

CHAPTER 16

It was a warm September, but a big coat had been wrapped about Mrs. Martin for the journey to Rugby. 'Well, you don't know Dolly', Bill Martin said using his pet name for his wife, 'It could be very cold up there. It's always cold the further north you go.' He kissed her and patted her bottom.

"Dad's right mum. You might have to stand around waiting for trains, and it can be very draughty on those platforms."

When Mrs. Martin arrived back in Maria Street, it was as though she had won a prize, for there hanging onto her arm for dear life was the fourteen year old Joan. She looked just like the rest of the family, olive skin, shiny dark brown hair, petite, and pretty. She fairly bounced along in her camel coloured topcoat, with a smile as wide as the advertisement of the water melon boy. Her smile lit up even more every time she embraced one of her sisters and brothers. They hadn't waited for her at home; they had raced into the street as soon as they heard she was there. Alan and Violet threw themselves into her open arms. Rose stood back hesitantly, but Joan drew her close and kissed her. From that day on Rose felt a special bond with Joan, Joan didn't mind that she was plain and skinny, Rose thought.

Elizabeth had cleaned the house as much as possible, and put some flowers on the old wooden table, to welcome Joan. She now embraced the rest of the family. Elizabeth, Nellie, Lenny, and last of all her father. They both went a little pink. It had been a long time coming, but Joan was home at last.

Joan settled in with the family as though she had never been away. There were a couple of arguments with her father, especially as he said, "She thinks she's too posh for the like of us." The only reason the family could think of, was that Joan spoke with a quiet accentless voice, no trace of cockney, and no country accent either.

Joan was a good daughter, she helped in the house cooking, cleaning, and helping in any way she could. She had found herself a good job at Tyzack's in Old Street, as a shorthand typist. She also went to night school to improve her skills, and finally became a private secretary. Mrs. Martin was justifiably proud of her. On Friday nights she gave up half her wages, never once questioning it.

Although Joan was a quiet girl, the old Martin temper was there when aroused. Violet had a new pair of slippers that first Christmas, and Joan had decided to try them on. Violet yelled "Don't do that Joan, you'll stretch them and make them too big for me." Joan didn't heed her sister, so Violet headed for the old sideboard on which stood Mrs. Martin's pride and joy, a twinkling glass cake-stand bought by Joan for her birthday. Violet took hold of the glass

cake-stand by its edges, and brought it down with an almighty crash on to the sideboard, where it splintered into a hundred pieces. There followed a deadly silence until, with a blood curdling yell, Joan raced after Violet, who by now was making for the door, and grabbed her by the back of her dress. The family stood back in amazement as the back of the dress came away in Joan's hands and Violet was left standing in her underwear. The catfight that ensued was bloody. Both clawed and punched at each other. The fight only stopped because the whole of the family stepped in to separate them.

Mrs. Martin collapsed into a chair weeping. The family often fought over little things, but it always upset her. Violet and Rose fought every day of their lives, over hairclips, "you've got mine," or "Get away from the mirror, you've been there long enough." This was a major row, because Joan had saved up hard to buy her mother the present, and Mrs. Martin had just got a glimpse of Joan in fury.

A few days later everything was back to normal, except that Joan was not talking to Violet, even Mrs. Martin was sometimes punished by Joan's silences. Must be something she learnt down at Auntie's she thought.

A few days after the fight, the ragman came down the street calling out for rags. In exchange for your rags, you received a tiny yellow chick. The Martin children had had endless tiny fluffy chicks, but all had eventually died. Sometimes they broke their fragile tiny legs, and the children would put

matchsticks either side, and bind them around with wool to keep the matchsticks in place. They were always sad when a chick died, and would hold a funeral ceremony in the garden, where it was duly buried, and a jam jar filled with water and weeds was placed on its tiny grave. Therefore when Joan took an old coat down and received a little yellow chick in return, and it actually survived, everyone was amazed. Joan was as pleased as punch, she named her chick Charley, and he grew into a fine big cockerel. He loved to hop up the back garden steps, and join the family in the living room. Once there he would look askance at the family, and they would fill his chipped blue enamelled plate with bread, and biscuit crumbs. His red comb, and shiny green feathers, lent colour to the room. No one kicked him out; he was accepted as part of the family. So it was a terrible day when Gyp was in an aggressive mood, that he decided to bite the throat out of poor old Charley. It took Charley two days to die, and the family especially Joan, were heartbroken. The children got over their sorrow quite quickly, by holding an elaborate funeral service, where hymns were sung, and a small wooden cross made out of two sticks tied together with string. The usual bunch of weeds, generally yellow daisies were put in a big onion jar, and placed on Charley's grave.

Now that there were four of the Martin family at work, and Mrs. Martin had been given a pension because Jimmy had been killed in the war, they ate well, and there was some money left for clothes. In fact Mr. Wright the butcher in Hoxton market, now treated Mrs. Martin to little extras at Christmas, because she was a good customer.

Sunday tea was the highlight of the week. Mrs. Martin would listen for the winkle and shrimp man to come down the street on Sunday mornings. On hearing his call and the noise of his creaking old wheelbarrow, she would march down with her money, inspect his wares, and if she thought they were fresh enough, she would buy winkles and shrimps. Served along with these fishy delights, were huge plates of bread and butter, and salad. Nellie would make jellies, and custard, and a plateful of Mrs. Signal's delicious assorted cakes would be the piece de resistance. No one gave a second thought that Mrs. Signal's cats had quite possibly been walking all over the cakes, or that the numerous flies in her shop had quite possibly already feasted on them.

Teatime on Sunday was a noisy affair, as all the family tried to sit down together, and they all talked at the same time.

Squabbles broke out. Alan, Violet and Rose would all want the same cake.

"Alan had the custard tart last week, let him have the Sanbury cake," this was Rose.

"Shut up the lot of you and get eating, or I'll throw the lot in the dustbin.

Children starving in Africa would love any type of cake." Mrs. Martin was always giving out empty threats. They all knew that she would never throw food

away, they had all known hungry days, but this did not make them grateful, this was today, and things had changed for the better.

After tea Joan started to clear the table.

'Why don't you give your sister a hand to wash up?' Mrs. Martin spoke to Rose.

'Why should I?' retorted Rose cheekily.

"Don't they teach you down at that church, that charity begins at home," Mrs. Martin said for the hundredth time.

Rose just shrugged, and began getting ready for the church service that began at six.

Bill Martin didn't say a word, he loved Rose the same as his three boys, but he knew that Rose and her mother couldn't get along. Rose always felt that she wasn't loved the same as the rest of the family. She remembered the time her Auntie Rose had wanted to adopt her. Why her? Maybe Auntie Rose understood just how unhappy she was. She must have seen the beatings she got from her mother. Even so, she didn't want to leave her family, and go and live with posh Auntie Rose, although she loved her. No way was she going to leave her family, she loved her sisters and brothers, and especially her father.

Sunday evenings for Mr. and Mrs. Martin were spent listening to the wireless. Alan and Violet would go out to play with the numerous children in the street, and Rosie would be at church. Tonight Elizabeth was going to see Casey, Nellie was off to the pictures with her beloved Freddy, Lenny was going to the dance hall in Mare Street, and Joan was meeting Helen a friend she had met at evening classes.

Mrs. Martin settled herself beside her Bill by the fire, and turned the radio on to listen to Dick Barton, who every week left you hanging in mid-air, wondering how he was going to get out of yet another disaster. Rather like Tarzan that the kids watched on Saturday morning pictures.

"Thank God, a bit of peace and quiet Bill." Mrs. Martin sighed.

"I'll tell you something Dolly. When all the kids have left home, you'll cry your eyes out. You won't know what to do with yourself."

"I know you're right, but I get so very worn out, and tired. I know you help where you can, but the heavy load falls mostly on my shoulders, and I've had it for years. I know I'm a nagger, but let's be honest, I've got plenty to nag about."

They had just got themselves nicely settled when there was a knock at the door.

"Oh God, who do you think that can be now?" Mrs. Martin got up, rubbed her hands together, and clonked down the well-scrubbed wooden stairs. The street door was already open, so that the children could run in and out at will. In the doorway with his hand raised to knock again, stood a fair-haired young man.

"Well young man, what can I do for you?" Mrs. Martin asked politely.

In a soft country brogue he asked if Elizabeth Martin lived there.

Mrs. Martin became suspicious now, "What if she does. What's it to you?" she narrowed her eyes to take him in more keenly.

"I knew Elizabeth in the army, when she was posted to Dorset. I was in London, and thought I'd look her up."

"Oh, did you. Well I can tell you now, she's out with her fiancé, and he's a boxer." Mrs. Martin said this in the hope that the young man would leave immediately. She didn't want any trouble; she knew that if Casey came back and caught any man with Elizabeth there would be a fight.

"No you don't understand, Elizabeth and I are just friends. I wanted to ask her if she knew of a place I could stay. I've just arrived in London, to get a job. Friends of mine, moved up to London to find work, so I thought I'd do the same."

Before she could answer him, Bill Martin called down the stairs, 'Who are you talking to down there? I'm waiting for a cup of tea.'

"It's someone who used to know Elizabeth in the army. A man." Mrs. Martin emphasised, the word man, as if to imply, 'Wouldn't you know it.'

"Tell him to come up then," Bill Martin called down again. Mrs. Martin sighed, and shook her head, she didn't like people in her place, only family, but she knew her Bill missed male company, he had especially missed Charles when Elizabeth finished with him. So, she stepped aside to let the young man enter.

CHAPTER 17

Elizabeth had spent another boring evening with Casey. They had gone to the pictures followed by drinks at a pub that stayed open after hours. Although she smoked herself, the smoke in the pub had made her eyes smart, and her mascara had begun to run. She took out her mirror and began to dab the black away, she clipped up a few brown curls that had come loose from her curly topknot, and reapplied her lipstick. She didn't want to arrive home untidy, her father was still given to lecturing her on the "Type of life" she led. He never stopped telling her, "that Shoreditch got its name, because Lady Shore was no good, and ended up dead in a ditch." There was no way she could sit down with her father and explain that she never went further than a few kisses and hugs. It wasn't the kind of conversation she could have with her father; it would have proved too embarrassing for both of them.

She kissed Casey goodnight, and said she would write to him as he was touring for the next two weeks.

"Pity you haven't got a phone Elizabeth my darling, we could talk sweet nothings all evening long, and then I wouldn't miss you so much." Casey hugged her once more, and she practically fled up the stairs. She was beginning to find even Casey's touch made her skin crawl. "How could I

once have thought I was in love with this man", Elizabeth was thinking as she entered the living room.

Casey had lost his last three fights, and had turned up drunk on several of their dates. He also wasn't taking such a pride in himself, his once immaculate camel overcoat was stained, and he wasn't always shaved.

Hearing a number of voices, her mother's, her father's and a stranger's, Elizabeth entered slowly. Her shock at seeing Ray sitting cosily talking with her parents brought out the worst in Elizabeth, she liked to be the one in control.

"What a bloody cheek you've got. What the hell are you doing here?" Elizabeth screamed at Ray. She had only ever used him to buy her drinks down at Dorchester, and was fuming at the thought of him tracing her back to London.

"Nice lady you are. What a way to welcome an old comrade," her father sneered.

"He is not my comrade, I hardly knew him down in Dorchester. He was just one of a crowd." Elizabeth stood with her arms folded across her chest, and her foot tapped with an ominous rhythm. She looked as if she would have like to have hit Ray.

Ray stood up now, and brushed his blonde hair out of his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Elizabeth, if I've put you out, and upset you, but I've just been explaining to your mother and father, how I've come to London looking for work. I thought you might have known a family I could lodge with."

"No I bloody well don't. So you can get back to Dorchester as fast as you like. Look at the time, nearly twelve o'clock, where do you think you are going to find a bed tonight, the doss house?"

Mr. Martin stepped in now. He had taken a shine to Ray, the same as he had with Charles. He could talk about the war with Ray, even though it was now over, he found Ray's talk about landing in Ypres exciting.

"You shut your mouth Lady La-Di-Dah, he can stay the night here. Mum can make him up a bed in the attic." He did it to help Ray, but he also liked to get one over on Elizabeth. Although they got on much better, Casey was still the problem. Elizabeth had never admitted to her father that she no longer wanted to be engaged to Casey. She knew that at only five foot nothing he would stand up to Casey and tell him, to "Piss off."

Mrs. Martin had kept quiet while they argued, now she said, "Come on son, I'll show you where to sleep."

The little old attic at the top of the stairs with its single bed must have come as quite a shock to Ray. He had come from a council house in Dorchester that was surrounded by flowers. He always had a bed with snow-white sheets, and his mother always put a meat and two veg dinner in front of him and his three brothers, and one sister.

Ray didn't care about the old iron bed, and lack of furniture, all he could think of was that he was sleeping in the same house as his beloved Elizabeth. He had thought about nothing else but Elizabeth, ever since he had been demobbed.

The next morning there was the usual rush to get ready, with everyone tripping over everyone else. Ray had got up early and had lit the fire for Mrs. Martin, whatever the weather she always had a fire, her Bill felt cold all the time. He had even tried to make them a cup of tea, but Mr. Martin would have none of it.

"You sit yourself down son, you've done enough. Dolly will get your tea."

Elizabeth ate her toast and drunk her tea, glaring at Ray all the time, with her big brown eyes.

"I hope you're out of here this morning, and don't come back."

"Take no notice of her son, she's always a misery in the mornings."

The children left for school, and the adults for work. Elizabeth was still angry when she and Nellie set off together up the road. Nellie's head was filled with plans for her forthcoming wedding, so she didn't question Elizabeth about Ray. They parted company in the Kingsland Road, Nellie was still working at the doll factory; she waved goodbye as Elizabeth walked on to the cafe.

If Elizabeth could have foreseen what would be happening in the next half hour, she would have run back home, as it was she quickened her pace, she loved being the centre of attention in the little cafe, and couldn't get there quick enough.

She was a little late, and so there were a few men in the cafe already. They sipped their mugs of tea, and said "Good morning" to Elizabeth. She smiled back at them, "I'll with you boys as soon as I get my apron on."

She walked past the counter, and through to the kitchen. "Good morning Tony" she said cheerily.

"You're late again." Tony replied wiping his greasy hands on his once white apron.

"What do you mean, again. I've only ever been late once before ever since I started working here. You miserable old sod, after all I've done for you in this cafe. You take twice as much money now, than when you ran this place on your own. What's upset you this morning had a row with that miserable old cow of a wife of yours." Her anger was bringing forth the child in her, that's why she resorted to swearing.

Tony had the grace to look guilty. "Elizabeth I'm sorry, but you've got to go."

"Go. What for? I haven't done anything." Elizabeth's big brown eyes looked at him in amazement.

"Oh Elizabeth, I really am sorry. My wife is a silly cow. She thinks I've been having an affair with you. She's so eaten up with jealousy, she says it's you or her. Elizabeth, I wouldn't care if she went, but she would take the children. I'm sorry, but you must leave. Look I've given you a week's wages, and a week's holiday money."

Tony couldn't look Elizabeth in the eye, as he handed her the brown envelope with her wages in it. She snatched it from him, saying, "Thanks for nothing, Tony."

She rushed out of the cafe, nearly knocking over one of the workman's tea.

"Oi, where're you going, you've only just come in?" he said as he steadied his tea, with one hand, and straightened his cap with the other.

Elizabeth ran along the Kingsland Road with her hair flying out behind her. Her face was red with rage. "How could that silly old bitch think I would even look at Tony," she fumed. Her anger soon gave way to tears, she had loved her job, and she hadn't done anything wrong, life was so unfair.

She dried her eyes as she entered Maria Street, she saw Mrs. Wilson dragging her child into the welfare centre, "Poor little bugger, probably going to the dentist," she thought. It brought back unpleasant memories of the first and only time she had gone. At seven years old two of her first teeth had decayed, and she remembered feeling happy as she sat astride the huge grey and white rocking horse that was in the waiting room, and rocked away. When the rubber mask was put over her face to supply the gas, she began to scream and fight the dental nurse. When she came around with blood pouring from her mouth, she told her mother, "That's the last time I'm coming here", and promptly kicked her mother in the leg, for which she got a resounding slap around the head.

Fortunately Elizabeth never needed any more dental treatment, probably because of the lack of sugar during the war years

On arriving home, Elizabeth ran straight up to her bedroom. Mrs. Martin heard her, and told Bill, "That's our Elizabeth home from work, I'll just pop up and see what's gone wrong."

Bill Martin just shrugged and said, "I bet she's got the bleeding sack again."

Elizabeth was lying on her stomach, with her hanky pushed into her mouth to stop herself from crying, when Mrs. Martin entered the room.

'What's gone wrong Elizabeth. Not lost your job have you?'

"I'm sorry Mum"; she mumbled and then told her the whole story.

'Well that's life Elizabeth and no one told us life was going to be a bed of roses. You know the old saying about wine and vinegar and let's be honest, you've had more than your share of the wine. So dry your eyes and come downstairs, I'll make you a nice cup of tea.' Mrs. Martin firmly believed that a cup of tea cured most ills.

Elizabeth looked straight at her father, and before he could say anything, she snapped, "Yes, I did get the sack, but it was not my fault."

Mrs. Martin had already relayed the story to Bill, so no more was said.

As they drank their tea, her father said to make matters worse, "I've told Ray he can stay here until he finds somewhere to lodge, he's down at the saw mills right now, to see if they need an extra hand."

All the fight seemed to have gone out of Elizabeth, and she didn't reply. An hour later she was still sitting at the old worn table reading the Star, and smoking a cigarette, when in walked Ray.

"They didn't need anyone down at the saw mill, so I'll go to the labour exchange, and see what they have. I don't know where it is, so maybe when young Alan comes home from school he could show me." Ray made no attempt to speak to Elizabeth, he knew something was wrong, or she wouldn't have been sitting there when she should have been at work. She kept her eyes down, and refused to look at him as he spoke. She rustled her newspaper, and kept on tapping her cigarette on the side of the only ashtray, a green metallic one bearing the name Truman's, so it was evidently stolen from the local pub.

"You've got to go to the labour exchange to find a new job, so why don't you show Ray where it is Elizabeth?"

"I'm sure he's big enough and ugly enough to find it himself, if he really wants a job." Elizabeth spoke without looking up.

Ray took no offence. Realising Elizabeth had lost her job, he said, "I would be grateful if you'd come with me Elizabeth, maybe you'll bring me luck."

Now Elizabeth almost laughed, "Luck, I'm more likely to be a jinx," she finally looked up at Ray. "Come on then, let's go if I must." Her mother smiled, "That's more like my Elizabeth."

Elizabeth was wearing a pretty print dress of mauve and lemon pansies, in her ears she flaunted yellow flowers to compliment the dress. She pulled on her yellow three tiered wedges, buckled them, saying, "Come on then."

Ray fairly walked on air as the neighbours called out "Hello" to Elizabeth. He was so proud to be seen with her.

Leaving Maria street, they turned into Kingsland Road, then right into St. Leonard's street, at the top they were in the centre of the bustling Hoxton market. Although goods were still rationed, there was plenty of fruit, and vegetable stalls, the earthy and fruity smells wafted over the market. The Co-op and Sainsbury's always had queues of people, and for a quick meal, there were pie shops, and the traditional fish and chips. As Elizabeth passed the fish

shop, she said, "Sniff up Ray, you'll think your belly's full." Numerous cockney voices called out their wares, "Come on, Missus, I bet it's been a long time since you've seen cucumbers as long as that." This was said as an innuendo, and the shopping ladies giggled, knowing full well that they were supposed to compare them with the size of their husbands' wedding tackle. Oranges were also back on the stalls, so there were many jokes about, "What a lovely handful." The ladies loved it, there hadn't been a lot to laugh about down the market during the war years, and everyone was making up for lost time.

As they passed the Saint Leonard's hospital, Elizabeth broke the silence, "My father has always maintained that once you go in there, you never come out alive." They both looked up at the grim grey building.

Not wanting to start an argument, Ray said, "Is that so."

"Yes, my father had two very good friends, both went in there, and never came out again."

To see what Ray made of this, Elizabeth turned her head to look at Ray. She was surprised to find that he was quite good looking, his blue eyes were merry, and his blonde hair was very blonde. She had always thought of him as a rather plain man, so she was pleasantly drawn to him. Elizabeth had always liked handsome men.

As they passed the pie shop, Elizabeth explained to Ray, that they sold pies and mash, with liquor. Ray wanted to know what type of gravy, liquor was.

"I heard that it is a fish gravy, made from the water that the eels are cooked in, and that parsley is added to it, and that's why it's green. It's an East End dish, and if you're not used to it, you can find the pies a bit rubbery." Elizabeth giggled.

"Maybe after we've been to the labour exchange, we could have some?" Ray was determined to keep Elizabeth by his side for as long as possible. "Is it expensive?" He asked with a smile.

"No anyone can afford pie and mash, all through the war years, my mother used to buy pie and mash, for her and dad, and the kids would get a bowl of mash and liquor. With lots of salt and pepper, and a good splash of vinegar, it's the best meal on this earth." It was Elizabeth who smiled at Ray this time, and his heart did somersaults.

At the job centre, Elizabeth was offered a job at the Co-op, and Ray said he would go along to the glass factory. Neither wanted the jobs, but they knew that they had to have money to survive. Mrs. Martin was a good person, but as she was always reminding the family, "There's no free rides in this house."

Before going home they did fill up with pie and mash. Ray was really pleased, he had thoroughly enjoyed the meal, but before he went in, he had had second thoughts about meat pies covered in green gravy. He also found it novel to sit in the high backed dark wood benches, surrounded by blue and white Dutch styled tiles. To complete the surroundings a young man came along every so often and threw sawdust on the floor.

'Why is he doing that?', Ray enquired of Elizabeth.

"I've never given it much thought, but I suppose if someone drops liquor on the floor, it could be quite dangerous. You'd probably slip from one end of the pie shop to the other," she said with a laugh.

Ray was in his element, he had never felt so happy. here he was with Elizabeth, the girl of his dreams, and she was laughing and joking with him.

They set off back to Maria Street, because they were chatting away, Elizabeth failed to see the black taxi outside her street door. As they neared it, Casey jumped out screaming abuse. "You slag, to think I wanted to marry you." He made a grab for Ray, but missed. Elizabeth promptly put herself between the two men. She yelled, "Call me what you like, but I'm not a slag, and if you're interested he's my mother's lodger, not my boyfriend."

"Don't you lie to me you no good cow, I saw the way you were walking down the street together."

"Go away Casey and calm down, I'm telling you the truth."

She told Ray to go indoors, but he refused.

"I'm not afraid of him", and he tried to get passed Elizabeth, but she stopped him saying, "Don't be a fool Ray, he's a boxer and he'll kill you. Now go inside, don't get yourself a good hiding for nothing."

She turned to Casey, she still had her hand pressed firmly against his chest, "Casey, I've had enough. I told you the truth, Ray is not a boyfriend, but I'll not have you dictate to me who I can walk along the street with; so here you are, here's your bloody engagement ring." She pulled the ring from her finger and threw it at his feet. Elizabeth felt as though a weight had lifted from her shoulders, as Casey scrambled to pick it up, she took Ray's elbow and pushed him towards the street door, "Now get away from here, you're polluting the air." She straightened her back, held herself as though she was six feet tall, and entered number sixty Maria Street, like the queen her father always said she imagined herself to be.

On entering the living room, Mrs. Martin said, 'Was that Casey and you having a row down there. I couldn't see or hear properly from the window. You're father wanted to come down, and give that Casey a good belting.'

Elizabeth smiled a little smile; 'Thanks Dad, but I can look after myself. You'll be happy to know I've finished with him for good. I threw his ring at him.'

'Good girl Elizabeth, I tell you, that bugger was no good for you. I knew the first day you brought him home, he hardly gave me the time of day, he knew I had summed him up as a drunk, and a womaniser.'

If you ignored Bill Martin, you made an enemy for life. Elizabeth knew that in his younger days her father had been Jack-the-lad, so maybe he had been able to see through Casey.

The huge great brown enamelled teapot was brought in full of steaming tea. Mrs. Martin began to milk and sugar the cups as she asked, 'Well how did you both get on down at the labour exchange, you've been gone a long while?'

CHAPTER 18

At a quarter to eight Elizabeth was standing outside the Co-op with four other young girls. They cold-shouldered her, as she wasn't one of them yet, Elizabeth wasn't bothered, she felt superior to these silly little girls. Once inside the girls practically ran to put their bags away in the office, and don their white overalls and compulsory hats. The manager took her details, and handed her a uniform saying, "You must never serve behind your counter without your hat." Elizabeth wanted to laugh when she donned the hat; it reminded her of the nineteen twenties. She felt like doing the Charleston.

"I think until you get the hang of things, you had better serve on the biscuit counter. Later on today I'll get Maureen to show you how to cut and shape the butter with the butter pats."

Elizabeth found the morning flew by, she knew many of the customers, and had a little chat to each of them. Biscuits were in large tins with glass lids, so that the customers could view them before buying, and Elizabeth just had to weigh a pound, or half a pound onto the large silver scales. Many were still short of money, and would ask for a bag of broken biscuits; these were sold at half the price of the regular biscuits. "Child's play" she thought, but the cutting and patting the butter into exact half pounds, or even quarter pounds was trickier, but by the end of the afternoon, she had got the hang of it. Maureen who taught her, nodded towards the manageress saying, "You've done well today

Elizabeth, but one word of warning Mrs. Dawson won't like you talking to the customers too long. I know it's not your fault, you can't help knowing them like myself, but keep it short if you can."

"Thanks for the warning Maureen, I don't want to get the sack." During their tea break, Elizabeth told Maureen the saga of the cafe.

'What a bloody shame Elizabeth. Never mind you'll be all right here, everyone's friendly, and they will all help you if they can. They are always a bit frosty until you've been here a week, after that you'll be one of us."

On returning home, her mother asked, "How did you get on Elizabeth."

"Just fine Mum, where's Alan?" Everyone had gathered around the table for tea, and his robust noisiness was missed.

"I didn't want to worry you Elizabeth. So I didn't pop into the Co-op to tell you that they are keeping him in hospital."

'What's wrong with him?"

Violet relayed the story before her mother could get in. "He was climbing over Mrs. Bywaters' fence to get his ball back, when a piece of the pointed fence

stabbed him in the leg." Violet looked up at Elizabeth with her big black lashed eyes, as if to say "What about that."

In truth, Alan was always getting injured; he would climb and have adventures. He told his mother, "You've got to have adventures, otherwise you would get bored." Alan made sure he was never bored.

"It was pretty bad. The piece of fence had gone right through his thigh, and was sticking out of the other side. In fact I had to leave him lying in the garden until I could borrow a pram from Mrs. Jenkins at number 42. It was terrible trying to get him up onto the pram, but we managed to get him in lying face downwards, with the piece of fence sticking up in the air. I was worried, because I couldn't imagine how they were going to get it out, but the staff at Saint Leonard's were very kind. They took him away, because I was so upset, and the next time I saw him he was lying in his nice hospital bed." Mrs. Martin took visits to hospitals in her stride, but this was her baby, even if he was nearly nine years old. Her children were always at the children's Queen Elizabeth hospital in Hackney Road with some illness or other. She paid for it with her H.S.A. stamps.

"I feel sorry for Alan Mum, but you must admit he does ask for it sometimes. He knows he shouldn't have been climbing into Mrs. Bywaters' garden to retrieve his ball. She's told him before, just call out and I'll throw your ball back. She doesn't like the kids in her garden."

Elizabeth started to eat her tea of kippers and bread, she was not a finicky eater, and polished off four slices with ease.

There was a chorus of, "Oh don't pick on him, you should be feeling very sorry for him."

Elizabeth wasn't giving up, "I do feel sorry for him, but let's be honest, he is thoroughly spoilt."

With this remark, Elizabeth alienated herself from the whole family, they knew that what she said was true, but you weren't supposed to talk about Alan like that. No one asked her about her day; instead they turned to Ray, who by now was being treated as one of the family. Mrs. Martin said, "He pays his way the same as the rest of you, so treat him properly. We need the money."

Mr. Martin who hadn't said a word up until now said, "How did you get on at the glass factory Ray?"

Ray had hated the glass factory; he had felt like a prisoner. The men were fine; they welcomed him straight away. This was not always so. When there was a shortage of jobs, they could be very mean. The jokes were bawdy, and Ray loved the warmth of the East End men, but the work was soul destroying. All day long he had moved large glass panels from one end of the factory to the

other, where another man loaded them onto lorries. That's what he would really like to do, drive the lorries, but he knew there was no hope of that until he learnt his way around London, and the counties.

Although these were his true thoughts, he answered Bill Martin in a casual way, "Oh not so bad; it's a job to be going on with until I find something better."

"That's the way son. In the bad old days of the Jarrow march, there was no work anywhere, if it hadn't been for Dolly's sisters chipping in to keep us going, I think we would have starved. They were very good to us, but then they both had good jobs in the city. See those two large photos either side of the fireplace, that's them, Rosie and Nellie." He pointed to two enormous photographs behind glass and framed in black wood. Smiling back at everyone were two young girls, hair parted in the middle with huge fringes, and bunches of curls either side of their ears. There was no mistaking that they were Mrs. Martin's sisters. One of the other walls was adorned with the Stag at Bay, a picture bought second hand in the Hoxton market.

Mrs. Martin changed the subject, "I think it would be a good idea if we all had a day out on Sunday. How about going to Southend?"

Squeals of delight rang out around the table, the adults as well as the children thought it was a great idea.

"Yes, Mum, yes", Rosie said, "That'll be marvellous, "I've only been to Southend once before. We can go in the Kursaal, and run on the sand, and you Alan can make sand castles."

"Right young Rosie, I want you to promise me that you won't start fighting with Violet as soon as we get there. I promise you that if you two start while we're out, I'll let your father get his belt off to you when you get home, do you hear me?"

Now that Elizabeth wasn't seeing Casey anymore, she was free again at the weekends. She was determined to enjoy the day out.

"What about you Ray, do you want to come with us?"

"I would really like to Mrs. Martin, but I've already written to my mother telling her I'm going to catch the train, and see her this weekend." Ray would much rather have been going to Southend with Elizabeth and her family, but if he wrote another letter, he knew it wouldn't reach her in time.

"Good boy Ray. That's just as it should be. You only have one mother, God bless her." Mr. Martin liked Ray even more when he heard this.

Sunday arrived, and the sky was blue, a brilliant blue. "Thank God for that, the kids would have been so disappointed if we'd had to cancel everything," Mrs. Martin said as she busied herself packing tons of sandwiches of cheese and Spam, as well as bread and jam.

Nellie had made a cake with dried eggs, and had spread a thin layer of condensed milk on the top as icing, not all foods were plentiful yet. She had been a bit upset when her mother remarked "I don't know whether the condensed milk was such a good idea Nellie, it's got a long journey ahead of it."

The long journey to Southend began. Nellie held on to Alan, she nicknamed him her little "Bubbalinker" whatever that might mean. She adored him, and had practically brought him up from a baby, as she had been sixteen when he was born. Violet was clinging to her mother's hand, and Rosie and Joan were arm in arm as they made their way to catch the bus to take them to Liverpool Street station, they had become very close since Joan's arrival from the country.

Lenny was stationed in Palestine; he hated it there, writing to tell his mother and father, "If the Arabs aren't firing at you, then the Jews are!" Mr. and Mrs. Martin tried not to worry, but it was hard not to think back to the day when they received the telegram, telling them of the death of their beloved son Jimmy by the Japanese. They felt Lenny's absence on this happy day; Lenny would have

made it even happier with his fooling around. Elizabeth was walking behind her mother and Violet, when her father dropped behind, and took her arm.

"I know we've had our differences in the past Elizabeth, but let's be friends. Don't let's say who was at fault, all that's in the past, or we will start arguing again. The trouble is, you're more like me than your mother. Nellie and Violet are more like your Mum, but the rest of you take after me. Poor sods." he added.

Elizabeth laughed. "All families have their problems Dad, and the last year has been good, hasn't it? We've got plenty of food now, and the kids are better clothed now than when I was small. I mean a treat to the seaside was out of the question then."

"Yes you're right girl," Bill Martin paused before he said, "Elizabeth, I want you to get your mother on her own today, and ask her what the doctor had to say about me when I saw him last week. Will you do that for me?"

Looking a little nonplussed Elizabeth asked, "Why can't you ask her Dad, or better still why don't you ask the doctor?"

'When I went to the doctor's last week he asked me to sit outside while he had a chat to Mum, I thought it was something to do with the kids, but now I'm not too sure.' He squeezed her arm that was still linked in his. She

returned the squeeze, so glad to be at peace with her father. "I'll try and find out for you Dad," she smiled.

The day was a huge success, with a picnic on the sands. Joan complained that there was sand in her sandwiches, Alan laughed and said, "That's why they're called sandwiches." Everyone laughed, and Bill Martin rolled his youngest son around in the sand, and then gave him a hug, his love for his youngest son, gave his tired face a warm glow.

Mrs. Martin retorted, 'Well I can't help that, the wind's blowing sand all over the place, I told you we should have tucked ourselves into that little corner near the pier. The youngsters made their sandcastles with little moats around them, and when the sea came in to fill them, their cries of delight must have been heard back in Shoreditch.

They were walking along the seafront towards the Kursaal, when Elizabeth and Nellie decided to have their photograph taken, while they still had their woolly swimming costumes on. An old car was kept on the seafront for this purpose, and the cheeky photographer egged them on to get into the car. "Come on girls, don't be shy," and he waved his arm towards the car. Elizabeth and Nellie jumped in eagerly, but before he could take the photograph two handsome young lads jumped in beside them, and put their arms around them.

Bill Martin exploded with rage. "Get your bloody hands off my daughters, before I bloody well give you one." The photograph was taken quickly, and the two lads ran off saying with huge grins, "Thanks girls." Elizabeth and Nellie giggled, but their father was furious, 'What's the matter with you two, do you want people to think that you're a couple of tarts. Put your dresses on at once. That's the last time you'll be seen in swimming costumes."

All was forgotten by the time they reached the Kursaal, and everyone had a great time. Mr. and Mrs. Martin looked on while their brood rode the Merry Go Round, the Octopus, and the Big Lizzie. The three youngest kicked up a merry dance when it was time to go home, but Mrs. Martin insisted, 'We have a long journey ahead of us, do you know its forty miles back to London?"

"But I'm not even tired," wailed Alan.

"No but you will be, by the time the journey's over. So come on behave yourself, don't spoil what has been a wonderful day out."

They walked back along the esplanade that was still thronged with people, all enjoying a day by the sea. The children called to the shrieking seagulls, and hoped that the tide would push the sea up and over the seafront, so that they would have to rush away yelling, but the sea disappointingly just, slap, slap, slapped against the stone wall.

Mrs. Martin said again and again, "Don't forget to breathe all the ozone into your lungs. Five winds meet here at Southend, and it will clear some of the London dirt from your lungs."

One last stop was made at the fish stall, where Mr. and Mrs. Martin indulged themselves with jellied eels, and the rest of the family ate rubbery whelks, and gritty cockles smothered in vinegar and pepper.

"Don't forget to take the worm out of the back of the whelks, I know some people say you don't have to, but I think it's safest." This put Joan off, she said, "I think I've had enough."

"That's all right Joan, I'll finish them off for you," and Rosie's hand stretched out for them.

"I swear she's got the worms again Bill, she's always starving."

Mrs. Martin was holding her Bill's arm, helping him up the slope towards the station, the three youngsters ran ahead like busy bees, still full of energy.

Joan, Nellie, and Elizabeth brought up the rear, and if Bill Martin could have seen them he would have had a blue fit. The young men found the three girls very attractive and were trying to chat them up.

CHAPTER 19

Mrs. Martin came rushing up the stairs, and into the living room. The Martin family were in various stages of dress or undress as the mood took them on a Sunday morning. Mrs. Martin had the News of the World under her arm, and trying to get her breath said, "Someone's gone and murdered poor old Beardy, they've smashed his head in with a brick!"

The intake of breath was enough to take all of the oxygen out of the room.

'What evil bastard did that? He never hurt a soul.' Mr. Martin looked sad, and spat into the fire.

The children looked guilty, their idea of fun, had been to torment the two eccentrics that ran the gauntlet of Maria Street. One had been "Old Granny Grey Hairs", and the other had been "Beardy".

Old Granny Grey Hairs was just an old lady who dressed all in black, and had long flowing grey hair. The community believed that she had pig's trotter feet and hands. It was said that she had sold her body already to the hospital

for experimentation, but that she had cheated them, by getting killed in a bombing raid, and her body was never found. No one had ever seen her feet, she always wore stout boots, and her hands were enclosed in thick black woollen mittens, summer and winter.

She was fair game for the children of Maria street. They would stand on the opposite side of the road near their houses, and when she drew level with them, they would charge across and march along behind her calling, "Old Granny Grey Hairs, you're an old witch, Old Granny Grey Hairs you're an old witch." This carried on until either she got to the end of Maria Street and turned the corner, or one of the mothers would lean out of their window, and scream "Leave her alone, you wicked little blighters." This did not always stop them however, but if she turned and made to hit them with her walking stick, they ran. They ran as fast as their legs would carry them, they really did believe she was a witch.

The children asked, "Is he hurt bad Mum?"

"I just told you didn't I, he's been murdered. He's dead, dead, dead, dead. Do you understand me, dead?" Mrs. Martin wiped her nose on her overall.

"You kids should hang your heads in shame, you made that poor man's life a misery every time he walked passed here."

Beardy looked just like the picture the children were given at Sunday school of Jesus. His face had a translucent look to it, a handsome, but delicate face.

His long flowing locks were scrupulously clean, and his beard reached to his chest. He always wore the same old beige Mac tied around the middle with string, and on his white bare feet were the Jesus sandals.

He had been fair game for the children too. They played at walking along behind him like the children in the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, and then the chorus would start, "Beardy, Beardy, Beardy!" Eventually increasing in sound, until Maria street echoed with the name. He never turned around; he walked on with his blue eyes fixed firmly on the street ahead of him.

"Do you know Dolly?" Bill said, "I think poor Beardy must have been in the war, and got discharged shell shocked. I can't think why they didn't have him in the army otherwise, can you?"

"You're probably right Bill, I know he was harmless, but he couldn't have been right in the head, because he never ever spoke to anyone to my knowledge. They are saying in the street, "That a couple of the "boys" must have killed him because they thought he was a miser, and had money hidden away in that tatty old room he lived in by the side of the canal."

After a few weeks Beardy's death was almost forgotten. the Martin's had a wedding in the offing, so the excitement about what you were going to wear was tantamount. Mrs. Martin got some Dawson's cheques to pay for the three youngest children's clothes; she would just be able to pay for them weekly if she was careful. The store in Old Street was kept in business by the people of the East End, who could not possibly find the cash when a big event, like Easter or Christmas came around. The same applied for weddings and funerals.

On the morning of the wedding Nelly had dressed in her new suit of grey and mauve wool, with a little hat resembling a mushroom, complete with stalk in a matching grey. Her hair had been rolled up in dozens of tiny pipe cleaners; it wasn't until after the ceremony that Nelly discovered that she had been married with a curler still in her hair. This gave everyone a good laugh. Fred her husband to be, looked smart in his army uniform.

Elizabeth and her mother both wore black suits, and flowerpot hats with wide bands of white ribbon adorning them.

Mr. Martin had got dressed in his smart grey suit, and then topped it by putting on a homburg. As he entered the room to show his family how fine he looked, he was met with howls of laughter from his three youngest children, and a snigger or two from the rest.

"Right, that's it I'm not going!" So saying, Bill Martin took off his homburg and threw it across the room.

"Don't be silly Bill, it looks fine," his wife tried to cajole him."

"Don't try and humour me, I'm not going, and that's that." He sat down hard in a chair, and starting to unbutton his coat.

"Oh Dad, please Dad, I don't care what you wear, as long as you are there to give me away. Put your old cap on if that makes you feel better, please Dad," Nelly pleaded.

His mood changed immediately, "Alright girl, that's what I'll do". He picked up his cap that was hanging behind the door along with a mass of old coats, popped it on his head saying, "Right, what are we waiting for, we've got a wedding to go to." He smiled, and held his arm out for his daughter to hold.

A sigh of relief went through the whole family.

The church was packed with the Martins, and their huge array of Aunties, Uncles and cousins, and Fred had a family just as big. His brother Jim also in uniform was his best man, and Jim gave one or two glances over to Elizabeth to see if she remembered meeting him with Fred at the cinema. She

just nodded but didn't want to encourage him so she didn't smile, even though her sister was marrying his brother. The church was Saint Barnabas' in Homerton, and as Fred's mother had a large flat almost opposite the church, the wedding breakfast was held there.

She had done them both proud, food was still rationed, but she had managed to put on a banquet of ham salad, wedding trifle, and lots of cakes she had made herself, including the wedding cake. It stood proudly at the centre of the top table, complete with bride and groom adorning it, under an archway of flowers.

Mrs. Eaton seated herself next to her sons, and Bill and Dolly Martin sat next to Nelly. She was still shy and lacked confidence so she was glad to have her mother near. It was Bill who upset the seating arrangements; he called Ray to sit at the top table with him. His own son Lenny had decided to sit with his cousins, and it had left an empty chair. Aunt Rose and Aunt Nell both called out immediately, "He's not family, so he shouldn't be on the top table." Both were jealous and would have loved a prize seat at the top table.

Bill just shrugged, and said, "I'll have who I want sitting next to me, so shut up the lot of you." He leaned back in his chair and lit a Woodbine. He immediately engaged Ray in conversation, not realising that Ray's attention was elsewhere.

It was Joan who pointed out to Elizabeth, that Ray's eyes were looking at her, although he was pretending to be listening to Bill.

"So what? I'm certainly not interested in him. I told you all when he first planted himself in our house, he is not for me. He's just a friend, and that's all he'll ever be. I've told you Joan, I want to get away from Maria street, you don't think Ray's ever going to amount to much, he'll still be working at the glass factory this time next year."

"You can be such a cold fish sometimes Elizabeth, money isn't everything you know? Joan spoke quietly she didn't want anyone near them to hear their conversation. She wiped her mouth on her white paper serviette, and continued, There is something else that's important to getting married, and that's love, love with a capital L." They had both finished their ham salads, and now were tucking into their trifles with great delight.

They called up to Fred's Mum, "Delicious trifle Mrs. Eaton." Mrs. Eaton blushed, but no one could tell because of her already high colouring.

"Glad you're enjoying it girls, she called back."

Joan was wearing a red blouse and black tight skirt, and she had dropped some red jelly from the trifle on to her blouse, she giggled, "Oh well if it does stain it won't show, red on red."

Elizabeth let her sooty lashes lift from her dish to look at Ray. Sure enough he was looking at her. "Oh God Joan", she snapped, "You're right he's looking at me with those cow eyes again. I think when I get a chance, I'm going to tell him just where he stands with me, and that's nowhere." Elizabeth frowned back at Ray. It didn't bother Ray, he was just happy to be anywhere his beautiful Elizabeth was, if she was around he felt warm and happy.

The wedding breakfast finished, all hands pulled together to clear the trestles tables, and leave the floor clear for dancing. Joan walked over to where the wind-up gramophone stood, and put on her own particular favourite, Jealousy. When she had earned some extra money for overtime she had put the money away until she could afford a tiny wooden gramophone, and bought her first record, Jealousy. She decided it would be nice at the wedding, so had brought it along.

Aunt Rose and Uncle Dick took to the floor straight away, upstaging the bride and groom. Not that Nellie minded, she was grateful that she was not the centre of attention. Aunt Rose, always the show-off, was giving the tango her all. Head held erect, turning sharply to left and right, she held most of the party mesmerised, and when she was doubled backwards by Uncle Dick in the finale, there was lots of clapping, and shouts of "well done". Aunt Rose looked the part, with her gypsy looks and a mane of black naturally curly hair. Along with the rather startling red dress she had chosen to wear to the wedding, she somehow looked like a cabaret star, not that the Martin's or Eaton's had ever been to a posh cabaret. The nearest they had all got to it,

was a sixpenny trip to the Hackney Empire in Mare street. Not to be outdone, although he was very fond of his sister in law, Bill Martin decided to give a rendering of Bye, Bye Blackbird and Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree. While he sang he held Dolly Martin around the waist first and then faced her for Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree and they mirrored their actions.

Elizabeth realised that her father and mother were still very much in love, it came as quite a revelation to her.

"Don't overtax yourself Bill. will you, " Dolly whispered.

"I'm just getting into my stride, girl," he answered with a smile.

He crossed the room to where Elizabeth was standing chatting, getting to know Fred's sisters when her father pulled her into the centre of the floor.

"Come on Elizabeth, let's show them how the Russians dance."

Bill Martin had been shown by Russian sailors, how to bob down and kick one leg out, with your arms folded across your chest. Elizabeth kept it up for a few minutes, but said, "You're better at it than I am Dad, you carry on, I'm better at jitterbugging." She joined the circle surrounding her father who were all clapping in time to something that sounded like "Arshitonier." No one

cared that they didn't know the words, everyone had filled up on plenty of beer and spirits, and were yelling their lungs out. The children all thought it was great fun, never had they seen their parents so abandoned. Sweat was pouring from everyone, and hankies were out wiping faces, and bosoms. The finale to all East End parties was "Knees Up Mother Brown", and all the company did their best to outdo each other by kicking their legs the highest, and even daring each other to show off their knickers.

Nellie and Fred left about eleven o'clock to get the bus back to Hackney Road, where they had been allocated a one bedroomed flat with bathroom. This had caused great excitement in the family, everyone had said they would be around for a bath instead of going to the public baths. With sniggering calls of "Enjoy yourselves", Nellie left with her face the colour of beetroot.

The wedding party broke up after the bride and groom left, so the Martins bade their farewells to the Eatons, and thanked them for being so kind as to lay on the wedding breakfast.

On the walk to the bus stop, Elizabeth and her father linked arms. "I bet you were a terror with the girls when you were young Dad. You really have had a good time tonight haven't you?"

"Yes Elizabeth, this has been my best night for years. Well it's got to be, one daughter married, and only five to go," he jested. On a more sober note he

asked, "Did you ever ask your mother what the doctor had to say when he saw me last?"

"Yes Dad. She just seemed to shrug, and say, we'll know more when he's seen a specialist. So obviously Doctor Statnigross is making you an appointment at the hospital." She pulled the jacket of her black suit around her, and almost rammed the flower pot hat on her head, before taking her father's arm again. "Gosh it's chilly for a May evening."

"I'll tell you this Elizabeth I am never going into St. Leonard's, I've already told your mother, all my old mates who went in there never came out alive."

"Don't talk so silly Dad. They didn't come out alive, because they were already dying before they went in. You're only fifty-one, a man in his prime. Be honest what have you got, just a bit of old bronchitis. Everyone's got a touch of that these days."

Elizabeth wasn't fooling herself, she knew that her father's coughing and spitting had got worse, and she knew that her mother was dreadfully worried. Elizabeth had caught her mother deep in thought many times, but she just shrugged and said "Oh I have so many things on my mind, it's not anything in particular." Her Auntie Lizzie had once said to her, when she had paid her weekly visit to the Martin's household, "Your father will never make old bones you know."

Elizabeth had been so shocked by what she whispered that it had filled her with dread for weeks. She pushed it from her thoughts now, squeezed her father's arm more tightly, and said I'm so glad we get on well now Dad, I used to be so unhappy."

"Don't fret girl. You know I love you, I love all of you. You're too much like me in nature, so we are bound to rub each other up the wrong way."

Feeling braver now that her father had admitted love for her, that she spoke quietly, "Do you really love Mum, Dad?"

"Love her? Of course I do. She's always been my pocket Venus. I suppose you're thinking about all the rows and fights we've had over the last thirty years. Well, girl, they don't count for nothing. When you truly love someone you can overcome anything. Your mother and I have been through some terrible times together, the worst was when Jimmy was killed, but we pulled together and we got through. That's what a real marriage is."

He pulled an old white silk scarf from out of his pocket and draped it around his neck, I certainly do feel the cold these days, I always used to be hot and sweaty, I suppose it's losing all that weight. I never was a big man, but my clothes seemed to hang on me these days. That's enough of all this talk, when I get home I'll do my impression of Jimmy Cagney just for you." They

both laughed, and walked a little faster to reach the bus that had just pulled alongside them.

Everyone slept in the next morning, only Mrs. Martin was up getting the tea, and collecting the News of the World, from Mr. Bright's shop in Kingsland Road. Only Elizabeth spoilt the morning by calling to the cat, "Here Puss, hear puss, come and get this bacon, its raw again." Mrs. Martin was always saying, "Right my girl, you'll get no bacon next week, because I will not bum it black for you." She was a weak woman and the usual bacon sandwich was brought up to Elizabeth while she lay in bed.

CHAPTER 20

Nellie had been married just three months, when she came tearing into the living room crying her eyes out.

"What's the matter Nell?" Alan looked very sad to see his favourite sister crying. She had practically brought him up, and had always spoiled him. He repeated "Nell what's the matter?"

"Go outside you", she snapped "I want to talk to Mum and Dad."

Alan was very put out, she had never spoken to him like this before; he had always been her little "Bubberlinka."

"Sod you then, I don't care what's wrong", so saying he left the room, and they could hear his little black boots banging down the stairs.

"What is it Neil", Mrs. Martin now asked, 'What's wrong that you should be so upset?"

"It's him. I hate him, I'm never going back to him. I mean it." She continued to sob.

Dolly Martin looked shocked, with all the terrible things that had gone on in her own marriage, she certainly would never have left.

"Do you know what he said to me? All I ever want to do is polish up bits of furniture. He even emptied an ashtray all over the table after I'd polished it. He said, "there's a bit more for you to clean up. Oh Mum I hate him."

'Well my girl, marriage isn't all wine and roses, I've told you all before you'll get plenty of vinegar along the road. Now put your coat back on, and get yourself back to Fred. Do you think that you're going to go through life together never having a cross word, that's only in those love books you were always reading. Come on girl I mean it, get your coat. If you like, I'll walk a little of the way back with you, but you must go indoors and make it up with Fred. You have made your bed, and now you must lie in it. You always were one for scrubbing and cleaning, I'm not knocking you for it, I was always glad of your help. But maybe you're driving your Fred mad with all this cleaning and polishing. I know you've got nice furniture now, but stop and think Fred needs a home he can come home and relax in."

She took her cardigan from behind the door, took Nellie's hand, and left the house. Bill Martin hadn't uttered a word; he had thought it better to leave things like this to Dolly.

"Oh Mum, you are mean, I thought you would have let me come back home. I miss you all"

She kept her head down as they passed Mrs. Taylor standing at her gate. Dolly Martin just said, "Good morning," and noticed for the umpteenth time, all the rings and jewellery Mrs. Taylor was wearing. Mrs. Taylor's husband was a coalman, a well-paid and coveted job, always food in that house even when times were very bad. She was a kindly woman; whenever she made a bread pudding, she would make a huge batch, so that the children coming home from school on cold and wet days could take a lump indoors and fill up, if there wasn't much for tea.

When Fred opened the door, Mrs. Martin just pushed Nellie inside, and said, "Now sort it out you two, I've got my own problems at home." She pulled her cardigan around her, and practically ran back home. Mrs. Martin very rarely walked, she lived life on the trot.

It was a lovely warm August day, when Bill and Dolly Martin set off for the Chest hospital near Victoria Park. Dolly knew Bill was feeling very apprehensive about seeing this specialist. So she held his arm, and said, "Maybe when we've finished here, we could go for a walk in the Park, it's been years since we've been for a walk on our own, we've always had the kids with us."

"Alright Dolly, if that's what you would like." Bill turned to her and smiled. In his heart he felt that he already knew what the specialist was going to say.

They took the X-Rays, asked him lots of questions about how he felt, and was he still coughing up a lot of mucous. He told them yes, and that sometimes he spat up blood. He looked into the specialist eyes, it was all there for him to see.

'Would you like to go down to the canteen and have a cup of tea, and then I would like you both to come back so that we can have a little chat together.'

Bill and Dolly drank their tea in silence. They both knew that the forthcoming news was not going to be good, but neither was prepared for the news that he had TB. Both knew that he had been sentenced to die. There was no cure for TB

The doctor spoke to Dolly Martin. "It will be your job to keep your husband's cups, plates, and cutlery completely separate from the rest of the family's. TB is very contagious, so I would also advise you not to forget this at any time.

You must try and protect the rest of the family. I know it will be very hard for you," and looking down at his notes, he said, "I see you still have three young children of, nine, eleven, and thirteen, so do your best." He gave a little smile, but it didn't show in his eyes.

They left the hospital as they had entered it, arm in arm. They walked to Victoria Park, and sat on a park bench as they had done in their courting days.

"I'm sorry it was bad news Bill," she tried her hardest not to cry, but grabbed at an old hanky in her pocket and blew her nose.

Neither of them could take in the beauty of the swans sailing on the lake, admiring their reflections in the water on that beautiful summer's day.

"Don't cry Dolly, I think we both knew that it was going to be bad news. The thing now is to try and keep it from the children. We don't want them burdened with this, life's hard enough as it is."

"Bill, I'll have to tell the older ones. They will know something's up, as soon as I start insisting that your things are kept separate. They're not stupid you know."

"Don't tell them I've got TB, you know what people are like, they will all expect me to pop my clogs tomorrow. As for the kids it will break my heart if they are not allowed to come near me."

"Alright if that's what you want." Dolly looked up into his sad grey face, and the tears began to roll down her cheeks again.

"Don't cry Dolly, you and I have got to be strong. We could have years together yet, what do hospitals know?"

Come on dry your face, and lets go home."

They left the park deep in their own thoughts, the beauty of the flowerbeds, and the children's laughter as they rowed the boats on the lake was lost to them.

On arriving home they sat together having a cup of tea. Bill Martin put his arm around Dolly, and said with a quiver in his voice, "I'm not afraid of dying Dolly, I just don't want to leave you and the children. Do you remember when we thought the Germans would overrun England, and I said before one of those bastards would get near my girls I'd kill them. believe I could never have done it. I just love them all too much."

Alan came bounding up the stairs the first home from school, "What's for tea Mum?"

"I'll do you a bit of bread and jam, and when all the family's in, I'll pop down Hoxton and get some pies and mash. How about that?"

"Great Mum," he replied with a cheeky grin. His normally rosy cheeks were more red than usual from the exertion of running.

Next in was Rosie and Violet. "How was school girls?" Bill asked.

"Bit boring" Violet said, but I liked playing off ground touch with the girls in the playground at dinner time."

"And you Rosie?" Bill smiled at her, he was very fond of his clever daughter.
"Fancy one of my kids getting into the Grammar school, the only kid from the street that year/" he pulled her to him, and she sat on his bony knees.

"It was great Dad, we went all the way to Muswell Hill to play hockey, and I played centre forward and had to bully off. What about that? Our side won."

"Alright Rose, stop bragging. We're going to have pie and mash for tea, so as ifs getting near the time for the others to come home, I'll pop down and get them now."

She slipped her cardigan on and was gone. "You alright Dad?" Rosie asked.

"Of course I am, why do you ask?"

"Well you seem a bit quiet, like you're thinking of something."

"No, I'm fine. Be a good girl, make me another cup of tea."

Rosie jumped to do it, she wouldn't have done it for her mother though.

When all the family were seated, all tightly packed around the big wooden table Mrs. Martin began to dish out the pies and mash. Two pies and mash for all the adults, but only one pie and mash for the children.

Rosie complained, "I'm starving, I could easily eat two pies."

'Well you're not getting them, when you go to work you can have two pies." Mrs. Martin didn't sit with the family, she had eaten stewed eels, mash and liquor while she was in the pie shop, and Mr. Martin had his on his lap in the armchair. This way the family had a little more room at the table.

Ray was seated opposite Elizabeth. Before leaving work she had reapplied her lipstick and mascara-ed her lashes yet again; she had joked with the girls at work before she left, "If I die in the night without my makeup on, one of you girls must come around to my house and make my face up. I don't want anyone looking at me bare faced."

"They all chorused, "Not me, I'm frightened of dead bodies."

Elizabeth had settled in easily at the Co-op, she didn't mind the endless weighing up of biscuits and butter. The jolly girls and happy customers soon made the day fly by.

Ray decided to take a chance, and ask Elizabeth out. She had been very nice to him lately, even letting him walk her home some evenings from work.

"There's a great film on at the Regal, do you fancy coming with me Elizabeth?" He had decided to ask her in front of the whole family, because he thought he would stand a better chance, if it were said easily, and without the pressure of just the two of them. Elizabeth had told him twice already since Nellie's wedding that he stood absolutely no chance with her, she would never go out with him. She thought of him as a brother.

Everyone around the table looked towards Elizabeth. They all knew, even down to young Alan that Ray was extremely fond of Elizabeth, and couldn't understand why she was always so sharp with him. Even cruel at times.

"No. I'm going with Jeannie and her fellow." Elizabeth was still friends with all her old girlfriends from the doll factory, and didn't mind tagging along. This wasn't very often as she would often go out with someone for just a week or two and then dump them. She still wanted to get out of Maria Street, but it wasn't so urgent now that she and her father were getting on so much better.

'Well, couldn't I come with you to make up a foursome?" Ray's blue eyes almost begged her.

"No Ray, and that's final."

Elizabeth got up from the table, and went to get ready for the evening out. Putting on her pretty mauve and yellow pansy covered dress, she pouted at the mirror and was gone.

That evening when all was quiet, Ray sat opposite Bill by the fire, and asked, "How you feeling now, Mr. Martin?" He didn't call him Bill; somehow he felt it would be disrespectful.

"Not so bad Ray." He changed the subject quickly.

"I don't know what's wrong with my Elizabeth, she doesn't seem to want to settle down with anyone, it's not just you Ray. She's had some very nice young men court her, but she eventually gives them all the brush off. She doesn't mean to be cruel, she's always been very headstrong." Bill Martin began to cough. He grabbed for a piece of white cotton at the side of his chair and coughed into it. He couldn't hide the blood from Ray.

Not making any comment, Ray went outside to the kitchen, and came back with a drink of water.

"There you are Mr. Martin, that will ease your coughing."

Bill Martin looked into Ray's face, and saw the sadness there.

"Don't say anything to Elizabeth or the others, will you Ray?" He reached out and took Ray's hand, and with what strength he had left he squeezed it."

Ray gave a little smile, "Don't worry, you can count on me, but I'm sure Lenny knows, and I suspect so does Joan.

Elizabeth I'm not sure about. She doesn't talk to me much."

Ray told Bill Martin how much better he liked the glass factory now that he was driving. " I feel free again, once I'm out on the road, I feel like my own boss. Ray had studied all the maps he could lay his hands on to learn the roads, he had even joined the library so that he could borrow books on London and the counties. He felt happy living with the Martins, but his heart still ached for Elizabeth. He knew he should leave, but he was weak where his feelings for Elizabeth were concerned. He would rather stay put, just so that he could see her each day.

"I think I'll pop down to the pub for a pint Mr. Martin, see you later on." "Enjoy yourself Ray, if I felt better I'd join you."

It was some months later that Nellie informed the family that she was going to have a baby. She and Fred had solved their differences, and were lovey-dovey again.

'When will the baby be born Nell?' Joan asked as they all sat around the big table for Sunday afternoon tea.

"Middle of September."

The family began to count the months.

"Well if its March now, so we've only got six months to wait. I bet you're both excited."

Fred just looked down at his shoes, then looked up and smiled. "Yes, we are, both of us, aren't we, Nell?"

Nellie looked at all the beaming faces, they were all happy for her. There were shouts of I'll baby-sit for you from Violet and Rose, and Joan and Elizabeth promised to get some knitting needles and start knitting some bootees, and mittens.

"If you have the baby in September, it won't be long before the winter sets in, and he'll need lots of warm woolly clothes. I might even try knitting a matinee coat," Joan said earnestly.

Joan's eyes glowed at the thought of the new baby. She had just met a very nice boy called Lenny at evening classes, maybe this was making her feel maternal. She had told the family, "He's only got one fault. He works at a furrier, and every time I see someone coming towards us wearing a fur coat, I know I am going to hear not only how fur coats are made, but also the life story of the animal involved. I cringe inwardly and pray that while I'm out with him we don't see any fur coats, but of course this winter's been so cold, with icicles hanging from roofs and doorways, that I feel as though I've seen millions."

"If he's a nice boy, you hang on to him," Dolly Martin said as she poured more tea out of the huge brown teapot. Within a couple of days, the whole of Maria street knew that Dolly Martin's Nellie was going to have a baby.

It was a well-known fact that Mr. Martin adored boys, so the whole family were keeping their fingers crossed that, when Nellie gave birth, it would be a boy.