thing that mattered was whether or not you were up to the job. But that left the question – what job? How did others know what I was capable of? Come to that, how did I? So I decided I had to have a go at it. The London School of Printing explained the syllabus and loaned me all the books I would need. A much bigger affair than I'd thought. I stood back. Looked up at the pyramid that loomed up in front of me. Resolved to climb as high as I could.

The first thing I learn about learning is how much I didn't know. All that time at the production desk had hardly got me up the first few steps. So every morning on the train going up to London, and every evening coming back, an hour each way, I spent in the company of William Caxton, Eric Gill and the dozens more, who made the Art of Printing come alive for me. Until, that is, I get the letter informing me of the date of that year's City & Guilds examination.

There were about a dozen of us. The others look like art students or printing apprentices. They seem to know one other – from classes perhaps. But as I'd never been to any, and a good deal older, I'm the odd one out. The papers are handed round. Searching questions. Three hours to give the answers. Two hours later and I've finished the written part. All that time spent between Woking and Waterloo seems to have paid off.

Now for the final test. The practical. The one I'd most been looking forward to. Straightforward enough: design an invitation card for a cricket club's Annual Dinner and

Dance. All the words are there, all I have to do is draw the layout and mark it up with instructions for the printer. A doddle.

I flex my Hill Street muscles and produce a typographic masterpiece. Professional. Expert. Slick. With all the little tricks I'd ever learnt: Cursive initial capitals; optical letter spacing; fancy rules; ornaments...the lot.

All finished with twenty minutes to spare. So I sit back. Look at all the youngsters still struggling. Take a last admiring glance at mine. Eye dwells on the words 'Cricket Club'. A past memory leaps into my mind. And I'm hit in the stomach by a wet sandbag

*I'm fielding at first slip. Their opening bat takes guard. Ordinary enough sort of chap. Dusky skinned. Hatless. The fact that his name is Roy Marshall and opens for the West Indian test side and has just scored the fastest century ever against England makes him no less unremarkable. Today, being a Sunday, he's playing for his County, Hampshire, who our village club, Frimley Green CC, are hosting on the usual round of benefit matches. If he thinks this is just playground stuff he's in for a big shock.*

*Hemmings, our fast bowler comes roaring in to bowl the first ball of the match. High stepping, arms pumping, it scares the life out of most batsmen just to see him. And today, with a fresh, chill wind at his back, blowing straight down the pitch, and the slope of the ground in his favour, he looks unstoppable. I just hope that Roy Marshall isn't going to get hurt. Fred Hemmings hurls down the ball. Well pitched up. Straight at the stumps. To my amazement, the batsman doesn't step back to defend, as is usual with the first ball. Instead, he steps forward, no more than a short pace, right at it. Lifting his bat no higher than his knees. Brings it down with easy nonchalance. Catches the ball on the half volley. A thunderous whip crack as the centre of the bat meets the middle of the ball. Hits it straight back over Hemming's head. Already it's halfway to the boundary. And is still rising. Shrinks to a small black dot in the sky before dropping down in the next field. Far away. So simple. So precise. So just-so.*

All the qualities that are absent in my pathetic attempt at an invitation card. So I tear it up. Stuff the pieces in my pocket. Start on another with just fifteen minutes to go. I put the main line of copy right across the centre, halfway down. Above it, I arrange the words that precede it in single lines, also centred. Reducing the point size of the type, line by line. Do the same, in reverse, to the words coming after the main line. Choose my favourite typeface, Aldine Bembo – based on 16<sup>th</sup> century calligraphy - for every single line. It makes two triangle shapes, one inverted over the other. The whole design in graceful, elegant type forming the natural shape of a symmetrical diamond. So simple. So precise. So just-so. I finished it as the papers were being collected. No time even to give it a second thought.

Five weeks later I received my result. I'd been awarded the City & Guilds Diploma for Typographic Design. With Distinction. One of only a small handful to achieve the honour. Now I'm ready for anything

## Seven

As I turn the corner into Gray's Inn Road, I start shivering inside. Nerves? Fright perhaps? Or just good old human nature when you're about to step into the unknown? Some call it excitement, but in my case it goes a lot deeper than that. Whatever it is, it gets stronger as I get nearer the Sunday Times building.

I first started taking The Sunday Times the day after we were married. Until then I just read the two that my parents had delivered to the house for as long as I could remember: *News of the World* and *Reynolds News*. And, from the very first page of that very first paper on that very first day, I entered a totally different world: I travelled to places I'd never been; met people I didn't know; enjoyed meals I'd never tasted; music I'd never heard; plays I'd never seen; games I'd never played; spent millions I didn't own. In short, I discovered a life that until then I knew nothing about.

Week by week, over the years, this was the education I'd never had. Learning from those who greeted me every Sunday like close friends... Dilys Powell, Felix Aprihamian, Leonard Russell, Vivian Jenkins, J W Lambert, Brian Glanville, John Mortimer, Tom Stacey, Ernestine Carter, Maurice Wiggins, Peter Jay... Learned, expert, intelligent people who wrote simple, elegant prose with wit and understanding. Not for them the clichés, malice or Shakespearean quotations favoured by lesser writers. Headlines like signposts, not tombstones. The photographs, miniature works of art worth every one of their legendary thousand words. A layout that breathed white space through the columns of crisp black type. Even the paper it was printed on seemed to have a smooth crispness unlike any others. A newspaper that lived up to, in every way, the modest strap-line under the title: *One of the World's Great Newspapers*

*It certainly doesn't look it from the outside. Instead of the imposing frontage I'd been expecting, there's a rusting grid work of iron girders of a new building started twenty years before and never finished. The rest of the building is like a red brick factory. Around it the flattened acres of the blitz, now car parks. Could this really be the place that every week spawned a newspaper of such distinction and good taste?*

I'd spotted the ad in the 'Situations Vacant' columns. As usual, crammed with jobs for high-flying graduates and highly paid executives. But there, tucked down amongst them, to my amazement, is one with the heading 'Typographer'.

Even more astonishing was to find that it was the Sunday Times itself that was doing the looking! It could have just as well had my name on it, so certain was I that this was for me.

*But now, waiting in the drafty hallway, with the warm, paraffin smell of printing ink wafting up from presses below, I wasn't so sure. There must have been dozens of applicants, the best in the business, better qualified than I, for such a prestigious job. And as my doubts grew by the minute, so did my desire for getting it.*

I'm greeted by James Benson, a six-foot-something of a man with a voice and personality to match, who fills his small office to bursting point. He's head of the Research & Promotions Department, whose job is to persuade advertisers and their

agents to buy space in the paper. Which, as newspapers live on their advertising income, not on the pennies we pay, is crucial to their survival.

He tells me of his aim to run advertisements for The Sunday Times that are as good as the paper itself; in writing, illustration and presentation. 'Only the Best to attract the Best'. An ambition not as easy as it sounds. His small team of writers and layout people do what they can, so now he's looking for someone with experience from the Agency side.

Then suddenly asks me if I 'happen to play cricket by any chance?'. I tell him that I bat at about number four; bowl medium pace swingers; field in the slips; even keep wicket from time to time. He looks at me long and hard. Then out of the window. Turns and says 'That's what we're looking for – a good all rounder. When can you start?' And going back towards Holborn, trying not to dance on the pavement, I'm still not sure if I'm joining an elite advertising hot-shop or a cricket team.

I soon discovered it was both – and a lot more. Working for The Sunday Times was not just what you did, but how well it was done and how quickly. It was a place where the impossible was requested politely and as a matter of routine. To survive at all was as much a test of competence as a question of holding your nerve. And, being the sort of place it was, it wasn't long before my time came to prove myself.

I was asked to go and see Mr Michael Renshaw, the Advertisement Director. He was responsible for the whole Kemsley Newspaper Group, of which The Sunday Times was the flagship. From my position on the lower deck, he was somewhere up there on the bridge, not quite in gold braid but immaculate in a pale grey suit and old Etonian tie.

He asked if I would find the time to him a little favour 'by way of helping a close friend' and hands me a sheaf of typewritten papers covered with hand-written corrections. Explains it's a diary of a recent Mediterranean cruise by a number of mutual acquaintances who almost lost their lives when their yacht foundered in a freak storm. He would like it printed in the form of a small booklet in a private edition of just two hundred copies. Leaves it entirely to me to design and oversee its production. And as I'm leaving the room, casually adds 'Oh, and have them delivered to Clarence House addressed to Her Majesty The Queen Mother, if you would - no later than next Tuesday.

What he'd just asked for was almost impossible. Such a job to such a standard would normally take at least three weeks. Today is Thursday. I've got three days. For a brief moment our eyes meet. Mine into his to see if he was joking; He into mine to see if I flinched. He wasn't. I didn't. In that split second, without thinking about it, my pride, my lowly background, my determination to do well, suddenly erupted out of my heart and into my mouth. 'Yes of course'

When it was done, I thought it looked rather handsome: Dark blue leather finished covers with a small anchor, gilded and embossed on the front; well-spaced Baskerville on heavy ivory antique-laid paper with wide margins. Free of blemishes and printer's errors. Delivered on time.

A week later I get a phone call from Mr.Renshaw. He's had a letter from the Palace saying how pleased she was and thanking him for his efforts. He thought I'd like to know. That was all. But just from his tone of voice I knew that I'd just become an associate member of a rather exclusive, nameless, club.

It's Masonic-like influence extended even onto the cricket pitch. Every Wednesday during the summer months I was expected to turn out for the side. We played on secluded private grounds in leafy suburbs against teams of old-school old-boys, Whitehall sub-mandarins, show-business celebrities and advertising executives, sporting striped blazers with caps and ties to match. The pitches were immaculate, the strawberry teas sublime, and the after-the-match beer drawn straight from the wood. But should the wickets begin to fall, and it was your turn to bat, this pastoral paradise took on a much darker tone. Then, if the captain tells you to 'Hold on at all costs until teatime - we're settling for a draw. I'm depending on you', he meant lay down your life. And I did.

It didn't take me long to realise that, at The Sunday Times, to achieve the impossible was not greeted with hats in the air or slaps on the back. It was privilege enough to serve such a newspaper. But was its success due to those who worked for it? Or was it that its worldwide standing drew to it the very best people?

I never did find out, but I did discover that Jimmie Benson, under his six foot something of high-volume, high-octane personality, was also co-author of a best-selling story based on his wartime experiences as a naval sub-mariner. A specialist in midget submarines, he and another sat astride such a device, packed with high explosives, under the icy-cold waters of a Norwegian fiord in the dark, to slip through the bristling German defences guarding the battleship 'Tirpitz'. The book was made into an epic feature film *Above us the Waves* starring the heroes of British cinema. This was in production at the time of my joining the paper but was never ever mentioned. From time to time, when he was away from his office, Jennifer, his secretary, would say 'Oh he's just popped out for an hour or so - Shepperton Studios I think'.

On the floor above is Terence Ottway who, as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Airborne Division was awarded the Victoria Cross for the part he played in the invasion of France. His fleet of gliders, packed with troops, landed in pitch darkness at the wrong location. Surrounded by German troops, he rallied his men to fight their way out. Single-handedly silencing four machine gun posts.

The Manager of The Foreign Desk, another floor up, is Ian Fleming, who, every year while on six weeks leave in Bermuda, would turn out a new James Bond story constructed from incidents and characters he met during his time with Military Intelligence during the war.

On the top floor Dennis Hamilton the Editorial Director, was a senior staff officer to Field-Marshal Montgomery all through his Desert and Italian campaigns to the end of the war. He'd played a leading part in events that became a part of history and helped turn the course of war in our favour. And it was to this trusted aide that Montgomery turned to have his diaries of these years opened to the world through the columns of The Sunday Times.

And it didn't stop there. I began to realise that this shabby building in the Gray's Inn Road was full of people whose lives had been shaped by the war. When it began in September 1939, they were young, ambitious, and full of the excitements that lay ahead of them in their newspaper careers. For those that came back, now older than their years, their bright new future hadn't materialised and the building hadn't been touched. That was nearly fifteen years ago and it still hadn't been. There's nothing they could do about that, so they turned inwardly to the paper itself. Exorcising regret for the lost years by an inner resolve to make it the best there was. And they did. Week after week it led the way:

‘One of the World’s Great Newspapers’ – turned out by some of the greatest newspapermen in the world.

Although I couldn’t be one of them, I felt I was part of them. They’d been in the war, but I’d been through it. Their names were made out of printing, and I’d chosen printing to help make mine. I felt also that I had something to contribute to the paper in a way different from theirs. I’d come from Mayfair, the hub of the advertising business, to Fleet Street, the hub of theirs. In many ways poles apart, yet both living side-by-side on the same pages. Each relying on the other for their livelihood. Now I wanted to use my agency experiences to their advantage. It’s what Jimmie Benson meant by ‘wanting an all-rounder’.

One afternoon such airy-fairy notions suddenly became concrete. I get a phone call from Jimmie Benson. He’s at the film studios. There’s a crisis over the scene they’re shooting. He can’t get away. Would I stand in for him at an urgent meeting between heads of departments that has just been called? He’s not sure what it’s about but it could be something to do with the six-month readership figures that are due out. ‘Just make a few notes if anything happens – I’ll be back as soon as I can’.

They were all there - editorial, circulation, advertisement, publishing, publicity - a dozen or so hard-eyed men who are the sinews of the whole operation. It’s chaired by Cheadle, circulation director. Red faced and beaming from his lunch in the top-floor boardroom, he starts it off by making an announcement. In ringing Mancunian tones suitable for the crowning of a new world heavyweight champion he tells us that the ST has just passed the magic million figure for average weekly readership. The very first quality Sunday newspaper ever to do so. Having thus beaten our competitors to the punch, he, being the sort of man he is, wants to rub their noses in it by immediately launching a hard-hitting publicity campaign. He wants ideas now. Going round the table.

Up come all the usual ones: Charts; Comparative graphs; Readership figure in the biggest type in the brightest colours; Old photo of first edition alongside today’s; Reader’s competition for best slogan; Map of UK showing readership by counties; and a Message from the The Chairman; As they come up the table towards me, I frantically rack my brains for an idea. In a sudden flash I get one. But then, much worse, I feel my dreaded nightmare coming on.

Those years living through the blitz had left me a legacy of tattered nerves and a persistent stammer. It started during the air raids...became less painful afterwards...and gradually ever since been manageable in the normal everyday. But buried deep as it was it could suddenly fly out like a coiled spring. Especially when I had to speak out publicly and openly. Then the first word beginning with d,g,m or s, damns me to a miserable hellhole of being unable to get it out of my mouth. Try as I might, it always beats me. All I can then do is to mutter and squirm into silence.

But now I was cornered. Cheadle’s heard enough. He’s about to put this mediocre rubbish to the vote. I half raise my hand. ‘You’re one of Benson’s people aren’t you? Standing in are you? Houser, isn’t it? Yes, Mr.Houser have you anything to add? Let’s hear it then!’. And as one, all the heads turn. A dozen pairs of eyes staring at me. Curious, condescending, disinterested.

The next five seconds are the longest of my life. Torrents of fear and courage, indecision and certainty, past and present come tumbling together into a whirlpool somewhere in the

pit of my stomach. I offer up an urgent, silent prayer. Then, in an instant, I hear my own voice speaking. Unhurried, deliberate, loud and clear.

I tell them we should aim our good news at the advertising agencies, and tell it to them in a way they'd appreciate. That's concise, novel and honest – the three qualities of all the best campaigns. With the warm-up over, and seeing that they're getting interested, I start to reveal my idea.

I say that the most memorable thing about the million number is its six noughts strung out in a line after the single figure one. But if you placed one nought inside the other, in a series of concentric circles, reducing in size, it takes on the design of a target. Put the '1' in the bull's eye like an arrow and it says the game is won; the match is over; we are the champions. A vivid image that all will understand and few forget.

There isn't even a vote. I'm thanked. Told to get on with seeing that it's done. Cheadle gets to his feet. Everyone shuffles away. I'm left still sitting here. Stunned with knowing that the buried secret of my stammer has itself been buried. Forever.

When Jimmie gets back and I tell him about my target idea, it releases a guffaw that brings Jennifer scurrying in to see what's happened. He didn't say much more, but by the end of the month I'd been given my own room, complete with telephone and drawing board. And when next he called me into his office it was to offer me a three-year contract as promotions executive with The Kemsley Group with built-in salary increases.

As part of my induction I was sent on visits to all the regional offices where I was treated as someone rather special sent up from London. Manchester was, until then, the furthest North I'd ever been; Cardiff the furthest West; Sheffield my first time in Yorkshire; Edinburgh, the first time I'd flown in an aeroplane; Belfast, the first time I'd crossed the sea. Always someone to meet me at the other end and guide me around. I was put up at the best hotels, ate in the best restaurants, drank in the best clubs and met some of the most interesting people. A deluxe tour of my own country that didn't cost me a penny. In return I offered my services to the dozen or so daily newspapers and to help in any way I could. I was the first from HQ to do so. They took me at my word and, as all this came on top of my Sunday Times work, for the next three years I was at full stretch. I couldn't have wished for more.

The same was true of what was happening at the same time at the other end of my daily train journey to and fro from London. Grenville had now been joined by a younger brother - Jonathan. The garden had been planted, a driveway laid, a fishpond dug. I had made a swing wide enough for the two boys to sit side by side. Then hung it from a bough of a great big apple tree in the back garden. I swung them both, backwards and forwards, higher and higher, shrieking with rapturous terror. What a lark! What fun! How happy we were! The only shadow lurking at the back of my brain is the thought that with their bedtime only a few hours away it would be a week before I see them again. A family life of two days, a working life of five.

I always got home late, and left first thing in the morning. Jean was always there to feed me, make sure I was well turned out, and that I was told of everything the boys had done, said and been up to. Despite my long hours away she never complained or recounted her own daily round of washing, shopping, cleaning and cooking. I too avoided any mention of meetings, brainwaves, presentations, or the private goings-on of

my workmates. Our two lives seemingly poles apart at either end of a suburban railway line. But it really wasn't like that.

I had taken a course of driving lessons, passing the test first time. Found a second (or third) hand small family saloon, scraped together enough to buy it, and at weekends in the summer, set off, like thousands of others, to the seaside. With the boys splashing about in the water, Jean and I would sit together on the sand, side by side, watching our children. Just like two children ourselves. If we'd ever been asked for a wish to be granted, it would surely have been for everything to stay just it was. But we weren't. It didn't. Things were about to change.

## Eight

Looking back, I suppose I should have seen it coming. Jimmie Benson did. He'd been offered a top job in a top advertising agency and made the jump I'd made three years before but in the opposite direction. We were all sorry to see him go. Especially me. I'd been hoping that the department would have grown by now. But the powers-that-be seemed to be blind to advertising's increasing muscle power. Huge budgets and canny space buying had given the hucksters power to make or break the Barons of Fleet Street. Handshakes had become arm locks in this gentleman's world of striking deals. And the media's best plan would have been to use the same aggressive persuasion tactics in its defence. But not Lord Kemsley. He was still content to have us tucked away in a brown painted corner of his brown-lino empire. Hoping for the return of those pre-war days when a good lunch at Simpson's could drop a juicy fifty thousand pound advertising campaign in his lap. But not anymore.

It's Wednesday afternoon. We're playing at a club in North Finchley.

I'm batting with Hugh Begg. It's the end of an over. There's to be a change of bowler. The captain begins to reset his field. One of our people comes out of the pavilion carrying a glass of water. Scuttles towards Hugh as if he's being chased by a bulldog. His water sloshing out onto the grass. Whilst Hugh drinks the remaining dregs, the messenger speaks quickly and urgently into his ear. The umpire begins calling for play to restart. Hugh comes walking down the wicket towards me. I meet him half way. I expect him give me fresh orders on what we should do in the light of the change of tactics by the other side. But instead, he blurts out, wide-eyed, 'Guess what! We've just been taken over! Raid on the Stock Exchange! Two hours ago! Kemsley's gone! But there's no time to hear anymore – the umpire's getting shirty. With my head spinning with questions of who our new boss might be, and what his arrival might do to my job, I have to wrench my mind away to concentrate on something even more important. I have to take a new guard. The last bowler was right arm over the wicket - this bowler bowls left arm round. And from the length of his run up, is fast. He comes tearing up to the crease. My grip tightens on the handle. I squint through half closed eyes. Here comes the first ball...

Everything about him was unexpected. Even his name: Roy Thomson. (Roy?). No one in Gray's Inn Road had ever heard of him. A Canadian by birth but made his money in Scotland. Bought *The Scotsman* five years ago. Then won the franchise for Scottish Television, when he coined the memorable phrase "Licence to print money". Not surprising, as he's an accountant, not a media man. Got The Sunday Times and the rest of the Kemsley Group for relative peanuts by getting Eric Cheadle to smuggle confidential figures out from under the noses of his fellow directors in return for a handsome retirement settlement. The price of being loyal to your boss.

It was said that Roy Thomson had first got into the business by selling radio sets to backwoodsmen in deepest Ontario. He would trudge through the snow pulling a sledge laden with them. Finding a remote cabin, he'd give a demonstration of his magic boxes. They bought one on the spot. It always worked. Suddenly they were connected to the big world outside of their local pine forest. And the price? Cheap! Not much more than the wholesale price that Roy had paid. For it wasn't selling radios that interested him. Neither was it the thought of producing programmes to entertain and educate their listeners. No, it

was something much bigger – *Advertising!* Anyone with anything to sell was queuing up to have their tempting offers go crackling over the miles of snowy waste right to the firesides of all these people they'd never even met. Happy to pay for the privilege of having someone to read a few words into a microphone. And the more ears they could reach the more they were prepared to pay. Roy borrowed some money to buy a radio station.. Sold more radios. Charged the advertisers more money. Began to make his fortune. Licence to Print Money Mark One. Now, still pulling his sledge, he'd arrived at the Gray's Inn Road

The studio door swings open. In shuffle half a dozen strangers. At their head the most ordinary man you've ever not seen. Short. Stout. Sixtyish. Dark blue serge suit, shiny with wear. Thick grey hair, thinning with age. Clean-shaven. Ruddy complexion. Bespectacled. But what spectacles! The lenses like the bulls-eye glass you get in the panes of Elizabethan windows. So thick you can't see the eyes on the other side. Yet thick enough that he can see everything that's going-on on your side. This is Roy Thomson. Shakes hands with everyone in the room, including the studio boy. Calls us all by our first name.

("Bern-ard"). Shuffles out. Goes right through the building from top to bottom, not missing a single person. Captured us heart and soul. Became "Uncle Roy" from that moment on.

One of the first things he did was to order that work is restarted to complete the new building as quickly as possible. The architect's blueprints come out of the draw where they've been for the past twenty-five years. Uncle Roy wants to know what it'll look like when it's finished. I get the job of having an artist's impression – coloured and in perspective – made from the scale drawings. I track down a genius at such things at his home in Esher. As we want it in a hurry, and he's busy, he agrees to do it if I get the plans to him that night.

It was dark, wet, and cold. I had some trouble finding it. A converted redbrick barn at the end of a narrow lane. Garden leading down to the black river sliding past. Inside, oak beams, a roaring log fire, two dogs stretched out in front of it, children's toys on the floor, the smell of grilled kippers, a glass of red wine and Gordon Cullen and his wife. Charming, intelligent, friendly. They ask if I would like to join them for supper. I'd have loved to, but politely declined. The roads might be busy this time of night. My wife is expecting me. I'm still a long way from home. Also, although I didn't say it, I felt envious of their peaceful, placid, unhurried, lives. Living, working and bringing up a family under one roof. Doing what he liked best. Spending his time with those he loved most. A seed is sown. I realise that's what I want to do more than anything. One day I will.