

## About QueenSpark Books

QueenSpark Books was founded in 1972 as part of a campaign to save the historic Royal Spa in Brighton's Queen's Park from being converted to a casino. The campaign was successful and it inspired participants to start collecting memories of people living in Brighton and Hove to preserve for future generations. QueenSpark Books is now the longest-running organisation of its kind in the UK.

More than one hundred books later, as part of our 45th anniversary celebrations, we are making the original texts of many of our out-of-print books available for the first time in many years.

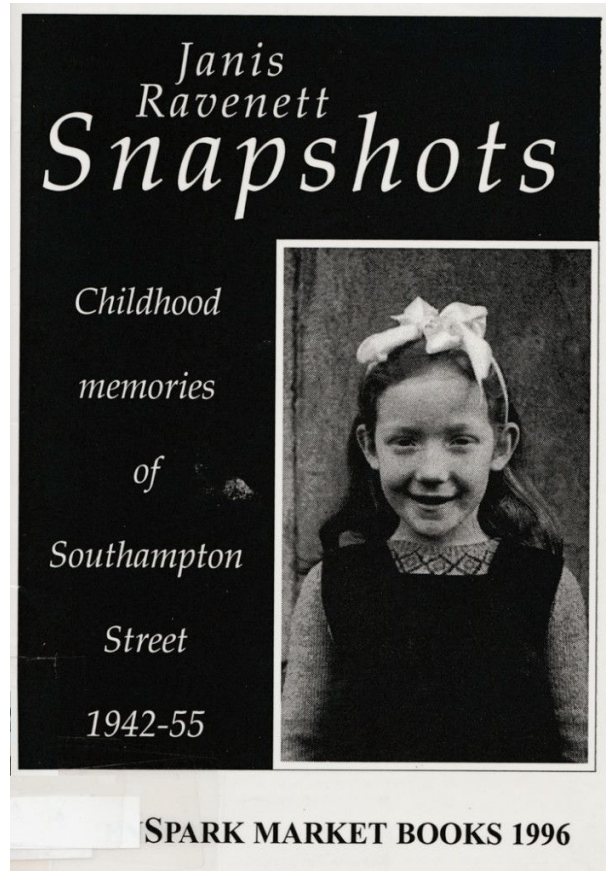
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## About this book

In her 1996 autobiography, Janis Ravenett recalls her memories of Southampton Street in the Hanover area of Brighton, during the years between 1942 and 1955. Janis describes a childhood that was happy and full of fun, living in a house in a close-knit community with few modern conveniences, and tells of the excitement of swimming at Black Rock pool, visiting the then new and modern estate of Coldean, and taking a trip to Woodingdean.

This book provides a unique first-person account of childhood filled with love and companionship in post-war Brighton.

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# SNAPSHOTS

## Childhood memories of Southampton Street 1943-55

### Foreword

I was born at Brighton General Hospital in the autumn of 1942.

My father, Bill Sheldon, came to Brighton from the village of Pentre in South Wales during the depression of the 1930s, in search of work. My mother was born at 56 Southampton Street, in the Hanover district of the town, and they met at her brother's wedding. My father proposed and was accepted that same evening and on Boxing Day 1939 they shared a double wedding at Saint Paul's church in West Street with his brother Danny who later served a term as Mayor of Brighton.

My parents set up home at number 56 and it was here that I spent my childhood. For many years, until his death in 1968, my father represented Hanover Ward on the Brighton Borough Council.

This book is a series of personal childhood memories, written from a child's point of view. It tells of people and places that were important to me and of how it felt to be growing up in Hanover immediately after the war.

### The Homestead

The house in which I spent my childhood was set in a backstreet terrace in the Hanover district of Brighton. It had no bathroom or hot water supply and only an outside loo situated at the end of a red brick path in the backyard. It meant home and security to me and my older brother Bert. We lived there with my parents and maternal grandmother. From the street, three steps led up to the front door, above which was a fan-light bearing a stencil reading *The Homestead*.

We spent most of our time in the big basement room at the front of the house which we called the kitchen, although no cooking ever took place here to my knowledge. The range or Kitchener had long since been removed and we had a lovely living coal fire for warmth. To one side of this fire stood Nan's upright Windsor armchair and to the other side an easy chair for Dad. I have no memory of a special chair for Mum.

The walls were plain and painted green to about half way up, then a narrow band of brown paint separated the two halves, the top half being distempered in cream. Against the wall which faced the window stood a horse hair sofa or chaise longue covered in some kind of cold black slippery material. I used to pretend that the head end of this was a horse and go galloping away across imaginary fields. My Mum would say, "Get off and stop `riling' on the furniture, or you'll break it," and off I would reluctantly get.

A large table and chairs filled the middle of the room and beneath the window stood my Dad's bureau, a very precious and important piece of furniture. Just inside the door and opposite the fireplace stood a huge sideboard, and on top of it in pride of place, was Dad's wireless set. It seemed enormous to me and I can remember spelling out the words SUPER HETERODYNE on the front and wondering what they meant. But no-one ever explained to me, and I still don't know.

In the recess beside the fire was a built-in cupboard and if we wanted Ruth's Mum from next door we would open the cupboard and bang the wall with a shoe. Two minutes later in she would come calling, "Did you want me Doffie?" when she got to the top of the stairs. No-one ever locked their doors in those days.

Next to this room was the scullery where Mum cooked and heated water in a large gas fired copper. Later a bath was installed in part of this room, but as tiny children we were bathed in a tin bath which hung on the wall when not in use.

From outside these two rooms a flight of bare wooden stairs led up to the ground floor. Here on the bottom stair I would often sit and pretend to be in Africa. This seems really strange now since I realise I had no idea where Africa was or what it was like, and why did I have to be alone and on the bottom stair? I never told anyone about Africa except Monica - my ugly, ugly doll, whom I thought beautiful and who shared all my secrets. When I was recovering from rheumatic fever I longed for a "sleeping doll" and apparently she was the only one my parents could get. She really was ugly, as everyone delighted to tell me, especially my older brother Bert, but I didn't care. She had sleeping eyes and she loved me, so what did anything else matter?

Another game I loved to play on these stairs was called "shoe shops." If you ran up and down you could produce a lovely important sound. I would pretend to be a grown-up shop-lady going down to the stock room without holding on to the rope which served as a hand rail. My Mum or Nan would always try to stop this game in case I fell - but I don't remember that I ever did fall. They probably didn't like the noise of me up and down, up and down "Yes madaming, no madaming" away to myself.

A door at the top of these stairs led into the backyard, or garden as we called it. Against the right-hand wall stood the shed and coal bunker from the roof of which I could gain access to Ruth's garden. At the bottom of the yard, next to a large lilac tree, stood the loo, and beside the loo some wooden steps led up into some allotments. Standing with your back to this door you faced a long narrow passage leading directly to the front of the house. There were two rooms on this floor, Nanny's bedroom at the back and the front room or sitting room at the front. The walls of this passage were distempered in some neutral colour with what was called stippling all over them. Mum was very pleased and proud when it was first redecorated soon after the war ended.

Just inside the front door stood a hall stand for coats and umbrellas etc. This was made of dark polished wood with two dark green tin trays at the bottom to catch the drips from wet umbrellas. There was a small mirror in the middle, but this was often obscured by all the coats which people hung there, especially when we had visitors, which was very frequently.

The top flight of stairs was carpeted and led to the remaining two bedrooms. One belonged to my parents, and the other I shared with Bert. As we grew older the ground floor front room was made into a bedsit for Nanny, and Bert and I were promoted to a room each. Although I missed having him there to talk to at first, I soon learned to enjoy the privacy and my bedroom became the centre of my fantasy world.

## **Mummy**

She was tall and slim with dark, curly hair and she always wore glasses. I used to love watching her put on her make-up while pulling what, to me, looked like funny faces in the mirror above the fireplace. Her lipstick was always bright red and I thought this quite beautiful.

Her hands were very soft with long carefully shaped nails, especially the two pinkies. It fascinated me to see her carefully filing these finger nails ever so gently and slowly, sitting at the big table in the middle of the room, all the while carrying on an animated conversation with Nanny who disapproved of make-up and nail polish. Nanny called it "trash" and would say, "I don't know why you want to put that muck on your face."

Mummy would sit for hours each evening beside the coal fire, knitting and listening to the light programme on the wireless set. She made me jumpers with pictures on the front which she called "Fair Isle." I would sit at her feet and watch the picture growing row by careful row. Palm trees and camels in bright colours appeared gradually before my gaze and I longed to be able to do things like this myself. The different-coloured balls of wool would be tucked here and there about her lap but she never seemed to get them tangled or knit the wrong colour.

"Show me how to do it - please," was my daily plea and as soon as I was old enough she did.

Upstairs in her bedroom she had something which I truly envied and wanted with all my heart. In a drawer in her dressing table she kept a pair of maroon woollen "slacks." Ladies in these days didn't wear trousers and Mum considered herself a fashion leader whenever she put them on. Daddy loved to see her in them but Nanny would sniff disapprovingly and then grin at her and say, "Oh Doffie not those trousers again."

On rare occasions Mum would consent to me putting them on when I was playing at dressing up. This had to be when she was in a very good mood as it took a lot of safety-pins and time to fix me in them. I would parade around the bedroom thinking I

looked the bees-knees, frequently tripping over when the pins came undone and the trousers slipped lower and lower over my tiny hips.

Of all the things we did together cooking was my favourite. Sometimes we would make currant cakes and I would wait impatiently for them to cook so that we could sit down and eat them warm from the oven. There was a little mould shaped like a fish and this was the best of all. Trying to place a currant in just the right spot for his eye before he went into the oven could take a long time and much careful positioning. Her speciality was custard slices and as she decorated them with icing sugar and hundreds and thousands I would sit at the table watching and eagerly nibbling the end pieces and misshapes she rejected.

The other kind of cooking was even better, but didn't happen so often. I possessed a small tin oven which could stand on the kitchen table and it was my pride and joy. There were two burners on the top and an oven at one side. Next to the oven was a container for cotton wool. By soaking the cotton wool in methylated spirit and setting light to it, you could actually make the cooker produce heat.

Sometimes on a wet and windy afternoon when she had cleared away the lunch things and done the washing up, Mum would set this cooker up for me and we would sit together carefully heating small amounts of water and stirring Dolly Mixtures in the other saucepan with a tiny spoon until they melted. This mess was then fed to my ever-patient dolls Penny and Monica.

Every night Mum would tuck us into bed and listen while we said our prayers. On Saturday and Sunday mornings we would wake to find that she had placed a small parcel beside each of our beds. These parcels contained a couple of biscuits or a marmalade sandwich and we never realised as we enjoyed eating them that it was to keep us quiet so that the grown-ups could all have a nice lie-in.

While doing the house work she would often sing the same song, "Let him go let him tarry, let him sink or let him swim," she would warble and the word "tarry" puzzled me. How did one "tarry," and where, it must be something to do with the water if he was swimming. Why did I never ask her?

When she was going to a Council "do" with Daddy I would watch her getting ready and doing her face and I thought she looked beautiful. It would please me when Daddy said, "Toots you look great, give us a cwtch," and they would hug each other, but Bert would say, "Oh stop that you two," and then we would all laugh and off they would go leaving us with Nanny for the evening.

## **Nanny**

I stood at the top of the basement stairs and watched as the old lady went slowly down ahead of me - backwards! Carefully she put both feet on each stair in a childlike way

and supported herself by clutching the hand-ropes with one hand and resting the knuckles of the other hand on each stair in turn.

This was my maternal grandmother and the most wonderful person in the world to all her large family.

She was then about seventy years old, but suffered from sugar diabetes and was very frail. Every morning as soon as breakfast was finished my mother would give her an injection of insulin. Often she did not come downstairs at all but sat in the armchair by the window, "watching the world go by." Her hair was sparse and white and always drawn into a bun at the nape of her neck. I never ever saw the hair loose except when it was being combed. Her face had never known the touch of make-up nor had she ever worn perfume.

Her skin was the softest skin that I had ever felt and her large lap was undoubtedly THE BEST place to be in the whole entire world! She could put right any wrong, wipe out any fear and totally eradicate any unhappiness by simply reaching down and lifting me onto her lap and gently cuddling my face against her ample bosom. Her eyes were pale blue and when she laughed - which was often - her whole body shook with giant chuckles.

Because she lived with my parents I felt she belonged to me alone. On more than one occasion I fell foul of visiting cousins by demanding that they get off "my" Nanny's lap. Even when she was dead I still felt I had special rights to her, and could never understand why my many cousins seemed to think she was "theirs."

For me the most wonderful privilege was to be allowed into Nanny's bed. Because her health was failing the old lady spent a lot of time in bed, and always retired early in the evenings. Sometimes, when my parents went out, I was allowed to climb in beside her for a cuddle. I could usually persuade Nanny to let me stay for a long time and to tell me a story. These stories were about people she had known who were now long dead. They all involved a rich young girl called Miss Annie who had servants and was driven around in a pony and trap. Only many years later - after Nanny's death - did I realise that the stories were true and that Miss Annie was in fact Nanny! Apparently she was from a "good" family who disowned her when she became pregnant before marriage. She married the baby's father but he turned out to be a wastrel and Nanny often told her own children that only their love for her and need of her enabled her to carry on living.

She had raised twelve children of her own plus two "adopted" sons, and worked as a waitress to support them all. All of her children adored her and did all they could to make her last years as happy as possible. The husband had died before I was born so I never knew him at all. Nanny's children always referred to him as "the old man" so I never thought that he sounded very nice.

Beside her bed Nanny kept a large pile of glossy books called *The Picturegoer Annual*. Each Christmas she received a new one as a present and I loved to lie beside her and

look through these books. They contained pictures and stories about all the big Hollywood stars of that era and to me they were wonderful. They introduced me to a completely new world and I would plead to be allowed to look at "just one more please," before being sent off to my own bed.

I never left for school without going in to kiss Nanny goodbye and hers was always the face I saw first when I got home. She spent many hours sitting by the window and I would spot her from the distance and begin to run for a hug and a big kiss.

In her room stood the piano where I was made to practise for half an hour each day and suffer through the dreadful lessons with Miss Prior - who insisted that ANYONE even I could play the piano if only they would try! I never understood why, but Nanny agreed with Miss Prior and would say, "Come on Janis Ann my girl, get on with it and practise that piano." She would sit and listen to my efforts and never let me stop until the allotted thirty minutes had passed.

This was her only blind spot as far as I was concerned, we spent many hours together and I always ran to her if Mum was cross with me. She would give me a secret cuddle before sending me back to face Mum's anger. Sitting on a footstool at her feet I learned to crochet and embroider flowers onto hankies. She taught me how to play Patience and Crib, Sevens and Rummy and she always had time to spare for either me or Bert.

Nanny died when I was eleven and my childhood ended with her death - my world was never to be so safe and happy again.

## **Daddy**

A tall broad-shouldered Welshman with laughing blue eyes and a moustache which tickled when he kissed me. A man who filled the house with singing and my world with joy and laughter. He could make my Mother's eyes light up like candles on a Christmas tree and, as far as I was concerned, there was nothing in the world he couldn't do!

When we were small my brother and I would sit, one on each of his palms clutching his arms like riders on a carousel and he would swing us simultaneously towards each other and away again while we screamed with delighted laughter.

At tea time I would wait impatiently on the steps of number 56 until I saw him turn the corner of the street. Then I would run as fast as I could towards him, holding out both arms and flying along the pavement to hurl myself into his arms. He would stoop towards me and sweep me into the air - spinning in a circle - my face looking down into his upturned face - and then he would kiss me - and I would feel the tickle of his "sharpies" or moustache.

Holding his hand tightly I would lead him towards the house pouring out to him all the insignificant happenings of my day, my tongue tripping over itself in my haste to take

him into my confidence. Always - every single day - during tea he would ask me and my brother Bert the same question, "What did you do at school today?" Each day I would catalogue the most important things to tell him and he was always ready to help the school in any way he could. He loved to mend broken toys for the teachers or help with any odd jobs, and once he built a three-walled Wendy house for the class-room. I was very proud of him and thought no-one else's Daddy could be half as wonderful as mine.

Every Sunday morning Bert and I would climb into bed with Daddy while Mummy was cooking breakfast. We would play wonderful games of "Riding the Tiger" or piggy back rides until he pleaded for mercy. Then we would all lie quietly while Daddy told wonderful stories about people like King Alfred who burnt the cakes or the builder who got tired while building a house so decided to "Bung a low" roof on it and go home.

But best of all were the stories about a naughty cripple boy. This boy wore leg irons on both legs and was always doing incredibly naughty things by accident. Once, for example, he tried to jump like his brothers and sisters did but of course he fell and his leg irons went right through his Mother's horse hair sofa covering. When he wasn't being naughty he spent a lot of time being the village hero. Then he would rip off his leg irons, dash onto the "rec" and score the winning goal for the school football team. Or sometimes he kept his leg irons on but ran two or three miles to fetch help when disaster threatened the village.

My Dad was a keen member of Brighton Male Voice Choir and sometimes I was taken to hear them sing. My favourite item was *Pedro the Fisherman*, because it contained the words "Let your dreams of Pedro go to HELL!" I thought it was very naughty and exciting.

He was only forty-three when, following a game of five-a-side football, he suffered his first heart attack. This was a terrible shock to him since he believed in his own indestructibility, and after that his personality, although basically unchanged, was never quite the same. His wonderful placidity could no longer be taken for granted, little things would worry him and when he was tired, he would become very irritable.

We all loved him dearly and when he died very suddenly aged fifty-eight I was shattered. It just didn't seem as if the world could possibly continue without him - he had always been so enthusiastic and vital and alive!

Of all the things that people said about him after his death I thought the most apt was:

"God fashioned his smile of sunshine  
And moulded his heart from gold."

### **The doll's house**

It was Christmas Eve 1948 and I was so excited I could hardly breathe. Tonight Father



Christmas would come! When Bert and I were both fast asleep he would creep down the chimney into the bedroom we shared and fill our stockings with toys and presents of all kinds. Bert and I had both written our letters a long time ago and I had been counting the days until it would be Christmas. I had asked him for a doll's house like the one Ruth next door had and I didn't think I would live until tomorrow if bedtime didn't come soon. I had posted my letter up the chimney and Mummy had watched Father Christmas collect it so I knew I would definitely get one!

But it was still only three o'clock and Mummy still had lots to do before tomorrow. Every Christmas lots of relations came to visit because Nanny lived with us and some of them would have to sleep here because they lived in a place called London near the King.

One who always stayed was Uncle John and I didn't like him at all. He was so tall and thin he didn't seem as if he could stand upright and he reminded me of a huge daddy long legs. Also he was a horrible tease and loved to pop Bert's and my balloons with his cigarette and then scream with dreadful laughter. His wife, Auntie Myra, was really nice and used to tell him not to be a "naughty boy." I wondered why Auntie Myra loved him at all if he was always so naughty.

Mummy and Nanny were still busy cooking and Daddy was adding balloons to the paper chains in the kitchen. The whole house smelt wonderful but oh, when would bedtime come? I thought that the sooner I went to bed the sooner it would be tomorrow and I would possess that most magic of all things - A DOLL'S HOUSE!

At last tea was over, we were both washed and in our pyjamas and clutching a large stocking each. Bert and I climbed the two flights of stairs to our bedroom. Hasty prayers, a quick kiss goodnight for Mummy, then close your eyes and will yourself to go to sleep!

Complete and total stillness and darkness all around me! I held my breath and listened to Bert's gentle breathing. Had he been? Was it morning yet? My heart was beating so fast I was afraid to look. I opened one eye and saw the lumpy outline of a bulging stocking at the bottom of the bed. Taking a huge breath I murmured, "Bert - he's been," and sat up straight and wide-eyed to see the doll's house!

I sat in bed rigid with disappointment and stared around the room in disbelief. There was no sign of a doll's house anywhere in sight! Climbing out of bed I crept into the next room and hurled myself at Mummy and Daddy's bed in stunned disappointment. "He didn't bring it - Mummy - he really didn't bring it!" And I began to cry. Very quiet gentle tears that slid slowly down my cold cheeks.

"Oh, don't cry - don't cry on Christmas day," said Mummy. "Let's put on your dressing gown and go downstairs - we'll make a drink for everyone shall we?"

Stunned into obedience by my awful grief I allowed myself to be bundled into dressing gown and slippers. Completely ignoring the stocking full of surprises I clutched

Mummy's hand and crept compliantly down the two long flights of stairs to the kitchen - slow tears still trickling down my face.

And there it stood - in the middle of the big table, all blazing and twinkling with tiny tiny lights. And there beside it, watching my face through the mist of tears in his own eyes was Daddy!

### **One row plain one row purl**

I was just desperate to learn how to read, but I was still quite young and although I tried and tried I just couldn't understand the printed word. Because I thought reading was such a grown-up skill, I much admired Bert who seemed to me to do it with ease. In fact I used to borrow his comics and stare fixedly at each picture in turn for what I deemed a long enough period of time. By doing this I hoped that the casual observer would think I was reading the words printed under each picture.

Although I could not read I did have other skills which quite impressed visiting aunts and cousins alike, I had learned to knit! For some considerable time I had spent many happy hours sitting quietly on the little footstool beside the coal fire watching my Mum who was a skilled performer in this domestic art. The rhythmic click, click, click of the needles and steady movement of her fingers fascinated me. Watching the coloured threads being intertwined so neatly and seeing the shiny picture on the pattern being reproduced slowly, day by day, were all part of the pleasure for me. Finally after much pleading she had agreed to show me how it was done. Apparently I took to it like a duck to water, much to her surprise. This was apparently quite a coup at my young age and my skill was much debated within the family; admired by some while being regarded as somewhat bizarre and undesirable by others.

Being so young, I was of course slow and faltering at first. But, being a quiet child, I was more than happy to practise and practise till I got it right. Now I had been promoted to my own pair of bright plastic needles and a ball of rather dull grey sock wool. However I thought it was the bee's-knees and I was making myself a purse. All I needed, Mum had explained, was a rectangle of stocking stitch which we would then fold into three, fasten with a popper and hey presto my very own purse!

The reason for the promotion was that I had just mastered "purl." With my tongue clamped firmly between my teeth and a feeling of dogged determination, I sat there by the fire slowly and carefully travelling back and forth, back and forth. If for any reason I was interrupted I would become completely lost, not knowing by looking at it whether I was in the middle of a plain or a purl row.

By now the day was wearing on and Mum was fed up with my constant wails for help. "Leave that alone now will you - you're tired - that's why you can't do it - leave it till the morning. Come on - BED for you my girl - NOW!"

"Oh Mummy PLEASE I want to finish it."

"You can finish it tomorrow - come on now."

"Well then can I take it up to bed and do some when I wake up - PLEASE?"

"Oh alright then but hurry up now - bed."

"How will I know if it's plain or purl I need to do when I wake up?"

"Janis - BED!"

"Oh I know - will you leave me a note - PLEASE?"

"Alright but only if you're in bed by the time I count to ten - one... two..."

I was gone, flying into the kitchen to brush my teeth. I stampeded up the stairs as fast as my little legs would carry me. In the morning, as soon as I opened my eyes I thought "knitting" and reached out to pick it up from where Mum had left it. Sitting up properly I reached over and picked up the note - and that is when it hit me again - right between the eyes. Life was just IMPOSSIBLE for a non-reader such as me! Oh I wish I was SIX like Bert - then I could read!

### **"A sickly child"**

As a young child, I enjoyed a reputation for being sickly. My very first memory is of lying on a bed made from two armchairs pushed together beside the fire in our big living room. I had been suffering from rheumatic fever and had apparently almost died. I was four years old and can remember calling out to be turned over simply so that Mummy would come and speak to me. The illness had made me so weak that I could not turn over or even look around the room without help. For several days neither my Mother nor Nanny had gone to bed, but had sat up nursing me and taking it in turns to doze beside the fire.

One day they told me I was going upstairs into the "front room" the following day. I thought I was going to be better and sitting up in a chair, but they made up a bed for me on the Put-U-Up and lit a fire in the grate. This is the first time I remember a fire in that room. A specialist from the hospital visited me at home because I was too ill to be taken out to visit him. My parents decided that even if they had to sell their dining room suite to pay his bill, it was worth the expense. Fortunately this sacrifice did not prove necessary.

According to my Mum the specialist worked a miracle and I began to recover from the day of his visit. I am more inclined to think that the tablets he prescribed had something to do with it. They were called M & B tablets and were probably some kind of early

antibiotic. The illness left me with a heart murmur, which is I believe quite common, but it worried my Mum throughout my childhood.

Several times over the years, I was put to bed under doctor's orders and kept there for a week or so at a time. Visiting aunts would "ooh" and "aahh" at me and say things to my Mum like, "We never thought you'd save her." Over the years, when it became obvious that I was well and truly saved, this phrase changed to, "We never thought you'd rear her," and was even quoted on my wedding day.

Going to school was a big adventure, but my reputation had preceded me. Mum had spoken to the school and I was not allowed to run around in the playground or do PT for quite some time. Bonnet, gloves and fur-lined boots were the order of the day in all but the mildest weather, and Nanny would insist I buttoned up my coat before leaving the house, "Otherwise you shut all the cold air in with you," she would say as she kissed me goodbye.

Being confined to bed had its compensations, especially when my arms and legs ached and felt stiff. There was always a supply of oranges then, and new books to read, which I loved. People would come to visit and do jigsaws with me or tell me stories and I don't remember minding very much on the whole, except when I heard the children come out at playtime in the school playground next door. I would lie and listen to the shouting and laughter and wish I could join in.

By the time I went to secondary school at the age of eleven I was quite fit and well, then Mum's constant cry of, "Come and sit down quietly," changed to one of, "Why don't you go out to play Janis, and take your nose out of that book for five minutes do!"

## **Finsbury Road School**

Forget surfing the Internet, for the children of 1940s Hanover, Finsbury Road School was our window on the world. The entrance was two doors away from where we lived and I couldn't wait to be old enough to go there. Bert went a whole year ahead of me and I was green with envy. They taught him how to read and write his name and all sorts of grown-up things. He could even tie his own shoe laces - I just couldn't wait to go.

The infants' department had a separate entrance in Southover Street and to this heaven on earth my Mum was going to take me the very next morning. I can distinctly remember Bert telling me not to be nervous. He said that he would only be in the next room and if I started crying I should ask the teacher to fetch him and he would look after me.

Years later I realised that this was a downright lie and teachers never fetched older brothers for any reason apart from impending death. At the time however I only wondered why on earth he thought I might cry.

Apart from the wonderful smell of chalk dust and warm milk, the only clear memory of my first day is playing in the sand table and watching fascinated as lots of tiny low tables were set up at the other end of the vast room. Only when the teacher said, "Come along now, it's time to lie down," did I realise that they were in fact canvas folding beds. Only babies went to bed in the day time! Nevertheless lie down we did and we were each covered with a grey scratchy blanket. Eventually I must have dozed off but it was a severe disappointment to me. Maybe school wasn't going to be as wonderful as I thought.

The other really vivid memory of the infants' department is being sent for one day by Miss Fanstone, the Headmistress. She was a huge lady and smelled of mothballs, but this day, in a very unteacher-like way, she invited me to sit upon her lap. Somewhat surprised by this strange request I mentally shrugged and thought it best to comply. I therefore settled myself comfortably on her ample proportions and waited to see what would come next.

What came next was awful! All the other children were going up after the holidays to the junior school, but I was too young to go with them - my birthday is in September - so I would have to "stay down" in the infants'. I was distraught, I wanted oh HOW I wanted to go up. She cuddled me and did her best to explain that it wasn't her fault, and I would like to stay with her wouldn't I? On and on she went, but I couldn't stop crying. I don't know how or why but the decision was reversed and I did go up that year with all my friends.

Unfortunately this caught up with me later, as these things always do, and I had to repeat the last year of Junior School before I could go to Senior School. On sober reflection, I wish I hadn't made such a fuss, now I think it would have been better to waste a year at age seven than at age eleven. However, everything is clearer with hindsight, isn't it?

### **Election day**

Early in the morning I was woken by Mum coming into my room with a cup of tea. Dad had already eaten his breakfast and set off for the polling station. Today was election day - and my Dad was the Labour party candidate for the Hanover Ward in which we lived.

Maybe because the war was still such recent history, interest in local politics was far more intense than it seems to be these days. For weeks the houses in all the nearby streets had been displaying posters urging people to vote for this or that candidate. Because I was such a "Daddy's girl" I was very proud to see his picture smiling down on me from many of the windows which I passed each day. Hanover was a Labour stronghold so there were a good number of posters supporting my Dad. Maybe because he lived in the area and understood and shared the problems of the electors, my Dad was a popular man locally and had a good following of devoted helpers.

Our house was, as usual, a committee room for this election and excitement this morning was at fever pitch. Finsbury Road School was used as a polling station, so we all had the day off and could join in the fun. My brother and I used to enjoy all the comings and goings in the weeks of the campaign and the day itself. It gave us a feeling of importance and involvement to be allowed to deliver leaflets door to door and we would take one side each of the street and race to see who could finish first. I also enjoyed preparing lists for the canvassers. To do this I would carefully cut an electoral register into separate streets and then paste these pieces onto stiff card. Canvassers would visit each house and mark down whether the residents were for or against our candidate.

This morning, after eating a quick breakfast of bread and marmalade I begged to be allowed to visit the nearest polling station and see how Dad was getting on.

"All right then, you can go and collect the numbers - but bring them straight back - and don't show them to anyone!"

This cryptic message endowed the whole enterprise with daring and adventure. Off I shot without a coat or hat and ran as fast as I could from Southampton Street to Finsbury Road where Dad was taking the early shift as a "teller." He was sitting outside the polling station asking people for their voting number as they left. It may be different now but in those days you never asked anyone their number until *after* they had cast their vote.

Why I wasn't to show anyone the list I'm not sure, but at the time I feared instant arrest and certain imprisonment if anyone caught a glimpse of it. Clutching it tightly in my hand I made my way furtively back to the committee room glancing frequently over my shoulder for prowling policemen. Here things were now in full swing and everyone was frantically busy. It was possible to hang around and enjoy the excitement in a vicarious way without being noticed. Various people would come and go as if they owned the place and almost total strangers would make free of our kitchen to produce endless cups of tea for the "team".

After a couple of hours, as children do, my brother and I became bored with "grown-up" business and set off to find adventures of our own. The wonderful thing about election day was that Mum was far too busy and preoccupied to care what we really did. This was a rare treat for us as we were usually closely supervised so we tended to make the most of it.

There were always groups of children roaming around looking for adventure. Nothing too way-out, just enjoying the freedom and maybe collecting car numbers. Not many people owned cars in those days, so boys used to hang about on street corners collecting the numbers on busy occasions. Of course election day was wonderful for this since cars were being used to ferry people to cast their vote. I can still remember the

delight certain people took in using the car of one party for the journey while secretly voting for the other side.

Half way through the morning we drifted home for refreshment and to see if Dad was in the lead. Having reassured ourselves on this point we would be off again. Collecting numbers from each polling station in turn we would compare notes to see which area was busiest.

At lunchtime huge trays of sandwiches would be produced by the various helpers who had spent the morning in the kitchen. If things were going well at the polls then the atmosphere was jolly and noisy. However, if it seemed that Dad was trailing there would be a certain strain in the air. Then Bert and I would make ourselves scarce for a while.

"It's alright," Bert would say, trying to cheer me up and sound grown up at the same time, "our supporters always vote in the evenings after work - he'll catch up - you see - it's only Tory fat cats who can vote in the mornings." I knew he was right and would try hard not to worry - but I knew I couldn't stand it if my Dad lost.

Suddenly a great cry went up among the children hanging around, "It's Griff! It's Griff! Give us a ride mister!" Griff was Lewis Cohen's chauffeur and he had arrived with the Land Rover. How or why we never knew or asked but every election day he would turn up and we would pile in one on top of the other and be taken for a ride round the streets of Hanover. I suppose it was just good PR really but we kids loved it!

Late into the evening - or so it seemed to us - we roamed in total freedom on election days, until the polling stations closed. Then the weary helpers straggled back to the committee rooms for more tea and sandwiches before going to the Dome to witness the count and hear the results announced. But Bert and I were still too young to join in that excitement, so we were sent to bed and left in Nanny's care while Mum accompanied Dad.

How well I remember the mornings after - waking early and creeping into my parents' room to ask in a small whisper, "Did you win?" Then the shouts of joy if the answer was yes, and going down to breakfast secure in the knowledge that MY Dad was absolutely the best and most clever man in the whole wide world!

### **Auntie Flo**

"Look - you go through Cobden and I'll go along Lewes Road - and we'll see who gets there first. But NO running! Okay?"

It was Sunday morning and Bert and I were off to visit Auntie Flo in Shanklin Road. She was always my favourite relative and I loved to be allowed a visit all by myself. But if Bert was sent too, well I could live with that. After all, he was my only brother and we had to stick together didn't we?

Dad was off on his usual Sunday "tour of the ward" to collect subs etc. Mum was cooking a huge Sunday roast, Nan was having a lie-in and Bert and I were off to see Auntie Flo and Uncle Jack. GOODIE!

Without actually breaking the rules of our game I hurried as fast as I could towards Shanklin Road. Please let me be first, please let me be first, I muttered under my breath. All to no avail. When I arrived at number nine Bert was already there. He came to the bottom of the basement stairs with Uncle Jack and grinned triumphantly at me. BOYS - what a nuisance they were in life! Always being older and stronger and cleverer than me - it quite got me down at times. But not for long today, visiting number nine was always so lovely I couldn't be cross or out of sorts for more than a moment.

The house was very much larger than our house and it sparkled and shone with polish and shiny paintwork. The smell was a gorgeous mixture of polish, disinfectant and home baking, which enveloped you as you entered the front door. Over the door was a sign which said DULCE DOMEN and at the top of the basement stairs a framed copy of the poem from which this name was taken. Auntie Flo said it meant "sweet home" and number nine was certainly that.

We never had to ring the bell or anything forbidding and doubtful like that. Our welcome was always assured. We just used to turn up and walk in, calling out when we reached the top of the stairs. When I was a little older I often stayed with Flo and Jack, they were both very special to me, probably because they made me feel special. I now suspect that they had this fortunate effect on everyone, but at the time I thought I was their favourite.

Having sorted out who had won the race we separated into the usual pairs. Bert went off to the shed with Jack and I settled down for my visit with Auntie Flo. From her dining room two stairs led down into the kitchen and on these stairs I would sit and chat to her while watching her cook. She was a very houseproud lady and a superb cook - but she had one fascinating and amazing habit. She smoked while she cooked! I can see her now, a turban round her hair and a floral print apron covering her dress, with a filter-tipped cigarette dangling from the corner of her elegant mouth. The ash would get longer and longer and I would stare in fascination, waiting for it to fall into the food. But it never did! Always in the nick of time she would remove the cigarette daintily with her left hand - squint at the ash through half-closed eyes, and delicately flick it into the ashtray which stood on the bench.

All the while she was cooking and smoking she carried on a conversation with me, occasionally bursting into song:

*Sing of the coming glorious day  
When want and care shall pass away,  
When sin no longer spreads its pall*



*Of guilt and worry over all, she would warble.*

Another favourite which I loved, was currently very popular:

*Handle me with tenderness  
And say you'll leave me never  
In the warmth of your caress  
My love will live for ever and ever...*

Wonderful stuff for a dream-filled child like myself. Especially since Flo's only child, my cousin Dennis, was about to be married. How romantic!

At some point in the morning Bert and Jack would reappear and it would be time for "elevenses." Home-made fruit cakes warm from the oven or if we preferred, savoury cheese straws all melting and dripping with butter and grated cheese. Of course it wasn't really butter. These were post-war days, but to us they tasted wonderful.

Jack used to breed budgerigars and sometimes he would let us handle one of them, or Flo would take me round the tiny garden and tell me the names of all the flowers she managed to produce in a plot no bigger than a handkerchief. The whole place was full of fascinating things for children and even the garden seat was special. It was a wooden bench from an old tram and the back used to move so that you could face either way! So it didn't matter where the sun was, you could still face towards it. BRILLIANT!

Upstairs in one of the bedrooms was an octagonal card table with eight tiny drawers to house the cards and counters needed for evenings of family entertainment. I loved all these unusual things and never tired of visiting Shanklin Road. We cousins even had a "haunted house" to be frightened by when we stayed the night. We called it "the house of winking lights," because to us that's what it seemed to be. With hindsight, I suppose there was a tree between our window and the other house, whereby the leaves made it appear that lights were coming on and going off as we lay in bed together watching. But we loved to scare ourselves almost witless so that Flo would come and give us a drink and a cuddle. She never failed to appear at just the right moment, and she would kiss each of us goodnight and tell us to stop giggling now, or we would keep her and Uncle Jack awake in the next room. Knowing that they were next door took away all our fear at once, we would sip our drinks and then snuggle down together and be asleep in no time at all.

### **Weekend away**

Five o'clock on Friday afternoon and a very excited small girl hopping from foot to foot on the front door step. Will he never come? Every time someone turns the corner of the street, I strain my eyes to see if it is Uncle Frank. This is the big day, he is coming to fetch me straight after work and I am going to spend two nights with him and Auntie Emm in the new house at Coldean. In a huge new council estate on the edge of

Brighton lots of local families were being rehoused and because they were overcrowded in their one-bedroom flat, Uncle Frank, Auntie Emm and the cousins, Douglas and Anne, had been allocated a brand new three-bedroom house.

I had never seen Coldean and had very little idea what to expect, but it sounded wonderful and I couldn't wait to go. At long last I saw him in the distance. "He's here - he's here!" I didn't know whether to run and meet him or fly indoors for my case. The same little blue case that would one day feature in the midnight feast that wasn't, was now about to feature in a travel adventure. It had been packed and waiting since goodness only knows when. Two clean pairs of knickers, my library book, some knitting, a brand-new toothbrush and I was ready to "travel."

A few minutes later, having said, "Hello and Goodbye" to my Mum and Nan, Uncle Frank took the suitcase in one hand, my hot, sticky little fist in the other and led me along the street. The anticipation was such that it almost robbed me of speech, but not quite. Outside number five stood Shirley, a tall girl with pigtails.

"Where you going then?" she asked.

"This is my Uncle and he's taking me on a holiday to Coldean so there!" I stuck my freckled nose in the air and stalked by her as if she didn't exist. For me she didn't, until school-time on Monday anyway.

The number thirteen bus turned off the Lewes Road into Coldean Lane and I knew that this was what heaven must look like. There were trees everywhere and each house had its own front garden and there were flowers and space and everything looked so clean and new - which of course it was. No doubt there was also dust and builder's rubble, as Auntie Emm pointed out more than once, but I was used to terraced houses, back yards and basements - and I KNEW this was definitely HEAVEN!

The house itself was a revelation to me. It had garden on each side of the front gate and behind the house as well, there were two toilets, hot and cold running water and a BATHROOM. This last contained a beautiful new shiny white bath and matching sink! I was almost overcome.

In the garden were not only grass and flowers but vegetables and a ROCKERY which filled the space between the shed and the garden fence. The tiny little plants peeping between the huge rocks were beautiful, and imagine having so much space to spare you could build something like this in just one corner of your garden. I knew straight away that Southampton Street wasn't after all the best place in the world. This was quite a surprise to me at that time and I realised then that the world was a bigger place than I had thought.

Anne and Douglas showed me round and helped me unpack, then we went downstairs for tea. To sit at the table and be able to look out over the garden was a whole new

experience and I'm afraid I took somewhat longer than the cousins to consume my food.

After tea, we all played a card game called Winkle's Wedding which was new to me and reduced me to tears of hysterical laughter.

"It's all the excitement I expect," said Auntie Emm kindly, and made me a hot drink and tucked me into bed next to Anne.

Next morning, we went to the Wild Park to play, together with the new friends Anne and Douglas had met since moving house. I remember falling over and rolling right down the steep bank which overlooks the main Lewes Road. I got very muddy, but it was all good fun. A lovely hot bath in the shiny new bathroom was a wonderful way to end that day, and on Sunday we all went for a long walk round the perimeter of the estate while Uncle Frank pointed out all the things of interest to me. It was amazing to see cows grazing so near to the houses. Being a "townie" I was more than a little scared but would never dream of admitting this fact to anyone.

The most romantic thing about Coldean to me then was being so far from the shops. No popping to the corner store for them, it was a major expedition which I thought exciting but which Anne and Douglas found a bore. "Will you go to the shops for me?" had a wonderful ring of adventure to it, not a bit the same as, "Pop round Viddler's Janis," which was what I heard at home.

All too soon it was time for Sunday tea and then the bus ride home. My head was spinning with all I had seen and done and my one big ambition was to live in a council house at Coldean.

## **Lindy Lou**

I was seven years old with gappy teeth and pigtails. A "pale sickly child," very quiet and well behaved. Much given to "amusing herself for hours," as my mother put it.

Alone in my bedroom I inhabited a world so secret that my family never even dreamed of its existence. With a couple of beloved old dolls and my own imagination I controlled the universe. Sometimes I was the Queen, and Monica and Penny, the dolls, were two princesses of the blood royal. I would swish around being queenly while they sat on the floor of the pretend royal nursery, playing royal games and being waited upon by invisible royal servants.

Sometimes we were all in a poky little flat above a fish and chip shop. I was driven mad trying to cook and serve in the shop as well as look after my two grizzling infants. Sometimes, I was a very rich and famous doctor and the children were sent to boarding school in the wardrobe. Once Penny had German Measles and had to stay in the wardrobe for days and days until she was better - I really missed her.

But on this particular day I was not in my own room. I had been led up two flights of stairs to Mother's big front bedroom and something very special was about to happen. All my short life I had heard references to "Lindy Lou." Lindy Lou was the only doll my Mother had ever owned. Mother was the youngest of twelve children and her parents had no spare money to spend on toys. Lindy Lou had never been played with, only possessed and proudly displayed in Mother's childhood bedroom. She had lived for some years now in a secret drawer in my parents' bedroom and today she was to become mine. Now that I was old enough to look after her and because I loved my own dolls so much Mother had decided to pass her on to me.

I stood there scarcely able to breathe. Reverently my mother opened the drawer and took out a cardboard box. Removing the lid, she revealed a tissue-swathed parcel and as she took it into her hands I felt my heart stop.

The last layer of paper was removed and I saw Lindy Lou for the first time. The beautiful bone china head with real sleeping eyes; the dainty, dainty dress; petticoats all lace and frills - I was almost afraid to touch her. I gasped quietly and held out my hands spellbound.

"Now you look after her and love her as I have Darling," and Mother handed her to me. As I stood there gazing at her in wonder my friend Ruth came running into the house. "Janis, Janis there's a bride outside - it's a wedding - come and see, come quick - come quick."

I spun round clutching Lindy Lou and ran out of the room. On the top stair, I slipped and losing my footing I reached out instinctively to save myself. A terrifying feeling of falling over and over, the sound of my own voice screaming, bump after bump as I fell, a terrible bang to my head then darkness and silence. Dreadful pains in my head and legs, the sound of someone crying a long way away - Mother's voice calling my name. I opened my eyes slowly.

Lindy Lou lay shattered all around me, her beautiful dress splashed with my own blood. Mother knelt beside me crying, whether for me or for Lindy Lou I didn't really know. The tale of Lindy Lou's awful ending passed into family folklore and I was never allowed to forget it. Neither did I get to see the bride!

When my mother died we found among her things a faded sepia photograph of her standing with her sister, each proudly displaying their dolls. My aunt who is in her eighties, has hers to this day, it sits proudly on a little chair in her room - and I swear it smirks at me whenever I visit her.

## **The pianoforte**

Thursdays were my worst days. On Thursdays, after school, Miss Prior came. She lived in Sandown Road near the top of Elm Grove and she was a music teacher. Some pupils

went to her house but, maybe because we were young, or because there were two of us, she came to ours. Bert was learning the violin and I was learning the piano.

There was no democracy in our household, as far as we children were concerned anyway. "Nice children" learned music, we were "nice children," so we learned music. Mother had decreed it - and Mother's word was LAW!

Had I been born with a recognisable physical handicap I am sure my parents would have been full of understanding and done everything possible to lessen my suffering. Unfortunately, my handicap was invisible - I was born tone deaf - or at least this is my firm belief. To this day I only recognise tunes by the accompanying words. All music sounds like noise to me and although I can tell that some sounds do vary, I still can't work out what it is that makes the difference, or even reproduce a single note accurately.

My parents though were having none of this! Dad was a Welshman for heaven's sake - of course his daughter could sing and play the piano. Whoever heard of a person with good Welsh blood in their veins not being able to carry a tune! Wasn't my Dad in the Brighton Male Voice choir - didn't his brother sing opera - constantly and all round the house? Weren't my cousins all wonderfully gifted?

"You just don't try Janis - do you? Be honest now - we won't be cross. You must practise more - of course you can do it if you try. Now come on - stop grizzling and get in that front room and practise the piano - now!"

How many times was this scene repeated on Thursday evenings after Miss Prior's departure? They just could not or WOULD NOT see the problem.

Day after day I would sit on the piano stool trying vainly to make some sense out of the jumble of black and white keys before me. Sometimes I got quite fluent at a piece only to be told firmly on Thursday that I had practised it quite wrong. Since I could not hear when I hit a wrong note this was inevitable, but still none of these all-powerful grown-ups who ruled my world could see that I had a real problem. Is this how dyslexic children suffer? I have wondered since.

Miss Prior must certainly take her fair share of the blame. She would stand behind me sighing and ringing her hands week after week while I struggled not to cry with the desperation of it all. THEN - when the time was blessedly and finally up I would hear her saying to my mother, "Yes - well it needs a little bit more practice - but she is coming along slowly."

Did she perhaps need the money really desperately? I think perhaps she did. To put up with me week after week must have been cruel indeed.

Eventually after one particularly bad day I heard her in earnest, whispered conversation with my Mother at the top of the stairs. I never saw her again and have no idea what was said - or who decided to end my torture and humiliation and her suffering. Bert gave up the violin at the same time and we both heaved great sighs of relief.

Not for long. Auntie Rene was a frequent visitor to our house and like all my relatives Auntie Rene played like an angel. Her daughter Barbara, one year older than me, was so good they talked about her taking her "cap and gown" when she was older. Where to no-one ever told me. Came the day - I was sitting halfway up the stairs with Barbara, sharing gossip and secrets as was our wont - when Barbara dropped the bombshell!

"You're coming to my music teacher now. My Mum told her about you and she said she'll take you even though she's full really. She's ever so strict, she makes you sing as well. And she writes it all down in a book for your Mum every single week."

OH MY —!! There are no words to describe the terrors which well-meaning adults inflict upon their dearly-beloved offspring. Desperately I sought help from anyone who would listen. Cousin Christine from London was a great girl of about twelve and hearing my tale of woe she gave me some very good advice, "Just do what I do, go for a bike ride and say you forgot the time. It never fails - my Dad always laughs when I do it!"

I stared at her open mouthed. Do WHAT? I'd never have the courage - open disobedience was just not in my nature. So I suffered on. Lessons with Mrs. Campbell were, as Barbara had warned me, simply awful. She would stand me with my back to the piano, play a note and ask me to sing it! Of course I had no idea of how to comply with her seemingly simple request. While waiting for my lesson to begin I would hear other children doing it with apparent ease - but she may as well have asked me to speak in Sanskrit or even Heavenly Tongues. Fortunately for me she was a kind lady and after a few weeks of this torture, she put her arm round me one day and asked in a kindly, puzzled voice, "Why can't you do it dear - don't you like music?"

Near to tears with the total humiliation of it all I gulped out my tale of woe. All about how hard I was made to practise, and how all the notes sounded the same to me, and how clever Barbara was, and how my Dad was in the choir - and on and on. She listened all the way through then went to her desk and wrote a note to my Mum.

"You are wasting my time and your money," she wrote. And that was the last piano lesson I ever had!

### **I can swim!**

When I was a child Black Rock boasted a magnificent pool with deckchairs all round the edge, and a paddling pool at one end of the enclosure. We spent many happy hours playing in the water, sometimes just we two, sometimes with friends and the best bit was that Mum and Dad would often join in. They both enjoyed swimming and tried to

teach us the art of diving as well, to no avail I'm afraid: neither Bert nor I ever got to grips with diving, an inelegant belly flop was the best we achieved, but Black Rock Pool was a Mecca to us. Sadly, it no longer exists, it was destroyed in the name of progress to make way for Brighton Marina.

This particular day the sky was blue with high, fluffy clouds, there was a slight breeze from the sea to keep the temperature just right and we were in our favourite place. Mum and Auntie Flo were settled in their deckchairs with all the picnic things and Bert and I were enjoying ourselves playing in the pool.

I was following Bert around like a shadow trying to copy everything he did. In this way, I had learned to ride a bike, climb a tree, stand upright on a moving swing and many other childhood achievements. He was my hero and I would watch and copy and follow along, sometimes driving him mad with my persistent presence.

"Go away and play - you're a girl - girls can't do this," he would sometimes yell.

"Yes they can so there - Mummy said you're to show me."

But of course she hadn't always and sometimes I would have to concede defeat and wander away disheartened to find a more girlish pursuit.

Swimming was one of the things I couldn't do, try as I might my feet would not stay off the bottom. Bert would put his arms under my trunk and I would do all the right movements, trolling through the water and nearly drowning anyone who foolishly got in our way. As soon as he moved his arms, down I would go. Coughing and spluttering I would struggle back to the surface spitting water everywhere and gasping for breath.

"Once more - please Bert just once more," I would plead and off we would go again. He had shown me how to jump in from the side of the pool, how to leap off the springboard whilst holding my nose, how to touch the bottom with my hands, so WHY couldn't I SWIM!

Suddenly Bert had one of those brain-waves unique to children when everything becomes blindingly clear in a flash! "Come over here," he commanded and went to the edge of the pool. "Now listen - if I swim up the side of the pool in front of you - you can hold the side with one hand every time you do a stroke - see? Then - when you get good at it - say like after dinner - you can just let go."

And off we went, the SHELDONS in pursuit of success - and it worked! I managed to go quite a few feet up the side of the pool with no mishaps. Thus encouraged, there was no stopping me. I tried and tried and practised and practised, till I felt quite happy with my expertise. I could of course only go in one direction and never out of my depth. But I could do it!

Sitting having lunch Auntie Flo casually remarked that soon I would be able to swim a width if I went on at this rate. Not one more word was needed. Bert and I simply exchanged a look and our plan for the afternoon was decided upon.

As soon as Mum thought it safe after eating we were back in the water splashing away, Bert in the lead and me behind, panting and gasping with the effort of it all. Eventually I could manage quite a few strokes without having to touch the side and my "coach" decided the moment had arrived.

And I did! Climbing from the water, I collapsed at Mum's feet, totally exhausted and overcome.

"I can do it - I can do it - I can really SWIM!"

No Channel swimmer stepping ashore on the other side of the Channel ever felt a greater thrill of achievement than I did at that moment.

### **Guy Fawkes**

It was the 4th of November and tea had long since been cleared away. Mum sat one side of the fire knitting and Nanny sat the other side in her high-back Windsor armchair. She was alternately reading one of her film magazines and dozing quietly, but every now and then she would give my Mum a strange, knowing look and glance towards me with a silly grin sparkling in her eyes. She was planning mischief.

Intent upon my own business I took very little notice of the two adults. I was carefully cutting out paper dresses for my family of cardboard dolls and telling myself wonderful stories about their lives, all about the balls they attended and the carriages they drove around in. Without Bert or my Dad there it was lovely and quiet. Just the ladies all together - my favourite hour of the day.

Just then Dad and Bert came back in. They had been helping Uncle Frank with something or the other but I gave that no thought at all. Uncle Frank was Mum's brother and my Godfather, I loved him dearly and he was always very good to me. He lived with Auntie Emm and their two children in Finsbury Road. However, the lovely thing was that we had a "secret" way of getting to his home from ours. At the bottom of our garden a small flight of wooden steps was fitted to the wall. By climbing these steps, you could go up into Uncle Frank's allotment - and from the allotment a small gate led to Uncle Frank's garden - brilliant and exciting for seven-year-old me!

Now, though, the "men" were back and it was time for bed. "Come on Janis Ann my girl," said Nanny, "off you go to the toilet and beddy-byes," and she grinned at me in the most strange way as she handed me a torch. The toilet was at the bottom of the garden beside the wooden steps and I hated visiting it after dark. I would put off the ordeal for as long as possible, sometimes almost having an embarrassing accident as a result. As



I crept quietly from the room, my main concern was about the journey "down the back" which lay ahead of me.

Reaching the top of the basement stairs I took a deep breath, told myself to be brave and opened the door. After all, my Dad was downstairs, he would soon deal with any ghosts or robbers for me! The sky was dark and starlit and the air was damp and foggy. Slowly I crept down the red brick path glancing round me all the time, watching out for Demons and Dragons. I was about halfway down the path before I looked up and then I nearly died! Standing motionless in Uncle Frank's allotment was a tall figure! I leapt in the air, dropped the torch and emitted a blood-curdling scream which I'm sure was heard for miles.

Tearing back to the house I flung open the door gibbering with terror - to be met by the entire family who were falling about laughing! Dad and Bert had been helping Uncle Frank to build a guy - and I had been set up! All three of the "significant adults" in my life fell over themselves to give me cuddles and reassurances but I'm afraid my visit to the toilet had become unnecessary for that evening anyway.

### **The midnight feast**

My cousin Marie was coming to sleep at my house for the night and we were both very excited at the prospect. It was a rare treat for me to have an overnight guest and I could hardly wait for Friday to arrive. Marie was just a few months older than me being almost eleven to my ten and a bit. Like me she was an avid reader and both our heads were crammed full of Enid Blyton stories. We both loved the boarding school sagas but our favourites were undoubtedly the *Secret Seven* and the *Famous Five* adventures. What amazing things those children got up to, what wonderful lives they led. Full of adventure and parental disinterest. They seemed to do exactly as they pleased and Marie and I wove many of our childhood fantasies around the stories which we read and read over and over again.

At last it was Friday afternoon and with my mother I went on the bus to fetch cousin Marie. All the way back to my house we talked about all the things we would do during our brief time together. Should we build a treehouse? Not enough time. Form a secret club? Oh yes that would be wonderful! And we wouldn't tell Ruth or Cynthia a thing about it. It would be entirely between the two of us. Not even my brother was to know - ESPECIALLY not my brother - he was a boy and every schoolgirl is born with the instinctive knowledge that boys are not to be trusted.

As we got off the number forty-two bus at the Pepper Box and walked down Islingword Road Marie had the MOST AMAZING and WONDERFUL idea. An idea so stupendous we both wondered why we hadn't thought of it earlier! We would have a MIDNIGHT FEAST! The Secret Seven and the Famous Five did it all the time, but to us the idea of being awake and eating food secretly in the middle of the night was a wonderful adventure.

We made our plans with care, and after tea Marie kept my mum occupied and diverted while I secretly slipped into the kitchen to see what I could find. Unfortunately 1950s food wasn't as plentiful as it appeared to be on the tables of the Famous Five on Kyrin Island but I did my best. Into my small blue suitcase made of cardboard I carefully placed a bag of marmalade sandwiches, a bottle of water, four biscuits and the remains of my weekly sweet ration. Quietly I crept up the two flights of stairs to my bedroom and slid the suitcase under the bed. Gently I tiptoed down again and slipped silently into the living room to join the rest of the family.

So excited were Marie and I that the games of Snap and Ludo before bed were largely wasted on us. Oh so slowly the clock ticked the minutes away! At times I thought it was going backwards, it seemed such a long evening. Eventually we asked if we could go to bed and "talk."

"You are funny," said my Mum, "I never wanted to go to bed when I was your age. Okay then - if you're sure. Don't forget to clean your teeth. I'll come and tuck you in later."

Joyfully we escaped into the kitchen to give our teeth a hasty scrub, then up the stairs we bounded like rabbits laughing and giggling for all we were worth. The food was dragged out and inspected, Marie declared it "perfect" and it was quickly replaced under the bed. Into bed we climbed together chattering away nineteen to the dozen. Before we settled down to sleep we worked out a system whereby we would take it in turns to sleep for two hours each, since we had no alarm clock and therefore couldn't both sleep at once in case we missed the deadline. I don't think it occurred to either of us that a midnight feast could be held at any time but the stroke of twelve.

It may well be that Mum tucked us in later, but by then we were both dead to the world, worn out with all the excitement and planning. Next thing we knew Mum was standing beside the bed with an early morning drink for us both. We leapt out of bed to get on with our day together, ate a hasty breakfast and headed off into the morning sunshine, me on my bike and Marie on my brother's. In those days there was hardly any traffic through the back streets and we were happy to ride our bikes up and down for hours at a time.

We were skilfully riding figure-of-eights in unison when my brother appeared from nowhere and casually informed me that Mum was cleaning my bedroom! I shot off the bike filled with horror, galloped into the house and dived up to the bedroom. Throwing open the door I dived under the bed, grabbed the case, and stood up looking as casual as possible in the circumstances.

"What have you come in for?" asked Mum quietly.

"Oh nothing. Bye," I said and walked towards the door. With a heart-stopping crash the case came open and marmalade sandwiches, biscuits and water cascaded onto the clean floor.

"I suggest you clear that lot up my girl, and don't tell lies to me again," and Mum swept past me and down the stairs. It may have been my shattered nerves but I felt sure I heard the sound of laughter as she receded. The incident was never referred to again - and I never found out if she sent my brother to find me, or if it was just a coincidence. After all, I couldn't ask him, he was a boy and not to be trusted.

## **Cowboys and Indians**

It was the last week of the school year and we children were all somewhat "high." In a few days, we would break up for the summer and in September we would all begin secondary school. This afternoon was warm and sunny and the word was buzzing round the classroom in a persistent whisper. "Cowboys and Indians - pass it on, Cowboys and Indians - up the park after school - pass it on."

Passed on in this manner the whisper eventually reached me - and there it almost stopped. What were they on about? Always a quiet timid child, I had never been one of the "in crowd." It always seemed to me that my copy of the book of rules for life had been printed in a foreign language. Other children were privy to all sorts of things I could only wonder about. They communicated in a code I could not break. Cowboys and Indians - in the park - whatever could it mean?

Sitting next to me that day was a street-wise girl I much admired and after some minutes she took pity on me. "Haven't you ever been?" she asked, "it's ever so good, you can come with me if you like. We all go to Queen's Park after school and play in the bushes. It's great - you sure you've never been?" She was clearly amazed at my innocence. I thought about it all through Geography and at 4pm, greatly daring, I hovered around my heroine and followed her every move in case she changed her mind and left without me.

It was the most amazing adventure of my short and sheltered life. What seemed to me like several hundred children rampaged up Islingword Road and into Queen's Park where we completely ran amok! Or so it seemed to me. We crashed through shrubberies and trampled over flower borders with complete disregard for all the world. Divided into gangs of Cowboys and Indians we whooped and screamed at the top of our voices. How long the game lasted I've no idea - but it was the most WONDERFUL experience of my whole life so far!

Until, with a bloodcurdling shout, the Park Keeper came striding out of his hut and straight towards us. Children flew in all directions, arms and legs flailing about madly. All except me of course. My legs turned to jelly, my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth and I almost wet myself. Tall and broad shouldered, he gave me the worst ticking off I have ever received - even to this day. I stood there shaking and could say not one word in my own defence. I was literally struck dumb with fright.

When he had finished he told me to "clear off home" and said he would be in to see the Headmaster in the morning. I got myself home somehow, there being no sign now of any of my erstwhile "friends." Throwing open the front door I burst into tears and poured out the tale of my crime to my Mum. She further upset me by laughing at me and saying it would do me good to be a bit more "kid-like" from time to time.

All evening I kept breaking out in a cold sweat as I recalled the Park Keeper's voice and threats. Eventually it took my Dad reading to me to get me off to sleep at all. But I had a very restless night. All next day I dreaded the Headmaster sending for me. The other kids were cross with me for being caught and called me feeble. My humiliation was complete. Needless to say, just as Mum and Dad had said, the parkie' s threats were just that. Threats and nothing more. I never heard another word about it - and I never played Cowboys and Indians again either.

### **Over the hills**

A brilliant, hot sunny day in late July and the bush telegraph in the narrow street was positively humming.

"Can you come over the hills? Go and ask your Mum." The cry seemed to fill the universe as excited children ran from house to house rounding up their friends. Feet were scraped along basement gratings to attract the attention of sluggards who hadn't yet appeared outside. The news spread with amazing speed and from all directions children converged on number seventeen.

Outside on the pavement stood the cause of all the excitement. Mrs Rose Thompsett, big-hipped, big-hearted mother of three and Southampton Street's famous "camper outer." Each year during the long summer holiday she would organise two or three trips to the country for a picnic and any child resident in the street or close by was allowed to join in. There were only two rules: they must have parental permission and they must be self-supporting with regard to food and bus fares.

Of course she wasn't the only grown-up involved, but she was definitely in charge and the organiser of it all. Once the cry had gone up, children would disappear to pester their mothers for permission, bus fares and food. There was much running backwards and forwards with questions and messages. "Mum says how much bus fare will I need?"

"Please - what time will we be home?"

"What time are you going?"

"I've got to go an errand for my mum - will you wait for me?"

"Can Joe come? He lives in Scotland Street and he won't be no trouble - I'll look out for

him - honest!"

"Can I bring my dog?"

"Definitely NO dogs! Yes, Joe can come and I'll wait if you be quick!"

The tension and excitement were almost too great to bear as the anticipation mounted. Eventually, after what seemed like years since the first joyful cry of "Over the hills" everyone was ready and assembled and off we set.

We were a long, straggly, untidy crocodile of street kids. The ones whose mums weren't coming carried a parcel of food and a bottle of drink. Many of the sandwiches contained nothing more exciting than jam and often the drink was tap water in an old lemonade bottle - but who cared? FREEDOM - THE COUNTRY - TREES - WOODS - GOSH!

The picnic place was called Woodingdean and was only about three miles away, but this was before families had cars, and not many of the children ever went so far from home. With much shouting and laughing we made our way to Elm Grove to wait for the bus that would take us to that magical place - the country.

After a journey of unbearable suspense - would this bus never go any faster - finally, we were there among the green fields. With whoops of joy we dashed across the road and into the woods where now is a garden of rest and a graveyard. There were no houses in sight and no hint of the huge housing estate which stands there now.

The first priority for the accompanying mums was to find a nice comfortable spot to sit down - not too hot - so it must be fairly shaded but not so shaded as to feel chilly. All we children dumped our food, drink and jumpers near the grown-ups and disappeared with whoops of joy to begin the real adventure of the day. Total freedom to climb trees, fight, play Cowboys and Indians - anything our hearts desired for a whole day.

The mothers now set about the serious business of their day out. A brew of tea! Of course for this they needed a fire, so some of the more biddable children who had not yet made off were set to collecting fire-wood. Very soon there was a lovely camp-fire blazing and the billies were boiling away ready to make tea. The women settled down for a good long chat and several cups of char, while the younger children played round about them. Through the trees could be heard the yells and whoops of the older ones.

After some time, most children drifted back to the fire to eat their sandwiches and some managed to cadge a drink of tea. The women would produce biscuits to share round and maybe a few sweets. Sweets were still rationed in those days.

Later some of the girls would lie in the sun and share secrets with each other, making daisy-chains and dreaming about being country children and living on a farm-for-ever. The boys would have tug-of-war games or build their own camp a little way away - and

who knows what they talked and dreamed about.

All too soon it would be time to start the mammoth task of rounding up the children and their belongings to begin the long trek home. The shadows in the street would be long in the dusk as the crocodile crept slowly home. But what a day it had been - and what tales they had to tell their mums as they got ready for bed. And what a wonderful sleep they would have that night after all that fresh air and adventure!

### **Down the beach**

I was completely lost in my own little world, making perfume and medicine in my laboratory. The laboratory was the flat lid of the coal bunker in our backyard and here I would spend many hours happily engrossed in my fantasies. Over a period of time I had collected an odd assortment of jars and bottles, and in these I would mix crushed flower petals and powdered chalk with water to create wonderful "perfume" and all-powerful "medicines."

The coal bunker was built as an integral part of the garden shed and by climbing up onto it I could reach the flat roof of the shed and then climb down a set of wooden steps into Ruth's backyard next door. On this particular day as I worked away at my experiments, Ruth's blonde hair and then her fat, smiling face appeared over the shed roof. "Janis, Janis we're going down the beach - come on - get ready - get your swimmers on."

Almost the only thing better than experiments was "the beach". A world completely different to the back street where I lived. A world of space and light and clean, clear water. Waves that broke with a roar on the shingle and then dragged back down the beach to gather themselves and return in a most awe-inspiring, unbelievable way. A world of unknown treasure where almost anything might be discovered on the water line after a high tide. And sometimes, most magical of all, a world of sand castles and excavations, of building pathways and tunnels and burying our legs deep in the soft warm sand. Oh, the beach!

Quickly I abandoned the jars and pots so dear to me and ran indoors to change. "Can we have a bucket and spade Mum - Mum can we - please?" My brother was changed already and hopping from foot to foot in his eagerness to be off. Buckets and spades in those days were made of painted tin and soon got very rusty so new ones had to be purchased every summer.

At last we were ready and the two mums had packed the picnic food so we were off. Peter Thompsett from over the road came to keep my brother company and Cynthia from number fifty-five would join us later with her mother "Doo-Doo." I never found out who invented this nick-name but it was very appropriate. She was one of those ladies who never sat down and her whole house always shone and smelled of disinfectant. I thought it was wonderful in there.

We took the number forty-two bus from the Pepperbox to St James Street and then walked down Rock Gardens to the sea front. Once safely over the busy main road, we four children ran ahead of the grown-ups. Helter-skelter we hurled ourselves along to the top of the huge flight of steps and here we stopped and took a deep breath. Then, eyes alight with the joy of it all, we caught our first glimpse of the sparkling water. Nothing ever compared to that first glimpse, and I still get the same thrill today every time I stand at that spot and look at the sea with the Palace Pier striding proudly out onto the ocean.

Stopping only to purchase shiny new buckets and spades we hurried along looking for just the right spot to settle. It must be near the water's edge - not too near if the tide was coming in, and it must be fairly flat so that the mums could sit in comfort. They never wasted money on deck chairs. After much discussion, we all agreed that we had found the perfect spot and we four children literally tore our clothes off and plunged into the water.

Oh, the freedom, the fresh air, the space, the wonderful, wonderful water. Swimming, paddling, resting, eating sandwiches, the time passed in a happy blur till, best of all, that breathtaking moment when you put your feet down in the water - almost but not quite out of your depth - and felt with your toes - SAND!

"Ruth, Ruth, the sand's coming in." The cry died on my lips, some moments are just too precious to share, and this I must keep to myself for just a few moments until the others found out for themselves - this was my most magical secret. I turned away to hide my smiles and hugged my ecstasy to myself.

I never could understand that it was the water that moved and not the sand, but I can still vividly remember that feeling of joy and of not wanting to share it with anyone else.

At last as the sun set in the soft blue sky we gathered up all our bits and pieces, all the seaweed and precious pebbles we had gathered during our day on the beach and set off to make our way home. The long walk up the pebbles, the climbing of the huge flight of steps, trailing up Rock Gardens to the bus stop, buckets and spades clutched in our tired hands - completely worn out but totally, totally happy.

### **The entrance exam**

Nervously I stepped off the bus, negotiated the busy Seven Dials junction and set off down Montpelier Road, a thin anxious-looking girl of eleven with long red pigtails and freckles. In my hand I clutched the letter giving details of my interview and exam times. I had already passed the eleven plus and this was to see if the local authority would support me at the local Girls' High School - which was grant maintained - and belonged to the Girls' Public Day School Trust.

As I walked along the road I thought to myself, "If I pass I'll walk to school past that lovely little park every day." The "park" was in fact an elegant Regency crescent with a green in front of the houses - but I knew nothing then of Regency crescents, and grass in a town equalled a park.

Timidly I opened the gate marked "Pupils' Entrance" and took a deep, steadying breath. My feet scrunched on the gravel with a lovely beachy sound and as I made my way across to the front door, I noticed the tennis courts and felt a little thrill of excitement.

The front door and vestibule were very imposing and a lady in a maid's dress and white apron showed me into the school hall. I didn't know then that the school had originally been built as the private residence of a famous Regency architect called Sir Thomas Kemp after whom Kemp Town was named, but I did know that the room into which I now walked was beautiful.

The floor was polished pine and shone in the sunlight. One wall was a series of graceful floor-to-ceiling windows with curved tops, and at the far end of the hall was an impressive raised platform of the same material as the floor, with two flights of steps set into it - one on either side.

There were groups of girls in twos and threes standing around talking nervously and as I realised that they were all wearing various kinds of school uniform I began for the first time in my life to feel totally overawed and ashamed. I was ashamed because I wore no uniform. Finsbury Road Junior Mixed boasted no such middle-class effects. My blouse was made from an old dress cut down to fit by my mother and my tunic was borrowed from an older cousin specially for this occasion.

Finding an empty chair next to a window I sat down and looked out across the lawn to the boundary wall. Ice cold drops of perspiration formed in my armpits and I felt them trickling down to my elbows. I wished - oh HOW I wished - that I was anywhere but here. If only it were all over and I could go home, home to the basement kitchen and security where Mum and Dad would be. I hoped I wouldn't let them down, they were so thrilled that I had got this far.

So nervous and preoccupied was I that I didn't hear my name called. I came to with a start as a mistress swept into the centre of the hall holding a sheaf of papers and announced that only one candidate was missing. The name she called out was mine and I wanted to die! Somehow I managed to cross the seemingly endless space between us and apologise. I felt as if all eyes were upon me and I flushed scarlet from top to toe.

The mistress smiled graciously and directed me to join a certain group of girls. We were shepherded out of the hall, through a door and into "the wing" where the written papers were to be held in room seventeen. As soon as I entered I felt better. The desks were



battered, just like those at Finsbury Road, and the room was quite small, not at all overpowering like the hall. I knew I was good at school work and quickly settled down to the exam, forgetting my nervousness and embarrassment in my desire to do well.

When the papers had been collected in we were left unsupervised for a few minutes before the individual interviews with the headmistress. A girl with long bushy hair and piercing blue eyes swept me up and down with a scornful gaze. "Why aren't you in uniform?"

"We don't have a uniform."

"Oh my God! What school do you go to?"

Almost before I had whispered, "Finsbury Road," she turned on her heel and walked away, dismissing me from the universe with a cruelty that only eleven-year-old girls know how to practise. While I was recovering from this snub an enormous-looking girl entered the room and called my name. She wore the uniform of BHHS and pinned to her jumper was a badge which read "Head Girl".

In a complete turmoil, I followed her I knew not where until she stopped outside a door and said, "Wait here - and good luck." Then she swept off into the distance.

Glancing at the door I saw the sign, "Headmistress - Please Wait" and only then did I realise that the moment of my interview was upon me. A few moments later a young girl emerged, closed the door behind her and was led away by another huge prefect who had appeared from nowhere. Almost immediately there was a soft buzzing noise and the sign on the door changed to "Please Enter". I went in, trembling from head to foot.

The room was huge and even more splendid than the hall. I didn't think I had ever been in such a beautiful room before. The headmistress sat behind a desk which seemed a great way off, but she rose as I crept across the carpet towards her and smiling kindly she shook hands with me and told me to sit down. Through the window behind her I could see a lovely tree and behind that in the distance the tennis courts again. "Just like an Enid Blyton book," I thought, "Oh I DO hope I pass!" After a few minutes, the headmistress stood up and suggested we move to some more comfortable chairs nearer the fire. She asked me a few more questions and then requested me to recite a poem to her. I began to recite my favourite, *The Toy Shop Window*:

*I stood at the toy shop window,  
The rain was falling fast,  
'Twas Christmas time and the shoppers  
Were hurrying quickly past.  
Their arms were filled with good things  
The heart and home to cheer,  
But many a little heart was sad*

*On that Christmas Eve so drear...*

After three verses I stumbled over the words and dried up. "Oh I'm sorry I've gone wrong," I gasped.

"That's quite alright - I was just about to stop you anyway. You've done very well, and that's quite enough for one day." She smiled kindly again and stood up - the long-anticipated interview was over! I was escorted back to the hall by the Head Girl who was mysteriously back outside the door when I emerged. We collected my things and then she showed me the way out.

All the way home I hugged to myself the vision of the Enid Blyton world I had just visited. Oh I did so want to pass - but it would be several weeks before we knew the results. I knew nothing then of the pain which the bushy-haired girl was to cause me in the future. I hurried home for tea dreaming of *Malory Towers* stories come to life in Brighton.

### **The day Pauline came**

It was very early in the morning when Mother sat on the edge of the bed and shook me gently. "Come on Janis - wake up. I'm going on my little holiday today. Daddy has made you a cup of tea, drink it up nicely for me, I have to go now. You get breakfast for you and Bert and then take yourself to school - and be a good girl for me till I come home."

I lay on my back and stared at her, excited and frightened at the same time. Excited about what was happening but frightened of the changes which today would bring to all our lives. My only brother was fifteen and I was thirteen - a pigeon pair, we'd always been called and now mother was going into hospital to give birth to her third child. Not a planned pregnancy, but one which my father laughingly referred to as the greatest mistake of his life. Mother had been unwell throughout the pregnancy and the changes to our family life had been very unsettling and difficult for me.

She and Daddy set off for the hospital on foot although she was already in labour and my brother and I ate our breakfast and, after tidying up, we set off for our separate schools which were on opposite sides of the town. It was a Friday and I remember that I told no-one at school what had happened at home that morning. Arrangements had been made for me to stay at a friend's house each weekend that mother was away - but I wanted to stay at home with my Dad - so I kept quiet.

All day long I found it impossible to concentrate - the hours dragged by and I wondered what was happening at the hospital. At lunch time I mooched around the tennis courts on my own just longing for four o'clock when I could go home and get some news.

The bus took forever that day to cross the town. Remaining at traffic lights and bus stops as if timetables were unheard of. Finally - finally - my stop! I jumped off the bus

and flew along the road as fast as my legs would carry me. Flinging open the front door I dropped my satchel on the floor and grabbed the phone. In a fever of excitement I waited to hear Dad's voice - but instead it was his boss who answered the call.

"Is my Dad there please?"

"Just a moment I'll call him. Isn't it exciting - what do you think of your new little sister?"

Total silence while my world exploded round me. I needed to hear it from my Dad not this almost stranger. Eventually Dad was speaking to me - saying he was sorry he hadn't been able to tell me himself - but the damage was done. Daddy's "little girl" was experiencing feelings of rejection and jealousy of unbelievable proportions. When I put the phone down I dashed next door to tell Ruth and her Mum.

"It's a girl - it's a girl, " I yelled. "Yes we know love - your Dad phoned us earlier."

Tears stinging my eyes I backed off and slunk home to wait for Bert - at least I could break the news to him. He came home soon after that and as he opened the door he called out, "Did you know - it's a girl - I phoned the hospital at lunch time. They are both okay - it's being called Pauline."

But I was no longer listening, I crept off to my bedroom to cry and cry and cry. It was undoubtedly the most important change in all our lives since my own birth and I felt completely rejected and isolated because of the way in which I had heard the news.

## **Sunday tea**

Between them my parents boasted eighteen siblings, all of whom were married, and most of whom had children, so there was never any shortage of company in our house. Sunday tea was a favourite time for entertaining and the preparations would take several days if it was to be a really "posh" do with several sets of aunts and uncles present.

"Come on you two - off to Sunday School," was the regular command as soon as we had said grace and left the dinner-table. There was never any spare time to do secret personal things, or just have a good quiet think all to myself. Every moment of our day seemed "spoken for" and now here I was being sent to Sunday school again. I didn't mind Sunday School, but a choice would have been nice.

Each week I would call for Ruth next door, but frequently she didn't want to come. What amazed me was that her Mum would just call up the stairs to me, "She's not coming today Janis lovey - she wants to stay with me and her Dad." Lucky lucky Ruth! This particular day I wanted to stay with my Mum and Dad too but no such luck. Off we had to go, Bert and I, clutching our copies of *Golden Bells* and our pennies for the plate. And all the while at home preparations were well under way for Sunday tea.

Auntie Flo and Uncle Jack were coming today and I didn't want to miss a minute of their visit. Auntie Flo was my Godmother and quite my most favourite Auntie. She always made a fuss of all her nieces - she had no daughters of her own - and all us girls vied for her affections. Uncle Jack was also a favourite, he had a lovely smile which crinkled his whole face, and he could do magic tricks with lighted cigarettes and make coins appear from behind children's ears.

It wasn't fair to have to be out when they arrived, but my parents were not nearly as laid-back as Ruth's, so here I was in Sunday school singing, *Jesus wants me for a Sunbeam*, while secretly thinking, "Why doesn't he want Ruth then?" and wishing I was at home to greet Auntie Flo before my "awful" cousin Barbara, another Goddaughter, arrived and "got in first."

At the end of the hour, I scuttled out of the Mission in Islingword Road and ran all the way home. "Auntie Flo - Auntie Flo," I called in eager anticipation from the top of the stairs. "Hullo Darling," she replied, "how's my favourite girl today then?" Daringly I jumped the last two stairs and dashed into the kitchen for a cuddle and to tell her all my news. She called each of her nieces "my favourite girl" but we didn't mind because we knew she loved us all equally.

The large table was fully extended in the middle of the room and a smaller table had been stood next to it and both were covered by the same clean sheet. They groaned under the weight of the salads and fancies so lovingly prepared and there were fresh winkles too - all shelled by my Mum and Nan between them. Home-made fruit cake and custard slices, jellies and blancmanges - oh, it was a feast and it looked a picture!

"Right then," said Mum, "grub's up - or should I say tea is served? Now come on everyone sit up and let's begin." We all sat in our appointed places - it was a bit of a squash - and Bert and I, together with various visiting cousins, were assigned to a bench at the very end of the table near the door and furthest from the fire. We were just about to begin feasting and people were already passing round the bread and butter when Mum had a sudden thought. "Willie can you just put some coal on the fire before we start - don't want the children getting cold."

"Okay Toots - if you're sure it needs it." Dad walked round behind Nan and Uncle Jack who were sitting with their backs to the grate. He picked up the coal-bucket and gave it a mighty shake.

There was a sudden cloud of smoke in the room and then a muffled roar as great piles of soot fell down the chimney all over his face and covered everything on the table and several visiting aunts in a layer of sticky black soot and coal dust.

As Dad remarked later, "You never saw a party break up so quick in all your life!"

## **Their song**

We were all crowded into the big downstairs living room, all the aunts and uncles and cousins from miles around. The coal fire was roaring in the fireplace, the table had been pushed to one side and the Christmas festivities were well under way.

The chairs were in a large ring all around the edge of the room. The most important family members - Nan and "staying guests" were nearest to the fire and we cousins were all on school-type benches nearest the door - and furthest from the food! These benches were produced by the simple method of balancing a plank between two chairs and covering it with a blanket.

We wriggled and squirmed on our seats as we watched the grown-ups enjoying themselves. Every so often some-one would approach us and offer refreshments. Sandwiches and tiny cakes, custard slices and cheese straws and sometimes BEST OF ALL, the box of chocolates! Sweets were still rationed but people would save their coupons up to get boxes of chocolates at Christmas and it was always a great treat. Sitting there in agony watching while the cousin next to me dithered over her choice was awful. Would she take the coffee cream - oh please don't let her take the coffee cream! Finally it would be my turn, no indecision for me, if the coffee cream was still there it wouldn't be for long. Swoop and grab, shove it in the mouth quickly then sigh with delight as it slowly melted all around the teeth. There was definitely NOTHING to compare to a coffee cream in the evening on Christmas day!

All the evening the grown-ups would provide their own entertainment. Everyone had a party piece and would perform it at the drop of a hat. Ruth's uncle could play the accordion and was always sure of a welcome, while Mum's brother George could play anything on the piano "by ear." This puzzled me greatly as not once did his ears go anywhere near the keyboard. But I never asked - so no-one ever explained.

We had had Uncle Jack singing *If You Were the Only Girl in the World*. Auntie Flo had given us *Let Me Call You Sweetheart*. Mum's friend Florence had rendered *We'll Gather Lilacs* with a catch in the throat. *Her Heart was Broken in the War*, I whispered importantly to cousin Barbara. Mum had given us *Knees up Mother Brown*, to great applause and on and on it had gone for hours. We children did not escape, or even want to. I had recited a poem, Barbara had played the piano quite beautifully, Douglas had performed some tricks, we had all played charades and "touch the ceiling," "black magic" and many other family games. Everyone was having a whale of a time.

As the clock approached midnight we children were all on automatic pilot, very tired but unwilling to miss a moment. Besides, I knew what was coming next and wouldn't miss it for the world. My parents had married on Boxing Day and every year until Dad died they had the same ritual. At the stroke of midnight, no matter what was going on or who held the floor, my Dad and Mum would come together and it would begin.

Placing one arm around her waist and making an extravagant gesture towards the rest of the room he would begin to sing their song to her. *Oh How we Danced on the Night we were Wed*. She would join in with the next line, "We vowed our true love tho a word wasn't said." They would begin to waltz in the tiny space available. Round and round they would go, "The night was on fire, there were stars in the skies - except for the few that were there in your eyes." It would end all too soon to rapturous applause as they sang, "Could we but relive that sweet moment divine - you would find that my love is unaltered by time."

My Dad was always the one to break the moment by making a joke - but only after he had kissed her. The grown-ups would shuffle about and begin to refill their glasses, someone else would take the floor and another Christmas Day would end for us children, because always after "Their Song" we were sent to bed. But I would drift off to sleep with their voices ringing in my head, and if I close my eyes I can hear them to this day.

### **When I was a child**

*When I was a child I viewed the world  
Through a child's self-focused eye.  
And all the world was good or bad  
And I was the one to decide.*

*But mostly the world was very good  
And peopled by many friends,  
I had no knowledge that time rolls on  
And childhood days must end.*

*The skies seemed always sunny  
And dark clouds never came  
To spoil the days I spent with youth,  
When life was but a game.*

*Secure in the knowledge that I was loved  
I spent each carefree day,  
Doing the things I loved to do  
In my own childish way.*

*When the world was full of giants  
And teachers with powers vast,  
When laughter filled my horizons  
And friendships would ever last.*

*When days held a hundred hours*

*And each hour filled with pleasure,  
And I was young and innocent  
And thought this could be for ever.*

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