

Home Is Where You Make It

a memoir by

Carole Bastian

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The author may be contacted through the Memoirs Foundation.

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Chapter 1

An English Childhood

BOMBING BLITZ

My parents survived the German Luftwaffe, which in 1940 destroyed their home but not their spirit, though my father would never forget the horrors he saw and the sounds - those ghastly sounds - of war.

I was a war baby, as was my sister Jackie and the sister I never knew, Yvonne.

My parents had moved to Northampton from Coventry after their flat was bombed during one of the dozens of raids by the Germans on Coventry. Mum actually walked all the way to Northampton - it's 30 miles from Coventry - when she was eight months pregnant. But she lost the child, my sister Yvonne, when she was 10 days old, which must have been unimaginably sad for my parents. Yvonne died of internal bleeding, which nowadays of course is prevented with vitamin K, which they give babies.

It took my mother quite a while to get over Yvonne's death, she told me. They didn't tell her where they buried the baby.

And she never did find out so she could never go to the grave; she could never grieve properly.

The awful thing was, my father was giving the baby a blood transfusion when she died. He said you could just see her colour change completely.

My parents' flat was bombed out in I think September 1940. It was a top flat and my mother had laid out all the baby's clothes to show people. They were going to a shelter when the sirens sounded, that's when my father saw a man decapitated - a window came down and cut his head off, which really traumatised my father. My parents must have gone to a shelter and then gone back home to collect a few things, after probably spending a night in the shelter, and then walked those 30 miles to Northampton, to stay with my Auntie Vi. Mum retrieved a few baby clothes and personal things, but all their furniture was destroyed.

My father never served in the military because he was in essential services, making the actual aircraft that bombed Germany. His factory also got bombed by the Germans. He was an aircraft fitter - he made sure all the rivets in the planes were correct. He worked in Baginton, a village just outside Coventry - at Armstrong Siddeley Aircrafts - and always travelled from Northampton to there each day. He continued to do that all the years we lived in Northampton.

COVENTRY

Coventry is a very old city, dating from the 11th century at the time of Lady Godiva. It's in the West Midlands, in Warwickshire - in the heart of England - and is very industrial but it was once beautiful, with gorgeous Tudor buildings. It used to be known as the best-preserved medieval town

in England up until the 1930s. World War II destroyed the historic city centre, but actually city planners ruined much of Coventry's old architecture for the sake of 'progress', during the 20th century.

There is the famous saying 'sent to Coventry', which means being shunned or ignored. I think that dates from Oliver Cromwell's time and the dissolution of the monasteries.

There's also the famous legend about Lady Godiva riding through the city streets naked to protest over high taxes imposed on the people by her husband, the Earl of Mercia. Apparently the people were told to look away as she rode past but one man didn't and was struck blind. That was Peeping Tom.

By the Middle Ages, Coventry was a major centre of textile trades, especially wool, and was famous all over Europe for its dyed 'Coventry blue' cloth which didn't fade.

Coventry became the fourth largest city in England and at times was the country's 'second capital'. From the 19th century, industry developed, especially the bicycle industry; at one time Coventry was the biggest bicycle manufacturer in the world.

This then evolved into motor vehicles, and by the early 20th century, Coventry was a major centre of the British motor industry. It contributed hugely to the British war effort in World War II because of its high concentration of armaments, munitions and engine plants - which also made the city a major target for the Germans.

THE BLITZ

Coventry suffered more damage than any other city in England apart from London and down on the south-east.

Its darkest hour was the 14th of November in 1940 when most of the historic city centre was flattened. This air raid by the German Luftwaffe was the Coventry Blitz; the Germans code-named it Operation Moonlight Sonata. That's when Dad's factory got bombed but I think their flat was bombed early, in the September of 1940. Hundreds of people were killed and thousands of homes destroyed in that one raid in November.

Altogether Coventry was bombed dozens of times, from June 1940 up to 1942. After the Coventry blitz on November 14, 1940, there were two more really terrible raids in 1941. Coventry was the first city to have mass burials because so many hundreds were killed, too many for individual burials.

During the war, Coventry's famous historic cathedral was destroyed but a new one was built years later. Opinion was divided over the modern version - it certainly was very modern - but I sang in there once with a German choir and the acoustics are excellent.

After the war Coventry started to attract South Asian migrants, Indians and later Pakistanis, which was a shock to us then but now it's just normal. South Asian people are the largest minority in Coventry these days, making up about 10 per cent of the population I think.

WAR BABIES

Jackie, my sister, was born on the 19th of August, 1942, and I was born on the 30th of January, 1944, in Northampton General Hospital. We were both war babies. My mother used to tell us that we were put in containers for the gas when the Germans flew over, but they only ever dropped one bomb in Northampton, I think. My father was very traumatised by being bombed out in Coventry and seeing that man

decapitated. Every time the sirens went my father used to shake - he got really, really upset about it. He was frightened that Northampton would get bombed as well. The war really made a big impression on Mum and Dad and to lose a child as well, not really because of the war but I think through the trauma. Just really, really awful.

NORTHAMPTON

Northampton is in the East Midlands, in Northamptonshire, about 100 kilometres north of London. It goes way back, even before the Celts. It has quite a history. It was settled by the Romans, Anglo-Saxons, the Vikings and several kings and queens lived here - or were imprisoned at various times.

Northamptonshire is known as the county of 'squires and spires' because of all the country houses, castles and beautiful churches. Princess Diana is buried here, at Althorp, where she grew up. Daniel Defoe once called Northampton "the handsomest town in all this part of England", back in the 18th century, but of course it's changed a lot since then. Northampton became known as the 'shoe city': It was practically the shoe and boot-making capital of the world at its peak. When you go through the Census, you see so many shoemakers, just like my father's family.

HOME LIFE

We had happy times during our childhood in Northampton with lots of other children to play with. We were living in a lovely little council house in a cul-de-sac at 13 Canberra Crescent. Every Christmas we'd take out our pillowcases out for Father Christmas to fill and everybody would put out their toys. Not that there were really very many because nobody had any money in those days. But it was such a lovely community and there were no cars ... we had all our milk and

bread delivered in a horse and cart. Maybe the only person who ever came in a car was my very rich uncle, my mother's brother Uncle Willy ... he'd sometimes visit us and it was "Oh, your rich uncle's here again."

My mother would go to the orchard at the back of the house and buy apples to make toffee apples, which she would sell to the children in the street for a penny out of the kitchen window!

I'm still friends with one girl, June Buswell, now Smith. The contact has never really dropped out.

I'll never forget watching television. We never had one until I was 14 in Coventry, but in Northampton the boy on the corner, whose dad was a policeman, he had one. I used to always think that the cowboys were all inside the little set. I'd think "How did the actors actually get in there?" Nobody really explained to me how television worked. I think the first time I ever saw television was 1949, when that boy on the corner got one.

My father made all our toys, like a blackboard made of orange boxes and a little engine you could ride on, well pedal. And a beautiful rocking horse - to make the mane he took a piece of my mother's fur collar.

RATIONS

During the austere war and postwar years, my mother's relations in Aberdeen, who were very well off, used to send her kippers, which she traded for sugar and tea. We had ration books - my sister unfortunately lost one once when she was going to buy some sweets ... there was a big drama. You could only get liver when your alphabet letter was up. My mother got caught once trying to find things; her bicycle had no lights

and she got fined - so the things she bought were actually very expensive because she had to pay this big fine.

Things were still tough in England right into the early 1950s. They finally took away ration books in 1953; in fact rationing was stricter after the war than during it. Rations were introduced in England as early as 1940, because Britain imported so much food. Everyone was issued with a ration book: a buff-coloured for adults, while schoolchildren had a blue ration book and babies a green one.

It was difficult buying clothes, sugar, everything ... you only had two eggs a week, an ounce of butter and two rashers of bacon, which my father ate.

All our clothes had 'utility' on then. You had to have school uniforms ... it was very difficult, you only had two pairs of pants and if you turned up with the wrong colour you got sent home!

One thing they did which I think was good was that because we were war children, they always gave us orange juice and milk. I think this really made a big difference to our teeth and I see it in my own children - our teeth are all healthy. Of course, they also gave us cod liver oil as well, which we hated.

BARRONS AND TIPLERS

My mother Gladys was born in Aberdeen in 1914 and my father Thomas in Northampton 1915.

My mother's family name was Barron, they were famous butchers - that's where Barron's beef comes from. My grandmother (Mina nee Blackadder) started a business selling meats and cooked meats. They had butcher's shops ... there are still two in Aberdeen. My Uncle Andy sold the name to

the Sainsburys supermarket chain in England, so there's quite a famous background. I also have Blackadder descendants but I haven't traced them.

My father's family, the Tiplers, came from Northampton, and they all worked in shoes. My grandmother did have a coal business herself and I think during the war she was the only one who had wood and coal. They had a horse and cart and they actually owned two houses in Market St, in Northampton. My father took over the business when his mother died when he was 14; his father died when he was 21. His father did not run the business as was he working in a shoe factory.

Unfortunately my father and his stepbrother didn't agree - there was a stepbrother from another marriage - so the whole thing went bust and my father went back into working with shoes. But then he did study at night and that's when he did his engineering as an aircraft fitter. He did all that in night studies and he moved to Coventry.

That's where he met my mother, who had left London to get a job, making screws or something in a factory. I think they'd only known each other for about six months. Well, actually it was my mother's canny Scottish nature coming through - she was living in digs and he was living in digs and she thought that maybe they could save a bit of money. This was in 1939; World War II started in the 3rd of September, 1939, when Britain declared war on Germany after Hitler invaded Poland.

BATTLE OF WILLS

My mother was very dominating and my father also, so they clashed a lot. They had lots of rows. Their marriage had been a battle of wills, two very headstrong people. I think one was trying to be the boss and the other was also trying to be the

boss and that was the reason why they had so much trouble.

I decided in my marriage to never go down that path my Mum and Dad did because you don't win anyway. My children said to me, "Oh Dad always had his own way and did everything but you always got your own way in a roundabout way." I very cleverly then did what I wanted to do, but not in a direct way; never to cause any trouble - I found that worked much better.

My mother was very to the point and my Dad wouldn't give way so they clashed all the time.

SEPARATION

When I was six they separated - it was very dramatic when I think about it. My mother was working as a bar woman so she was out in the evenings when Dad came home from work. One day the electricity man came and emptied these meters and she had such an awful lot of rebate, so all of sudden she got all this money. There was a big row the evening before about money and she was really upset and went upstairs and packed her suitcase. We didn't even go to school the next morning to Headlands Primary. I didn't know whether she knew she was going to get this rebate, but anyhow, we went off to the bus station and they told her that the bus to Glasgow didn't go till 10 o'clock that night. So what would we do? We couldn't go back home so we went to the pictures and watched Esther Williams - mother stood at the back with the suitcase and we sat on seats - and I can remember watching Esther Williams - we saw it twice - until we got to the bus station and went off to Glasgow.

GLASGOW

We arrived in Glasgow and went to my Auntie Betty's, who is stepdaughter to John Blackadder, my grandmother's brother.

She took us in and said “You’ll be OK.” But about four days later, I went to bed one night and there was such a commotion in the night ... apparently my father had sent a telegram saying he wanted his daughter Jackie back immediately in England. So my sister had to travel all the way by herself. I mean, all the way from Glasgow to Northampton is a really long journey, and at night. So I woke in the morning and I had no Jackie ...

It was very upsetting. Then two days later my mother had applied for a job in Inverary. She got a job at a hotel called the Argyle Arms as a waitress. It was a really posh hotel and she could do silver service.

INVERARY

So we left Auntie Betty’s and Mum and myself lived in the hotel, in a room in the hotel. Inverary is beautiful, it’s on the west coast of Scotland with a big castle and lovely scenery. I went to school there - I’m still so traumatised by it because they’d say, “Listen to the way she talks, she’s just a Sussener (Southerner), she’s not from here.”

Their school curriculum was much more advanced than the one in England so I really struggled. I didn’t have any problems in England but problems really started in Inverary. I was really good at school in England but in Scotland I only ever once got a star for something - I was the bottom of the class, which made me feel so inferior. So school wasn’t really good there, but I only went for six months.

MISBEHAVING

I found a little kitten once and wanted to keep it so I put it in a drawer. But they wouldn’t let me keep the kitten so I locked myself in the hotel bathroom, the only toilet for the staff. They had to get the fire brigade to get me out of the toilet. I

did misbehave there. There was a family called Carmichaels doing the hydraulics in Inverary, for the power, and Mrs Carmichael insisted she wanted to adopt me. I didn't want to live with my mother. The Carmichaels took me out and about - they took me horse riding, made it really interesting. My mother wouldn't let me go anywhere. But I remember once she let me stay with somebody who took me home and I can remember lying in this great big bed, it seemed huge! I was really homesick and frightened that my mother was actually going to give me away but it was only a weekend - my mother had a lot to do - so it was really convenient for her that this lady looked after me.

I didn't have any other children to play with, except one girlfriend I'd made at school; her dad was the caretaker at the school. Once we found some money along the beach - we were just walking along and we found this money, it must have been about forty or fifty pounds, so we took it to the police station. I can't remember this girl's name, a nice girl.

Mainly I was left up to my own devices. I got up to a lot of mischief. I'd go down to the beach to throw pebbles - the hotel was just across the road from the beach; it was all very free. Or I'd sit in the great big kitchen and be served a meal - I was treated very well. They gave me bacon, eggs and chips and the bacon had a fishy taste. And they gave me lots of icecream.

I've never gone back to Inverary. I always get to Scotland and somehow never, ever get there.

REUNITED

I missed my sister terribly. I found that really, really distressing. We couldn't even phone her ... it was just a matter of corresponding with letters. Mum used to let me then,

because I was really good at writing - I used to write little bits at the bottom. But Jackie had quite a good time. She stayed with older people who spoilt her. She would play cards with them and she would always win because they had a mirror behind them and she could see their cards!

Then my mother got a phone call or telegram - I think it may have been a phone call in the hotel - saying my father was bedridden with sciatica and we had to go back to Northampton. I remember arriving in our house and I said to my Dad "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you", which was really, really awful. I think from that point on I never did have a good relationship with my father ... I was always a bit of a problem for him.

And then I had real problems at school and Dad used to say that I wasn't as clever as Jackie, that I was daft. I'm sure I had problems because of the trauma, going to different schools and I spoke with this Scottish accent, which I had to get rid of very quickly, which was very traumatising. We were only in Scotland for six months but I picked up the accent very quickly. And then Dad was always saying whether we should move to Coventry, so at school I tended to be the girl who was always going to move away. So I never really after that made lots of friends ... I was always going to move.

I got the feeling that when my mother did come back my Dad really tried to make up for the whole thing. They decided to see Jersey, like a second honeymoon, and it was the first time they flew. I used to always tell everybody it was because my Dad built aircraft, that's why they could fly. I used to make up all these stories. I never really did twig that you had to buy a ticket. But my mother had actually paid in to a holiday fund to be able to afford their holiday, because it wasn't cheap

to fly in those days. There was a bit of harmony in the family after that.

SENT TO COVENTRY

We did end up moving to Coventry in 1950 to save Dad travelling, because he always worked at Baginton Armstrong Siddeley. I will never forget the day we moved ... we went in the removal van, my mother and I, and I will never forget the breakfast we had at a truckie's stop - a great chunk of bacon, I'd never seen anything like it. That always stays in your mind. It was a very cold February morning, I'll never forget that, and we got to this house and it was all bare, but the neighbours did bring in sandwiches and tea.

We lived at 68 Lawrence Sanders Road, which my mother later bought for £5000. She lived there until 1984, when she and Jackie moved to a smaller bungalow at 2c Farm Close, Kersley.

When we moved to Coventry in 1952, my Dad had lots of other interests, mainly the Workingmen's Club. His club was everything; he was the chairman, the secretary, everything at that club. He still drank very heavily and still bet on the horses, but I think my mother just decided that was the way he was.

My father never really had love from his own parents ... you could feel that projected all the time ... he didn't really know how to show affection. My mother came from so many brothers and sisters and had a really hard life but they all loved each other ... you could really feel the lovingness in their family. My mother was also very caring ... she'd save like hell to buy anything for us and Dad would go and spend it all on the horses. He'd win and then we'd go out and buy all these different things. It was a rollercoaster.

I would say he was an alcoholic. He got very violent at night and on Sunday afternoons - we'd say "Be careful, Dad's drunk," and keep out of his way.

MUM

My mother made friends very easily - she was the Scotty, wasn't she? She had lots of friends in Coventry, and in Aberdeen. And she always worked. In Coventry she worked in a factory, then she was a barmaid at times; she did all sorts of jobs, waitressing, all sorts. She was very versatile. Even when she was 70 she used to pack the bags at Sainsburys! She didn't want to give up work. Even when she went on the pension, she said "I can't sit at home," so she'd dash into town. She always dashed into town (Coventry). She'd buy things for the neighbours; she was very generous. When she'd come to Germany she'd always have to buy a bar of chocolate for the neighbour's daughter or somebody. She was always thinking of other people all the time.

My mother and father both danced, ballroom dancing. Dad would wear highly polished shoes and a tuxedo, and Mum a long gown. They'd go out every weekend dancing ... that's where they met a lot of friends. They also both played the violin as well - that's where my music comes (I sing). My Uncle Albert sang on BBC Radio as a tenor. But my parents wouldn't play the violin together because they'd get into little arguments - they'd never agree on what to play. When my mother went for lessons in Aberdeen, the other children would say to her: "Hi Gladys, have you got your coffin with you?!" Coincidentally, her teacher was from Berlin, where I was to later live.

I learnt the piano (Uncle Willy bought me one) and had some singing lessons - this was my father's idea - and passed

three exams. I sang with a children's choir but the choirmaster told my parents to let my voice develop naturally. It never did though - I've always had a little choirboy's voice. I didn't sing with a church choir, it was just an ordinary children's choir, the Coventry Children's Choir, which wasn't affiliated with any schools.

My Uncle Willy, who was very well off and had all these butcher's shops, he died and left my mother £11,000, which was a lot of money in those days. So she went on a trip to Canada in 1962 to visit a sister, Auntie Mina, and Uncle George. And while she was there, she even got herself a job, in a coffee shop. She was only there three days when the coffee pot disintegrated, the bottom fell out and coffee burnt her leg, so she was off work with some compensation. She also got a job on the telephone selling things so she was earning quite a bit of money in Canada.

She was there for three months and when she came back from Canada she brought back this great big trunk full of clothes - it was a sea trunk because she went by sea. She had bought us all the modern things because she had earned so much money. She even bought pedal pushers, which you couldn't get in England, and all sorts of tops. We really had lovely clothes ... it was just gorgeous.

CORONATION, 1953

Auntie Yvonne (my mother's friend in London) had bought two tickets to see the Coronation (of the young Queen Elizabeth). Jackie and I travelled by ourselves on the train to London to stay with her. We got up very early in the morning to get to Whitehall, to stand, but there was only room for Auntie Yvonne and Jackie so my aunt got me a taxi, told the driver where to take me and I ended up sitting with Chinese

people from Hong Kong watching the Coronation on the television! But I tell you something, I saw the Coronation so beautifully. Jackie came back and said “I only got to see the Queen of Tonga as everybody was so big, and I was getting pushed to the side all the time.” So in the end I got to see the Coronation much better.

They had all these parties in the street for the Coronation; we had ours at the school at the back of our row of houses. It was such a big do. In London, my sister and I went to a Coronation party there too, in Regent St in the West End of London. The whole street had great big tables all along it and all the food was free. And we actually got pop - we never got drinks like pop, it was always cordial - and it was all proper fizzy pop, which you don't forget. That's why you always associate something like the Coronation. And they gave us a little medal, which I still have.

AUNTIE YVONNE

Auntie Yvonne was my mother's friend who lived in London. (My mother met her in a hospital when she was working in London; Mum had left Aberdeen at the age of 19.)

Auntie Yvonne was a very interesting lady who was born on Jersey. She spoke French and had amazing contacts, knew all sorts of people, Chinese people, all sorts. I've got signatures from the singer Vera Lynne and the actor with the gap tooth, Terry Thomas, she knew him - he picked me up once and spoke to me. There was a photo but unfortunately it has been lost.

Yvonne had no children ... she was like our grandmother and really spoilt us. She always got us a doll or something - maybe from the black market. But she always insisted that we spoke French, so every time we had children to the

house for a birthday party - Jackie's was in August (summer in the northern hemisphere) so we had it on the lawn, she said: "Just like royalty, they all speak French so you've got to speak French too." But unfortunately my sister and I forgot it all.

We would visit her in London, in the West End - she lived around the corner from the BBC - in a tiny basement flat she rented. She had a small courtyard, bedroom, living room and a kitchen with a pully-up (wooden frame) to dry the clothes. And it always smelt of dog because she had two Pekinese. When I was much smaller we'd go and see her and she'd say "If you don't eat up I'll get the policeman", I'll never forget that. It made me not eat anyhow; I was a very bad eater.



1946: Me and Jackie in Northampton. Dad made this rocking horse.



*June 1955: Coronation Celebrations in Coventry.
(At top: Commemorative jacket for the photograph above.)*