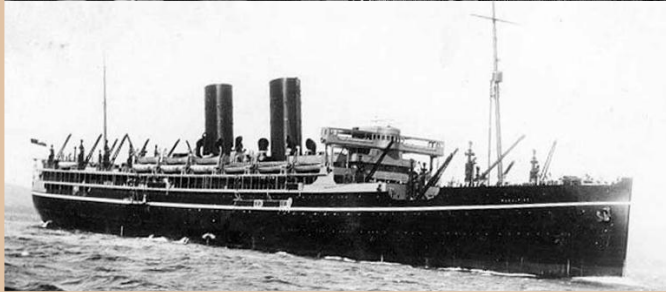


*Through the  
Rear View  
Mirror*

Lifescapes Writing Group  
2012  
Milton Public Library





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Lifescapes Writing Group 2012  
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This book was written by members of the Lifescapes group, a memoir writing program sponsored by the Milton Public Library.

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# Introduction

*Lifescapes* is a program of the Milton Public Library created to help adults/seniors write their memoirs. The Milton Public Library is committed to providing a gateway through which people may connect with other people, ideas, and information. We strive to encourage lifelong learning, to promote authorship, and to empower people to fulfill their creativity. The *Lifescapes* program introduces participants to something that will enrich their lives and also give them the opportunity to enrich their community through their stories.

Every life is worth writing about. A memoir reminds your children, grandchildren, and future generations of where they came from and gives them a sense of place in their families. There is great value to the author, as well, in the telling of a tale. In writing about your life, your past takes shape and offers a clearer vision of the person you are today.

Nine men and women completed the program this year. Some had been writing memoirs for years and wanted tips on polishing them up, but most were new to memoir writing. It was a diverse group that included native Ontarians as well as others who had emigrated from England, Hungary, and India. Each person brought something special to the group.

They worked hard researching, writing, and editing their stories. Their enthusiasm and dedication were inspiring. Each story is a joy to read—a little glimpse into the soul of the person who wrote it. My thanks go out to all of the authors for their hard work and for allowing me into their lives.

We hope you will enjoy the first Milton edition of the *Lifescapes* anthology, *Through the Rear View Mirror*.

Joan Faehrmann  
Adult Services Librarian  
Milton Public Library  
Milton, Ontario





## School Days: as I see It

By Wendy West

**1947**: “And when may we expect this curly haired little angel to join us?” I clutched at my mother’s skirt, staring at this imposing black hulk from which a small crumpled face peered out. And her hands...where were her hands? Not soon enough for me, mother and I retreated to the huge iron gates boasting the legend, “The Sacred Heart Convent.” Making my escape, I could feel Mother Superior’s pale watery eyes boring holes into the centre of my back.

1948 became the reluctant start to my school days of which I attended as few as possible, for later on, I became a dab hand at truancy—spending my time wandering forbidden places, scuffing my knees scrambling over bombed-out buildings. For my family and I lived in the then village of Northolt, just outside London, along with our Anderson Bomb shelter, squatting like an elongated tortoise in the back garden. This was, after all, Merry Old England.

However, where was I? Ah yes. I delighted in hiding at the edge of Black Berry Wood, fascinated with the gypsy encampment, awestruck by the vivid reds, blues, and daffodil yellow of their painted horse-drawn caravan, coupled with the appetizing aromas wafting through a morning haze from an open pit fire. Mind you, it was more than



**Me, posing like an angel**



## Through the Rear View Mirror

likely some sweet little hedgehog roasting which, to my horror I learned later on, are baked packed in clay to remove their needles.

Sometimes the exotic gypsy woman, child in tow, would show up at our door and my mother would purchase a bag of her hand carved clothes pegs. If this mysterious woman recognized me as the spy hiding in the undergrowth, she thankfully never let on.

But to return to my theme—school. When I was in attendance, my sole interest consisted of the arts which were meted out in meager fashion, as the lion's portion of my valuable time was consumed (or it seemed to me) by religion and my innocent head was crammed with the numerous things a young lady ought not to do, which I won't delve into as I'm endeavouring to keep this memoir brief.

I wanted to play drums and trumpet, Harry James and Gene Krupa being my idols. Therefore, imagine my dismay on being handed...wait for it...a triangle! Needless to say, I was not amused but then neither was I amused with my frequent canings coupled with being ignored in the classroom where I was made to feel a disruptive and backward delinquent.



### **What am I plotting?**

However, I will confess (not that I'm seeking absolution) to being a constant thorn in their sides. Take, for instance, the time I set all the birds free from the school hen house to give them a good stretch of the legs and enjoyed a chuckle as I watched half a dozen nuns flapping around the playing field as they tried to recapture the flustered fowl (who were not the only ones cooped up for awhile after that.)

I recall when Mother superior presumed triumph. I was made to stand in the school yard, hands on head, as every girl filed by calling me a gangster. I reveled in it. Anything was preferable to being brought to heel as a prim seen-but-not-heard young lady wearing a too-short gym slip, a shapeless felt hat akin to something found under a bed and gloves not to mention the hideous cloth over shoes for keeping (no doubt) a luster on the wood floors as I walked.

1956 found my two elder sisters, our long-suffering parents plus yours truly saying goodbye to our friends and all we had known as we set sail across the pond to the welcoming shores of Canada. I had done my best to prepare myself; whether Canada was prepared for me was another matter.

Once again, I was incarcerated in a school. I fared somewhat better receiving a cross country school prize for an essay on the Paulist Fathers.

Then one fateful day, I nagged and implored my Mater and Pater to allow me to attend a local dance at a community hall just down the road from where we lived at the time, off Bathurst Street in Toronto. I was relentless with my pleas. Finally, permission was granted providing a neighbor's daughter accompanied me (my sisters being busy with their own doings.)

Going on fourteen, I believed I was a grown up (but between you and me, I'm delighted to report I've never quite made it.) However, back to the extraordinary evening that was to set the stage for the rest of my life.

What I am able to recollect was a long narrow hall set with tables and hard backed chairs running along the length of both sides. At the opposite end from the entrance, a raised stage held an orchestra composed of seventeen musicians in the process of setting up and tuning their instruments. The hall was still brightly lit as not many people had yet arrived. My minder, only a few months older than myself and painfully shy, wanted to settle back near the entrance but I gravitated towards the music. We compromised and settled at a table two back from the band stand. Then, one by one, the lights dimmed as couples began to drift in and a man started spreading sawdust across the dance floor.



**My Confirmation, with my family and housekeeper**

The odours of cigarette smoke mingled with aftershave and women's cologne made this unfamiliar atmosphere even more heady. I had commandeered a dress, unbeknownst to my eldest sister Patricia, and had tucked it in and up with a number of strategically placed safety pins. I thought I looked like the cat's meow but in hindsight, a dog's dinner would have been closer to the mark. We were certainly getting a few glances though, albeit from ancient looking men. One in particular resembled an old weathered garden gnome but fortune smiled on us and a scowling skinny woman led him to a table at the rear.

The band struck up and the uplifting rhythms engulfed me. I couldn't sit still. I bobbed and sang along as the musicians went from swing to ballroom and back to swing. The dance floor began to vibrate as it became crowded. Everyone was having a marvelous time. Everyone, that is, except my minder. If she was enjoying herself, it didn't show. She sat very still, eyes cast down, sipping a soft drink. Ah well I thought, how odd. Then the vocalist stepped up to the microphone and began to sing some familiar songs as he stood in a blaze of spot lights.

All too soon the music came to a stop. Couples zigzagged back to their tables for some well earned refreshments as the singer announced the band would be taking a short break.

Without the music, it felt to me as if an ocean wave that once filled a cave had been sucked back out to sea leaving in its wake only an echo of distant rumblings. Suddenly someone was speaking. ....to me.....a man! "Hello," he said smiling. This is your first time here, isn't it?" His voice held traces of an Irish brogue; my mother's side of the family being Irish, I recognized the lilt.

"Yes," I answered. "And it's wonderful." Then, remembering my social graces, I introduced him to my minder. "This is my friend, Sylvia." They nodded to each other as Sylvia's boot nudged my shin bone. Then his attention turned back to me.

"I'm Paddy Butler, the leader of the band. How would you like to come up and sing something for us? You seem to know all the songs."

## Through the Rear View Mirror

“Oh, yes!” I squealed full of enthusiasm. Yet on looking back, maybe he never really expected me to jump at the chance and, perhaps if I’d had any sort of musical training, such as reading music, timing, or voice lessons, I may have been more hesitant knowing what was involved. But this proved to be one time when ignorance was pure bliss. So, reassuring Sylvia she’d be perfectly safe until my return, I followed the leader (no pun intended) backstage. With the help of his saxophone, we settled on a song of which he said seemed to be in my range. He explained I was a contralto. “Oh, how interesting,” I said puzzled. “What should I do now?” Paddy ushered me back to my table saying I’d be called up to perform sometime during the second half of the show. Sylvia looked petrified.

Finally...what had seemed to me an eternity, the leader stepped up and announced a young lady would be singing a song for their listening pleasure and asked the surprised audience to give me a warm welcome. I stepped up into the blinding spotlight as the strains of “Blue Moon” transported me to another plane. A number of couples stopped dancing to listen and before the evening was over, Paddy Butler had asked me to become a member of the orchestra.

Needless to say, I accepted, knowing that somehow, someday, I would wheedle permission from my parents. I no longer felt I was a duck on dry land. I had taken the plunge and, by chance, found my natural environment.

Postscript: I walked out of school for the last time at age fourteen with only one regret—that I had not walked sooner.



**Part of the Paddy Butler Orchestra**



*I am a self taught professional actor, bronze sculptor, and portrait artist with works in private collections such as Gordon Lightfoot's; a vocalist, song writer and composer although I don't read music; a recipient of many international awards including the "Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal" for songs written and performed especially for the War Amps of Canada commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of WWII. Under the name Zoe Kendell, I was a feature vocalist at the 1984 Toronto International Jazz Festival. I currently perform (as Wendy West) with the Sentimental Swing Orchestra and, with his kind permission, I'm sculpting Christopher Plummer as Prospero from "The Tempest." I'm just another dyslexic born in the U. K. many moons ago.*



# War Memories of a Teenager

By Mary Cummings

**T**his should not be happening! How could life turn 180° in such a short space of time?

Last week, I was lazing around on the beach, swimming, boating and having fun, and this week, in the early a.m., I am hunkered down by a breakwater, feeling scared! The air raid warning had sounded, so action was necessary. After half an hour or so, my grandfather came down on the beach and announced, "I've had a note from Hitler. No bombing until after breakfast."

This was September, '39, and my first experience of an air raid, but obviously not my last. And, my life, my family's life and the life of our nation had suddenly been put at risk - from peace to war.

I went home at the end of September, but not back to school. All schools were closed, expecting to be used for casualties from air raids. Many new things were happening. Now we had to black out every window lest any chink of light might be a beacon to enemy aircraft and, when the siren sounded, we needed to head for the air raid shelter. We had already been issued gas masks, but had no experience in using them as yet.

Rationing would be coming soon. We had to save every scrap of paper, metal, and bones (for aircraft glue) - all precious commodities. I had to learn how to watch for incendiaries (nasty little fire bombs that could explode) while I patrolled the streets on fire watch at night. My Dad became an Air Raid Warden, my Mum worked in a first aid station, and the young men were being called up into the Armed Forces.

Things were pretty quiet at first and my school re-opened. When the siren sounded, we all trooped down into the air raid shelter which had been dug out in our playing fields. Next, we put our gas masks on. It was pretty funny. We'd turn to talk to the student sitting next to us (who was not too visible in the dark) and our gas masks would bonk together. We'd laugh, causing rude noises to come from the side vents, causing more laughter!

## Through the Rear View Mirror

In the early days, when such things were still available, my Mum sent me to buy cream cakes from the bakery. She was having her bridge afternoon, and these were to be the treats. Unfortunately, the siren sounded when I was in the shop, so I ran all the way home. Even though no bombs fell in our area, my Mum's cakes arrived home in a scramble!

At the beginning of the war, the bombs were fairly small, perhaps knock down a house or two, but at the last a rocket would decimate a whole street. In '39 and early '40, the war was mostly on the continent, and we were gearing up for action. Later, in 1940, there was so much bombing, much of the City of London (the mile-square that was the hub of the city) was destroyed by fire, including the building where my Dad worked. Amazingly, St. Paul's Cathedral only suffered slight damage. 1940 was also the year when so many of our men were miraculously saved at Dunkirk and we rejoiced at the victory of the Battle of Britain.

In 1939, I suffered my first loss of a friend. Jack was 18 years old when his merchant ship was torpedoed by a German U-boat.

Thankfully, after Dunkirk the Nazis decided to change direction and set their sights on Russia, postponing invading us until another day. So I was able to finish school.

That summer, I met a soldier. I could tell by the flashes on his uniform that he was from Canada. He had twinkling eyes and a friendly smile and of course, an accent. "Hey, kiddo, would you consider writing to me sometimes?" he asked.

"Maybe I will," I replied. He was too mature for a schoolgirl like me, but it was very important to keep up the morale of our forces, so I thought, "Yes!"

In the fall, I was tired of spending time down the air raid shelter and I told my Dad that I wanted to get a job. So I started my first job two weeks before my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. There were lots of air raids by this time. My Dad had reinforced our garage, put in bunks, and we, plus two or three neighbours, slept there. He'd hung a huge Union Jack, plus a black out curtain over the door as we had to get in and out without showing any light. At some point, we gave up carrying our gas masks as that threat seemed to be over.

I did fire-watching. The shifts were 7-11p.m., 11-3a.m., 3-7a.m. If it was quiet, my partner and I stayed in. If there was an air raid, we patrolled our street and the next, especially to watch where any incendiaries might fall. If we spotted some, we were supposed to advance, flat on our tums, brandishing a hose or sand, our heads protected by using a heavy dust bin lid as a shield! Thankfully, in our patch, we never had a real live experience of this!

On duty, I used to wear my warm school scarf, plus my Dad's W.W. 1 tin hat. This was good protection. We would often see planes caught in the beams of the searchlights, and shrapnel would shower down from the anti-aircraft guns, and that could be lethal. In the early days, we'd sit in the shelter for hours until the "All Clear" sounded - or perhaps Mum would dash into the kitchen to make tea - she'd have to turn the gas on. However, as time went on, we wouldn't bother to take shelter unless it seemed dangerous.

I was slated to go to Canada on an evacuation scheme. I had had my medical and was all set to go. Then, "The City of Benares," a ship carrying 600 British kids, and clearly marked with a Red Cross, was torpedoed crossing the Atlantic, and only a few survived. My friend's sister was supposed to go on that ship, but she had such a bad cold that her Mum kept her home. This disaster finished the scheme, parents preferred to let their kids face the bombs rather than German U-boats.

Another new experience was learning to navigate in the black-out. On moonless nights, it would be pitch black. One time, my Mum had been playing bridge, had used her bike for transportation (no gas for cars), and on her way home she had managed to get herself through the

gate of someone's front garden. There, she wheeled her bike around and around, trying to find her way out. Finally, someone came along and helped her. The next day, in broad daylight, she saw her tire marks all over their nice flower beds and she was so embarrassed!

The second young man to disappear from our midst was Freddie, a navigator in Bomber Command. Home on leave, he would always serve at the altar in our church. Next, a work-mate's brother, Doug, was posted missing over the North Sea, likely shot down.

By this time, we were strictly rationed. If we saw a queue at the grocer's, we would rush to join it, in hopes of getting a few raisins or extra dried fruit. Oranges and bananas had totally disappeared. We almost starved in the third year of the war, because so many ships were sunk. I understand, now, why my Mum and Dad kept chickens and rabbits - just in case!

Now working for an insurance company, I had to take my turn fire-watching there over the week-ends. Our office had been near King's Cross, a mainline station, so we had evacuated to the suburbs. Unfortunately, a bomb fell on our building there, so we moved back to North London. Besides the fire-watching, I worked in a factory for four hours on two evenings. I began at a small aircraft parts factory, then I packed cigarettes for troops overseas, and finally, I paint sprayed resistors to be used in radios.

By this time, my Canadian friend had been welcomed in our home whenever he could get leave. I had a friend, Roy, who went to Canada, and trained near Trenton as a Fleet Air Arm pilot. Unfortunately, he died later. Another pilot, Reg, was in a dog fight over the Channel, and managed to limp his Spitfire home. But, on touching down, his aircraft burst into flames and he was very badly burned. But he lived, and I was able to visit him on and off through the years. Johnnie was a survivor, too. His ship was torpedoed, and he spent two days bobbing around in the North Atlantic before he was picked up.

I became a bit fed up with this Canadian always hanging around, and we had a big bust up. "I'm not writing anymore," I said. Next thing I know, he was on manoeuvres and had a bad accident. Riding a Harley-Davidson, his foot had caught in the wheel of an oncoming staff car, and was badly smashed. So how could I not visit him in hospital?

He was in a Canadian hospital at Taplow - a beautiful place on the banks of the Thames. As he began to heal, it was fun for me to visit the ward there, lots of lonely young men, but they would tease me and make me laugh and I would try to bring them a few of my Mum's homemade treats. And I began to realise how much I cared for this friend of mine from overseas. Of course, this injury meant he would never be able to be in combat, much to his sorrow.

It was not only food that was rationed, clothing was, too. I learned to pull old clothes apart and remake them.

The middle part of the war, we just kept keeping on. So many defeats, so many ships sunk, raids night after night, Coventry burned to bits, the docks pounded unmercifully, and on and on. Another sort of defeat - my Canadian told me he'd fallen in love with my best girl friend - that was an "Ouch!"

Then came the flying bombs. They were well described. Bombs with wings, plus a bluish green flame that emitted from their tail. They sounded something like a motor-bike, only louder. It was helpful if you could see them and know which direction they were travelling. The RAF did their best to intercept them as they crossed the coast. They would try to shoot them down or clip their wings to divert them from the city. With flying bombs, if they were flying you were O.K. If they stopped you were the target. We called them "Doodlebugs." I remember, I used to walk to the station to work and on a day of poor visibility, hearing a doodlebug putt-putting overhead, I'd think, "If that man in front of me hits the ground, I will, too."

## Through the Rear View Mirror

Once, in an early morning, my Mum and I were outside when a flying bomb stopped right over the tree at the bottom of our garden. We ran, got jammed in the door of the shelter, and collapsed on the ground with our arms over our heads and waited - and waited - and waited! Nothing happened and we started giggling and hugging each other. Mum breathed a, "Thank God" and I'm sure I said, "Amen!" Later, we learned that that particular flying bomb had glided on another three miles before it touched down.

Because of the flying bombs, our whole office moved into the air raid shelter. It was a zoo - so noisy! Finally, some of us said that we'd rather risk the bombs than work down there. It was better up top, but you had to be ready to dive under a nearby desk. I remember someone coming into the room, looking for a fellow worker, Mr. Biggs (Mr. Biggs was a dear man, rather short and chubby, slightly balding, who loved his pipe.) Mr. Biggs was nowhere to be seen. Disappointed, the enquirer left. Mr. Biggs was still contentedly sitting under a desk! Another man, Mr. Hennequin, was in full view. He was too dignified to dive right under a desk. He would just put his head under, and his rear end was left sticking out - a perfect target for flying glass or debris!

People still carried on but if you went to the show, and it got too noisy with Ack Ack fire and bombs were whistling down, it was wise to vacate and run for the shelter. Many people spent every night in the underground stations, or in caves below ground, south of London.

I remember one very bad day - flying bombs all day. My Canadian friend was back, and in my life again - cautiously, on my part. He had told me, "I've come to my senses, that was just a flash in the pan." ?? Anyway, this day he met me after work, and decided I needed a



**My escape to the county**

drink. We sat upstairs in a pub, and a flying bomb flew over about five feet above our heads. I was shaking and ready for that gin and tonic!

Sometimes, on a week-end, I would escape from the city and head for the country.

Early on in the war, my Grandma had a nasty experience. One Sunday morning, as she was in church, a land mine plunged into the ground next to the church, and thankfully, did not explode. A bit later, in another raid, Grandma and Grandpa had a large piece of masonry crash through their bathroom ceiling. So they decided to rent a bungalow in the country. Situated high on the Chesham hills, on Lord Rothschild's estate, this became a wonderful refuge. The spot was beautiful, with massive cedars of Lebanon, and the drives were flanked with rhododendron bushes of every colour.

Anyway, I would come home from work on a Friday, change my clothes, get on my bike and cycle twenty plus miles to this wonderful spot, though I never managed to ride up the last steep hill!

My patient Grandma put up with me, plus several of my cousins, over the week-ends. It wasn't that she had nothing else to do. She looked after 100 chickens, called it her war effort, and had only recently given up four pigs, who did their best to knock her over. Grandfather was a

## Through the Rear View Mirror

gardener, and every wild edible mushroom he noticed, he'd cover with a container, to protect from clumsy feet. He was a walker, too - five miles to the pub, then five miles back!

On Monday morning at 6 a.m., I'd get on my bike, refreshed and renewed. The mornings were beautiful, and I enjoyed the ride back home. There, I'd change my clothes, walk to the station and get on the train for work.

Things began to look up - a few victories here and there. We invaded the continent. But if anything, the air raids got fiercer. The V2 rockets came faster than sound, so there was no warning. They would destroy more than a whole street and because no one had the opportunity to dive under a table or any bit of cover, many died from flying glass or debris. Going to work on the train one day, I saw that during the night a whole street of houses beside the track had been completely demolished.

Perhaps because of the flying bombs, or perhaps the expectation of some other attack, the Canadian outfit I knew was moved from south of London up into Yorkshire. I received, from my friend, an invitation to the Regimental ball. That meant a train journey of some hours. I also knew

that, because of the bombing, many trains were cancelled. But I knew that the mail train would always go through. So, with about a thousand other people, I waited on the platform.

At first, I thought I'd be left behind (many were) but someone pushed me in. There were no seats. I finally landed up in the ladies toilet, with five other persons. At least there was a seat in there, which we took turns to occupy. If someone desperately needed to come in, one of us would have to squeeze out. As politely as we could, we shut our eyes and turned away while the necessary operation was in progress. This was not my favourite mode of travel. But I got there safely.

It was a fun time at the dance, but what I remember most was walking along in the moonlight afterwards, eating, out of a newspaper, the most superb fish and chips I had ever tasted!

At this time, my brother was old enough for the Army, and he was called up. Another "Reg," a tank driver, was posted "Missing in Action." I learned later, that he had been taken prisoner in Italy, and died there from his wounds.

We kept losing friends, often not knowing exactly where they died. Many were posted as "Missing in Action," and often there was no closure. I suppose another thing we learned was to live every moment as if it was our last - sometimes it was. We had to get used to the fact that a person could be there one minute and gone the next.

Slowly, though, things began to get slightly better. The campaigns in Italy and North Africa were over, though our troops were still slogging it out in the Far East. The invasion started. American bombers attacked Germany in the day, RAF bombers flew out at night. But civilians at home were still coping with flying bombs, rockets, and air raids. We had learned to



**The Canadian**



## Through the Rear View Mirror

carry on fairly well. Many people had allotments growing veggies to supplement our rations. You could still go up to London to see a show, or go dancing at the Hammersmith Palais - though you might get caught in a raid.

We stopped sleeping in the air raid shelter, though I remember one night being awakened by a flying bomb putt-putting overhead and wondering if I should wake up the rest of the family. In the morning, I learned that it had flown on a bit further and taken out a whole apartment building. My Mum's friend died in that one.

Surprise, surprise!! My Canadian asked me, "Please, will you marry me before I get sent back to Canada?" Many were being repatriated before the war was over. Not to be too quick about this, I answered, "Maybe."



**She says "yes"**

...," whoa, we hadn't heard bells for years and "peace on earth" - really? The next verse was more in tune with us - "And in despair, I bowed my head, there is no peace on earth," I said, "For hate is strong, and mocks the song..." ...I could feel the pain, sorrow and weariness that lay like a blanket covering us all.

Suddenly, the sound changed - the key had shifted and it seemed as if a current of electricity flashed through the crowd. The notes throbbed out, strong and clear: "Then pealed the bells more loud and deep..." I could feel the excitement rising up in me, and I was singing my heart out: "God is not dead, nor does He sleep..." The words went on, "The wrong shall fail, the right prevail..." The bells were ringing out now, the organ thundering, and the orchestra seemed to be going wild, "With peace on earth, good will to men."

As the notes trembled into silence, there was a hush, then a sound, an echo, a stream of joy and laughter erupted from every side and in a moment or two, the whole crowd was cheering and the bells kept ringing and ringing! We were going to make it; the end was in sight! All the way home, the bells were ringing in my head and in my heart! Even over tea and crumpets, the bells kept ringing, "Peace on earth, good will to men."

Finally, VE day came in May, 1945, and some lights came on right away. A girl friend and I went up to London and gathered with the crowd in front of Buckingham Palace. The May night was like mid-summer, and we were singing and dancing in the streets.

Victory seemed to be in sight although it was still a race to see who would get the atomic bomb first and still the threat of missiles on London every seven seconds! The last Christmas, before my Canadian fiancé left for home, we decided to go to the carol concert at the Royal Albert Hall. We loved the old carols and in that big place, where the organ dominates even the orchestra, the music was beautiful.

We sang the usual carols, "O Come, All Ye Faithful," "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" and others. Then we began another carol - "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

## Through the Rear View Mirror

Some time later, there was a Thanksgiving Service at Wembley Stadium, some 80,000 people being very thankful—thankful for Winston Churchill, for the King and Queen, for so many brave and wonderful folks. We saw so many miracles. Often we were saved by a whisker. All the near misses, all the times we were usually “there,” and this one time when we weren't.

When you are scared, you pray. And we were scared lots of times. In '38, the time of the Munich crisis, people were drawn to pray. In 1940, the King called for a day of prayer (if you saw the movie, “The King’s Speech,” perhaps you may have sensed the urgency of that time.) And again, when our men were trapped on the beaches at Dunkirk, the King made the same call.

At the last of the war, a Cross was seen for 15 minutes, in the sky over the London docks. I still have the newspaper clipping. They had taken a terrible beating. The bombers used to come up the Thames estuary and they were the first in the line of fire.

I have no idea what my life would have been like if the Nazis had taken over and invaded the U.K. I just say, “Thank God for our deliverance.”

What did I learn during this time? How to put a gas mask on, how to patrol streets at night and deal with incendiaries, what to do in an air raid, how to give some first aid, how to keep “mum,” how to conserve food, how to somehow make do, how to pray.

I wondered would everything turn back to normal now?

Off to Canada meant new ways of coping with life, but nothing as traumatic as the days between 1939 and 1945.

Of course, I can never forget. In spite of the 180° turn in my life, I hope I will always remember the important things. To be thankful for all the benefits of life. For food and shelter, for freedom and safety. Most of all, to deeply treasure the folks around me. and to count every day as precious.



*Mary was born in London, England, lived through the Second World War, and came to Canada as a war bride in 1946.*

*Here she raised her children, and now has grand children and great grandchildren. She worked for some years in the bank, then cared for her husband, who died from Alzheimer's disease in 1982. In later years, she acted as an associate counsellor at the Christian Retreat Centre, in Orangeville, Ont.*

*She is retired now and lives in the country.*



## Can I Do This?

By Jean Barratt

**T**he idea of writing some of my memoirs was exciting until the first class. Realization of what was involved jumped out at me. What was I doing? Never writing and age have a way of depleting academic skills. I talked myself into going ahead and with Joan's guidance and encouragement, here I go!

Where would my story begin? An old autograph book came to light and there were only a few names written, nothing more, no "your friend," "see you next year," "love you," "Roses are Red...etc." This turned the light on and away I went.

I was born in Hamilton, Ontario on February 11, 1931, having a sister Eleanor 4 years older. My early life was pretty normal. Things did not seem exciting at that time because, when a person is raised during a depression, each day was a challenge to put food on the table and keep a roof over your head.

I was blessed with such charitable parents who were survivors and gave us the happiest childhood with very little. My father had a car and my mother's cooking and managing the household made life better than most. We went on picnics and Dad always had a nickel for an ice cream cone. Niagara Falls was a frequent destination winter and summer, and Forks of the Credit. We would take off our shoes and socks to puddle around in the shallow stream—it was always so clear and sparkled in the sun light, trickling over the small stones.

My mother walked my sister and I through Gage Park every afternoon. My first memory of life was being dressed for the bitter cold. First stretching home knit leggings over little boots, tugging up to the waist over bulky flannel diaper and a woollen soaker, and then a drawstring pulled tight. Was this string necessary? Then came the little lined coat mother had made, probably from another old worn coat with a white rabbit fur collar. Next a woollen bonnet and mittens with a string attached to each mitten.

The carriage was a wicker exterior with big wheels and with a creamy coloured fabric lining which seemed to make it elegant and have a warm feeling. I can still visualize staring at the hood.

## Through the Rear View Mirror

Mother made all Eleanor's clothes and, when I arrived, she made mine too, from the same material. We had the same clothes—dresses, bloomers, pyjamas, etc. When Eleanor grew out of her wardrobe, guess who got to wear it? I will add at this point, several homemade quilts are still being used in our 180-year old farm house as a spread. Eleanor and I can still pick out our dress material in the pattern of the quilt.

Women passed materials back and forth to make quilts and rugs. Lisle stockings that had worn out were boiled in different colours of dye, dried, and made into rugs. They would last forever. This was real "recycling."

A name that I can remember, which people talked about, was Evelyn Dick who supposedly murdered her husband, which meant nothing to me. She could have been a movie star.

At the age of three, we moved to Caledonia and lived in an old stone house opposite the fairground's entrance. This house had such a stately veranda across the front with beautifully carved posts and a wooden lattice adorned with lush green ivy that made a wall of privacy and homes for many birds. The summer was beastly hot and I recall mother hosing down the stones with water to cool the house off after dark. Also, our feather mattresses were hauled down to the veranda for us to sleep outside.

Mother always had a big vegetable garden which she dug out of the grass to provide us with food. The produce was put in the cold cellar unwashed for the winter. She would go to local fruit farmers to pick fruit to preserve for winter. Chilli sauce is one of the most delightful aromas when being cooked. Like Aladdin's Lamp, steam soars from the kettle, is carried with the breeze around the kitchen, and escapes out the open doors.

Times were still very hard. I remember men coming to the door asking for food. Mother always shared a good sandwich or something with them and they would sit on the steps to eat and drink. Then, with much gratitude, they would leave, to where, I don't know.

It was winter and my father was given a side of beef for a payment towards his wages. My father worked for a truck dealership and was transferred frequently for a job. The side of beef was hung "safely" from a rafter in the garage and one night a dog (from who knows where) broke into the garage and mauled part of the carcass.

Moving on to Fonthill in the Niagara region was where I started to live my childhood. Our house was a pink, sparkly stucco on a corner lot with the highway on one side and a side road on the other. On the other two sides were peach orchards.

I developed a happy-go-lucky personality, enjoying my best summer ever, always busy working, "creating." This also is when I decided Eleanor hated me. I can still hear her screaming, "Mum, Jean's doing....." Of course, I had to take time out in a hammock between two large, old maple trees and sometimes got a spanking.



**Jean in Gage Park, 1932**

## Through the Rear View Mirror

We had lace curtains in the living room with a few holes in the bottoms above the ruffles. Being creative, I could see the lace was like little spider webs. I got the scissors and cut every other web out across the bottoms to make it look like it was part of the pattern. My creativity was not appreciated. Needless to say, I was punished for four or five days with no getting off easy with good behaviour. I could not use the big swing. I could not go down the road to visit Mrs. Dickson with the big black Newfoundland dog and have a cookie. I could not visit the farmer and his chickens (to whom I sang “You Are My Sunshine” every day or so to make them lay more eggs.) I could just help mother with the household chores, drying dishes or helping to put laundry on the clothes line. My freedom was gone.

The farmer told mother we could pick all the peaches we wanted, so mother made preserves, pies, upside down cakes—you name it. We also worked picking raspberries for the farmer. We picked all day long and took our lunches with us. I got a big brimmed straw hat to wear to prevent a heat stroke, which I later decorated.

One day, some new people arrived to pick. When you picked a flat, you took it to the shed and the farmer’s wife gave you a ticket with the number of flats. I remember someone stole all my tickets and left me with only one or two. The kind lady paid me anyway what she felt I had earned that day.

On a very hot, stifling day, the farmer’s hired hand had the team of horses with harrows hitched up to work the field next to the orchard. Eleanor, with her love of horses, begged and finally had the young man put her on the back of one of the horses. We used to walk behind whatever was going, bare foot in the furrows, talking to the farmer or young man. With the heat and strange passenger, the horses spooked and away they went. Eleanor had the ride of a lifetime with the harrows flipping back and forth. I realize now what a good man he was to stay focused and stay with the situation and bring it to an end safely. I know he got proper “h...” from the farmer though.

I started grade 1 at age 6. The first day, I got the strap because I had been tricked into doing something “unthinkable”. I was dared to spit on another kid’s hat, not knowing the two girls called the teacher to the cloak room and squealed. Clearly, school was not in my future. I knew then I was going to be a farmer or a lady truck driver. From then on, I knew never to trust other kids.

We had a long walk to school and there were no kids for me to walk with but my sister had several friends to be with. She never let me walk near them in case I heard them talking. Meanwhile, some boys on the other side of the highway would cross to my side and punch me and torment me. My sister never stuck up for me so I was on my own. I decided not to be bullied any longer so one day I picked up a large fallen limb and chased them onto their own side, swinging that branch and giving them a run for their lives. From then on, I learned to stick up for myself. You punch me – I punch back. I guess that’s why my Dad always called me “Joe.”

In the fall when the garden was finished, Eleanor and I dug and dug a deep hole large enough to get into and lined it with an old blanket. Then gathering the corn stocks, built a tepee over the hole, fastening it with binder twine at the top. We spent many hours playing in our little house even having cookies for a treat.

Brantford was our next location. The school we should have attended was full, so we went to another one much further away. The curriculum was different in each school. I didn't know what they were talking about. Then we moved again and went to another school. Needless to say, it was a lost cause for me. As you realize by now, my hatred of school kept growing bigger and bigger each day. Being "creative" one morning, I purposely thumped down the stair case, landing at the bottom, screaming and holding my broken leg; this would get me off school for a few weeks. After a few minutes, Mother called, "Hurry up! Your breakfast is getting cold and you'll be late for school." Talk about deflation. There were my Dad, Mom, and Eleanor sitting at the table having breakfast unconcerned. I guess I blew that one.



**Grandsons Christopher and Andy in a cornstalk teepee at summer's end**

My only memory of Brantford was that my father received some potatoes and a boy's bicycle. Somehow we managed to stretch under the cross bar and be able to ride on an angle. To this day, I can't imagine doing this. We took turns and spent many hours on that bike; we thought we were big time as father painted it at the shop and it shone like brand new.

The King and queen came through Brantford by train around the beginning of the war. I remember them on a little balcony on the end car of the royal train. The school children were all there that warm day and were given a square tube about 12 inches in length with a mirror at the top and one at the bottom inside the edges of the tube. This way, you could see the royalty waving to us. What a thrill!

My father was a very good cook and made the best French fries ever. In those days you used real lard that "crackled" when you put the potatoes in. One day the grease exploded and all I could see were flames shooting up the wall, so I ran out the door and down the street. I kept running and running until I realized there were no sirens screaming along the street to our house, so I ran back home to find everything under control.

Toronto was our next move. My father joined the military and was gone. He left us a fun Dad and came back a stranger, missing our important growing up years. I don't remember school but brought home mumps, chicken pox, measles and then I got scarlet fever. We had a big red sign put on our front door for weeks and weeks. The sign was for "Quarantine" which meant no one in or out of the house. My mother was allowed to write to my father, iron the letter and envelope with a hot iron and post it late at night.

Scarlet fever left me with Saint Vitus Dance. I was in bed for a year under horrible medicine and couldn't speak. Nothing could be done. They wrapped my arms and legs in flannel bandages to protect the skin. We had a gray cat who was allowed to stay with me in the bed. It

## Through the Rear View Mirror

was a long year but, to make a long story short, I did recover with God's grace and my mother's determination.

Still in Toronto, after living on Gillespie Street (where I was ill), we moved to Westmoreland and I went to Kent Public School. I had kind and caring teachers from grade 4 and up. My story is about my grade 8 teacher, Mr. Ward. He was my first male teacher, about 40-45, wore nice dress pants and a sports jacket, and always had the shiniest shoes. I was so scared to be in his class because when he did duty in the school yard at recess, he seemed so gruff and strict.



**Pat, Mr. Peterson (a teacher), myself and Lois, a lifelong friend**

Day one, he went through what was going to happen and gave us a test. Those who passed would be on one side of the class and those who didn't pass would be on the other side (you know where I was.)

Day two, we had a letter from our parents allowing us to start school at 8:00 a.m. and stay until 5:00 p.m. He was the most patient, encouraging person I ever met. We would be at the black board and he never yelled or made us feel dumb. He just kept working with us step by step. In those years you had to have passing marks to avoid writing entrance exams. Mr. Ward had a record of no one ever failing or having to write the exam, me included. I owe him so much. Because of him, I learned more in that year than the seven previous years. When I left grade 8, I knew I could learn and challenge the future.

Mr. Ward taught all students that they could learn and were not misfits and that they should have respect for one another. This is where I became friends with Lois and started to have trust and confidence.

Yes, I did it! Thanks Mr. Ward.

On another note, my sister does love me!!



*Jean Barratt was born February 11, 1931 in Hamilton, Ontario and moved seven times during her young years. She married Ross Edmund in 1952 and they were together for 59 years, which presents another romantic story. They have two daughters, Susan and Kathy and two grown grandsons. Jean's memoir is about falling through the cracks of the education system, almost drowning.*



## Plymouth Navy Week 1938 (and an afterthought)

By Trevor Trower

**T**here are not a lot of people still alive, who can tell you about Plymouth Navy Week 1938 from their personal observation. I was there and I still feel the thrill and amazement of my good fortune to have had that experience. There is only one other exposition in the whole world where you can be thrilled to that extent, and that is the Kennedy Space Center, at Titusville Florida. I have been there too and in many ways they both demonstrate man's tremendous achievements. The beauty of the American show is that it is still there, available to be visited for a modest cost. For a handful of dollars you can walk among the space travel hardware and touch those vehicles which have been to other worlds. Navy Week alas, is history.

I was eleven years old. Most of us were poor and the idea of a shilling to pay the entrance fee was un-imaginable but there are more ways to skin a cat, as the saying goes. Young boys are by nature very adventurous and not having a shilling did not deter our expectations; my pals and I were going to see everything that was on display.

The British Navy ruled the waves, and it behooved the champions to show to the world the Royal Navy in all its splendor. Plymouth and the Dartmouth docks was the venue. The entire area was contained by a wall and on the wall an iron fence six feet in height. Now for one glorious week the great iron gates were opened and the public allowed entry. The first ships to be seen, introducing us to the fleet, were the aircraft carriers, and the first of those was the magnificent HMS Ark Royal. Then in the nearby dock was the HMS Eagle, the sister ship of the Ark Royal. Later we walked the deck of a third carrier, the HMS Argus. Lined up on their decks were the airplanes which flew from them. Front and center on their flight deck was the Fairy Swordfish, with its torpedo mounted on its undercarriage.

We walked on the huge flight deck and experienced a ride on the elevator, the size of a tennis court, which took the planes from flight deck to the hangar beneath. All around were uniformed friendly sailors, anxious to describe their ship and her weapons to anyone who



expressed an interest. Thousands of visitors with their cameras walked the decks of those ships and I wondered how many were spies recording secret information. There were great battleships,



**A Fairy Swordfish**

quarters and the shining engine-room and of course the galley, from where more than a thousand ships-company were fed. How neat and clean everything was, and how friendly and sharing the crew. They shared their cigarettes and tobacco with us and I at eleven smoked my first cigarette; I can still remember how nauseated it made me feel. In the galley we were given samples of ship's cocoa, which was cocoa and sugar pressed into blocks. Cocoa was a common beverage



**HMS Hood**

served to sailors when on watch in cold weather. The block of cocoa would be melted in boiling water and the sweet frothy mixture would be served in large mugs. We were allowed to wander around the ships; there was no one to restrict us. I found my way into a 16 inch gun turret where an exercise was in progress. Great packs of gunpowder and a shell weighing a ton were brought by a lift arrangement from deep in the bowels of the ship. We listened enrapt while the gunnery-officer's orders were carried out by the team of sailors. Every member of the gun crew was wearing a sort of helmet covering his head and ears; this was normal dress as the thunderous noise of the firing

the HMS Hood and the HMS Rodney and others, with their huge 16 inch guns looking so alert and at the ready. There was even a cruiser which carried ahead of her bridge, a Fairy Swordfish plane, mounted in a form of catapult. I asked a sailor how would the airplane return to the ship when its work was done, there was nowhere for it to land. The crewman said it would find a place on land or land in the sea beside the ship and be winched aboard.

We not only walked the decks and gun turrets but below decks we examined the crew

We were allowed to wander around the ships; there was no one to restrict us. I found my way into a 16 inch gun turret where an exercise was in progress. Great packs of gunpowder and a shell weighing a ton were brought by a lift

## Through the Rear View Mirror

guns would deafen a man at the first volley. That day, of course, only the routines were being followed. It was explained to us that the armory housing the shells was located in the remotest part of the ship, for safety during battle.

There in a nearby dry-dock was an old ship being re-fitted, the HMS Colombo. It looked out of place amidst the giant fighting ships. We were not allowed on the Colombo but it didn't look interesting anyway.

Further along in a great wet-dock, triple-moored, were three H class destroyers, the HMS Fame, Fearless and Foresight. The outermost ship, the Foresight, was crowded with sightseers, as



**HMS Fearless**

a display of torpedo firing was to take place. Now for exciting action: The HMS Seahorse, a small submarine, was to be the enemy today as the Foresight would fire one of her torpedoes at her. This simulated battle was being watched by thousands and I of course being small and inquisitive was able to find a place close to the action. The torpedo firing device was like a large rack, in which were located four torpedoes. A sailor sat on top of the frame and by turning a handle could point the unit in the desired direction. The instructions to the crew were coming over the public address system in a loud clear voice. Then, when the torpedo was aimed, the voice loudly spoke, "I see near the torpedo a small boy wearing a pink shirt, sandals and torn khaki shorts. Perhaps he would like to fire the torpedo?" I looked about me for a few seconds then I screamed out, "It's me, it's me" and ran to the firing station and took a seat beside the sailor in charge of the firing. Then came the order to fire and I pulled the lanyard firing trigger and with a mighty "whoosh" a charge of compressed air shot the projectile into the basin towards the submarine. I felt like a hero listening to all those cheering voices as I made my way to other ships needing my attention.

Most of my time that day was spent with my best pal, Gerald Teague. Gerald was a year older than me and had more experience. I fell off a work-raft into one of the docks and it was Gerald who saved me from drowning. But boys aren't Siamese twins and we did eventually get separated. I ended up going to a free movie in the dockyard, one of the amenities usually reserved for naval officers and men. A wonderful movie was playing, "Life on the Ocean

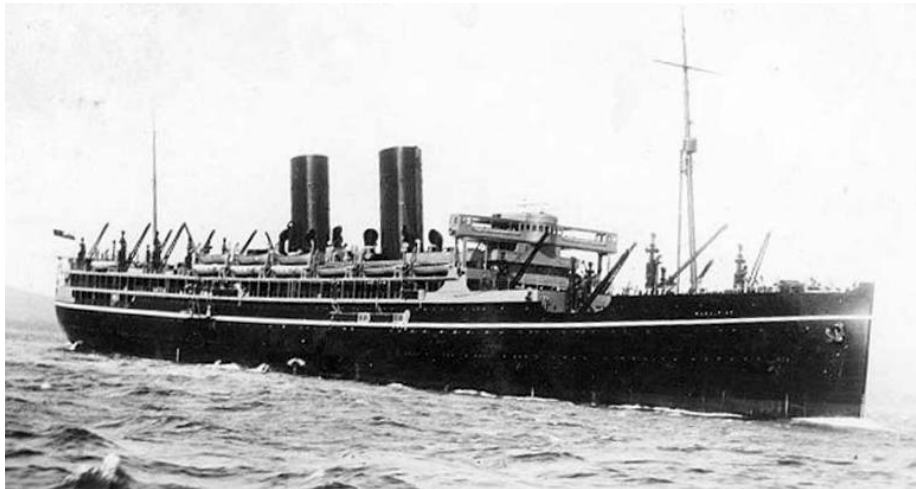
Waves” with Tommy Trinder. I smoked some of the cigarettes that were given me as I watched that movie, then became quite ill and made it to the toilet just in time.

There was an area where figure-heads of old sailing “ships of the line” were mounted and each had a plaque describing that ship’s history and, of course, a friendly sailor ready to bring that story to life. Some of those carved figure-heads were more than twice as big as a man and beautifully painted and decorated with gold leaf. I remember one carving of Britannia, and I imagined her on the prow of a great “ship of the line” square-rigged and under sail sweeping our enemies from the sea. What a thrill to see such power and to be part of it.

What a wonderful day in the summer sunshine, not one thought of the dark clouds of war gathering on the horizon, and not a thought of the rumbling of activity in the shipyards of Germany as Hitler was preparing for war and to wipe the British Navy from the sea, its secret weapons being mass-produced, the pocket-battleships and the worst killers of all, the U-boats. In thinking back of that time, there was no anger or shouting, no complaints or criticism. There was no fighting or drunkenness, no police display of authority, no mace or phasers and yet there were thousands and thousands of people milling about. In a way it is, in that regard, similar to the Space Center display in Florida.

Yes, one year later, Britain was at war, and a dreadful toll was taken of British shipping and so many thousands died. The pocket-battleships did their terrible work, and the U-boats, the scourge of the seas, hunted the allied convoys, sinking hundreds of thousands of tons of ships bringing food and supplies to the war-torn Brits. The famous HMS Hood foundered beneath the grey Atlantic and only three men survived while over a thousand sailors perished. This was probably the lowest point of pride and morale of the British people. Some prestige returned when the German pocket-battleships Bismark and Tirpitz were destroyed

My friend Gerald Teague joined the Royal Navy early in the war; he was just fourteen. How that came about was not an unusual story. Gerald’s dad was a sailor on the armed merchantman HMS Rawlpindi. Sadly that ship was sunk by the pocket-battleship Deutschland early in the war. She was shelled and sunk by the Deutschland with all hands and passengers lost. The range of the German ship’s great guns was able to reach out to the unsuspecting



**HMS Rawlpindi**

Rawlpindi while still several miles out of range of the smaller ship’s armament. As a result of the action, the Royal Navy offered to take Gerald under its care as a boy-seaman. A few years ago I wrote to the Admiralty in Whitehall and tried to get in touch with my boyhood friend. I received a reply

indicating that Gerald had left the Navy in 1955, and they had no knowledge of his whereabouts. Even though I regretted the news I was gratified to hear that he had survived the dreadful war.

## Through the Rear View Mirror

In the fall of 1939, I was fishing on the pier at the Barbican, in Plymouth. I seemed to be taking such a long time to grow and be able to join the Royal Navy. There, slowly sailing past was the HMS Exeter, limping into her home port after her business with the Graf Spee off the port of Montivideo. Sailors dressed in their number one whites lined the deck of the brave little fighting ship and her ship's band played joyous music. Several thousand had collected on the shoreline and cheered as the ship sailed past, hardly making way. How gallantly she, along with the Ajax and Achilles, had fought, engaging the pocket battleship (Panzerschiff) Amiral Graf Spee. The Exeter was almost destroyed during that terrible battle and her crew was decimated but, patched up with canvas and plywood to hide the dreadful damage to her armor and superstructure, she was under her own steam to Devonport to be re-fitted. Eventually the captain of the Graf Spee, in order not to suffer the disgrace of defeat at the hands of those smaller Royal Naval ships, ordered his crew to abandon ship as his scuttled monstrous ship sank in the cold grey South Atlantic Ocean.



**The Admiral Graf Spee**

Thank God for the Commonwealth, friends, and the United States of America; we finally prevailed in that horrible conflict, and the Third Reich, which was to have lasted a thousand years, was defeated.

A sad post script to this dreadful affair was that the commander of the Graf Spee, later, was to take his own life.



## The Old Bailey (1988)

By Trevor Trower

I was fortunate enough to work for Canada's national airline, TCA/Air Canada, and retired after thirty five years. In my capacity of a Flight Service Director, I worked the overseas run and many of those trips were to London England. While in that wonderful city the crew would rest at one of London's excellent hotels. During the periods between flights, we would occupy our time enjoying some of the incredible adventures available to anyone interested. My, what great times we had and what marvelous people we knew in those days. I recall when a fellow crew-member, Tom, and I, along with two other friends, went to the Old Bailey in London to watch an attempted murder trial. We were allowed into the court because, "We were visiting Attorneys from Canada." I had better explain.

We, along with two of our colleagues, approached the entrance to court number one. We were stopped by the policeman at the door of the court and asked for our identification. We had no suitable I.D. except for our airport passes. The four of us wearing our uniform overcoats, were quite disappointed. The officer seemed to be a friendly sort of chap, and asked us if we were attorneys visiting from Canada. We naturally replied that we were crew members on a layover in London. He asked us again if we were Canadian lawyers. We again tried to explain that we worked for Trans Canada Airlines. The officer cut us short in our explanation and re-asserted that we were visiting lawyers. At the same time Ruth Fox, one of our colleagues, caught on to the subterfuge and along with our acceptance of our new status we were permitted access.

I don't recall ever being in a criminal court before. I was very impressed by the architecture and the heavy dark furniture. Nearly every seat was taken. There were a lot of people wearing funny little white wigs which seemed to be sitting on top of their heads rather than being worn. Most of the officers of the court were men. The judge was wearing long black robes and wearing a different, fuller and longer type of headpiece. It struck me that the differences in headwear may have had something to do with position or status. Anyway, while the four of us were rubbernecking around, a loud voice called out, "Hear Ye, Hear Ye, the court of the queen's bench is now in session," or words to that effect. A panel of the defendant's peers

sat in two tiers in a secure area of the courtroom, and it struck me at the time that everyone, including the jury looked guilty of something questionable.

Apparently a group of young men and women had been at a house party, including the plaintiff and the defendant and their respective girlfriends. The party had progressed in the usual way, with food and alcoholic beverages. Sometime later in the evening the effects of the booze became apparent and the girls decided that it would be a change to have some sort of relationship with the other's boyfriend. There are all sorts of techniques of flirtatious behavior, some more subtle than others. The approach used in this instance was for the one to quietly approach the other's friend and ask for a cigarette. Being out of cigarettes he asked the other group members for a fag and received one from the defendant. This information was extracted from the reluctant witness and it was difficult to follow as most of the language of the accused was spoken with a broad cockney accent. Several times his Lordship was obliged to ask for clarification of some cockney term.

Slowly a picture of the party was built in the minds of the spectators. One had the impression of twenty to thirty young working class people, crammed into a small council house; blaring music and attempts at dancing, loud laughter and ribald talk; jokes and innuendo were flying and some of the group becoming more friendly than sensible under the circumstances. It seems that the small kitchen in the house had held the food. On the table a bread-board, loaves of bread, sandwich fillings etc, and a long sharp kitchen knife were laid out.

The girl needed a light for her smoke but, instead of smoking, the two friends began to kiss each other. The defendant entered the kitchen to get some food just as his girl and his friend, the plaintiff, were in a close and compromising situation. He shouted out, "Get your hands off my girl." In return she called out, "I'm only having a cigarette." Rather than believe her statement, he trusted his own eyes and, giving his friend a push, separated the two would-be lovers. You must imagine these young people roused in sexual passion, at the same time not wishing to look a fool in the eyes of their lovers. Gradually the angry shouting and cursing gave way to coarser invective and to more physical confrontation. The two young men urged on by the two young women, faced each other a nose length apart in that tiny crowded kitchen. The music and laughter filled the house with noise. I thought to myself, as I listened to the circumstances of the event being drawn from the witnesses, that beyond any doubt the two men were guilty without any question, of rank stupidity if nothing else. But of course the charge was not that of stupidity but of attempted murder.

The sordid details continued, the expression on his Lordship's face showing his disgust. It soon became clear that the defendant, having received much the worse of the violence, made a final effort to re-assert himself. In desperation he had taken the kitchen knife and stabbed his friend in the chest. The knife had pierced the other's chest and finally rested in the poor man's heart. He fell to the floor and lay still. Blood began to cover the kitchen floor.

Even though we were several hours in the courtroom listening to evidence being presented, those, in effect, were the basic facts of the matter.

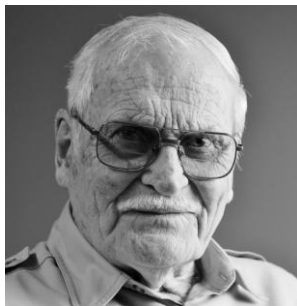
At the party the noise continued but the screaming in the kitchen was investigated. The blood-covered body was found lying on the floor, the girlfriend cradling his head in her arms and sobbing in grief and fear. One person, more lucid than the others, called for an ambulance which appeared within minutes and the victim was whisked away to the nearby hospital. The police arrived and arrested the suspect.

The stabbed man stayed five months in hospital. It was touch and go. Superb professional care saved the man's life. Now a year after the incident, the case was being heard.

## Through the Rear View Mirror

The Lord Justice gave the jury its instructions. He added the comment that having heard the evidence of the case he found it difficult to determine from the evidence, who was the plaintiff and who was the defendant, they both looked equally guilty to him.

It didn't take the jury long to find the defendant guilty as charged.



*Trevor Trower was born in Southampton, England. After a 35-year career with Air Canada In-Flight Service, Trevor retired and pursued various hobbies such as model trains, model radio-controlled boats, woodwork and archaeology. He trained in photography and became quite skilled with a camera.*

*In the last few years, his passion for writing short stories and particularly poetry resulted in the publishing of three collections of his work. A number of short stories and poems have been published in magazines and on the web at BBC North Wales.*

*He currently lives in Georgetown, Ontario with his wife of 55 years, Kay Thompson. They have 5 children.*



# I Remember Paris

By Dorothy Menear

**A**lthough I didn't always think so, I now believe I was very lucky to have enjoyed the privilege of growing up in a small town. Pretty little Paris, Ontario was that town with a population of only six or seven thousand souls, most of whom were known to one another.

When Mom, born and raised in London, Ontario, and Dad, born and raised in West Ham, London, England, married in 1927, they moved to Hamilton, Ontario. Unfortunately Mom had to give up a fine position in London because the move was absolutely necessary. Dad, an artist by skill and love, and a sign painter by profession, was offered work in Hamilton. Jobs were becoming harder and harder to find as Canada and the world rushed headlong into the Great Depression. My brother, Jack, was born in 1933 and I followed three years later. You may notice that they were in no hurry to start a family.



**Young love (circa 1927) Look carefully—Dad is pulling a string to trip the camera**

Once again Dad faced a slowing of work in his field so, when a position became available in Brantford in 1942, they decided to head to that area. There was no accommodation in that city so we moved to Paris, which meant he had to take the fully packed bus back and forth every day, a trip of seven or eight miles each



way, finally walking home up the long steep hill. We always laughingly called Brantford our suburb.

Initially a great disappointment set in because Central School had no kindergarten and the powers that be deemed it unwise to put me into grade one, even though I'd attended kindergarten, which I loved, in Hamilton at Ballard Public School. In retrospect, I can't really imagine that grade one would have been all that difficult for me, but *c'est la vie*.

We settled down in Paris and I was off each day on my three wheeler to find out if there were any other six year olds to be found or anyone who'd like to play. We were allowed lots of freedom, a combination of small town and the times. Lots of kids were around and it didn't take much time for a circle of good friends to form. In fact, as we graduated to two wheelers, our world grew immeasurably. We thought nothing of cycling seven or eight miles to enjoy a refreshing dip at our favourite spot on the river, then biking home, probably on arrival, feeling hotter than before. My first adult bike was a hand-me-down. Jack got Dad's bike and I was given his. The unfairness of being the youngest and a girl to boot hit me. "Do I really have to have this worn, old bike? It has a crossbar. It's a boy's bike," I whined.

"Well," there was no sympathy in Mom's voice, "You just keep riding your tricycle if that suits you best."

Whoops, I had just about over-stepped with my careless remarks so quickly back-pedaled. "Oh no, I'll keep it. It'll do just fine." Still, I had to turn away to hide a small, rogue tear which threatened to expose my true feelings.

Penmans (a company that designed knitted outerwear, hosiery and underwear) ruled the town in many ways as they employed a great number of local people. In the morning at around six o'clock, the first piercing whistle of the day was heard. It urged Penman's employees out of bed. The second whistle wailed at seven at which time every worker should be clocked in and at his post. Noon hour brought the next jarring noise when everyone was released to go home for lunch followed by the one o'clock sounding over the town with its sharp reminder signaling that the returnees should be back at their places. The final blessed whistle of the day at five sent all home for the evening and its activities till the next morning when it would happen all over again. However, particularly in summer when we kids might be anywhere with our friends, it was a great help in getting us home on time for lunch and later, for dinner.

Clip clop, clip clop. This was another frequent, familiar sound. Whether it was the breadman, the milkman, or the ice cream man making their deliveries, they all came in brightly coloured wagons, each pulled by a single strong horse. The fact that the horses always knew exactly at which house to stop never failed to astonish me. I wondered if there was a secret signal passing between man and beast but somehow that seemed unlikely. As far as I was concerned, the horse allowed his driver only so much time before moving to the next stop.

From time to time I would try to make friends with one of the huge animals despite the fact that I was somewhat frightened of him, but fascinated at the same time. Hesitantly, with a sort of sing song lullaby on my lips, I'd shakily begin to make my approach. "Hello old boy. You are so beautiful. May I come closer? May I pet you?" Usually as the gap between us lessened, the horse, tiring of promises of a nice nose rub, or more, would snort, toss his head and roll his big brown eyes at me. Scuttling back to my side of the street, I turned once again to admire my would-be friend from a distance. Never did I truly lose my awe of horses even when, some years later, the opportunity to learn to ride was offered. As I would tug the reins and click my tongue at the horse to go one way, he would immediately go the other so I'd feebly give in to his bad behavior and would shortly find myself back in the barn.

## Through the Rear View Mirror

Each day the milkman and breadman came and although there was a standing order for two quarts of milk to be left at the door, the smiling, good natured breadman always rang so he could display his basket of wonderful baked goods to the lady of the house. Unfortunately the lady of our house bought only plain bread. The odd time I was there, I'd plead with Mom to buy something special. "Please, Mom, couldn't you buy some of those buns with all the sweet, silky icing or maybe just a package of donuts?"

"No, I could not and don't ask me again," was her quick response. In all fairness to her, I have to say this wasn't Mom being mean. There were seldom any extra pennies for such frivolities and it was only her good household management which allowed us even a plain loaf of bread. If anyone could stretch a penny, it was her. She sewed her clothes, my clothes, and even the nighties she wore as well as Dad's nightshirts. Yes, Dad wore a nightshirt to bed which tickled my funny bone, but I don't know why. After all, other than seeing the hero in movies sporting his fine silk pyjamas, I had no idea what men usually wore to bed. I asked Mom to make me a nightie once, which she did, and as I happily prepared for bed, pulling the soft flannelette over my head, I had visions of looking so very adorable in my new outfit. Alas, by morning, the darn thing was wrapped around my neck which quickly sent me back to my snuggly pyjamas while sadly tossing the nightie carefully away in the back corner of my dresser drawer where it lay like a tossed off rag doll.

In winter the horses would stamp, blow and shake their heads while waiting for the business to be transacted. They sometimes even wore blankets which clung like huge cloaks to their broad backs helping them stave off the frigid weather. Meanwhile, the milk which had been left inside the screen door had taken on its own life as the head of cream grew taller and taller until the little cardboard cap sat jauntily perched on the cream high above the bottle. We gleefully estimated that the cream stretched at least three or four inches high and we always wondered just how far it could go if Mom hadn't mixed it back into the milk at that point.

The main track of the CNR ran through Paris. The mournful call of whistles, chugging of engines, and wheels clackety clacking over rails was constant. Freight trains, stopping for water and coal at the junction, were often so long that they extended back to and beyond the passenger station. Going by the station and across the tracks gave us a short cut home from school, a saving in time of at least two whole minutes over our usual route. My brother Jack and I arrived one day to find a freight train blocking our path. "Oh-oh, I think I'll go around over the bridge."

"Are you kidding?" came his scornful reply. "Are you going to tell me you're too much of a scaredy cat to just crawl underneath?"

"Well, actually, yes!" Jack began to cajole me telling me how safe it would be as long as we went under the car close to the front wheels and didn't dilly dally.

He continued, "Also, we wouldn't tell Mom and after all, you're nearly ten years old and besides, I'll tell everybody you were afraid." Ah, such agony for he was right, I was scared.



**Jack and I managing the angelic look (1941)**

But, could I stand the smug looks I'd be getting from friends if I didn't do it? Besides, my thoughts ran on, he's three years older than me and, in my adoring eyes, could do no wrong even though deep down I knew he was coaxing me to do the most dangerous thing I might ever do in my entire life. With no further thought, blood racing, I scrambled under the train and reached the other side without the sound of wheels beginning to roll or the train's whistle blowing, warning of its readiness to depart. To this day, I don't recall the feel of my knees touching the ground or my hands either but suspect that, in my relief upon reaching my goal, nothing could intrude upon my prayer of thanks, silently and fervently offered. Nevertheless I couldn't suppress a shout of victory, "I did it and I'm not a sissy!!"

Our poor beleaguered Sunday school teachers were obliged each year to present a Christmas concert. They had to coax and wheedle each of their reluctant classes to perform various plays, through which parents would eventually have to sit. It was a painful business till the year they decided to have all students participate in one pageant. Being a senior, I was given



**All set for Easter, when little girls still wore bonnets**

the plum role of Gabriel and how I revelled in that honour, rehearsing till I felt I had it down perfectly. Our big night arrived and, as parents settled into their hard, straight backed chairs and harried teachers scurried about making last minute adjustments, the curtain was finally drawn back to reveal the pastoral scene. On cue, I swept through the back curtain in my long white gown, wings trembling, halo slightly askew and, pausing for effect, raised my arms, voice intoning, "Fear not, for behold I bring you glad tidings of great joy..." and giving my speech in full to its finality and the sound of thunderous applause. Of course, I now know that the applause was probably polite as well as scattered but, under no circumstances, could it be called thunderous.

Easter, with its chocolate and new clothes was a favourite time of year. While Mom and Dad and even Jack made do with clothes already in their wardrobes, I most often would have a new coat and hat along with gloves, shoes and socks. One year it was a red poke bonnet in the shape of a heart, a fitted navy coat with socks to match and new shoes which sent me off to Sunday school feeling like a princess. My friends and I openly admired the fine trappings of each other and congratulated ourselves again and again on our excellent taste in clothes.

My carefree childhood probably ended when, at the age of thirteen about to enter grade eight, I was asked by Mrs. Muir, the librarian to work after school and Saturdays in our public library. I was thrilled to death to be asked as it was one of my special haunts, possibly the reason she thought of me for the position. The princely sum of ten cents an hour was offered but I hardly cared about that part of our bargain. She put a great deal of trust in me and I believe I

## Through the Rear View Mirror

never disappointed her in completing my duties. Four years later I left to go into business and it was another four years before, once again, I worked in a library.



*Dorothy Menear (nee Powell) b. 1936.*

*My husband, Harvey and I, after numerous moves, reside in Milton where we are enjoying our senior life. We met and married in Toronto in 1958, moved to a home north of Mt. Albert, Ontario in 1963 to raise our children, Ann (1962) and Martin (1964). While there, I worked in public and school libraries and eventually enrolled in Seneca's evening programme where I earned my Library Techniques diploma. Graduating in 1982, I worked in the educational department of a book wholesaler and then joined a publishing house, never actually returning to library work. 2001 brought retirement for me with a great deal of happiness then and now.*



# Learning from the School of Hard Knocks

By Gillian Reynolds

In the School of Hard Knocks there are students who learn their lessons and graduate, never having to repeat a grade. I was not one of them. I was one of those people who did everything in a hurry, rarely allowing myself the luxury of stopping to smell the roses. After a series of medical challenges over several years, I have finally learned some valuable life lessons - to slow down and live in the moment.

Most of the challenges were “accidents” although looking back from this vantage point I think I played a part in what happened.

In the words of the great spiritual leader Buddha, “We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts, we make the world.”

I have learned how powerful our thoughts are. This is known as the Law of Attraction: “like attracts like.” I believe that we can control our destiny by changing negative thoughts into positive and understanding the power of words, both written and spoken. It took me more than twenty years and a lot of pain and suffering to really believe this.

As the result of breaking nine bones and having five operations, I learned a lot about the human anatomy and medicine.

My first “break” came in the winter of 1973, when I fractured my right wrist (Colles’ fracture) while ice-skating on the frozen pond, which was next to our house on the Niagara Escarpment, just north of Milton.

It was on a crisp, clear, sunny day, when my neighbour and I were skating on the pond checking for cracks. We had a skating party planned in the evening.

Just as the words: “I hope no one trips over one of these cracks and breaks something” left my lips, I tripped over one of the cracks and broke my wrist. I fell to the ground, crying out in pain.

It was a difficult six weeks wearing a cast, especially with a one-year old daughter. I was unable to do so many things that I took for granted, like writing, (although I still managed to

## Through the Rear View Mirror

muck out the barn) and was forced to rely on my husband and friends, which made me feel uncomfortable. I learned that it's not good to be too independent.

I broke my left wrist (another Colles' fracture) in 1981 when I was roller-skating in an indoor rink.

I can still recall what I was thinking immediately prior to that accident: Everyone is overtaking me. Maybe I should go faster. The lesson here: slow down, slow down!

The "graceful exit" from my downhill skiing period was in February 1995, when I suffered a compound fracture of the left leg.

I did most of my skiing at Kelso, although I was what's known as a "fear skier." On icy days I would watch the injured skiers being carried on stretchers into the waiting ambulance, and think, Thank Goodness I didn't break anything today. Oh, the power of negative thinking!

This particular day was bright and sunny. The air was crisp and still and the cloudless sky was an azure blue. The soft snow on the ski hills was just starting to give way to the afternoon sun's caresses.

I was feeling relaxed and pleased with myself as I skied gently down the hill, making lazy Ss in the snow. The instructor had just told me that I had passed the Intermediate level course - not bad for a 53-year-old. One last run, I thought, before heading out to Kelsey's to celebrate with the group.

Suddenly I caught an edge, just as I was nearing the ski chalet. After regaining my balance, I kept traversing the hill instead of turning. It was like I was taken over by some strange force. As the trees loomed larger and larger, I was forced to turn, ignoring that little warning voice. That was my fatal error. My leg buckled beneath me and I fell to the ground, screaming in pain.

Bindings are made to release only when you are moving with sufficient speed on a steep enough slope. Mine did not release. Something had to give. What "gave" were my tibia and fibula, and my knee bone was crushed.

Then, everything seemed to happen in slow motion: one of my friends zooming down the hill to alert the ski patrol and finally a toboggan going up on the chair lift.

As I was lying there in pain, waiting and waiting for the ski patrol, I tried to take my mind off the pain by joking to the gathering crowd "I hope they don't rip my best ski pants." But my mind was thinking, my worst nightmare has come true!

I tried to pull myself together and started to think positively—I'll be back at work in a week. Little did I know that it would be nearly three months before I could return.

The ambulance transported me to Milton District Hospital where they x-rayed my leg. From there I was transported to Guelph General.

Twenty-four hours after the accident, the surgeon operated on my leg, inserting a plate and screws.

Three days later, he had to do a second operation, because further x-rays showed damage to the knee. The hardware was replaced with two plates either side of the broken bones with screws holding them together. The surgeon also grafted some bone from the hip. A third operation was needed to close the incision.

After twelve days in hospital, I was discharged. The bed chesterfield in the living room was to be my "home" for the next two months.

Every time I saw the orthopaedic surgeon, he would look at the latest x-rays and shake his head. "These tibia and fibula bones can take months to heal. I don't want you putting any weight on the leg until I tell you."



**My conveyance**

I was rigged out with a wheelchair, walker and commode and finally progressed to crutches and a cane.

Initially, the Homecare nurse came twice a day to dress the wound, which extended from ankle to above the knee. Looking at the inside of my body through this three-quarter inch wide gash was not a pretty sight. I have always been squeamish about surgeries and would close my eyes when they showed operations on TV.

After a week or so, the nurse asked one day, "What do you think about dressing your own wound?"

"I don't think I could do it with my eyes closed," was my reply.

My husband was brave enough to volunteer. Throughout the ordeal, he was always very patient, kind and helpful. In

fact, I don't know what I would have done without him and my friends, who were also Godsenders. The support I received by way of cards, gifts, meals, visits and phone calls kept me going through those long days.

In spite of all the therapies I used, both orthodox and unorthodox, it was nearly a year before the bones showed signs of any serious healing.

During those long weeks, when I was lying in my bed, gazing out of the window, I did a lot of thinking and reflecting on my life and I learned some valuable lessons.

I asked myself, how and why did the accident happen? I think maybe jerking the ski tip in the snow caused a hairline fracture of the tibia, which is why my "inner voice" was telling me not to turn. Now, I am learning to trust my intuition: that sixth sense.

I thought about my life before the accident. I was always very active and busy, like a bee flitting from flower to flower, never pausing long enough to appreciate their beauty. I began to realize that maybe I had been busy escaping from the truth and reality. I learned to slow down and be more cautious, and to listen to my body and, most of all, to value it.

My thoughts would drift back to a time before the accident: the exercises I had to force myself to do, the discomfort I felt when I jogged, the twenty-minute swims that seemed like an hour. I decided that if I was ever able to do them again, I would never complain.

After a few weeks at home, when friends didn't call as often, and the bones refused to heal, depression started to take over. The physiotherapist had told me that when I did walk again it would always be with a limp.

I decided to organize the videos and came across the Jane Fonda workout, which before the accident I used to do every morning. I got out of bed, played the video and did a modified version, holding on to the walker. My spirits started to lift with the release of endorphins. This became an essential daily ritual for me. I learned the value of regular exercise, for the mind as well as the body.

## Through the Rear View Mirror

It seemed ironic that a couple of years before, for my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday party, I was given a walker and two canes, as "gag" gifts.

Whenever I visited my mother in England, every day I would jog around the village, feeling sorry for all the old folk with their walkers and canes. Now I felt sorry for myself, because I was the one who was disabled. I had a taste of what it's like to be old and infirm, to feel incapable and dependent and frustrated. I learned empathy.

I also learned a depth of gratitude and appreciation that I had never felt before; for all those many things that I had taken for granted, like being active and mobile and having freedom. I began to appreciate the little things in life that had previously gone unnoticed. I thanked God daily for being blessed with a caring family and friends.

Finally, I had to develop patience - the hardest lesson of all.

Eventually the bones began to heal and gradually I was able to get back to the activities that I had missed so much, like dancing, badminton and tennis - only I enjoyed them so much more.

Two years later the plates and screws were removed. That was a weight off my leg - seven ounces to be exact. And, fortunately, I did not have a limp.

That same year I had a near death experience. Although my Ford Bronco was a "write-off" - miraculously I wasn't.

It happened when we lived on our horse farm north of Milton.

One night as I was turning into our driveway, I was t-boned by another vehicle, which was approaching the hill in the opposite direction. We met at the top.

I was tired because I'd been at a course all day and played badminton in the evening.

For twenty-three years I had gotten into the habit of stopping just before the brow of the hill and then looking and listening for an oncoming vehicle, before turning into our driveway.

This particular night I went through the motions, but I was not in the moment. I was looking ahead, looking forward to a comforting cup of tea in front of a welcoming fire.

My mind was jerked back to the present as my body was jerked forward by the sudden impact. My car was hit on the passenger side. It turned upside down and started skidding along on the ski rack, which fortunately prevented it from continuing to roll over. Maybe the ski rack saved my life.

I remember thinking: Is this how I'm going to die? But my life isn't flashing before me. I think that's a good sign!

Eventually the car came to a stop in the middle of the road with me trapped in it upside down. I could hear the other driver shouting, "Help! Help!"

My first thought was to turn the engine off. My second thought was, if another car comes along, he won't see me without lights. I didn't want to be hit again!



**No more bucking Bronco**



## Through the Rear View Mirror

The driveways were long and so was the wait for someone to notice us. Finally, a neighbour saw the lights while letting his dog out and came to investigate. He managed to open the door and undo my seat belt and helped me out of my vehicle.

Ambulances were called. I said I didn't need one but they told me that my face was bleeding. For several minutes, I didn't feel anything because I was in shock. Methodically I went about the business of emptying the Bronco, lining up the groceries and other contents by the side of the road.

Then I started to shake.

My injuries were relatively minor: broken ribs and internal bruising, but I was in a lot of pain the next day. My face was a mess, but that didn't hurt much. The other motorist had a badly broken leg.

It took a lot of courage to get back behind the wheel and drive again. I kept having flashbacks, hearing the sound of glass shattering and the clash of metal, feeling the sudden shock of the impact and then travelling upside down, not knowing where I would end up or whether I would survive.

Obviously, my time wasn't up and I still had a lot to learn. Life is fleeting and fragile. Make the most of every minute and live in the moment.

Three uneventful years until November of 2000 when, after putting up with an acute abdominal pain for several hours I decided to go to the Emergency Department at Milton hospital.

After two days of tests, the doctor still didn't know what the problem was, until my condition became critical and he performed an emergency laparotomy. That was when he discovered a gangrenous appendix that was just about to burst. (They call it a laparotomy because an incision is made down your lap.)

It took me several weeks to regain my strength after that episode.

I also noticed a pattern and asked myself the question: Why are my medical emergencies never simple or straightforward? Makes for a good story, maybe.

I was getting tired of all these things that kept happening to me and so I began to be more careful and slow down.

Actually, I wasn't rushing when I broke my right knee cap (patella) and left wrist again (this time it was the radius bone). My heel got stuck in a mat that was outside a variety store and I lost my balance.

A few weeks later I hobbled into to the variety store on a cane and with my arm in a sling. I noticed that the mat was gone.

The owner was obviously embarrassed when I explained how his mat had caused my injuries, but he didn't apologise – just offered me a cup of coffee. Right, I thought to myself, That should make up for all the physiotherapy expenses!

However, I did learn to wear more sensible shoes when out walking. "Pride comes before a fall."

After that episode, I decided enough really was enough. No more broken bones or operations for me. When people would remind me to be careful "Because you know how accident prone you are" I would reply with conviction, "Not any more".

Evidently I wasn't completely convinced because in October 2004 I broke my little finger. It got stuck "between a rock and a hard place" when I tripped climbing up some rocks on the Niagara Escarpment. The "hard place" was my wedding ring.

I did notice with appreciation that the incidents were getting less serious.

## Through the Rear View Mirror

Luckily, I have made a complete recovery from all these challenges thanks to therapy, exercises, supplements and a change in lifestyle and outlook. In fact I think I'm fitter and stronger than ever.

Today, I could downhill ski if I wanted to, but I prefer to play it safe and stick to cross-country or snow shoeing. Instead of jogging, I prefer to walk or ride my bike and savour the beauty of nature.

Now I make time every day to do something for my body to lift my spirits, whether it is yoga, aerobics, biking, hiking or just a half-hour walk.

I used to believe I was too busy to take time out to relax. Life on the run is no life at all - it's just running away from your problems. I am learning to slow down, relax and enjoy each beautiful moment. I'm learning to take time to smell the roses.

Maybe I have finally graduated from the School of Hard Knocks!



**Savouring the moment**



*I was born in Birmingham, England and immigrated to Canada in 1969 with my husband. We helped build our home north of Milton on the Niagara Escarpment, where we raised our two children. We owned horses and other animals and grew our own vegetables. After the children left home we moved to urban Milton in 2002 where we now live in an Adult Community. Being retired, I enjoy walking, biking, yoga and aerobics at the Leisure Centre and, of course, writing.*

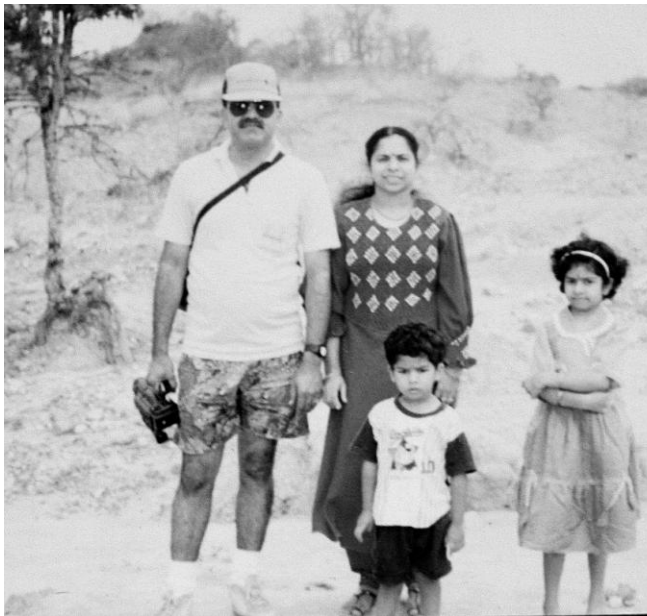


## Be a Little Optimistic!

By Sridevi Ravishankar

**T**he car was not a good idea after all. I didn't like the car my husband brought home for three reasons: firstly, it was a little Mini Austin which resembled a green bug. Secondly, it was our first car but in reality it was a second hand car. Finally, it would soon become my co-wife enticing and demanding more attention from my husband that I craved for.

So I hated it.



**Our little family in Eldoret**

Adding fuel to my apprehensions, my husband Ravi spent most of the first day checking and admiring the condition of the car. Soon he announced, "Well, get ready. This weekend we are driving to Nairobi to meet our friends."

"Oh, no! Not in this relic!"

"Vintage, that's what you call it. It will be a test drive for the car."

I realized that my idea of a car was poles apart from his. But my husband loves all the dilapidated, ancient, archeological stuff. Anyway, once he had decided, my "no" would only be momentary. I was surprised to see the car's triumph over me in the first round and I went out and kicked its behind with some vengeance.

Travel was the last thing on my list

as we were still settling down after the short four months in Kenya and our economic condition did not permit such luxuries. But I convinced myself. A good bug crawl across countryside may impart new vigour to our minds. Ravi's travel itch never allowed him to stay stationary in a place for long. Marco Polo always yearns for a change of place. He likes to drive from 'point to point' with no stopping on the way, which was the only inconvenience. Eventually, that Saturday we started our long drive.

I am not an early riser so I had packed everything the previous night. At 5:00 in the morning I forced the kids out of the bed and got them ready. Our 3 year old son Manu was still sleepy and sat on the couch dozing.

"Don't sleep; wake up, you Dumbo," nudged his sister.

"Depi, help me carry these things to the car." I had packed an entire kitchen for our trip. Depi placed her cold hands on her brother's face and he started chasing her around the couch.

As I was transporting the food stuff to the car, an ominous cloud shed a few tear drops. I winked my eyes and one fell on my cheek. Is this some sort of a premonition? I could not help wondering. Then I lugged a large can of drinking water.

"Why this?" asked Ravi in his usual irritated tone. "We are going to Nairobi not to the Sahara. It takes only 4-5 hours to reach."

"You never know!" I heard an echo when I said that, probably, the voice of Destiny.

"Can I lock the house now?" Ravi was growing impatient.

"Anybody don't go!" Our son Manu screamed from inside the house. He was learning everything, from self-dressing to language.

"He does that every time!" Depi remarked smugly and sat near the right window of the car. He hopped out of the house with one shoe on his foot and holding the other, sat on the veranda and completed the task and started tying the shoe laces.

"Hurry! You were playing with your toy car on the sofa all this time." I turned back and arranged the stuff to make some room for him.

"Amma, there is no place," Depi mourned.

"Push the things to the centre and seat him near the other window." I knew that would diffuse a lot of tension and sparks between them in the course of the drive.

Finally all four of us were in the Mini and ready to set sail. As the car pulled out of the gate into the street something ran across the car. I squeaked, "Is that a cat? Oh God, it is a bad omen!"

"No, that was a bunny. You didn't see clearly," assured my husband who is not a fan of superstitions.

Maybe it was due to the fuzziness of the dawn as darkness still lingered and partly because of the thick mist that I could not decide what it was. We turned right and reached a bigger road. Nothing was clear, all the trees and buildings were suspended in the fog. There was a fairy tale quality to the surrounding. It was an undisturbed, unstirred morning. I saw clouds walking on the playground on the side of the road. Huge willow trees stood in utter suspense guessing the day ahead. I could not resist the temptation to pull out my camera and shoot the serenity which was a total failure as the car wiggled on a bump. We left the very silent and calm moments only marred by our engine sound and merged into the main street.

"This City now doth, like a garment, wear the beauty of the morning; silent, bare..." the words floated from my mouth.

My husband just glanced at me and after a moment's meaningless stare turned to the road.

“It’s not mine—words of William Wordsworth!” I looked behind, “Kids are you hungry?”

“We have barely left home,” Ravi cried in disbelief.

“Depi did not eat anything. You know the usual, I’m not hungry blah...blah...uneasiness.” She is the stress master of the house. Every little thing will be perceived as a dangerous situation and her head explodes with tension but she tries to suppress it. The result is, however, an outburst in different forms, mainly throwing up.

We were slowly moving out of the city limits. The car was a miracle, I couldn’t believe it. It was faster and smoother than Ravi’s company car, a red Datsun, which was now standing alone in the porch of our house. It was for work related activities and could be used only within the city as its gruesome engines were tampered with and redone a thousand times solely by his boss to drive it in Safari rallies in its prime days. Now it is weather beaten with a hint of rust here and there and I was not particularly fond of that car either.

When we left the farmlands of our city Eldoret and were driving on A104, the bad road was baring itself like an evil road to hell. In addition, we were leaving the cooler temperatures of Eldoret as it was on a higher elevation and the descending gradient slowed us. People on the road side cheered us with thumbs up. Some cars responded with a hoot for the brave at heart. I was feeling disgraced sitting in that tiny cocoon. The car dodged between loose stones. I decided to look outside. Golden sun rays followed us like a sparkling thread peeking in between the conical tall pine and cypress trees teasing me to squint and close my eyes or painfully burning if I stared at it.

We reached Burnt Forest. I don’t know why it has this name but it had a continuous growth of evergreens and light filtered in, reflecting on branches and leaves which made it look rather spooky.

“Our office salesman told me not to stop here. Do you see those charcoal bags stacked? They are to charm the passersby. When drivers stop to buy, robbers hiding with guns come out to attack and rob them. This is the worst part of the road,” Ravi warned us about the danger.

I pondered, “Ah, Burnt Forest! Why do they call it so?”

“Because they burnt the trees,” Manu concluded.

“Dad, can you stop the car!” Depi begged.

“No—not here!”

I was still thinking if the forest got burnt at some time to give it this name.

“I feel like something,” Depi proclaimed. It simply means she was nauseous. But the conversation continued between the father and daughter.

“What? Describe it.”

“I don’t know.”

I interrupted. “Okay, you know what it is.” There is a plastic bag under the snacks. Pull it out.” Instead, standing up, she lowered the window glass with both hands and puked her heart and soul out before we could say anything. Manu was shocked and stopped his toy fight on the head rest. Luckily there was no one in sight. It was a shady and gloomy road.

“For God’s sake, stop the car!”

“I cannot.” Ravi slowed down the car. She always has motion sickness, even to this day. When she was a baby I was afraid of rocking her cradle or shaking her after food. When she was relieved and as we were reaching a clearing I said, “Stop at least now!”

He stopped. “Clean the car or else it will rust.”

“Seriously, is this car more precious than a child?”

## Through the Rear View Mirror

I pulled out the water, made her wash her face and rinse her mouth. After this episode we continued slowly. Yes, we had to, because of the road condition. We could feel every pothole, every stone, and every twig under the wheels. It was like lying low in a trench and experiencing the tanks rolling by, when trucks passed us. Normal cars swished past us whereas we stuck to the motto, “There is no hurry in Africa!”

It was almost 9:00 am when we reached Timbaroa which was a sort of junction town for trucks and weary travellers. The worn out road with frequent vehicle traffic raised a heck of a lot of dust. Small kiosks sold food, soda (cola) and other necessities. On both sides women (mamas) sold fruits and vegetables, fresh from the farm with dew drops intact. I wanted to use the washroom so I begged him to stop. A chubby woman wearing Kangas (the multicoloured, tribal patterned bright cloth, one around her breast and another around her waist) rushed to our car. Some children also ambushed our car forcing us to buy their farm produce. It was not my husband’s style of buying so he drove to a nearby restaurant and said I could try the bar there for a rest room. It was a dark place without any customers. I had to collect a key from the young lady at the counter and she directed me to go out, walk the open corridor to the back of the building. The moment I opened it, I stepped back. It was a hole in the floor and I didn’t have the courage to go ahead. So I returned the key and walked out. When my son ran towards me, I stopped him, “No, no, no...go back...maybe next stop!”

As I told my husband to buy some vegetables to give to our friends, he walked to the road and, after a hearty bargain, bought some crispy carrots, young and tender. I was sure it would taste like nectar. He bought baskets of plump tomatoes, potatoes and few humungous cauliflower heads. “On our way back we should buy some too,” I remarked.

By noon we reached the place called Equator sitting right on the imaginary line.

I wanted to take pictures at the sign “You are now crossing the Equator.” I asked him, “Is it safe?”

“Well, we will find out! But be quick!”

I posed first, made the kids pose and the whole family posed under the sign when another car pulled over encouraged by our brave attempt and helped us shoot.

When Depi was about to enter the car she screamed and fussed, “A bug!”

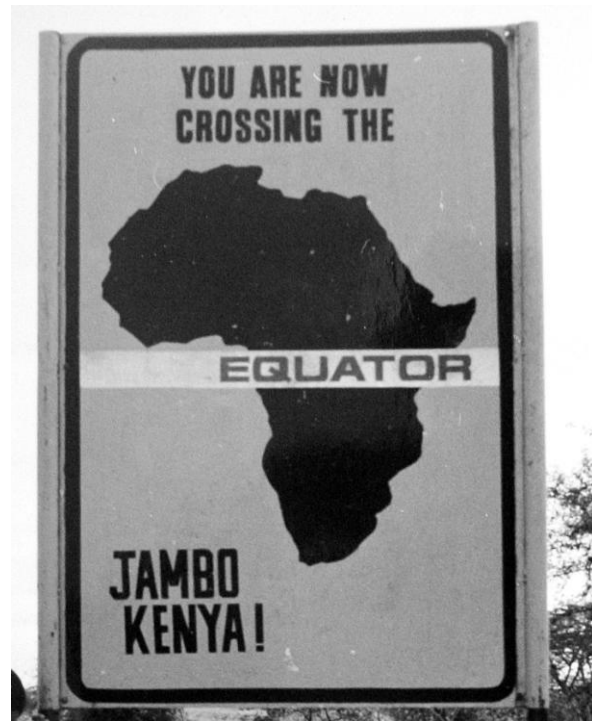
“Visiting his big cousin!” I never missed a chance to show my grudge against the car. Ravi took a book to slam it and both Manu and I cried in unison, “No!”

“Not my book.” And I snatched my *Man of the People* from his hand.

Manu said, “Don’t kill it” and placed a plate under it and pushed it forward, motivating it to crawl inside. Manu released it gently on to a bush.

“Hurry, we don’t have the whole day.” Ravi was time concerned.

“Ahh...my baby is so compassionate!” I



Equator—the imaginary line is here

## Through the Rear View Mirror

kissed Manu's head.

"Ok, enough of the drama. Get in now!" And off we went.

There were few cars, lots of trees, fresh air, peace and romance in nature. The sun was shining like the spear of a Maasai in the wide bright sky. The landscape had changed and lots of Acacia trees with yellow trunks shedding their barks were in sight. Then there were the Candelabra trees that looked a little like cactuses growing upwards making the plants resemble candelabra. It oozes white sap when the bark is punctured; I have seen that in a movie. Far from the road there were some huge ant hills built with amazing architectural excellence.

We were tired of sitting in the car and the steady slow drive was boring as we were closer to Nairobi. Suddenly the car started showing signs of exhaustion and was very reluctant to move and stopped with a jerk. Ravi detected that the engine was getting hot.

"What is the nearest town?"

"Naivasha."

"No wonder, Mini is homesick!" I was delighted to poke fun at it. The car was bought from Naivasha.

Smoke was issuing from the bonnet. Ravi tried to open the hood and burnt his fingers. He took my cotton scarf and opened the hood and peered at the heavy engine smoking. The water in the radiator was steaming away. "Give me some water." He poured the water which started boiling, burping and gurgling, so he waited for the engine to cool. The problem being solved, I returned to the car. Another car swished past us and pulled over in front of the Mini. A tough young man got out and walked to Ravi. They were talking and I thought he was offering help. We peeled and ate oranges and chattered. Now another car slowed down and stopped ahead. A slender guy walked towards them and they were talking on mobile phones the size of bricks. After a few minutes they got into their respective cars and fled. He came back and wiped his hand and started the engine, the car vibrated a little and turned on. It worked. "An engineer in need is a husband indeed!" I sang his glory. Ravi was in a sweat and said, "I was held hostage for a few minutes."

"What?"

Those two guys were looking for someone. The first guy asked me if I was Manji. As I was explaining and showed my identity card the other guy came and said I was not the person they were looking for because he was driving a black Mini and then they took off. Maybe they were armed.

"Oh, my god! I can't believe it! Let's get out of here as soon as possible. This car is the root of all problems. She is so malicious and almost killed you." After that Mini rolled off obediently.

We took the scenic route through Mai Mahiu and stopped at the view point to wonder at the Rift Valley which is a fault on land surface and dipped down to form the valley. I have read that the Great Rift Valley extended from Lebanon in the north to Mozambique in Africa.

## Through the Rear View Mirror

When we reached Nairobi by 5:00 pm and narrated the whole day's adventure, our friends said, "Ravi needs just 4 wheels or maybe 5 to travel. Do you know it is sometimes risky driving a small car? You cannot even go faster."

"Before coming to Kenya, my mother-in-law warned us with this saying, "Do not travel a lonely path without fear." I shared my additional piece of agony.

Another friend quipped, "I wouldn't drive this car even if you pay a million bucks."



**Rift Valley**

The next day we took it to a workshop recommended by him and the mechanic did a thorough check up and stamped it fit for the return journey. We spent the Sunday visiting Nairobi National park with friends. Monday was a holiday so we started early on our return trip. Concerned friends advised us to call them as soon as we reached home.

We had just crossed the suburbs of Nairobi when we heard the first out of pitch sound from the engine. But we moved on inclined to take any risk. Slowly, different unpleasant sounds started to accompany the annoying rhythm of the failing heart. The engine was getting hotter. He drove slowly and after a while Ravi stopped by the side of the road and looked at the engine. "It's giving up again."

"So soon! What do we do now?"

"When we reach Naivasha, I should take it to a mechanic." He did some tuning and got in with the hope of slowly reaching the nearest town. After a short distance it slowed down with unpleasant noises obstructing our progress. We stopped and poured water until the can was empty and then collected some from a road side tap.

He parked it on the shoulder of the road and tried to get help. A car stopped but he had no rope to tow so he drove away. We stopped another car and a truck for help but they were helpless. Finally we got a truck to tow us. The driver said he had a rope but it was short. He tied it to the car and towed to make Mini mobile again.

Hidden behind the big truck, Ravi could not see the road and had to brake frequently to avoid colliding with the truck when it slowed down or braked. I was sitting on the edge of the seat and watched the whole process like a horror movie. It was a great relief when we reached the town...shops appeared and people walking on the street looked at the funny procession with amazement at the truck pulling a bug. They even conveyed their bravos. After a while, some people on the road shouted differently, "Moto! Moto!"

"What is 'moto' in Kiswahili?" I asked Ravi.



“Hot!”

“Of course, it is hot.” I lowered the windows.

Then some more people shouted in agony, moto! moto! ...and I saw moto. Yes, there was fire from the bonnet of the car. I screamed, “Oh god, we are in a burning car. Can you stop or let’s jump out.” We were being dragged by the truck and the driver could not see what was happening. Ravi was visibly frightened for the first time. He yelled to the onlookers, “Tell him to stop.” They relayed it and ran in front of the truck and he stopped. The driver got off the truck and came to us and Ravi jumped out of the car as I handed him the water we had. They opened the bonnet. The brake drum had caught fire due to the constant friction of braking.

They doused the fire and the driver felt immensely guilty for risking our lives. He tried to be more sympathetic and said there is a mechanic shop close by and promised to drive slowly. We reached the mechanic and after examining the car he said it would take a day or two to replace the damaged parts and make it road worthy. I looked back at Mini standing innocently in his yard. For the first time I felt sorry for leaving the car behind. What if we never saw it again! Okay, that was wishful thinking.

Ravi thought about his next step. The following day was a working day for all of us so staying there was not an option and it would cost a lot. So we tried to find out if there was a bus to take us to Eldoret. Everyone we approached said that all west bound buses had left. So we requested the truck driver to drop us at the nearest bus station where we could get a bus. He agreed and it was past noon so we ate some roasted corn cobs from a street side vendor and transferred all our stuff from the car to the truck. I was not happy with the arrangement. “How can we trust them? What if they tricked us or blackmailed or hurt us?”

“Let’s face it. This is the only solution.” Ravi took the decision. That was the first time I laid my foot inside the cabin of a truck. It was large. We could easily fit in, with the children on our laps. There was a turn boy who also had some room. I sat there pondering as the truck moved forward. Sometimes life slaps across the face. It hurts...seeks revenge and scatters us on unknown shores. I was in a daze not knowing clearly if this was really happening or just a dream. Will we reach home safely?

Behind the seat was a curtained partition and I wondered what was in there. Relax, I said to myself, you have more time to explore. Manu asked his dad, “What is there?” And he replied that it’s the place for the driver to sleep. The driver was silent. We asked him questions to ease the uneasiness. His name was Amani and he was coming from the coastal town, Mombasa with a load of bicycles to be delivered to a company in Kampala. He had to pass through Eldoret to reach Kampala in Uganda. He was a fine young man with light skin and curly hair. He was strong and handsome with some Arabic features common to the coastal population. He spoke cheerfully but I was not sure if it was a performance. The turn boy, Juma was a very quiet, short fellow and suspicious according to me. They talked at times in Kiswahili and laughed. He even hummed a tune or two. I was stiff with fear and could not decide what direction this trip was taking.

He stopped at a weigh bridge and got off. I am sure Ravi was equally puzzled by the turn of events. I sat hugging the kids and Ravi went with them to find out what they were doing. My curious boy peeped anxiously leaning on the door to find out what was going on. When they returned he was glad to see his dad reappearing after 10 minutes. Ravi did not see him and opened the door. The boy fell down losing balance and the driver who was near the door caught him in time before he hit the ground. My little one was shocked beyond fear or pain. Then he started screaming and all of us comforted him. Timely reflex saved him from injury and from a

## Through the Rear View Mirror

terrible agony for us. I scolded him for peering out but Ravi said it was his mistake opening the door without checking. Of course, he was planning what to do next after hearing that the last bus had left. I thanked god for saving us from another disaster.

The driver did not have the heart to leave the unfortunate family on the way at the next town as no one was sure about the bus timing and it was getting late to be stranded in an unknown place. The security all over was not very commendable.

Ravi asked, “Can you drop us home?”

The driver agreed and we were on our way to Eldoret on a huge vehicle although we started in a tiny one. He started driving without any stopping. It was getting darker and the glorious orange ball was making arrangements for his royal departure. The sky was in its deepest blue and towards the west where we were headed dark and light clouds on the horizon displayed different hues of orange. The sky was a riot of colours from blue to purple, gold and orange. The tensed mind had something to see and loosen up for a while. Soon it was darker and one colour dominated all. Two head lights scattered the dust and cut through the darkness of the road.

Nearing a certain town the driver told me and the kids to sit behind the curtain, the reason being ‘police patrol’ in that area. His company policy did not allow him to carry passengers and if police started questioning, he would have to silence them with a large bribe. We sat silently behind the dirty curtain and were shut off from the world.

It was almost 8:00 pm when we reached Timboroa and the climb began. We were heading slowly as he had a heavy load and we were ascending. I had a lot of snacks in our bag and we munched sharing them with the truckers. It was convenient to sit behind so I parted the curtains and watched the mysterious road while Manu was sleeping on my lap. Depi was so scared that she did not speak and even forgot to puke. Amani asked the turn boy for something and he handed a long sharp machete. My heart leaped out and my tongue stuck to the upper palette. “What is that for?” asked my husband.

“Sometimes when we reach Burnt Forest there are some thugs who attack us. So this will save us from trouble,” clarified Amani.

“Have you been attacked?”

Amani replied, “A few times...but don’t worry.”

The climb was a bit steep and the truck hummed a sad tune. Suddenly we heard a loud clang on the back door of the truck which was locked.

“They are trying to break the lock.” One shadowy figure tried to jump at the driver’s door and Amani tried to slash him with his machete. But he was faster to escape and we left the men behind with their unsuccessful attempt waiting for their



**Mini Austin, after many years of use became my son’s favourite toy**

## Through the Rear View Mirror

next target. I prayed to all known gods to help us see Eldoret again. My prayer was answered at 10:00 pm. We requested them to drop us home as it was too late to find a cab from the main road. When I jumped down from that big truck helped by the small Juma, I realised, after all, the world was not a bad place to live. Kindness and help were still available at the least expected time. My husband asked Amani to come home on his return journey for a cup of tea and he smiled. We bid them good bye and Ravi gave him 500 shillings which he politely refused.

I am not the bravest of my gender but this is one of the incidents in Kenya that helped me to gain courage, to trust people and to be a bit more optimistic.



*Born in India, I lived in the same house until I got married and then the moves began. I am married to Ravi Shankar who cannot play any sitar, unfortunately. Our daughter and son were mostly raised in East African countries as we lived in Tanzania for 2 years and in Kenya for 10 years. When we immigrated to Canada, the first destination was Vancouver, B.C. Then we moved to London, Ontario and now we are in Milton. I have a very diverse and interesting experience teaching students and interacting with them in all these countries as I am a teacher.*



## Our Daring Escape

By Eva Hegedus

I was born in Hungary on September 11 1947, more than five decades before September 11 would become synonymous with the terrorist attack on New York City. It won't surprise you to learn that my birth on September 11/47 to Susan and Leslie Cserepy, attracted absolutely no national or even local media attention. I do believe, however, that it was the event that cemented my parents' decision to escape from Hungary: they would seek freedom and a new life for themselves, their son Frank (age 8), daughter Mary (age 6) and their new baby, Eva.

I, aka Baby Eva, am now in my 60's. I am looking back at the first 9 years of my life and piecing together my own memory fragments, my father's photographs, and the stories my mother told me about life in Hungary just after the war, our daring escape and our early years as immigrants in Ontario. I want to leave my children with a piece of their heritage: particularly an idea of just who their dynamite grandparents were. Without Leslie and Susan Cserepy, there would be no story to tell.

Had you ever met my parents in person, especially in their youth, you might have thought they would never stay married. They were complete opposites in so many ways. He was a dreamer with creativity to spare who could think outside the box. He loved working with people in his profession as a film maker/director and he loved to entertain his friends with storytelling, singing, playing piano (which he played by ear) and telling jokes. One of my earliest memories of him was how a roomful of people lit up when he came in. My mother, on the other hand, was grounded in the practical details of what



**Me, a few days old with my mother and my sister, Mary (Sept., 1947)**

## Through the Rear View Mirror

needed to be done next for her family. She would just as soon bypass social gatherings and small talk; her greatest pleasure and escape was working outside in her magnificent garden, coaxing flowers from tiny seedlings. She had been a tomboy as a child and still had amazing physical strength in her 30's and 40's. My dad, at 6'2", stood a foot taller than her but was not athletic in any way. She was attractive, youthful, and had broken many hearts in her teens; he was bald and overweight in his 20's and was 10 years older than her.

And yet, the two of them together formed an unbelievable team. Theirs was to be a story of love, loyalty and unbelievable courage that would be tested again and again and again.

Starting at the end of the war, Russian soldiers with firearms were patrolling Hungary's



**My brother, Frank, age 2 on the hood of the family car (in more prosperous times.)**

border with Austria. Day or night, they fired at anything that moved in the direction of the border. If our family of five were to come into their sight lines, they could pick us off one by one. If they caught my father, who at 6'2" would have had difficulty being inconspicuous, they would either shoot him on the spot or dispatch him to one of their notorious prisons or work camps. Caught or shot: these were clear and present dangers for anyone attempting escape across the border.

Even if our family crossed successfully into Austria, my parents were leaving behind family, friends, language, culture, and a pre-war past full of wonderful memories from a time when Hungary was neither war-torn nor occupied. In all likelihood, they would end up in a far-away country trying to assimilate to a new language and culture. They would be starting from nothing, with nothing. They might never be able to return to Hungary again, even to visit.

Why take such terrible risks? Why make such huge sacrifices for an uncertain future?

I wouldn't begin to understand why until I was well into my teens and my mother could give me a better understanding of why they had to leave Hungary. By the time she began to tell me this part of the story, she had already been a widow for 10 years. Our dad had passed away very suddenly in 1956 and she was left as the sole support for herself and her three children. I was 8 when he died.

When I was 5 and 6, I vividly remember being invited to join my dad as he developed black and white family photos. He had set up a dark room in our tiny Burlington home for this purpose. I couldn't have been more excited. Not only was I getting to spend time with him, something I always loved, but I also got to share with him the magic of seeing our photographs come to life.

Slowly---at least it seemed slow to me---an image would begin to emerge out of the white paper in its chemical bath. Presto! Here was a photo of our front porch taking shape or of my little friend and I playing in the snow or of my mother working in her garden! Part of the magic was not knowing what was on the photograph until that final moment when the image sprang to life!

As I pieced together more and more of my family's story over the years, different parts of our joined stories came into focus not unlike the way my dad's photographs sprung to life in that long-ago dark room.

## Through the Rear View Mirror

When I was in my late teens, my mother told me about finding out she was pregnant with me:

“Eva, I was terrified when I found out we were having another baby. In ’46, conditions in Hungary for the four of us could not have been worse!

There was barely enough to eat—beans were the staple; paper currency was badly deflated in value; families lived in cramped housing –anything they could find that hadn’t been bombed out or confiscated. Your dad had just returned from prison: he had been jailed for his supposed anti-communist leanings. There was clearly no future for him as a film maker if we stayed in Hungary: he could not even begin to imagine a future that consisted of making only Communist propaganda films, the only kind of films the censor board would permit.

Forgive me when I tell you this, but I actually considered ending the pregnancy. I’m so very glad that your dad kept insisting that he already loved this baby and so would we once he or she was born. As it turned out, my maternal and protective instincts completely took over once I felt you beginning to move. We started talking about names. If our third child was a boy I considered naming him Joseph until your dad reminded me that it was Stalin’s first name! Let’s just say that Comrade Stalin was not our favourite person in the world.

The bitter joke circulating among Hungarians was that we got “liberated” twice. First the Germans came in and rounded up the Jews and sent them to death camps, took from us whatever they fancied. By the end of the war, the Russians rolled in and took from us whatever was left that the Germans hadn’t gotten to. Anyone with anything of value (land, house, jewelry, money, paintings) would eventually lose it to the Communists. The truth is that war can turn people into animals, even the ones that haven’t already been brutalized by violence and trauma.

I was almost raped by a Russian soldier but I managed to shame him when I grabbed his knife and gestured to him that he’d have to kill me first. He left me alone.

I went into labour on September 11<sup>th</sup>. My pains were coming so quickly we rushed to the nearest hospital which just happened to be in Veszprem. You were my easiest birth at just over 6 pounds compared to your brother who had been more than 10 pounds! We named you Eva Katalin but soon we were all calling you ‘My Baby’ because you became everyone’s baby.”

Unfortunately I don’t know and will never know every last detail of our parents’ escape plan. I do know they received money from family but how much money, under what circumstances and from whom I’m not sure. Escape and our later emigration would probably have been impossible without some money exchanging hands. I’m sorry if the money collected caused hardship to any of the family who remained in Hungary after we left.

## Through the Rear View Mirror

Frank and Mary were the first to leave the country in December 1947. I believe they were told they would be going on a vacation to Belgium. However, my sister insists that they



**My brother and sister with their Belgian families. My father is in the centre, back row. (fall, 1948)**

were told nothing and were simply given their suitcases and put on the train in Budapest. Children under a certain age were allowed to leave the country on a trip but could not be accompanied by their parents. Try to imagine a boy of 8 and a girl of 6 being sent from home and not even having the comfort of staying with the same family after they got to their destination. My brother went to live with a kind family in Gand and was treated well; my sister, however, stuck with a less than kind family in Nimy,

was to feel completely abandoned and miserable. As you might imagine, my parents could not tell them the real reason they were sent away because that could have put in jeopardy their whole escape plan. Some vacation this was: Frank and Mary would not see my parents again until the following summer and their only communication would be letters between our dad and my brother. The two Belgian families with whom my siblings stayed were able to come together once during the time in Belgium and Frank wrote to our parents triumphantly about his brief reunion with his sister.

After Mary and Frank had gone to Belgium, my parents had to decide whether to make their escape across the border with me or without me. Their conversations went something like this:

Dad: “What happens if she cries or makes noises just as we’re making a run for it? You can’t count on a baby to sleep through that kind of turmoil. We might all be shot. Then what happens to Mary and Frank?”

Mom: “But how can we leave without her. Who could we trust her to?”

Dad: “We will have to find someone to bring her over the border that the authorities will not question too thoroughly: someone who isn’t Hungarian”.

My mother just barely managed to hold up under the stress of trying to choose between these two alternatives. Already she was sick with worry over Mary and Frank. For months she was not able to digest any of the food she ate: it simply passed right through her.

But finally they had a plan and there would be no turning back. I would be left behind with my maternal grandmother; my parents would cross the border, on foot. They made contact

with an official at one of the national parks on the border with Austria who would guide them at night to the best spot; he also knew the schedule of the border patrols and could signal to them when one had just passed so that they could run for the border.



**With my mother and maternal grandmother in March, 1948.**

Through my father's brother, they made contact with an Austrian couple who would be coming by motorbike to Budapest Hungary to attend a biking event.

A baby of my age did not have to be named separately on an Austrian passport. This meant that they could pick me up from my grandmother and bring me across the border to Austria as if I were their own child. Austrians could travel back and forth across the border with relative ease.

To be sure, this was a complex plan. So many things could have gone wrong. For instance, the Austrian couple could have backed out at the last minute feeling it was too risky for them. However, in the spring of 1948, my parents crossed successfully into Austria. There was now only one of the five of us left in Hungary. My poor grandmother did not even know for weeks if her daughter and son-in-law had made it safely to Austria. Letters were too risky at this stage.

I was successfully picked up by the young Austrian couple—a couple whose names I never learned and of whom I have no photograph. When this couple found my dad at the designated meeting place near the Austrian side of the border, they asked how they could be sure that he was the baby's real father. He simply broke down and wept. That was apparently enough to reassure them and they passed me to safety into his waiting arms. My father also made the trip to Belgium to bring back Mary and Frank from their "vacation."

Reunited, we once again became a family albeit a family whose only home, for the moment, was one of the many DP barracks in the town of Kufstein. Except for the barracks themselves, the Austrian town of Kufstein, nestled among the surrounding green hills and boasting its own castle, could not have been a more scenic place to be stranded. Small wonder there are several photos of us taking long walks and picnicking in and around the town.



No matter how pleasant the countryside might have been, my parents

**Our whole family of five, reunited in Austria (Sept., 1948)**





**The barracks in Kufstein, Austria: our home for several months**

Canada was turned down. Why? Because a medical exam revealed that he had varicose veins in his legs. Apparently Immigration Canada felt he wasn't a good candidate for manual labour jobs because of these veins.



**One of our last picnics in Austria, June 1949.**

could not truly relax. The arduous process began for them and all the other refugees in Kufstein of applying to countries for both entry and the right to apply for citizenship. Hungarians would end up scattered all around the world. Some went to various parts of Western Europe; large groups ended up in South America, Australia and New Zealand. Many would come to Canada because it was more or less open to anyone willing to roll up their sleeves and take jobs as manual labourers. My parents agreed that Canada offered the most hope for themselves and their three children.

My dad's first application to

Canada was turned down. Why? Because a medical exam revealed that he had varicose veins in his legs. Apparently Immigration Canada felt he wasn't a good candidate for manual labour jobs because of these veins.

But he was not one to allow one little "no" to dash his hopes. He wrote a letter to then Prime Minister St. Laurent outlining what his work experience and schooling had been in Hungary and what he might eventually be able to contribute as a Canadian citizen. He also expressed how eager he was to come to Canada. He and his wife, he explained, were happy to do any kind of work they could find; they expected no handouts from the Canadian government.

It must have been a very eloquent and convincing letter because we were granted entry.

The final stage of our voyage would be a long train trip to a southern Italian port to board a ship bound for Halifax. The heat was sweltering and we were stuffed together in one long overcrowded compartment. However, I would once again ride in style: a hammock rigged up over my family's heads allowed me to peer down at everyone.

While other children on the train were sick to their stomachs from the combination of food and heat, I was quite comfortable thank you very much. Some lucky family member always had the honor of carting around my potty.

And the trip on the *Nea Hellas* to Halifax? As a toddler I explored all the neat hiding spots on deck: there was always an adult or sibling close by. By now I was almost two and had a small vocabulary in Hungarian. I was fascinated by the vast stretches of water and rolling waves all around us: my family kept explaining to me that this was the Atlantic Ocean. I ran first to one side of the ship and told whoever was listening (Hungarian or not) “There’s the ocean”! Then I doubled back to the other side of the ship and announced, “There’s the other ocean”! I’m sure that this boat trip would have been even more fun to me than our train ride had been.

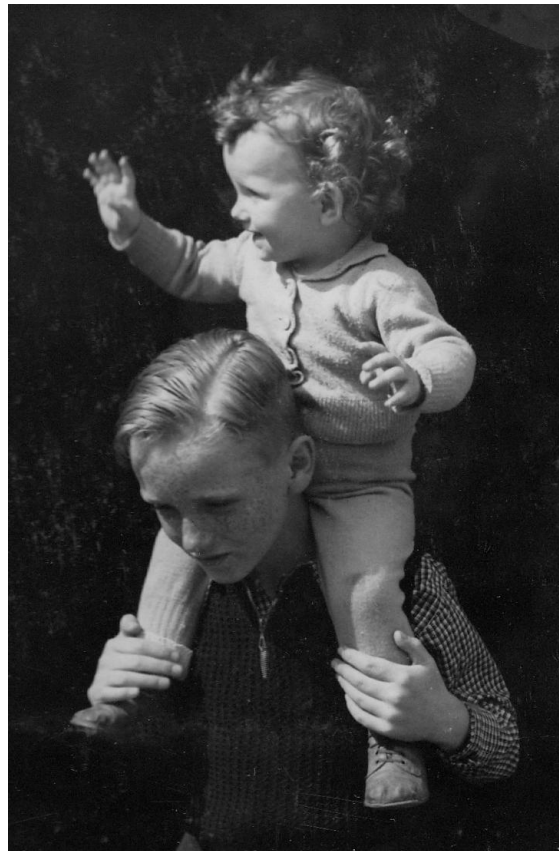


**Wash-up facilities for those on our train (July, 1949)**

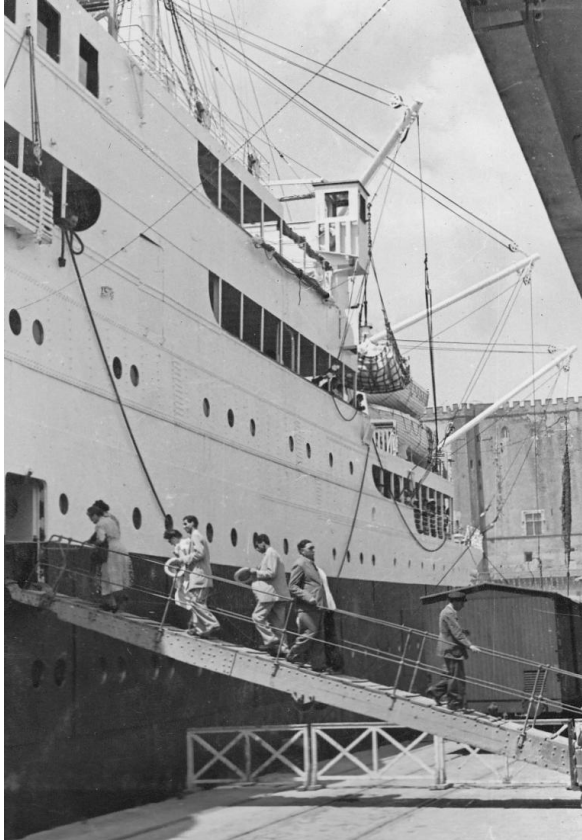
Our ship entered Halifax harbour on July 24, 1949 and we then began our life as immigrants, although I’m sure many Canadians still thought of us as displaced persons. We stayed with a family in Hamilton, Ontario and within a couple of years had bought a teeny tiny home, complete with outhouse, near Lakeshore and Brant Streets in Burlington. We lived there until 1953.

Although by now I had some awareness that we didn’t have the nice things that many other Canadians had, I still had an easier go of fitting in than anyone else in my family. Just by playing outside with children my age, I learned English. Frank and Mary had to start right into a new language and school curriculum, sounding like they were from a European refugee family and trying to catch up to the other children in their class. Kids their age could be nasty with their teasing and name calling and not all teachers were patient and helpful.

My parents went out every day to mop floors, clear garbage cans, and clean out toilets etc. at a local school. I remember how shocked they were at how much food some of the Canadian children tossed uneaten into the



**A favourite mode of transportation: on my brother’s shoulders**



**Boarding the Nea Hellas, bound for Canada**



**The last picture of my Dad, Mom, and me**

moved to a large comfortable house in Toronto. Eventually he was making documentaries—

garbage: a good portion of those discards was brought home at the end of the day. I was thrilled at the wonderful selection of sandwiches and sometimes even cookies. What a treat! I accompanied my parents to their job because they both had to work and could not afford a babysitter.

Rock bottom in Burlington came for my parents when my dad was diagnosed with cancer of the larynx. Doctors removed his larynx but he then had to learn to speak from scratch by swallowing air and burping it back up. “Scratch” would be a good word to describe his new way of talking. People would think he had a terrible cold when they heard him speak: the sound he produced was low, monotone and very scratchy. Gone was his beautiful speaking and singing voice; come to stay, for both of them, was the constant dread that his cancer might return. I would never recall the sound of his real voice because I was so young when he lost it.

Despite everything, my dad never stopped dreaming of a better future for himself or his family. Apparently nothing could dampen his sense of hope or his sense of humour. He would say to my mom, “Never mind darling, one day you and I will make it to the very top: we’ll be mopping out the halls of the Parliament buildings in Ottawa!”

Ironically it was not cancer that took his life on August 1, 1956 but a tiny rogue blood clot that traveled to his heart after a minor hernia operation. Even more ironically, he had by then returned to his beloved film making and had been working at the CBC from 1953 on. Our family had

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something he found very rewarding. He died on my brother's 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. My sister was 15. I was 8.

This time I was no longer the protected baby of the family who was shielded from the impact of what had just happened to us. I adored my dad and used to follow him around like a puppy. How could he be dead? Hadn't it been just the week before that I had skipped hand in hand with him down the street? I stared into his coffin at the funeral and kept willing him to wake up. My mom told me later that I cried for two days straight. No one could offer any explanations for this tragedy that made any sense.

But the same strengths that kept my parents going through the war and through our escape from Hungary kept my mother from collapsing in this most terrible of all ordeals. When my dad died he was only 48. My mother was now a 38 year old widow with 3 children to look after, a huge mortgage to pay off and no income source. Just as they had when they escaped from Hungary, she now came up with a plan (suggested by a family friend) and she mustered enough nerve to see it through. She applied for work with the CBC as a film editor. Fortunately she had helped my dad with some editing back in Hungary. She was hired on and worked there until she was 65. She paid off our house and even managed to give us each a post-secondary school education. She was proud of her accomplishments, including her position with the CBC and she was proud that she was able to do all of this on her own. Her refuge continued to be her beautiful garden. She never remarried and died in 2007.

Looking back, I see that we could never have come to Canada without the combined strengths of both my parents. Without my dad's vision, they never would have escaped to Canada. Without my mother's strength and determination, there would have been no one to carry this vision forward in the years that stretched out after his death.

I would recover from my dad's sudden passing thanks to the many different kinds of support I received from my mother, my sister, and my close friends. Still, I would always be left wondering how our lives would have been different had my dad only lived a few more years and had the chance to tell our story himself. Maybe he would have made a film about our lives.

Knowing what I know now about life in Hungary in the '50s and '60s, I'm eternally grateful to my parents for the decisions they made and the risks they took back in 1947, '48 and '49. Thanks to them, I grew up not just proud to be Canadian but proud of my rich heritage.



**My mother and I in about 1960.**

I hope our children's children will one day be telling their children about the grandmother who escaped from Hungary as a baby, on a motorbike. Who knows? They might even read my

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story, look at these photographs, and decide to write a story of their own. Or they might decide to visit Hungary, as I did in 1971.

The Russian patrols left its borders years ago and hopefully will never return.



*Eva Hegedus (nee Cserepy) was born in Veszprem Hungary in 1947. Her family escaped from the jaws of the Stalin backed Communist regime in 1947-48 and immigrated to Canada in 1949. Both now retired, Eva and her husband Zoltan have lived in Milton for more than 35 years. Although she loved her position with Milton Public Library, she finds the freedom of spending time with family and pursuing hobbies such as writing is equally rewarding. Her story focuses on her family's daring escape from Hungary.*



# A Document of My Time

By Maria Leather

## **Experiences that changed my attitudes and understanding of the diverse characters of humanity.**

**A**t the age of eight, I awoke one morning to find myself in a cell-like space furnished with a bed and wash basin, surrounded by curtains instead of my pretty bedroom. A voice was reciting prayer whilst issuing orders to the dormitory occupants. I did not realize then that, from that point on, I would not be alone again for years ahead; that my freedom and my adventurous spirit would be curtailed and reshaped; that any other benefits would be overwhelmed by the eventual inability to relate to the real world. It would take several years to regain this ability after I closed the heavy doors of the convent behind me and no longer had the presence of a nun monitoring my life.

It was obvious at the outset that I was not going to get away with rebellious behavior without incurring the penance. I was banished to a dark, bleak room at the top of the building and condemned to exist on bread and water for one or two days. Looking down on a playground below through the iron barred windows I could see the girls playing below who shouted encouragement to me. Possibly some feelings of claustrophobia I experience today were sourced there.

The anticipation of midnight feasts and fun was dashed. A nun occupied a small adjacent room with a window through which to view any of our activities put paid to that. In fact, she swooped in one night to accuse me of eating sweets when actually I was grinding my teeth. This gave me the opportunity to ascertain which nuns had shaved heads and which had long hair.



**With my Dad on a resort beach**

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I was disappointed as my expectations were demolished. Obviously my past transgressions had resulted in my placement here. Previously, I had attended a junior school near my home in Cheshire, England run by three old ladies who spent considerable time chasing me around the classroom in order to deliver a whack on the hands or elsewhere as a protest to my behavior.



**Soon after my world debut**

Thus, one day my parents packed me into the car. Seated in the back seat with my canary, Chirrip (a trusted confidant to whom I spoke of my apprehension about this move), and my favourite teddy bear, we travelled south.



Mother chatted away relating various experiences including the one about the time that my father bought his first car towards the end of World War 1—by all accounts, an early model named “Unik.” On their second trip out, it broke down on a hill. No amount of cranking outside by the starter handle urged it to move. So, with Father at the wheel, Mother got out to push. At last it started. Mother, still affected by this incident, explained, “He went charging away, so enthralled by this contraption, that he disappeared out of sight, not to return until over half an hour later. Eventually he had remembered that he’d left me at the roadside in all my finery!”

The family car has changed over the years but this original established a place in her memory. Later, my father, a chartered accountant, bought a Cotton Mill, which became known as the “Happiest Little Mill” in Lancashire. The 300 women workers frequently sang as they produced an extra war effort undertaking of making cords for parachutes. The leftover silk fabric made attractive blouses for me.

Meanwhile, my days in the convent continued until 1938, a year before World War 2 began. School days there linger in memory. Boys were accepted as day scholars until the age of

ten. A red haired boy in my class had a year left. After originally giving him a hard time, I decided to team up with him in disrupting the class. I missed him when he left and spent time in the Maths class day dreaming of a dashing Russian Cossack who would sweep me away on his horse to magical Russian palaces. Needless to say, I was a failure in Maths, but excelled as a dreamer.

Every morning, there was Mass to attend at 6 am, Benediction each evening, and Rosary several days a week. Three priests presided, one elderly one, one young, and one indifferent. The young one rode a motorbike and came armed with sweets to please his favourite girls.

Soon after my arrival at the convent, I trooped into Mass with the other girls. I turned my attention to the book the nuns had given me and continued to draw moustaches and beards on the angels therein. At a point in the Communion service, I found myself at the altar having been pushed there by my companions in the pew. The priest looked at me quizzically saying, "Put out your tongue." Completely bewildered, I did so, afterwards becoming aware of an urgent rustling and agitated hum like the drone of many bees. Leaving the chapel, I was faced by a collection of grim judgmental nuns which surged upon me wailing and threatening. Utterly frightened by this situation, I burst into floods of tears. One nun came forward saying, "Poor girl! She didn't mean to do what she did..." which was of course that I, one of the very few non-Catholic pupils, had taken Communion. I was unconfirmed in the Protestant church also. Well, God did not strike me down and perhaps he found the whole affair amusing.

At 14 years of age I was well absorbed in the convent life. Forever to be part of me were the lingering smells and sounds, the subtle odour of the dark secretive cloisters, the swish of the nuns' habits, the suffering Jesus statues, the periods of piety and rejection, the effort to separate legend from reality, normality from religious fervour, the genuine from the fake, afraid to think too deeply, to ponder ones' own feelings in case they were sinful. No wonder then that when I finally emerged from this chrysalis I considered which path to take, the good and safe one or the beckoning wicked alternative which did seem to be more exciting. I observed the busy road passing the convent, noting the super sports car with its attractive couple, she blonde hair breeze-swept, he dark and handsome.

About this age, I used to pretend to be going to the



**With paternal grandparents,  
Priscilla and Joseph Studholme**



**Mother**



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chapel through the visiting room so that I could see the Hungarian actress mother of a friend whose makeup, various coloured hair, and oozing sexuality fascinated me. I also looked for the night club owner father of my best friend whose worldliness and sophistication struck me dumb and on whom I had my first crush. Oh sweet pain! However, later I met him in army uniform during the war and wondered whatever I had seen in him.



**Me with the Studholme clan**

One day, as I ventured over to the visiting room, passing the main front door, a pretty novice nun was opening it to the young father of two little girls whom he had entrusted to the convent on the death of his wife. Previously I had sensed an indefinable connection between them which was evident again. The news later that she had run away with him gladdened my romantic heart.

I also passed the door where the Mother Superior visited. Many times I had been standing before her for various admonishments after the first frightening experience. The flesh was sliding off her skull, the face yellowed and sunken under the habit, the thin lips stretched over a mouth that never smiled. She remains in my memory.

Sometime later I was in the grounds acting out a play with fellow students and discussing the eerie noise of someone sawing wood which occurred on certain nights from the forest. This was attributed to the ghost of a monk. Indeed, perhaps a valid theory? Tearing away some dense undergrowth of creepers and other foliage over an elevated piece of ground, we uncovered an ancient wooden door which we pounded upon until it creaked open, whereupon we discovered a dank, dark passage. We excitedly explored this until it was blocked by a wall of bricks. Just in time, we recovered it all again before the nun who kept a vigil on us reappeared. Information received at a later date informed us that this had been an escape route for priests and monks between an abbey and the convent during the reign of King Henry VIII when the persecution of the Catholic Church had taken place. Perhaps it was also a location for trysts between nuns and monks? Who knows?



**Me in Spain, age 30**

As I left through the heavy oak doors of the convent for the last time, into a strange and unfamiliar world, it kept its secrets. The nuns no doubt prayed for me as a needy soul for a long time.

World War 2 was on the brink of becoming devastation and ruin to many lives and the world I had

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known would be changed forever. But that's another story. The sound of sirens and planes were added to those of rattling rosaries and holy chants in the substance of my being forever.



*Maria Leather: born in Cheshire, England of Irish and Scottish heritage. Served as a Firewoman in the National Fire Service during the war. Attended Manchester University. Came to Canada as the bride of an RCAF pilot in 1947. Settled in London, Ontario. In later years, moved to Toronto and married again having three daughters and a son. Also lived in Alliston, Ontario and Hastings.*