Ribbons in my Hair

Memories of Childhood

Rosalie Sneyd

August 2009

For my children—partly.
Also for me,
for the pleasure of remembering.

Foreword

Memory does not recall a continuum, but a series of vignettes, like shafts of light through the fog of time. But these memories are tantalizingly incomplete; never enough. I want to shed more light on my past so that I know what I felt like at that time; know the sort of child that made me as I am; know the essence of my childhood self.

I try hard to remember more but memory is a reluctant chronicler and plays games. Frustration is useless. Better to think of something else, and unbidden another vignette may pop up and get me nearer the kernel of my past.

But do I really want such insight as this that would come perilously close to reliving my childhood? How about the times when my mother was ill, or when my father was very, very angry: the times when I didn't win, wasn't chosen: the times of shame after a misdeed or unkindness: the times when I was ignored by a boy I fancied: when children at Sunday School made fun of my home-knitted blue suit: when . . . etc.
I take refuge in etc. before it sounds ridiculous.

But all these things mattered. Oh, how they mattered! Everything mattered. Nothing was trivial.

On second thoughts I'll quit trying so hard to remember and be content to write about such vignettes as I have.

That will have to do.

I want to thank Colleen Kennedy for going over
my manuscript so meticulously
with her expert eye.

Contents

My street that was...1

Our place...6

Peonies by the gate..12

Ribbons in my hair..15

Black serge and stockings...............................23

Dad...28

Freda...35

Grandma Kate...40

Lucknow..45

Afterword..53

My street that was

Our street, being only about five blocks from town, boasted tar-sealing and a footpath—both sides. It was just inside the limit for such amenities because past our corner the road was dirt with no proper footpaths. This was almost no-mans land to me at the beginning; the street towards town was the familiar bit with the fine view of the Catholic Church spire at the end of the street.

On the far side of us lived the Patchetts. He was retired, having handed over his menswear shop to his son. A grown-up daughter who had a faint moustache lived with them. Their brick house was ruthlessly neat and regiments of yellow pom-pom marigolds filled the front garden. Everything about them was respectable and, such was my upbringing, I was horrified to see the daughter, Margaret, drinking beer after mowing the lawn.

Mrs. Pope lived on the other side of us, nearer town, in a cottage set as far back from the road as our house, and dwarfed by a huge conifer (soon to become an enormous stump in those days before protected trees) in the front garden. She was old and didn't venture outside much but I can remember her scratching in the garden in a faded floral dress and an orange cardigan. Her importance to me was the mulberry tree in her back garden. Mulberries don't come as luscious now. On her boundary, and shading our side veranda, grew the biggest copper beech I've ever seen.

The Bathans lived up from Mrs. Pope. Their bungalow was a step up from the usual as befitted a professional man, a solicitor or something. The family made no impression on me at all. Later I heard he'd had an affair with one of my school teachers and I felt cheated about what I'd missed.

Up from them, a curved path ran through a cottage garden to a story-book house with the highest gables I ever remember seeing. Aunt (or possibly Great Aunt, or even Great-great Aunt) Emma lived there with Cousin Mary to look after her. Dressed completely in black this ancient, wizened lady sat in a dark room in a high-backed wing chair with her feet propped on a stool.

Although completely blind she managed to crochet clothes—even a complicated little blue and white romper suit —for my doll, Angelina. She did this by putting a safety pin at the beginning of the row so she could feel when a row was completed. She could write a letter too by folding the paper and crossing her left hand over her right and feeling the fold in advance as she wrote. They had an outdoor dunny which she found by hooking her walking stick over a clothes line running from the back door to the outhouse.

Early in my life she moved to be cared for by another relative when poor Cousin Mary was called home to look after her own mother. Aunt Emma didn't live long after this and the other relative inherited the story-book house and built a horrid brick box in the cottage garden.

Round a slight bend, where our street ran into the main road to town, was a corner store. Mutt Webster presided there, standing behind his sloping-fronted, wooden counter. With a jolly face and a whitish apron whose strings crossed in the back and tied over his tummy he would hand me the bread with our name on it (maybe a three-penny loaf or a double sixpenny loaf) from the row of loaves on the open shelf behind him. I

would clutch it in my hand (probably grubby) and run home with it. Mostly. History tells of the time I sat in the gutter and ate the middle out and took home the crust but I swear that's apocryphal. I like crusts.

So across the street and back down the other side.

Old Mrs. Neal, my mother's aunt, lived by herself in a small villa close to the road. She was short and fat and had many chins, swollen ankles and a ready, cackling laugh. Her daughter is one of the most beautiful women I know and I still search the memory of the mother's face for signs of young beauty.

My mother's family were early pioneers, making the perilous journey from England. Having reached Nelson, several children fewer than when they set off, they made their way across to Blenheim, and obviously decided their travelling days were done. They settled on the land and procreated enthusiastically. My grandfather alone had eleven siblings so it was no wonder I was related to half the town—and these were just the ones I knew about. Although I doubt whether there were many strays. The family was known for its uprightness and, probably, faithfulness. Lack of imagination might have kept them good. All keen sportsmen, the Neals fielded their own cricket team,

The Harringtons lived across the side road and kept to themselves behind a high hedge. Their only child, Michael, was a brash, curly-headed boy who would probably grow up to look like his father with a big frame, brown tousled hair and a red face. Michael was a bit younger than me and therefore not worth noticing. Mr. Harrington had some sort of white collar job and I think the family had pretensions, a foible my father deplored. Dad repeated to us with great delight how they had sent a photograph of Seymour Square to friends, claiming it was their own garden. Unfortunately the friends later came to

visit. I don't know how Dad knew this but we chose to believe it.

Our own family was not blameless in this respect. My father teased my mother over her penchant for acquiring bank manager's wives as friends with whom she exchanged afternoon teas; the 1940's version of today's coffee mornings.

Next to the Harringtons was Mrs. Gow and her twins, older than me. There was no Mr. Gow in evidence although it was generally believed he was still alive. This gave the family an air of mystery and a taint of something not quite nice. Contributing to this was her rouge and bright red lipstick and dyed hair which, surely by accident, was orange. I did not recognize it then as a brave face put to the world.

Short and corseted (I assume) into an unnatural, inverted pear shape, she would mount her Mary Poppins bicycle to cycle into town. My skinny mother wore corsets too. I think every woman did then and they must have been not only stiff upper-lipped but stiff all over. Not very cuddly.

Mrs. Gow's dilapidated house was mostly hidden from the road by unkempt bushes and weeds. The one time I went inside I was staggered by the sight of a lawnmower in the bedroom. To me, who was accused of being slovenly if a rubber band was left on my dressing table, this was a different world. As a child I had her labelled and was later mildly surprised to see her daughter grow very beautiful and both children rise in the world.

One house down, on the corner, was a nice bungalow in which lived the Allports. I played with their only child, Beverley, and one day while pushing their swing from the front, I collected her shoe in my face and split my tongue. It's not still forked; the doctor sewed it up. Beverley is still my friend.

So across the street again back to our house. You hardly had to look before crossing the road because there wasn't much traffic. Few people had cars and those who did limited their use because of wartime petrol rationing. We had a big, square, brown Hillman with a spare tyre and a box for luggage fixed to the back, running boards along the sides and a crank handle in front. My mother, being frugal—she claimed it was a hangover from the recent depression, a permanent hangover as it turned out—objected so much to taking it out at all that my father sold it in disgust.

At the entrance to our long gravel drive there was a big, white paling gate. Early on, before milk bottles, I would leave our billy here for Mr. Sowman who would come by with his draught horse and cart and ladle milk into it from big cans on the back of the cart. Each time he hopped up on the back board after replacing our billy by the gate the cart would dip. He was a big man.

Our street was on the 'right side of the tracks' but not even small-town flash. It was a friendly enough street in that everyone spoke, but each house was surrounded by a hedge or a fence and that was the way they liked it. There was no hopping across to a neighbour for an egg or a bit of butter; in a time of rationing I suspect that wouldn't have been welcome.

Our street, my street. The quiet (broken in the mornings by chooks), the smell of fresh bread in Mutt Webster's store, Mrs. Gow's painted face, old Mrs. Neal's cackle, Mrs. Pope's orange cardy.

Trivial and childishly judgmental these memories may be, but I can't edit them. If I'm to recount anything at all it has to be the way I saw it then through my child eyes.

It's changed now; the people dead, the houses tarted up or pulled down. But it remains, my street that was, safe in my memory.

Our place

Our house was the biggest in the street, but don't read too much into that. It was an old rambling wooden villa with bay windows and iron lace round the verandahs. A defunct fountain with a chipped concrete surround sat in the centre of the large front lawn and spoke of better days, but despite this the old established garden was beautiful. Mature trees ringed the lawn—heliotrope rhododendrons, striped camellias, lilac, tulip tree, oleander, copper beech, strawberry tree. This last tree overhung the footpath and when I was quite small I was supposed to have sat up in it and spat on people walking beneath. Believe it if you dare.

Our place was no longer grand but not without charm; a charm which wore thin for me when I was old enough to help mow the lawn—with a hand mower— and scrub the verandahs.

Inside, the many large high-ceilinged rooms opened off two long halls in a T shape. The stem of the T was rented out. My parents maintained it was part of their contribution to the war effort, and accommodation was certainly short in the town, but I suspect the contribution to their pocket was paramount. What would be unthinkable now excited no surprise at the time—the tenants shared our bathroom.

The front room, meaning the best room, had a bay window overhung by the giant copper beech which made the room rather dark. In the bay sat a heavy, black-stained refectory table which Dad had made, and a shiny, black,

upright grand piano given to Dad's mother by his father in 1896, the year of Dad's birth. Many times before school in winter I sat at that piano with fingers so numb with cold that I couldn't feel the keys, but there are nothing like scales to warm the hands.

I liked this room particularly on winter evenings with firelight on the black wood, red patterned carpet and big sofa. Later the colour scheme was changed to green with a chesterfield suite and I didn't like the room so much. In its green phase, the room also acquired three china ducks flying across one wall. Or were they fish? Memory fails me.

A casement opened from the bay on to the side verandah where I slept in the summer. The luxury of lying in bed in the open air listening to the rustle of the copper beech leaves, and the stifled feeling when the weather drove me inside are still fresh in my mind.

The kitchen and Dad's office were in the back of the house in a lean-to which opened onto the back verandah. Dad had put angled wooden bicycle supports here and I would ride my green bike around the back past the hydrangea bed in the angle of the house and then along the wall of the lean-to which had a grape vine trained on it, to the verandah to park my bike.

The motorshed, with no car in it for most of my childhood, opened off this verandah.. The washhouse abutted the motorshed and had a Virginia creeper with beautiful orange trumpets growing over it. When I was young we boiled the clothes in a copper there and then put them through a hand wringer. Later we got an agitator washing machine. The drying line stretched across the back lawn and was held up in the middle with a wooden pole. Being short, I had trouble reaching up to the line at its ends to hang the clothes, even when the pole was out. I had never seen a clothes drier; never even heard of such a thing.

On the far side of the washhouse was the chopping block, overhung by a prolific plum tree whose yellow cherry plums fell all over the path and into the wood pile. Together with everyone else in the town we had lots of plum trees—small yellow plums, bigger red plums, and large long blue plums. You couldn't give them away. Plum jam (with stones) was one of our family staples. We also had peach and pear and nectarine jam from our own trees. Although it was difficult to hoard enough sugar coupons, nobody I knew bought jam.

The back garden was even bigger than the front and stretched right back into the block. At that time when New Zealanders still had vivid memories of the depression, everyone grew vegetables but I reckon ours grew more than most. It was bigger for a start.

A path led from the back lawn past a large double glasshouse in which Dad grew tomatoes, cucumbers, grapes, and even on one remarkable occasion, a pineapple. One of my jobs was to de-shoot the tomato plants which stained my hands and left a characteristic smell. I also had to water them. I placed the hose on the ground at the beginning of each row, squatted on my haunches and waited until the water ran along the trough to the end, all the while eating grapes and seeing how far I could project the pips by pinching them between thumb and index finger. When I had competitions at the dinner table with my sister and father, my mother, understandably, got cross.

Then when the tomatoes were ripe I would run along to the shop on the corner with the surplus in a small, red bag Mum had made, for Mutt Webster to sell.

On one notable occasion a traction engine? (large, heavy and black anyway) came to sterilize the glasshouse before the new tomatoes were planted and unfortunately sank

into a grassed-over old well as it chugged over the back lawn. The hole became a useful dump for household scraps.

The glasshouse grapes, being smaller and sweeter than the outside ones, were our favourites. When we couldn't stuff one more down, Dad made the rest into wine. I well remember the oak barrel tilted on its side in the motorshed with a glass upturned over the bung hole and a white crust around the rim. Dad would kneel down, cock his ear to this hole and listen intently. I didn't know what for, but I did know that to jiggle the barrel was a heinous crime.

All his efforts must have been worth it because the local MP reportedly said when visiting us that it was better than the wine in Bellamys. It was certainly explosive stuff as evidenced by the fountain which occasionally sprayed the kitchen when it was uncorked. Occasionally Dad would make parsnip or elderberry wine or honey mead as well as grape wine.

For all his interest in making wine I hardly ever saw him drink it. He did it for the hell of it and just liked to treat visitors. There was no bought alcohol in the house and both my parents abhorred drinking.

On the other side of the path from the glasshouse, was our large vegetable garden, flanked on the path side by blackcurrant bushes and rhubarb and on the house side by a bean fence and fruit trees. The garden was never immaculate but it was certainly productive and I don't remember ever having bought vegetables. Dad was a good gardener. The story goes that early in his marriage he took great pride in growing bigger cabbages than his farmer father-in-law who thought him a hopeless townie. One thing he didn't grow was garlic. It was just coming into fashion but Dad would have none of it—'What do you want to muck up good food for?'

He loved company in the garden and would drag me outside, unwilling, to help him weed. Soon, after talking together about everything in the world while we worked I'd forget my sour temper and previous plans to play with Diane.

He was only interested in the back garden; the front was my mother's domain.

Beyond our vegetable garden was the tenant's vegetable garden, also large, and on the far side of this, our asparagus bed. Then came the side fence separating our property from the Hillmans'.

Down there on the other side of the path was an untended area of big trees, among them many elderberries, in the middle of which Dad dug our air raid shelter—a nasty, spidery, muddy, coffin-shaped hole in the ground whose walls kept caving in. Diane and I liked to play in her air raid shelter when we could get away with it. But never in ours. Hers had a boarded floor and sides and it was clean.

Almost at the bottom of the section were several huge walnut trees. The walnuts fell mostly into the long grass where they were hard to find but they were easy to pick up from the bare fowl run on the back boundary—another of my jobs. Several beehives sat underneath the walnut trees. After Dad donned all the gear and raided the hives, he brought the wax plates up to the washhouse, strung them up and let the honey drip off. Angry bees followed him and I had to carefully pick a patch of the door handle between the bees in order to enter. I was never stung.

The fowlhouse was a deluxe (as far as size was concerned) affair with two rooms and an outside yard, although the chooks often ran free. We always had a rooster, but as everyone else did too, no-one complained about the crowing. When I ran down to the bottom of the section to feed the

chooks household scraps, mash, wheat and grit, it seemed such a long way.

As I remember it, everything about our place was big; house, garden, glasshouse, fowlhouse, trees. Was this just a child's perception? To some extent, I suppose it was, but not entirely. It *was* big. I left that place when I was sixteen and never had a chance to go back for many years to check my memory. By the time I saw it again the developers had got hold of it, demolished all the buildings, divided it up and sold off the sections and many new houses (I couldn't see from the street how many) were squashed onto it.

Our place was gone.

Peonies by the gate

There was another house which was very familiar to me. It was not on our street but round the corner by the huge macrocarpa tree and down three houses. Diane Hillman lived here and her place abutted on our back garden from which it was separated by a wire mesh fence. I regret to say that our friendship had a rocky beginning. She had hung on to the fence with her fingers through the wire and I bit them. Or so I'm told. I don't remember this, but if it was true she obviously forgave me because we spent a lot of time together as children and are still friends now.

I would knock on their spring fly-door and if the weather was bad, spend the afternoon inside with Diane making a mess on her kitchen floor with our paper dolls while her father, at the end of the big table permanently covered with a thick cloth (I never saw the wooden surface of that table), meticulously sorted his stamps with tiny tongs and her mother worked at the sink bench through an archway.

Instead of playing with paper dolls we might read Diane's *Girls' Crystal* magazine. I seem to remember that boarding schools and horses featured prominently. My sister teased me mercilessly when she saw me reading a *Girls' Crystal* borrowed from Diane but still I desperately wanted to get this magazine myself. My parents were wise enough to stall until my reading taste improved. Long past my *Girls' Crystal* years I spent a year at boarding school and what an anticlimax!

The kitchen was warmed by a destructor and always cosy, and there was baking for afternoon tea; maybe date cakes which Mrs. Hillman knew I loved. She was a regal woman with thick waved white hair. I can see her now, gloved, hatted, straight-backed, riding her Mary Poppins bike into town past our place. Mr. Hillman owned a bike shop so they all had new bikes. I was shamefully envious of Diane's.

Mrs. Hillman's dominant feature was her nose, a detail that didn't escape me when I was small, and I remember saying to her in all innocence that if I had a bit of hers we'd both be right. Fortunately she laughed but it was many years before I understood why as it had seemed only sensible at the time. I have a decided pug nose. I'm told that when I was born I had no nose at all and my parents pulled it out every day, hoping it would end up normal. It didn't—and it bugged me as I got older. As I walked past the Catholic Primary playground on my way to High School, dear little boys hanging on the fence with their fingers hooked through the wire mesh chanted, 'Pug nose, pug nose'. So it is no wonder that I spent my adolescence trying not to present my profile to any boy who mattered.

Inside Diane's house the kitchen was our domain and I seldom went beyond it. Once I remember Mrs. Hillman taking Diane and me into the front bedroom where she reached up to the top of the wardrobe and brought down a brown cardboard haberdashery box in which the precious china bride and bridesmaid dolls were wrapped in tissue paper. It was a matter of look and don't touch though. Many years later Diane gave these dolls to me and I entrusted them to Kitty Rose. How can I make Kitty understand just how precious and what a generous gift they were?

Once, and once only do I remember having tea at Diane's place. Mrs. Hillman spread a white cloth—always a

cloth, never table mats back then—over the table cover and we had bread and butter and bananas.

And sleep-overs? We'd never heard of such a thing!

Outside everything was in order compared with our garden. Mr. Hillman's dugout air raid shelter was a model, and the gravel paths would not have dared to grow a weed. I can see him sitting on his haunches at the side of the garage chopping and stacking the neatest kindling I have ever seen.

Unlike us they had a car and sometimes I would go out with them in the weekend. They were assiduous cemetery visitors and Diane and I would race irreverently around the gravestones while her parents tended the graves. So we made fun out of an unlikely excursion. Once Diane came with me to stay with my grandmother at Lucknow for the holidays. I think, I hope, she enjoyed it, but none of her family were really outdoor people. How strange then that Diane married a farmer and happily became a farmer's wife.

There was a magnificent apricot tree in the middle of their back lawn and a persimmon tree too. The apricot bore prolifically but the persimmon only ever had one persimmon. Diane and I watched this pretty fruit ripen and finally succumbed to temptation and ate it. We were not popular.

I came and went through the gate in the wire mesh fence separating our back gardens and Diane and I didn't play much round the front of her house, but strangely my most vivid memory of their garden is of the flowers by their front gate—peonies; big, flamboyant, extravagantly deep red peonies. I thought they were the most beautiful flowers in the world. I still do; or maybe first equal with irises.

By the way, Diane still has her paper dolls. I fancy those days mean as much to her as they do to me.

Ribbons in my hair

I keep hearing about how dull, deprived, and boring it was in wartime New Zealand.

Well, let me tell you, I was there and it wasn't.

Granted, shops shut all weekend, there were few places to go out and eat and no money for it anyway, there was rationing, we often had bread with dripping instead of butter and there was *no television*.

But who's to say we were worse for all that? At least nobody needed to lock doors then, and I could sleep safely on the open verandah in summer.

I remember long, hot summer days and me in a print frock with sashes coming from the waist seam and tied behind in a bow, and bloomers to match. I remember winter frost glistening white and me, with numb fingers that didn't thaw out until playtime, bundled up in hand-knitted jersey, skirt, long woollen stockings, woollen coat, and pixie hat (a rectangle of hand-knitting folded in half, sewn down one side with strings attached to the free points to tie under the chin) warmed in the oven of the coal range. This was before jeans or jackets or tracksuits or sneakers; boys wore shorts and girls wore skirts, and most clothes were home-made.

Few fripperies, but summer or winter, my mother didn't consider me dressed until she'd tied ribbons in my hair.

Then off I'd run to school with my square, cardboard, school case. There was no question of being driven. This was

war time and for most of my childhood we didn’t have a car anyway.

I always left home wearing shoes but they didn't stay on for long. The Borough School was a string of eight single-storeyed classrooms with the headmaster’s office and staff room in the middle and the Dental Clinic perched on top. Every classroom opened right out on to a covered verandah and from there concrete steps ran the full length of the building. This is where we left our shoes in rows as soon as we got to school. You can imagine the scatter when it rained. The steps led down to a large concrete playing area, where the whole school lined up every morning, every class in a double stranded snake, one side boys and the other girls, facing their classroom. After the announcements we all marched inside in a set pattern to the military music, often the de Souza march, blaring from the loud speakers.

First thing, Miss Morecambe, our Primer One teacher, made us display our hankies. No tissues then. My mother sewed a pocket in my bloomers for my hanky and mostly I could thankfully display it and be a ‘fairy’ rather than, oh dear, a ‘sniffy’. The shame!

At playtime we all helped ourselves to half a pint of creamy milk from a crate and a red delicious apple wrapped in tissue paper from an apple box, and then played catty-corner in the girls’ shelter shed which backed onto the lavatories at one end of the classroom block. By this time, in winter, my chilblains were itching.

So back into class to recite the times table, read out loud, practise printing with a pencil and finally graduate to a pen—what an event!—with a nib dipped in the inkwell at the top right hand corner of the desk. It was a big day if you were ink monitor and mixed the ink and filled the ink wells.

Miss Hilliard was our teacher in Primer Four and I remember her for her kindness if not her truthfulness; she called me her ‘little prairie flower’. Now wasn’t that nice!

I also remember our Standard Four teacher, Miss Wastney, a homely, kind, older woman; and the teacher who took us for Games—a nice, young woman with freckles, and, my father hinted, a ‘reputation’. What could that mean? My ears flapped.

Most of our primary teachers were female, and Miss rather than Mrs. It was no doubt considered a genteel vocation for young single ladies. A *Mr*. Pratt was the Headmaster, though. Of course.

I ran home for lunch except when the weather was really bad. Lunch at school was an exciting event. The teachers made us urns of cocoa, and the long narrow cloakroom stank of galoshes and wet socks.

When I once stayed for some months with my grandmother while my mother was having one of her frequent bouts of illness, I went to the country school by bus and took my lunch every day. The novelty soon wore off and I have a lasting memory of lettuce and marmite sandwiches tasting of the greaseproof paper they were wrapped in.

On the way home from school my friends and I, with shoes in our school bags, competed to see who could walk furthest on fences before being forced to put a foot on the footpath. Often I stopped off to play with a friend and was given an apple from the box that made everyone's wash-house smell of apples, and a glass of Mr. Poswillo’s home-made ginger beer which he sold around the town.

When I got home there might occasionally be three or four ladies, white-gloved and hatted, perched decorously on chairs in our front room sipping tea and nibbling butterfly cakes or thin diagonal sandwiches with the crusts cut off from

a selection of delicacies on bone china plates in a three-tiered cake stand on a dinner wagon. Perhaps Mum let me help myself. I don't remember.

Mostly I'd have a piece of bread with butter if our ration hadn't run out and honey. Never biscuits, at least never bought ones. My mother never bought biscuits that I can remember. She did, however, as befitted a home science teacher, make very nice jam drops.

Then off outside to play. I never stayed inside unless it was too cold or wet or I had to do my practice. Twice a week, beginning when I was seven, I left home early to go to my piano lesson with an elderly lady who lived opposite school. Mrs. Stuart had a convulsive facial tic and poked her index finger into my right palm while I was playing to maintain correct hand position.

In time, no doubt thinking it was good for us to perform, the British Musical Society held a monthly Saturday afternoon meeting in a fusty, private drawing room. Beverley and I would bike along to join other unwilling kids, and giggle through our piano pieces, longing to be outside.

To offset the B.M.S. the year was punctuated by events almost too exciting to be borne:

Basketball tournaments. We didn’t have extras like school trips, but when I graduated from catty-corner to basketball, our team played against the local Spring Onions (Springlands School) and the Convent Cats. (*They* both called *us* Borough Pups, but with weight of numbers we were certain of our superiority.) I yearned silently for a basketball and for years indulged in the fantasy of throwing Valerie’s basketball up and miraculously seeing two fall down through the hoop—one for me.

The church August Tea, which involved a concert, food and much rushing round. The concert was the thing, with the

stars, as we thought ourselves, decked out in flimsy home-made costumes, maybe swinging garlands of paper flowers. We were certainly always overexcited.

The annual school Fancy Dress party. I wore a red, peasant girl outfit which was too big the first year, okay the second and too small the third. Actually I desperately wanted to be a fairy like Valerie and Barbara. With a wand. I didn’t care so much about the wings.

The school sports. I tried so hard but never shone.

The annual picnic when the whole school would pile on the train and go down to Essen’s Valley.

The school Flower Show. Even this excited me. I took it very seriously and couldn’t understand why my parents did not. Every year I hoped in vain to have the red card against the shiny, dark green vase with my flower in it. Now, the scent of spring flowers, as well as the smell of apples and wet socks, still overwhelms me with nostalgia.

Small town; small events; great pleasures; and only little disappointments.

School wasn’t all joy. Every so often we’d get the dreaded call to the torture chamber of the Dental Nurse. And I got the strap once for talking. It hasn’t warped me for life and probably shut me up effectively.

There were other hiccups in my primary school life. Rumour had it that a grubby, swaggering boy called Rex, who we girls viewed with trembling condescension, had sworn in the playground. He’d said, 'Bum.' I was shocked to the core. Then I found out a girl was adopted and I told. And a group of us misbehaved shamefully at Ngaire’s birthday party by taking turns to pee into a jam jar.

Small hiccups; small sins; big ructions.

Big sins were in another world. I had a hint of that world when the headmaster's son, engaged to a lovely girl who

played the romantic lead in the local musical production (how I dreamed of doing that!) took up with the blowsy, brash beauty from the bread shop. This was heady stuff of real life decadence! I was mightily impressed.

But my world really rocked when I heard of a murder a few miles away in Picton. There must have been other murders in New Zealand when I was a child but this is the only one I remember. In those days, murder was big news.

With no television I never saw and seldom heard of violence. Even the flicks I saw at the Palace on a Saturday afternoon with Diane from over the back fence were only of Judy Garland singing and dancing, or Esther Williams parading in her bathing suit, or Lassie or Walt Disney. At the beginning we all stood up for God Save the Queen, and before the picture began we saw unreal (to us) shorts of the war and a cartoon. Then there was interval during which Diane and I went next door to Payne's milk bar to have a threepenny scoop of ice-cream in a dish, with a spoonful of flavoured syrup and a pink biscuit on top. We'd slosh it all up together into a 'pig-pie'. There were brightly coloured boiled lollies in a jar on the counter and sometimes we had some of those too. No other confections were on offer. Being war time we were lucky to get that.

No fathers of my close friends were at the war. One of my mother's brothers was in the Western Desert but it all seemed pretty glamorous to me, and hugely exciting when he brought me home a bracelet of tiny carved elephants and another made of linked medallions painted with Egyptian pictures.

My own father had three fingers missing from his left hand and was not accepted for war service. Instead he was in charge of a unit of the home guard. I wasn't aware at the time but he told me later how he'd march the platoon round the

corner and then order them to break rank into a ditch where they'd all hunker down for a smoke.

We dutifully did war drill at school. With a cork to bite on in the event of explosions which might otherwise rupture our ear drums, on a string round our neck we traipsed in a crocodile over the river to dug-outs on the far bank among the cows. By the time we all straggled over there any bomb would have long exploded. However it was a welcome diversion from sitting in class, except when one trod in a cow pat. At home we all observed the blackout and dug trenches in the back yard.

I suspect that if the Japanese had arrived our whole town would have been a doddle.

Because Woodburn airfield was nearby, soldiers in uniform were often in the streets to remind us that there was a war on, but this was a matter of interest rather than worry. The war overshadowed our childhood mainly by the shortages; petrol, meat, butter, sugar, tea and clothes were rationed and eggs were scarce. But, ever resourceful, each household grew vegetables and fruit trees and kept chooks. Sugar was hoarded for jam making and bottling, and spare eggs were preserved with ovaline. My father also had a canning machine which although never totally successful, was fortunately never responsible for poisoning us.

And I always had pretty clothes—smocking on my dress, girls and boys marching across my jersey, flowers growing around my straw hat— because my mother was good at sewing. All of us girls had ribbons in our hair.

I was particularly lucky to have an aunt in America who sent some beautiful blue material, ribbons and braid, and a full set of coloured pencils in glorious, subtly-graded colours. I rationed the use of those treasured pencils and consequently had outgrown and lost them before a fraction was used. But I got full measure of delight just looking at them.

So the war was just background white noise. Apart from the shorts at the pictures, the war came closest to me when I read The Weekly News, a magazine with a cover the colour of my father's pink long-johns, and the centre few shiny pages filled with the pictures of war casualties. I'd sort out who I thought were the best looking and think what a shame they'd been killed, before returning to play with my paper dolls.

Were we dull? Bored? Heavens no!

Deprived? Not that we noticed. We had the basics *and* we had ribbons in our hair.

So spare us your pity. We had a grand time.

Black serge and stockings

I discarded ribbons in my hair when I had my plaits chopped off. Plaits with ribbons didn't go with my new quasi-adult status of Intermediate School and a sexy, heavy, hot, black serge gym frock. So began the dreaded chore of ironing those pleats (on top of newspaper so the serge didn't go shiny.)

Out of school it was off-white swing-back coats and wedgies (wedge-heeled shoes) if you were so lucky. I wasn’t, and I nearly died of envy.

I wasn't the most popular child with the teachers; understandably. I recall being a giggly little smart-ass. Mrs. Forbes who taught sewing and cooking said to me once in her broad Scottish accent, ‘You’ll grow up to be a bad woman.’ I went home and told my father who was as incensed as I knew he would be, and I stood by smugly luxuriating in his anger. Actually I thought it was funny and couldn’t understand the fuss. My father probably used this remark as a hat to hang his long-standing dislike of Mrs. Forbes on.

Another person my father didn’t like was Miss Humphries. Miss Lavinia Humphries. She didn't like him either —or me. Although I can't blame my father for that. I probably earned it all by myself. In retrospect, she seems a nice woman.

By High School the fashion was for long skirts. At least we didn’t get chilblains on our backsides as our mini-skirted successors did. At inspection time we knelt down to make sure our gym-frock hem cleared the floor. No one to my knowledge

dislocated their back leaning backwards but it was a wonder. Hair had to clear the collar, so on inspection day we'd all stretch our necks like a hen looking down a bottle. On top of the hair went the hat. Woe betide if you were caught with your hat off in the street.

In an attempt to 'level the playing field', both boys and girls had to wear full uniform even to our school dances—those unsatisfactory occasions in the new assembly hall. Who needed a chastity belt when you had a suspender belt hitching up long black stockings, and a serge gym frock? Balls and formals with expensive long gowns, pre-dance dinners, stretch limos, after ball parties, alcohol. Come on! Not even dreamed of!

School dances were, for me, occasions of maximum anticipation, minimum delivery, and ghastly disappointment. I don't really think I can blame the long black stockings.

The truth was that boys were plainly not interested in me. By this time I was swamped by sexuality and didn't know what the hell to do about it. At Intermediate I had finally worked out while standing all by myself one sunny morning at playtime round by the girls' bike sheds—I remember the day clearly—what the male appendage was for. It hit me like a thunderbolt and life was never the same again. So I knew what I *could* do about it; it was what I *should* do that bugged me. It was largely answered by the boys who, as I've said, weren't exactly queueing for my favours.

I can hardly blame them. Five foot nothing, skinny, 32A cup (and that was two years after everyone else) when the rest of the horrible girls were 34B and expanding. My mother made my first bra. She was very good at sewing, but she wasn't *that* good. The shame of it!

Worse were the ghastly sales ladies who didn't know the meaning of privacy when my mother eventually took me in to Thomas's to buy a bra. 'Just bend over a bit more, dear.'

And this unfeeling stranger would stuff my little bosom in with her big hand to try and fill the cup.

Clothes became increasingly important and although I still didn't have wedgies I did, however, get my first bought dress. It was a demure white cotton pique with a sparse pattern of cherries, and a peter pan collar. This was before the days of cleavage flashing, and just as well because I didn't have one.

The bane of my life was people thinking I was younger than I was. This continued until the age when I *wanted* to look younger, when of course it stopped. Now the girl in the movie theatre gives me a seniors ticket *without even asking*.

Anyway back then in despairing and desperate midget days, I pursued boys relentlessly in a simulated offhand way. Finally I landed one; a nice lad who fortunately hadn't yet learned that a girl's 'no' often meant 'yes please', which protected me from any grunt work, so to speak. He came to dinner once; braved our girls-only household and my reluctant, anxious parents. I think we only had scrambled eggs. Oh, God! Mum was never one to kill the fatted calf. There's nothing like the excruciating embarrassment of adolescence.

I still played basketball—my skills only ran to big ball games—and I was still on the short end for the team photo. My boyfriends, such as they were, were always short too. I might say this persisted right through University. The pipsqeaks were so relieved to find a girl shorter than they were that they didn't bother to look at the detail. Sam was the first non-dwarf to show interest so I grabbed him.

One of the memorable occasions at Marlborough College was the production of *Hamlet*. I was Ophelia, a point I've laboured for years because Sam was Caliban in *his* school production. Of the actual performance I have no memory at all but I well remember my father marching in to an unexpectedly late rehearsal and dragging me out by the ear in front of

everyone. He was very strict about where his daughter was and what time she should be home. I could have killed him. And I remember early on in rehearsals being told that if I didn’t stop giggling they’d give the part to someone else who could.

I re-read Hamlet recently and although I love Shakespeare, that speech of Ophelia’s about all the herbs does sound more like a vegetarian recipe. No wonder I giggled. I noted that rosemary is for remembrance; just what I need to reduce my elderly moments before they coalesce. I’d make a better Ophelia now that sweetly mad comes naturally.

I also noted several verses which I don’t remember saying at school and can’t believe I would not have noticed at the time. I'll bet those bits were censored. It's hard to believe now that we were so sheltered.

I spent most of my last year at Marlborough College staying with Grandma while my parents travelled overseas. It was good of her to have me because she obviously felt the responsibility keenly. I was aware that she was terrified that I would go off the rails. She needn't have worried; I didn't have any offers.

This year was at least better than the next year, my last year at school, during which I boarded at New Plymouth Girls' High School while my parents taught in Taumarunui.

Boarding school was not a roaring success. It started badly—I arrived late, around Easter, with my belongings in an apple box because all the suitcases had been commandeered by earlier departees. Plucked out of relative independence, I floundered amid what seemed to me to be petty restrictions and stultifying routine of a girls boarding school. I wanted to work but never found anywhere quiet to do it. I wasn't unhappy, just bemused. How could other girls tolerate, let alone enjoy, as some appeared to do, so many years of this? I didn't even have the consolation of assignations with boys from the Boys' High

School in the cemetery down the hill by the swimming pool and across the river. Such boyfriends as I had got tired of working around the boarding school rules.

I don't remember an end of year climax with graduating ball, prizegiving, tears, vows of everlasting friendship and such like. My year ended with a whimper rather than a bang; high school days just fizzled out and I left school without any desire to prolong them.

Dad

He wasn't a big man, my father. Physically, that is. In many other ways he was big: big voice, big talents, enormous drive and determination, hugely generous (if he liked you), fiercely loyal. But he was short on perceptiveness, on tact, on listening as opposed to talking, and memorably short-tempered. He wore his opinions, either black or white—Dad didn't admit shades of grey—on his sleeve.

The upshot of all this was that he was not so hot on personal relations.

However, love him or hate him (and there were many in both camps) you couldn't ignore him.

He started life in relative affluence, the middle child of five. I have only one photograph of the McPherson family group, mother standing looking sour (Dad said she was in a bad temper that day), father sitting, three small boys and a baby, the only girl, on the father's knee. The fifth child had yet to be born. My father, Robert, is the one with the wicked grin, dangling his legs. His love of fun showed early. Adam, two years older than Bert (as he was called then), loved fun too but it didn't show in the photo because he had the mumps.

The affluence didn't last. His father, a mining engineer, lost all his money speculating on the gold fields. 'I was too greedy,' he told Dad. 'I wanted to have enough to leave you all something.'

Catastrophe piled on catastrophe. His wife, aged only thirty six and twenty years younger than him, died suddenly and the old man spent his last sixty pounds to bury her. Dad was thirteen then.

The family had to move house to the wrong side of the tracks—literally.

Catastrophe continued. Soon after Dad lost his mother he caught his hand in a circular saw in his father's workshop and sliced off the three middle fingers of his left hand. After the doctor sewed up the stumps he went back to school where his teacher gave him the strap and burst the stitches. This still brings tears to my eyes.

Without their mother the three boys ran wild and must have been a pest—undoing the traces of the bottle man's cart, hoisting Ben, the eldest, up in a bucket of a machine working on reclamation on the Dunedin foreshore. Adam was purported to say frequently, 'Be ready to run, Bert,' so apparently Bert didn't always instigate things. But judging by the cackling when he told us the stories, he was an enthusiastic accomplice.

Money was short and Dad left school early to earn. But his drive for education remained. In his teens, while doing his apprenticeship in pattern making, he went to night classes in art at King Edward Technical College. I have some of his beautiful pencil drawings from plaster casts. He took up the violin again too by moving the sound post of his violin, stringing it up in reverse and learning to play again fingering with his right hand. When the depression forced him to leave Dunedin and move to Dannevirke, he rode a motorbike to Hastings for lessons with his violin strapped onto his back. He loved the romantic composers—Paganini, Sarasate, Kreisler—and had an instinctive feeling for music.

A few years later he took a job as a metalwork teacher at Marlborough College where he became known as Mac. (Years

later when I was there too, he was called Old Mac and I was Little Mac). Soon after arrival he met and married my mother who taught home science there. Freda was highly respectable and I suspect this marriage, together with his new school teacher status, eased memories of his blue collar days, even if metalwork teaching only qualified as an off-white collar job. He referred to himself as a college master.

Still intent on educating himself, he enrolled in a distance music course at Canterbury University and passed several papers. But he failed one (which one I can't remember) and complained ever after because he had given the answer exactly as it was in the book. Perhaps that was the trouble. I suspect he regurgitated the book no matter the question.

Teaching was not what he wanted to do but it gave security and he stuck to it for the rest of his working life. It never satisfied him and after school hours he turned his brain and energy to various manufacturing ventures. A partner looked after the factory but Dad did the thinking and then the designing and making of the machinery needed. During the war plastic was reserved for the war effort and brushes and combs were consequently scarce. So Dad made machines to make wooden combs and to split whalebone into bristles in order to make wooden-backed hairbrushes.

At this time he also grew hybrid corn and shipped it to America to my uncle, a world-famous corn breeder, to take advantage of the extra growing season, and he made popcorn in a lovely shiny red machine at a time when popcorn was new to New Zealand.

Always full of enthusiasm, even in retirement he made machines and set them up in the garage to supply two scarce items, spiles for beer barrels and wooden strips for public lavatory seats.

He did all these things as much for the challenge as the money. On the other hand I don't think he ever forgot the lean years of his youth.

'Money isn't everything,' he would say. 'But it's damn useful stuff.'

Rising to a challenge extended to the garden too. No-one else I knew in Blenheim managed to grow a pineapple, peanuts and tobacco. He strung up the tobacco in the motor shed and when it was dry, rolled his own smokes and chain-smoked them at home, irritating my mother by dropping ash.

The garden contained other unusual things too. At this time he said he distrusted banks and kept a lot of cash in a biscuit tin buried there (but as he couldn't resist telling people, it rather defeated the purpose). Perhaps he was just trying to grow money too!

Older, and living in Dunedin again, his special love was begonias and he got much pleasure from growing them in the glasshouse and putting the huge blooms in pots in a specially built trough in the front room.

We teased him about his sartorial elegance in the garden. As he got thinner and older, he held up his increasingly baggy gardening trousers with binder twine; he wasn't a vain man. But he wasn't entirely without vanity. When he did get dressed up, a rare event, he did it properly, and willingly struck a pose for the camera. In dress suit and tails and with a shock of white hair, he looked every inch the gentleman. I think he was proud of his hair. The dashing sweep of dark hair across his forehead as a young man spoke of some time in front of the mirror.

In his way he was proper, even prudish, and just as he liked to be thought a gentleman and (occasionally) to look the part, he did his best to make ladies out of us. To this end he was fiercely protective, which didn't always please me. He was

particularly troubled by the thought that my boyfriends might 'paw' me as he put it, and watched from the front window when I was brought home to make sure they didn't. (Being a sensuous and demonstrative man, was he harking back to his own youth?) He even opened my letters when I was younger. Aged eighteen and in my first year of University, from force of habit I told a fellow student who wanted to take me to the pictures that I would have to go home and ask my father. Note that, grandchildren.

I trod carefully with my father. Quick to judge, quick to anger and slow to forget a slight, it was fortunate he didn't touch alcohol. Even so my sister and I suffered from his wrath with the help of a switch from the plum tree when we were children.

I never saw him hit my mother. He had a great reverence for mothers and demanded that we did too. 'You're lucky enough to have a mother,' he'd say. 'I didn't.'

He seldom caned boys at school either while maintaining strict order in the classroom. The story goes that he put it around that his cane had a steel tip (it didn't) which worked wonders.

For my sister and me, his public pride (with minimal reason) in us was nearly as distressing as his anger. He didn't appear to notice us cringe when he indulged in a little boasting. The up side of his pride was that we never lacked encouragement and he would have us believe we could do anything if we tried hard enough. He certainly was ambitious for us, but more for education than making money.

I can hear him say, 'I won't take out life insurance for you, I'll educate you. That's the one thing no-one can take away. It'll take two generations to put the McPhersons on top.' I 'm not sure on top of what, but if we didn't reach it, it wasn't his fault.

There is no doubt that my 'larger than life', volatile father was not easy to live with. He was, however, susceptible to kidding and I could often get around him. My mother never learned how. With his insensitivity to his effect on others, he seemed oblivious to many little things that irritated her. He loved to yarn over the fence to our many neighbours, especially when dinner was ready and she frequently complained that he wore her to a frazzle. Poor Mum!

What saved me from total exasperation with him was his sense of fun. It was exemplified in many ways. When we were small he invented the Green Rooster and regaled us with stories. I never quite believed but I couldn't entirely disbelieve either. One Easter the Green Rooster came into our bedroom—there were the bits of straw over the top of the open sash window to prove it—and laid eggs in nests beside our bed. The gender problem didn't worry us.

Whenever I was sick he danced around the room until I smiled, willing me to feel better with his fooling. Then he'd give me his universal remedy, one drop of iodine in a glass of warm milk.

Despite outward appearances he was a more conventional person than my mother; conventional in his dress, in politics, conventionally religious too although he never went to church. But he was conventional only up to a point. He never got young man's war fever. Called up half way through World War 1, they refused him because of missing fingers and said, 'Aren't you sorry, son, not to be able to fight for your country?'

'No, I'm not,' he replied, 'I don't want to shoot anyone.'

Judging by his usual combativeness I thought he would have enjoyed it.

I never saw him read a fiction book; he was a doer rather than a reader; he thought with his hands—nice hands,

clever hands, even without the full complement of fingers. Not big hands, but with large rounded nails and turned back thumbs.

I was sad to see him get old, his enthusiasm dwindle and his hands come to rest quietly in his lap. But he never lost his sense of fun. My last communication with him was a few days before he died. I found him in bed yet again and told him bossily that if he didn't get up and move around a bit he'd get pneumonia and die.

He gave a slow small smile and thumbed his nose at me.

Freda

Freda, my mother, must have been happy once. I have an old photograph album with tiny snapshots of her having fun among groups of friends at University, and newspaper cuttings of capping processions. Before that, as a girl, she was a keen horsewoman and champion show jumper, and represented Marlborough at hockey. So she must have had fun then too.

But not when I knew her. Pictures of her laughing face do not gel with the joyless mother I remember. My memories of her begin when she was in her early thirties. She was a devoted mother, capable rather than imaginative, admirably egalitarian and tolerant and even sociable in those early days.

She was also kind to her mother. Later, when we moved, my grandmother, disinclined to live away from her only daughter, literally turned up on our doorstep with her bags, and my parents put another bed in the room my sister and I slept in and took her in without hesitation.

Freda was not political, not religious, not musical either, but she encouraged my sister and me in our musical activities and sent us along to Sunday School.

Although of average height and thin, she came from solid stock and was big-boned. Her big hands were dexterous and she embroidered, knitted, sewed, even tailored, beautifully. Having studied Home Science (as it was then) at Otago University she was good at all facets of keeping house.

'Your mother is a dutiful girl,' my father would often say.

However, duty, a house and two little girls were not enough for her. Books could not fill the gap (she was not a reader) but she was intelligent and I believe bored. She seldom laughed and gradually her thoughts turned inward until hypochondria blossomed into her *raison d’etre*.

My father worried. 'Freda’s not a well girl.'

Then a perceptive doctor suggested she get a job and the ‘doctors orders’ gave her the courage to flout the convention of the 1940s and return to work, teaching sewing and cooking, baking mostly, at the local High School.

She tried to teach me these housewifely skills too at home. When she was baking she’d say to me, 'See how I place the butter and then fold the pastry and roll it.' I’d watch impatiently, wanting to do it myself, which wasn’t allowed because I got flour on the ceiling.

Then, 'Look over my right shoulder, dear,' she’d say as she sewed. It didn’t take; although I still hear her voice as I press every seam on the now rare occasions I sew. She made pretty dresses for my sister and me in the days after the depression when money was still tight then during the shortages of war, and dressed herself smartly too, often from a one-and-sixpenny remnant of material.

Strangely enough her flair didn’t extend to interior decorating. Our house was ‘shop window’ style, although it was possibly the tidiest and cleanest in town. I didn’t play much at home; I made my mess at Diane’s or Beverley’s.

My mother was a good manager and stretched money like nobody I knew. Nothing was wasted. If we couldn’t, despite urging, eat all our dinner she reheated it later. We teased her about the time my sister left an apple core on her

dinner plate and Freda accidentally dished it up next day in the lunchtime hash.

Despite her horse-riding and hockey and being brought up on a farm, my mother didn't like being out of doors. Her beautiful red-gold hair (which didn't show a trace of grey until she was well into her fifties) and pretty, deep-set green eyes came with a pale complexion, which burned and freckled easily. But that wasn't the sole reason. One got grubby outside and Freda liked things clean; the house, the food, me, everything. Picnics were out. Being fussy—fastidious my father called it—she loved America where, in the 1950s, she first saw food wrapped in cellophane in supermarkets.

'Routine' was my mother's favourite word . Every morning at seven o'clock on the dot, I would hear her pull up the blinds in her bedroom to begin the set routine of her day.

'Procrastinate' came a close second. 'Don't procrastinate. Do it *now*,' was her mantra. Another favourite saying was, 'If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well,' and she was meticulous in everything she did. 'Methodical' and 'efficient' were right up there too in her lexicon and the house ran like clockwork. There was not much leeway for spontaneity and seemingly no desire for fun. Poor Mum. Later, when I married, she despaired of my slovenly habits.

My mother, unlike my father, was even-tempered. She wrote in my childhood autograph book in her fly-away untidy writing—at odds, I feel, with her passion for order—'Dignity and temper are sisters hand in hand. Dignity steps back a pace when temper takes a stand.'

My father shouted and confronted; my mother quietly manipulated. And who won? A stalemate, I think, of hostile dependency.

And yet I don't know. My father worried about her health and unhappiness and gave her lots of sympathy which

she enjoyed. And love? Did they love each other? In my teens I searched anxiously for signs of it, but I'll never know.

She undoubtedly loved my sister and me but was not demonstrative and couldn't show it; possibly didn't know how to. And I'm sure she craved love herself but didn't know how to get it. To give her a hug was like embracing a brick wall and I didn't try often enough.

Could I have made her happy?

Who knows? Doubtless I could have done better.

Flowers gave her pleasure and sometimes when I dashed in to see her she would want to show me a particular rose in bloom, but as often as not I'd rush off without looking.

Gradually, as she got older, and especially after a small stroke which was triggered by over-enthusiastic medication and which left her with disabilities for the last 22 years of her life, the miasma of unhappiness thickened and what had enabled her to run a tight ship before developed into obsessions —hand-washing, food, thriftiness.

However, despite her irritating clutch on the pennies in her purse she could dole out lump sums unseen from the bank and I was one grateful recipient.

So what sparked off my mother's descent into seven shades of despondency? Life should have been plain-sailing for her—my father and sister and I were healthy and happy, we had enough money, she had great talents.

Maybe her marriage was even less satisfactory than I knew. But I do know that life does not submit to such order as she wanted and maybe this was at the root of some of her discontent. I know too that she was profoundly affected by her younger sister's death. Maybe I, who haven't experienced it, underestimate the lasting effect of such things—his mother's early death on my father, her sister's even earlier death on my mother.

She was nineteen and home from University. Apparently all the family were staying in Blenheim and her father and mother took turns sitting by her nine-year-old sister's sick bed in hospital. The day both parents came home together she said she knew her sister had died. It was a full moon that night and ever afterward she maintained her chronic insomnia was worse on a moonlit night.

My mother just didn't seem to have the grit for life, and when my father and grandmother died and my sister was living elsewhere, I was the only person to feed her over-riding desire for sympathy. I rationed this, with the gut feeling that too much could destroy what little coping ability she had left and plunge her into worse misery.

I believe she lived at least the last half her life inside out. Instead of directing her thoughts outward and then looking inside herself first for answers to her difficulties, she concentrated on looking inwards and only looked outwards to other people to solve her problems. Whatever, she couldn't escape the straightjacket of her anxieties and obsessions.

A pill, or rather a multitude of pills could, in her mind, cure any problem and the doctors duly prescribed. She couldn't recount a consultation with her doctor without an involuntary smile. Anyway, for all her ill health she lived to a ripe if miserable old age.

I did not inherit my mother's unhappiness; by good luck I am messy and happy. Yes, I know the rationalization is obvious. I'll never really understand her. The best I can claim, with the perspective of time, is a little more insight and compassion, albeit cheap and easy compassion now the problem has gone.

My abiding memory of her is her rare, forced, phony laugh and my failure to make her happy.

What a waste of a life!

Grandma Kate

Picture this:

A tall, well-made, handsome woman standing very straight with her head thrown back and a little to one side, flanked by her solid farmer husband and two strapping sons. (My mother must have been away, or perhaps she took the picture.) They are standing in the garden in front of an imposing villa. Behind the house the hills in the distance.

And there you have my grandmother.

The first family in the valley to get a set of cutlery, the first to get electricity, the first to get a car. She was secure her status.

It wasn't like that in her childhood. Then, she'd be sent down to the store to ask for food on tick when the money ran out. After her schooling finished at fourteen she was employed as a nursemaid. Later she taught Sunday School and there met John Neal, a widower twenty years her senior, who said if she married him he'd take her to Australia for a honeymoon. I never knew whether it was grandfather or the trip she fancied, or maybe it was his farm. Anyway they married and Kate, having come up in the world, raised her chin, kept it there and enjoyed it.

Kate had standards. She always looked good, helped by the parcel of outfits that arrived on the farm every year on approval from Ballantynes in Christchurch. A lifelong habit, somewhat annoying in later years if I was waiting for her, was

to change her clothes right down to the skin before going out in case she was run over and taken to hospital.

She always smelled good too. Not of perfume—Heaven forbid!—but of soap from her daily cold bath (in a spring-fed creek before they moved to Lucknow). I never saw her wear lipstick but as she got older she would powder her weather-beaten nose by flapping a powder puff in that general direction.

She didn’t swear. The worst thing she would call anyone was a ‘besom’. This conjured up cartloads of evils which were never specified. One up from being a besom was to be ‘common’. I don’t even remember her using the word ‘sex’, but having borne four children she must have practised it. Perish the thought! Nor did she say ‘pregnant’. In those days a woman might ‘be in the family way’.

When Grandfather was alive they went to Church, Anglican of course, every Sunday in Seddon, and after the service, as members of the inner circle, they went to the vicarage for tea and cake. When Grandfather died Grandma couldn't get there as she couldn't drive. But apparently the vicar visited her at the farm. Although she was very proper she couldn't resist telling me when I was quite young of one such visit (the last one?) which I suspect she regarded as a triumph. Apparently the vicar advanced towards her insistently in her kitchen, saying, 'Shall we? Shall we?'

Anyway, her faith remained firm and she knew she would join loved ones in heaven in due course. Maybe it was this that gave her no fear of death.

Education had passed her by but she did her best to educate herself from the Readers’ Digest, the only book I saw her read. ‘They say . . .’ ushered in the latest wisdom from this, the second holiest book. ‘They say soap causes cancer.’ On some things she claimed superior knowledge by virtue of her age. ‘You don’t get to my age without learning something.’

The moon landing she refused to believe. ‘Paper never refuses the ink,’ she’d say sagely.

There were also several pronunciations that she stuck to (I think she thought them refined) despite the evidence —'treefoil' for tinfoil, 'remrant' for remnant, nasturtium with two hard ts. She composed ‘lines’, not poetry, in which I, when quite small, had to put the ‘stops’. She became very deaf, and in her reverence for propriety she was tortured by the fear that she broke wind audibly. Once again I came to the rescue. 'Did you hear that, dear?'

She had no understanding of science and my husband’s research. ‘And what did you discover today?’ she’d say to him. She claimed prescience, but always after the event. Proof was a foreign concept.

Whatever else, Kate was certainly strong; tough of body and of mind. Good health was something she took for granted and she didn’t jeopardize it by going to the doctor. She never complained of being miserable; she would have considered it a sign of weakness. I can hear her say to herself when she was a little indisposed, ‘Well, the broom won’t sweep itself, m’lady’ and on she’d go.

Her home was her castle, work in the house her forte—and this without what is now considered a necessity; a vacuum cleaner. She cleaned the carpet squares at Lucknow daily with a whisk broom and several times a year hauled them outside, heaved them over the clothes line, beat them with a broom and then dragged them back and forth across the grass to bring up the pattern. I remember helping and thinking what a great game it was.

The house was always light and clean and smelled of soap—the big, fat blocks of yellow soap which she'd made herself by mixing the carefully saved and cleaned household

fat with caustic soda in a cut-down kerosene tin. There was no shortage of fat from the staple mutton dinners.

Above all Lucknow was pervaded by a rare calmness. Truly an oasis for me.

It must have been hard for Grandma to leave it. She loved to walk over the paddocks and had to make do with walking on asphalt footpaths in town. Later still, when she moved to the city, she would often walk the mile around to our house late in the afternoon after her rest and have tea with us—but only after the invariable ritual. It went like this. Kate, on arrival: 'I've already eaten, dear.' She'd sit folding the washing while I cooked dinner, and I'd dish some food out for her anyway (I guessed she might have had only boiled onions for her early tea). Kate: 'Oh, half that, dear.' Then we'd all sit down to the table and she'd eat the lot with relish.

Although she didn't bother for herself she was generous to others. Even in old age she liked to cook for us all in her flat, and although she didn't kill a fatted calf it was the nearest thing to it. Perhaps in her mind she was back on the farm cooking for shearers. Roast chicken was her specialty. She was an excellent baker and her custard tarts are legend. When over ninety she'd bake some if she knew I was having visitors, and walk round with them in a basket. And they'd always be the worst she'd ever made—'Bad batch of flour, dear'—and delicious.

A true farmer's wife, she fed all comers. If caught by surprise visitors she would open a tin of tongues, a supply of which she always kept for such occasions.

Housekeeping was her life to the end. The last job she did in the morning before going into hospital just days before she died aged ninety-three, was to clean all the outside drains of the block of city flats she lived in.

Tough, wise, ignorant, intolerant, even bigoted, kind, snobbish, hospitable. All those things at times. But they’re irrelevant to me; overshadowed by the love between us.

Lucknow

Did my grandmother really want to be saddled with me plus hangers-on—always one, often two, once even three primary school kids—every school holidays? Kid-like, I was sure of my welcome. Grandma spent many weeks alone on the farm which was worked by a son who, with his family, lived nearby but never spoke. Neighbours were a long walk away over the hill. And Grandma and I were real mates. We both liked walking, and hangers-on had to like it or lump it.

Lucknow. Sun, wide open spaces, much to explore and endless delight. It must have rained occasionally but I don't remember it. In my memory the farm always baked under a hot sun in a pale blue sky, the far hills shimmered in the heat, the grass was yellow-brown and any breeze kicked up the dust from the dirt road.

We kids would leap out of bed and rush outside while the dew was still on the grass. We, like Calvin from the comic strip, had serious playing to do. On hearing the big brass bell we'd race back inside for porridge with cream, and homemade bread, at the long, marble kitchen table with the wide crack right through the middle.

After breakfast back outside. There was never a shortage of things to do. Maybe we'd play on the old dray in the yard, or sail our flax boats in the creek over in the Magic Forest, or we'd make bows from willow and arrows from toi-toi sticks. We had fanciful names for our arrows—I remember

Genevieve and Bernadette. Would boys do that or was it just a girl thing? Were we perhaps foreshadowing a desire for our own family?

Collecting pine cones up under the row of pine trees bordering the cow paddock, and piling them in the woodshed was a favourite occupation. Why is it that girls like to gather and not hunt?

There were other things to gather too. We loved to pick flowers from the once-fine, now-neglected garden. Grandma loved flowers and mostly had fresh flowers inside, even if only one daisy in a tiny vase on the kitchen window ledge. But she had the bad habit of throwing them on the rubbish heap down by the motorshed before I considered they were properly dead. We would trawl through the rubbish, pick out the good ones, cart them round and sit on the front verandah with our feet on the splintery front steps and make button-holes.

But if the garden was neglected the house certainly wasn't. It was always immaculate and invitingly bright and airy from the open windows. Once fashionable, it still spoke of the well-off farmer—the huge etching of a gloomy young man seated at an organ contemplating in wonder the angels floating round him dominating the front hall, the oak suite in the dining room, and in the seldom-used front room the green plush horsehair sofa on a beautiful green-patterned carpet square, the gramophone (which didn't work) with his master's voice and dog on it, and the piano. This room was taboo for us, except occasionally when we were allowed to roll up the carpet and dance on the polished floor. I don't remember clearly but I'm guessing that on a wet day when, not knowing how to dissipate our energy, Grandma decided this was the least of many evils.

I particularly liked Grandma's bedroom; that wonderful, sunny room opening through casements on to the front verandah where Grandma draped her blankets over wicker

chairs every morning. With the pale oak suite, the pink satin eiderdown folded on the end of the bed, the then common circular picture of Cupid and his arrow on the wall, another huge etching (of The Charge of the Light Brigade, or was it The Thin Blue Line?) above the fireplace, and two very tall china vases painted with shepherdesses in bucolic Eden on the tiled hearth, it was a room of its time.

Underlining this was the chamber pot on the bentwood chair sharing the hearth with the shepherdesses. As was common in those days, the lavatory was outside, down a concrete path in its own little house decently shielded from view by the wood shed. There were no such frills as toilet paper. Little squares cut from anything handy were the only offering and they had to be put in a bucket when used for fear of blocking the septic tank.

There were still signs of the glory days in the garden too with its circular rose bed in the front and rose-covered archways, but even though no longer beautiful, it fed us royally. Apricots, pale pinky-orange and juicy, fell into waist-high grass from the old trees in the orchard. Maybe they were Moorpark. Whatever, they were the best in the world. After we'd stuffed ourselves, Grandma would stew some for breakfast or make pies or jam.

Blackcurrants and redcurrants grew in a wire enclosure by the back door. We spent hours picking them and still there were thousands more. Spreading them out on the table, we'd sit on bentwood chairs, fingers and clothes stained purple, and top and tail them ready for jam or pies. On that marble table Grandma made pastry for her pies from heaven. Pie and cream! I'm salivating now.

The highlight for me of any holiday at Lucknow was to pack the day's food in a basket and set off across country. We might go over Aroha's Hill to the Dollars' farm or south to the

foot of the Haldanes or north to join the main road at the Lion's Back and on to Seddon. Grandma always had a rough walking stick, and each of us had a pair of flax sticks which we called hobby sticks, to enable us to leap over wide creeks.

The basket was emptied at lunch time, and shortly afterward, ravenous again, we might call on a neighbour for afternoon tea. As we walked over the cattle stop and up their gravel drive to the front door, Grandma, no doubt with similar occasions in mind when we descended like a pack of locusts and demolished all food in sight, would make each of us promise not to eat any more than two pieces of anything which might be offered. Frantic sign language from Grandma (two fingers in the air, a frown and shaking of the head) when our hostess had her back to us refilling the teapot, never succeeded in keeping us to our promise. Well fortified we'd set off again. If we were lucky they'd take pity on us and drive us home.

These walks broadened our education. Nature in the raw was novelty to us townie children and we plagued poor Grandma for a full explanation of a bull mounting a cow. Sensing her embarrassment, and half knowing anyway, we'd persevere. But to no avail; she successfully dodged every question.

We couldn't walk to any shops—the nearest was at least five miles away—but Grandma wasn't entirely isolated. She had a telephone attached to the wall in the front hall, with a long black earpiece hanging on the side and a handle for ringing out. The line was shared by about six others in Tetley Brook and I suspect many secrets were spread abroad by 'accidentally' picking up the phone and listening. We were threatened with dire punishment if we ever did such a thing. We didn't.

Grandma's call was two long, ear-piercing rings. Other people's might be a long and two shorts, or three shorts, or

short long short, etc. Get the picture? When supplies of basics got low Grandma rang the store in Seddon and we'd all set off for the mail box about a mile and a half away (or did it just seem that far?) at the junction with the valley road, trundling the wheelbarrow. Smaller items could be looped by their string over a stick between our shoulders.

It must have been hard work looking after us and after lunch Grandma often rested her head on her arms on the marble table and had 'forty winks'. She was over sixty then and even though she was tough, we probably wore her out.

While she slept we'd clear the table, fold the table cloth and put it through the big mangle which stood against the wall opposite the green Beatty washing machine and wooden tubs with a hand wringer between them, in the washhouse off the back concrete. There was a dairy too out there with a seldom-used separator. And on the dark wall, a meat safe with half a sheep carcass hanging from an ugly meat hook. The large Kelvinator in the kitchen didn't work so keeping food in summer was a problem. Jugs of milk and dishes of butter, covered with crocheted doilies weighted with beads around the edge, sat in enamel bowls of cold water in the dairy to keep them fresh.

Two doors opened from the house into this covered back concrete, one each end of the U-shaped hall with its richly patterned red carpet runners. Although it was forbidden, the temptation to race round this circuit was great.

At the apex of the U was a large entrance hall with stained glass panelled door leading out to a deep verandah from which wide steps led down to a gravelled area. All very gracious still, even if the gravel was weedy. Inside the U were the bathroom and the fourth bedroom; outside the U the living rooms on one side and the bedrooms on the other.

Just inside the back door on the kitchen side, hanging on big old hooks, were two capes, a child's, one red and one pale blue. These had been Nita’s, the fourth child, who died when she was nine, some twenty years previously. The dark, back bedroom housed Nita’s old pram which we weren’t allowed to play with. Nita’s ghost turned up in other ways too. I was told she died by eating mushrooms/falling down the well, depending on what I was being cautioned about. Actually she died of pneumonia, I suspect tuberculous from a house cow, because my mother had two tuberculous toes removed when she was young. The ghost of Nita (‘Wee Petty’) loomed large in my youth and it vaguely worried me that I found it impossible to connect the photos of the round-faced, freckled, smiling child with death.

With Grandma awake we’d dry the dishes on the wooden draining board and put them back on the dresser. Among them might have been the fruit-patterned bowls I now have and never use for fear of breaking my memories. Another of my treasures surviving from Lucknow is a set of crystal dessert boats with a wavy edge which encourages overflowing. We didn’t use these when we were on holiday; they were reserved for special occasions. Perhaps my greatest treasure is a small brass bell, the size and shape of half a cricket ball, which usually stood on the dresser but was given to me to put beside my bed to summon Grandma on the odd occasion I was sick. Now I use it to summon Sam for a cup of tea when he’s upstairs at the computer or down the garden.

Every evening we’d feed the chooks and collect the eggs. Down a narrow concrete path, through a paling gate held shut by a loop of wire, over a couple of boards spanning a narrow gully, a nervous look round to see where bully and the cows were, and up the hill to the fowl house. The hens mostly

roamed free and only returned to their house to roost or, if we were lucky, to lay. Then back down with the eggs in a billy.

A billy was a universal receptacle in those pre-plastic days. Once a day we'd collect a billy of milk Uncle Ranji left hanging on a pine branch in the yard. (Ranji; my other uncle, Algy; Lucknow; no prizes for guessing my Grandfather was a cricket enthusiast).

A billy held the chop bones we'd take to the dogs tied up by the orchard. These dogs were working animals and not allowed to forget their place; we were forbidden to pat them because of hydatids, a real worry at that time.

In winter evenings, played out, we'd make toast from homemade bread in front of the hot embers in the cross-cornered fireplace in the dining room. There was skill in this. The bread had to be skewered firmly enough on the prongs of the fork not to fall into the fire but with not so much enthusiasm as to break the bread. Balancing the bread on top of the fork was mostly disastrous. But what did a few embers or a bit of charcoal matter when we spread the toast with little pats or curls of Grandma's own butter (I still remember the ache in my arms from turning the handle of the butter churn) and put great dollops of her apricot or blackcurrant jam on top?

At the end of the day we'd clean our teeth with salt and wash off the obvious dirt in the inside bathroom lit by a skylight, and go to bed in what had been Uncle Ranji and Uncle Algy's room. Like Grandma, we had a chamber pot. It was rose-patterned and lived in our wardrobe but we would have died rather than use it. If there were more than two of us, the overflow had to sleep in the big brass bed in the middle bedroom which had been my mother's.

Before being delivered back to our mothers we would be washed thoroughly in the big bath. Grandma, herself, bathed in cold water every morning, but we had hot water from kettles

on the fire. Grandma would wash our hair and then towel us vigorously until our skin smarted to stop us catching cold by going to bed damp.

Occasionally, feeling very daring, we'd plan a midnight feast and secrete bananas and some of Grandma's black fruit cake pinched from where it was wrapped in a teatowel and stored in a stone crock in the back cupboard. Grandma must have known—how could she miss the black cake crumbs or the smell of banana skins?—but she never said anything. I seem to remember these occasions being something of an anticlimax and not at all like the stories in the *Girls Crystal*. For starters, it was almost impossible to stay awake long enough.

Sometimes we slept outside on the wide verandah which wrapped the house on the front and most of the sides. The nights were pitch black and starry and we'd scare ourselves silly with the sound of hedgehogs snorting in the grass at the edge of the verandah.

Grandma moved to town when I was thirteen and I haven't been back since. I have driven in from the valley far enough to see the curve of the road leading to the house in the distance. That's as far as I wanted to go. I believe it's all changed now. Verandah built in, iron lace gone, back concrete done away with; in short, ruined.

Just as well no-one can tamper with my memories. The smell of porridge, or lamb chops, or gum trees or pine trees; or the sight of pine cones, or those bowls, and I'm back at Lucknow sitting at the marble table or walking the hills.

Thank you, Grandma.

Now, at the other end of my life, I'll ring the little brass bell to summon Sam for our morning tea.

Afterword

When I die all five of you will come with sad (I hope) weak jokes and clear my stuff out the house. Best of luck. I admit I'm a hoarder.

You won't believe it, but I do throw some things out. I find it hard to do this, so I have a system. I have to take myself gently and get used to being without things before they finally disappear. Avoiding any hasty decision, I take all the stuff I am considering jettisoning downstairs and put it on the study floor. It goes without saying that nothing you children have given me is included here; being parents yourselves now you'll understand why.

In a few weeks or months, when I'm tired of tripping over the pile I cart it all nearer the back door to the unused dark room.

When I can no longer shut the dark room door, I bite the bullet and triage the stuff (that is, the bits I haven't changed my mind about and put back upstairs), into things of possible, if remote, use to someone, and things of no use to anyone. The possibles go into the garage. The impossibles outside the back door.

Finally, when backing the car becomes too difficult I move the garage pile into the boot of the car to clutter up the Op Shop, and when a bout of heavy rain has soaked the backdoor pile and rendered it incontrovertibly useless I stuff it into the wheelie bin.

This progression may take six months.

But there are other things of no obvious aesthetic or practical value that I can't part with.

'What on earth did the old duck keep these for?' you'll say, as you bring down eight crazed and chipped bowls, fruit pattern yellowed with age, from the top cupboard. 'Never seen her use them.'

As your hand hovers over the rubbish bag, know this.

Those bowls sat on the dresser in the kitchen at Lucknow and I had my porridge and cream in them when I stayed on the farm. When young I ate it without salt or sugar and everyone exclaimed on this peculiarity. Unwilling to relinquish this fame I kept on for ages after I discovered that I liked porridge with salt and sugar.

'Good Lord, Granny's still got these,' you'll say, holding up two tiny plastic animals, a duck and a tortoise. The heads are attached with wire and wobble—so did the tortoise tail until the wire broke. There was a third, now lost; one for each child at that time. Kate sent them to Tennessee carefully packed in cotton wool in match boxes so there would be a Christmas present from her. Small things matter.

Hooting with laughter you'll hold up one of the mangy fur coats.

'Mooties would sure look a Gorgeous Granny in this. Glad she never wore it.'

Don't laugh. I nearly did. It looked so warm but it needed mending and I never got around to it. Not so long ago anyone who considered themselves anyone had to have a fur coat, Freda and Kate included, and I baulked at chucking out these symbols of their status and pride.

That is Kate's fur stole in the suitcase—the case, flash in its time, that she sewed into sacking whenever she travelled because train guards were rough with luggage. She wore the

stole when she was trying to be the grand dame. Mind you, she always kept up appearances, down to guarding against unexpected hospital visits. As well as clean underwear whenever she left the house she had a much-prized, hideous, purple quilted dressing gown put away for this purpose. That's there too, in the wardrobe. I don't imagine any of you will want it unless you're planning to set up a brothel or one of the children is playing Hamlet in the school play.

But Kate took trouble and always looked nice and we were proud of her. I kept these things as an object lesson to reproach myself for my slovenliness.

I doubt whether you'll rush to inherit the china coffee set in the top cupboard either. I never used it; never liked it. Anyway the fashion for drinking coffee from thimbles had long gone. Mum and Dad got it for a wedding present. Was it from Kate and Grandfather? I don't know for sure, but I do know that it was one of my mother's prized possessions. Perhaps it spelled for her that gracious living to which she aspired but had been denied by the depression. A pair of expensive Royal Doulton cake plates also come into this category. Dad bought them for Mum and I didn't care for them either.

Mum liked things nice. I kept them to preserve her dreams.

'Any of you guys know what this is?' you'll say, waving about a small wooden mushroom from the sewing cabinet Dad made for Mum.

Kate and Freda, both meticulous housekeepers, bless them, used it for darning socks before the days when everyone just threw them out. Everyone except me, that is. I didn't darn but holey socks were useful for polishing shoes, and holding, when suitably knotted, moth balls for the jersey drawer. And stockings made good garden ties.

Mum’s darns were neater than Kate’s; my mother was a fine needlewoman.

‘Mumsy even kept these,’ you’ll exclaim in disbelief when you find a small very old suitcase full of strings of beads. They were Freda’s; she loved beads. Perhaps they were the manifestation of a sensuous woman underneath the practicality. I like to think so.

'I'll bet it's some time since the Old Crumbly got into this,' you'll say, holding up a small, gold jersey with moss stitch round the neck and cap sleeves.

Too true. But I loved to wear it when I was young, and thinner. My sister knitted it for me when I was an impecunious student and it must have been a laborious job in such fine wool. She gave me other pretty clothes too and I was grateful. She looked out for me and I kept it for her kindness.

‘Hey, guys, here’s a treasure,’ you’ll say, grinning, while winding round your neck a yellow scarf, plainly past its use-by date.

Mum knitted that scarf for Dad. He often wore it inside the house in his failing years, and always in the garden. There is a precious snapshot of him there, complete with scarf, acting the fool—a rarity as he got sicker. He was full of fun.

You all said you’ll want the books but I wonder if there will be a taker for Dad’s ancient art and music books? I seldom opened them but they reminded me of his reverence for learning and his drive to educate himself.

‘Never seen this before,’ you’ll say as you unsnarl a blue enamel necklace from the trinket box. ‘Wonder why she kept it? It looks past its best.’

Maybe some of the enamel from the central star is missing but Dad made that for me in his metalwork room at school and I felt a million dollars when I wore it as a teenager, even if the medallions would swivel round the wrong way.

‘This is the limit,’ you’ll cry. ‘Two hairbrushes without any bristles!’

Dad made the wooden brush (the brand name *Macarl* has worn off) during the war using whale bone for bristles. A testimony to his cleverness.

The other one, the pink one, sat with a matching hand mirror on the blond oak dressing table in Kate’s Lucknow bedroom. I kept it for blankets smelling of the sun, for country air through open casements, for views of fields stretching to far-away hills, for tranquility.

‘Look, John, your old green jacket,’ you’ll say. ‘What a lot of useless junk.’

Not to me. When I opened the cupboard door and saw it hanging there, for a blissful fraction of a second I thought I still had one child at home.

Know all this, then drop the jacket into the rubbish bag.

Go on, chuck it.

But wait a minute. Maybe the Op Shop will take it. Anyway get rid of all the junk. I won’t turn in my grave or create a storm in my ashes (in the cup without the handle as you threatened?). You can’t be expected to clutter up your house with the trappings of my memories. Should I die before your father, you’ll get no opposition from him; he’ll help—enthusiastically. I know he plans to hire a skip on the way home from my funeral.

As for my ashes, don’t get too sentimental about them. Unless they clear out carefully after each cremation the ashes are not pure me anyway. Perhaps they will benefit my roses. Then a puff of wind may waft some through the window to lie on the sill. This is my best hope of immortality because none of you are keen on dusting.

One more thing. Your father and I were apart for only one Christmas during our marriage. In a box of memorabilia

you will find his present to me that year. I found it tucked in my suitcase: a small scrap of yellow paper with a hand-written note saying,

Thank you for 41 wonderful years
All my love
Sam

Just that. No ribbons. But complete; enough.

Keep this.