

Cameos

Greta Walker

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Contents

| <i>Chapter</i> | <i>Title</i> | <i>Page</i> |
|----------------|---------------------------|-------------|
| 1 | First Memories | 1 |
| 2 | Mother | 5 |
| 3 | Grandmother | 11 |
| 4 | Grandfather | 13 |
| 5 | My Father | 23 |
| 6 | My Brother | 27 |
| 7 | My Daughter | 33 |
| 8 | My Granddaughters | 37 |
| 9 | My Son | 39 |
| 10 | South Africa | 47 |
| 11 | A New Beginning | 55 |
| 12 | My Thirteen Homes | 63 |
| 13 | Step Children | 75 |
| 14 | Partings | 77 |
| 15 | Mother's Sad End | 79 |
| 16 | The Nonsuch Club | 81 |
| 17 | Jim | 83 |
| 18 | Travel | 87 |
| 19 | The Closure | 99 |
| 20 | Friends | 109 |
| 21 | The War Years in Fairseat | 111 |
| 22 | Southampton to Australia | 119 |
| | Conclusion | |

Introduction

This book is not just about me, it is a tribute to my family and friends who have helped me to get this far. They have assisted me over hurdles, disappointments and pain, with great support. They have shared in my joys, my sorrows and achievements and for this I thank them, one and all. God bless!

When I started to write this book, I knew I could never hope to do justice in describing all the events and people involved in my life. Memory can be selective and unreliable. Please forgive all I have left out.

Greta Walker

Chapter 1

First Memories

I believe I was born over a sweet shop in Perry Street, Northfleet, Kent, in England. As I grew up the delightful smells emanating from that shop were sheer overwhelming pleasures; one of my favourites being the ‘walnut whirl’!

Across the road from the sweet shop was a rather lovely church called All Saints, and I think the name of the vicar was the Rev. Hoare. Some years later, whilst attending All Saints, I was to receive a prize for a religious essay, and was also praised for my neat handwriting. I would get no prizes for neatness today I might add!

Next, came my parents’ (Alice and Cyril Evans) first home which they owned. It was while living there, that I vividly remember a little man coming round the streets each night to light the gas lamps with a long lighter. This must have

been about 1933. The neighbours were kind; all the couples were legally married and hardly any of the mums went out to work. One of our close neighbours was Mrs Bolton; her toffee making skills were just wonderful! Another neighbour must have been the cleanest housewife I had ever met; her whole house gleamed like an advert for a polish manufacturer. She had no children, but had taken in a 'lodger' to make ends meet. I could list just about everybody in the street, including the one and only corner shop. At five years of age, I began school and was unfortunate enough to have a very nasty English teacher. One day he crept up behind me and deliberately jogged my elbow causing me to make a blot on my exercise book; BLOTS MEANT THE CANE ON THE BOTTOM. How I hated that man!

When I was a child, holidays consisted of one day a year at the seaside! My father would hire a car and the family would all pile into it complete with a picnic for the day out. Funds were short and this was our only, once yearly, treat by the sea! We did not ask for more, and of course there was no television or commercial radio to stir up any discontent! Our lives were our lives and we were almost always happy!

My father belonged to a volunteer army group, the Territorials. I distinctly remember that dreadful day in September 1939, when my dad dressed in his bus driver's green uniform, stood with his back to the dining room sideboard, and told us that war with the Germans had begun in earnest, and he had to go. "I shall only be about a week," he said. He was gone for six years. Those six years, as it did for many people, changed all our lives. It is painful for me to even think about being evacuated, let alone write about it, but it happened. Brown paper bags containing essential rations were issued to us at school, and then we were shunted off in groups to the local

railway station. We were being sent to the country where we would be safe from the German bombs. I was chosen by one of the villagers to live with her and was taken to a strange, albeit lovely, house. Those who took in an evacuee were given ten shillings per week. I could not bear being parted from all my family. Ugh! I was only eight years old.

Chapter 2

Mother

Part 1 ~ March 11th 2007

It is the 11th of March and, in six days time, it will be the anniversary of Mother's death. Looking back to a year ago, I had no idea that I was about to experience one of the saddest times of my life. Yes, Mother did want to die as she had been battling with pain and discomfort for many years, and although I wanted to feel relief as well as grief, it was still very, very hard to do.

Mother was 92 when she died and she had had a tough and difficult life; nothing was ever easy. Marrying my dad at 17, she was totally unprepared to be a mother some ten months later, but was greatly helped by my very willing and able grandmother. My grandmother helped so much that it was almost like having two mothers really. I think I was a difficult child – determined, stubborn and restless. My little brother arrived four years later. I think the gap must have been caused by the fact that another child like me could have been very

stressful! Life jogged along with Grandmother's help. My dad at that time was still a bus driver with London Transport. The outbreak of war in 1939 changed everybody's lives and, before I knew it, we school kids were hustled off in trains to get away from the threat of the German bombers! (See: We Remember Wartime Britain).

To send me off to grammar school from our little village of Fairseat when I was 11, necessitated funds of course, and that was when my mother's and my grandmother's initiative came to the fore; thus the laundry and mending business was born. Both these wonderful ladies toiled endlessly doing the washing, ironing and mending for the local army officer cadets. Remember, there were no washing machines or driers then. Cold water had to be heated and everything had to be washed by hand. For six years during the war, my mother had been used to being her own person and it was quite a shock for her, and many like her, to suddenly have to slot back into the 'wife only' role. Business and officer cadet customers, all gone. This was tough, tough also for my dad and, I would imagine, all returning service men. I would often hear 'words' between my parents after I went to bed.

Yes, Mother loved my dad – but she also had loved her freedom! Life was bleak for us all when we moved back to the town, (Gravesend), from our village of Fairseat. Dad had to get back into his work as a bus driver, but was unable to handle the journey to work through snow, by motor bike, in the winter time. We adjusted, but my brother hated the move and desperately wanted to stay in the local village school. He did so for some time; staying with my grandmother and grandfather. Whilst I have appreciated being able to go to grammar school in later years, at the time I hated it. A lot of the teachers were sport and exercise mad. I was not, hence my

very distinct unpopularity with a lot of them. Rope climbing and ladder work were not for me. Netball and lacrosse, at a pinch, maybe. However, English was great; also history and in later years these have been my most enjoyable subjects.

One day I saw an ad in one of the newspapers for a shorthand typist at the Law Courts in London. There was a glut of divorces following the war. I applied and got the job. Shortly after that, I was to meet my first husband, John. When we decided to become engaged, (people rushed to the altar in the early '50s!) my mother and father very kindly offered us half their house to make a start when we got married. This would have been a great sacrifice, to suddenly only have the use of half of their own house. This arrangement lasted for two years when we were in a position to put down a deposit for a home of our own.

Sadly, some years later, my brother was offered a job in Belgium and my husband offered promotion in Australia. My mother hated us living in other countries. At one stage I didn't see my parents for nine years! My marriage to John ended in divorce after 28 years. My second husband was in a position to travel and frequently took me with him. It was such a relief to be able to go to the UK and see my parents; they got on well with my second husband and very much appreciated his generosity, as did I.

Sadly, a few years ago my dear old Dad died. I don't think Mum realised how much she would miss the companionship and all the little 'handyman' jobs he did around the house and garden. Mother plodded on, a tiny bit of gardening, a tiny bit of embroidery and lots of letter writing. She wrote to me every week at one stage and I really miss that, as we were able to keep up with each others lives. I hope she is happy and relaxed where she is and Dad too!

Mother ~ Part 2

I learned as I got older, that you receive lots of things in life; lots of lovely things — BUT you only get one mother! Just one! As a child I was a handful, mischievous, energetic and sometimes very daring. All these things had to be curbed and it was not easy for my Mum; she was barely 18 when I was born and thank goodness for the help from my grandmother, otherwise her life would have been very difficult. During WWII, when I was nine years old, the British government decided all the children in our area should be evacuated, and off we went to be temporarily adopted by complete strangers. I needed all that energy and daring to get myself back to live with my grandmother. I refused to be parted from family! Dad was in the army and my mother had taken off with my little brother to somewhere safe from the German bombers. I didn't resent this as he was only five, and needed her.

I grew up in my grandmother's house, next to a farm, and enjoyed every minute of the war... Danger? What was that? I was always determined to keep busy and loved to explore. One day, unknown to my mother, I was determined to take a rowing boat out on an old and very deep pond. The boat leaked and I only just made it to safety!

As a teenager, I was a bit of a rebel, but I learned pretty fast that the majority of boys were propelled by a great desire, to increase the population! The only safe option was a firm "No".

My mother never let me down and, even when I was being my most difficult, she was there for me. She loved my brother and me and all else came second in her life.

My mother was distraught on the day my own little family, my

husband and two babies aged one and three, left for Australia. She was baffled as to why we wanted to leave England, and unable to pull herself together for a long time. Luckily I was able to visit my mother and father many times, which meant a lot to them and my second husband was most generous in not minding my trips to England. There are many more things I wish I had done when she was alive; we can never buy back time and I take comfort in thinking I did what I could and never turned my back on her; even when she got grumpy.

Mothers are very special people — mine was very generous and a great friend. I miss her very much.

Chapter 3

Grandmother

*G*randmothers come in all shapes and sizes; some get grumpy and some try hard to ‘beat the clock’ and to look younger than their years – sometimes absurdly so. My own grandmother was in a class of her own; I think she was perhaps one of the most unselfish and caring people I have ever known.

Let me go back to when I was about five or six years old. My treat for the week was to spend Saturday mornings at my grandmother’s house. I was allowed to have fresh bread rolls smothered in ‘piccalli’ for lunch; something I would never have been able to do at home. Afterwards, the two of us would take a trip on the bus to Woolworths where I could spend my sixpence pocket money. I thought Woolworths was wonderful and in those days hardly anything cost more than three pence.

My grandparents were quite poor and although my grandmother scrubbed the linoleum floor until it gleamed and also made rag rugs, they lived in a rather depressing house. My grandfather was out of work, and to balance their budget, they took in a boarder. The lady I remember seemed very old and hardly came out of her room. Grandmother had been a post-mistress and also a horse drawn tram driver in her youth but later, the only job she could get was as an office cleaner. She made no fuss about this and set off for work every morning at six thirty.

At this time my grandfather managed to get himself a job as an inspector for the Mid Kent Water Board. He located himself and my grandmother in a nearby village called Fairseat.* During those war years life was very tough indeed financially, with Dad in the army and only a small private's pension coming to my mother. Together, my mother and my grandmother set about starting a laundry business for the young army cadets in the local officer's training camp. No washing machines or driers in those days. It was sheer hard work, but it paid my school fees.

Later on, when I was working as a shorthand typist, I felt I wanted to help the family a little financially, so I sent my grandmother a postal order for two shillings and sixpence each week. I was earning three pounds a week in 1946.

I am a grandmother now and constantly remind myself of the importance of my role. Don't nag, don't lecture, but attempt to guide my grandchildren to keep on the right path. All I can do is try and hope.

Chapter 4

My Grandfather

For some time now, I have been meaning to sit down and write about my grandfather. He was quite a character and had a lot of influence on me as a child. When war broke out my father went off into the army. My grandparents had a small house which they rented in Fairseat and, although it was rather cramped, six of us were to live there for many years to come. As well as housing my brother, my mother and me, my grandparents had taken my elderly great grandmother under their wings. As great grandmother was in an advanced state of dementia, it could not have been an easy situation all round! However, we all got along very well. Grandad was an inspector for the Mid Kent Water Company and his only means of transport was his trusty old bike. He always had to take a set of 'keys' along with him, which enabled him access to inspect various reservoirs dotted around the countryside. Occasionally I went with him,

riding cross bar on his bike. I must have been very light weight in those days! One particular reservoir we visited was near the Vigo Inn. It was a delightful spot – very peaceful; and it was here I remember picking the sweetest wild strawberries

Grandad was very popular and had to visit many homes in addition to the reservoirs. These visits would span a very large area including Fawkham, Ash, Hartley, Stanstead, Hodsol Street and many others. He often came home with a rosy glow and a wide grin. Many of the home owners were very enthusiastic home made wine producers and naturally offered him a sample or two. These samples were often accompanied by wonderful home made cakes and pies. This kind of sustenance stood him in good stead on his extensive travels on the bike. No doubt my grandmother would have packed him lunch, as he would disappear after breakfast and return around five.

My grandfather continued working for the company until he was 77. The local newspaper thought they would do a story on this wonderfully active, elderly man. This proved to be bad for Grandad, as I think his employers felt a little guilty and retired him – why, I do not know. He was fit, loved his job and subsequently hated giving it up.

Grandad's knowledge of all the villages he visited was enormous. There was little he did not know about their history and the present inhabitants; he was in fact, a very mobile fund of knowledge.

During those early war years my grandfather was very patient. In the evenings, after the dreaded 6 o'clock news during which we all had to be completely silent in order to hear the latest on the war, he would play dominoes, 'snap' and all sorts of card games with me.

After he was retired from the company in question, he found

himself a part time job. This, as well as providing all the produce needed in the garden, kept him fit and busy until he was 90. He never sat around doing nothing. Of course there was no TV then, and only a crackling old mantle radio. So it was always 'outdoors' for him! I never once heard him raise his voice or get angry with us – though I am sure there must have been times when we irritated him no end.

Sadly, he died whilst I was living in Australia and I was not able to attend his funeral, or comfort my grandmother. I pay tribute to a grand old gentleman, and am grateful for all he stood for in my childhood.

Greta Walker



My great-great-great grandmother



*My grandfather, Frank
Fletcher, c1900*



*My great grandparents
and grandparents with
their sons, 1900*



*My grandmother at Ash
school house about
12 years old*



The old house at Ash with my great grandparents and my grandmother

Greta Walker

*My great-great grandma seated,
my great grandma, left,
and her sister, Louise, right*



*Granddad
Fletcher on
the steps of his
bakery, c1885*





*Me, 10 months old, looking at
my grandfather's watch, 1932*



*Me, aged 3, with my
mother and
great grandmother*

*Left: Grandmother's
patchwork quilt,
made by hand
during World War II*



Me, my mother and brother, David at 56 Granville Road, Gravesend, 1939