

MEMOIRS

Sue Dowey

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The author may be contacted through the Memoirs Foundation.

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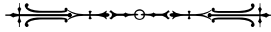


Foreword

I was born in 1948, in Lapworth, Warwickshire in the English Midlands. When I was two weeks old, my Mother took me to London where my parents lived at 6 Carver Road, Herne Hill. I have very few memories of life as a young girl. However, at the age of 4 ½ my Mother sent me to boarding school so that she could return to work as a Sister Tutor at King's College in London. My Father was the Hospital Secretary for the Croydon Group of hospitals to the north of London. I went to school at James Allen Girl's School in Dulwich and we were given Wednesday afternoons off. On these occasions I would sometimes go riding in Catford with my friend Joanna Bull. At other times I went rowing on the pond at Dulwich Park.

For annual holidays I visited my Aunty Barbara in Coventry and my Aunty Adelaide on her farm in Dorset. I enjoyed these times very much. In 1960 my dear Father died of lung cancer after a long illness and hospitalisation. I was 12 years old at this time and asked my Mother if I could work on the wards of the Belgrave Children's Hospital where she was the Tutor (the Belgrave was part of the King's Group of hospitals).

She suggested that I worked with Sister Watkins who was in charge of a surgical ward. This was very exciting for me, as I was instructed in the set up of dressing trolleys and allowed to feed babies, much to my Mother's horror. This hospital work continued during the rest of my school years.



Chapter 1

I woke one day to a surprise: my Mother told me we were going to live in Nigeria for two years. My Father had died four years earlier and my Mother, a Sister Tutor at King's College Hospital, London, was to be seconded to the University College Hospital in Ibadan. This meant that I was to leave my boyfriend Tony (who I had met at my friend's wedding) behind.

We sailed from Liverpool to Lagos, the trip took two weeks. It was holiday time and there were many teenagers on the trip. I became very friendly with Hilary whose parents were also about to start a new job in Nigeria. There was a carnival and competition for best dress-ups which Hilary and I both won, she being dressed as Britannia and I as a mermaid.

We were met off the boat by another Sister Tutor who had a car and driver waiting to take us by road to Ibadan. The road was shocking with potholes and puddles everywhere. She showed us to our flat, which was lovely and breezy with windows facing each other. By word of mouth a young houseboy by the name

of James introduced himself to us saying he understood that we were in need of a steward. He was a pleasant enough person so my Mother hired him on a month trial basis. He was to do the cooking and cleaning, washing and ironing; he addressed us both as “Madam” and so as to avoid confusion my Mother suggested that he call me “Little Madam”. He stayed with us for my Mother’s tour of duty. The next day we were introduced to everyone at the School of Nursing including a Mrs Starling who was considerably younger than the tutors and who taught biology to the student nurses.

She came over to my Mother and asked if I could go to the International Club on Tuesday evening where there was a dance for the holidaying teenagers. She kindly offered to drive me there and back again.

There was a striking dark chap playing the double bass. I told Mrs Starling, who was later to be known as Jean, that I would like to meet him. She asked one of the club members his name and if he would make the introduction when the band had finished playing. Bill introduced me to Frank who invited me to the bar for a drink! I asked him to make a suggestion and he ordered me a Cinzano and lemonade which turned out to be a very nice drink, one, which it turned out, I was to enjoy with Frank on numerous occasions. I told him about my Mother being seconded to the hospital and he told me that he worked for Patterson and Zerconis who traded in automotive goods.

Before returning to play the double base Frank asked me if I would like to go to the club dance on Saturday. I replied that I would have to check with my Mother but that I would like to. This was to be the first of many dates, which developed into a close ongoing relationship. In short Frank became my sweetheart. Frank was on the entertainment committee for the club and asked if I would like to join. We had wonderful events

including cabarets and a bunny hop at Easter. My Mother liked Frank and was supportive of my involvement at the club and came with Jean to all our cabarets. After one such evening Frank asked me if I would like to go to the nightclub before going home. Naturally I said yes. The night club was called "The Osh" for some unknown reason and was run by a Lebanese trader called Victor. It was dark and romantic inside and they played current hits as dance music. We particularly enjoyed the slow tunes as we could cuddle up! My Mother had said she would wait up for me as she wanted to ensure I got home safely at 1 a.m. I thought I was pushing my luck. This arrangement continued for many weeks and she became very tired with all my late nights so she asked me to wake her up when I arrived home. However, 1 o'clock soon became 2 o'clock and she suggested that I did not wake her at all, trusting that I got home safely.

One night I didn't go home. We left the Osh and Frank took me to his flat where we lay on his bed kissing and canoodling. The next thing I knew the sun was streaming through his red curtains and I shook him awake. I hastily put on my dress and shoes and rushed out to Frank's car where I found Marcelanus (Frank's house boy) cleaning it; the mats were out on the driveway and Frank joined me driving away quickly leaving a puzzled Marcelanus and the mats on the driveway. We now had to explain ourselves to Mother and it was a very sombre looking Frank who apologised profusely for keeping me out all night. Mother said that at least I was home now and she would see Frank later, so I thought I had got off pretty lightly!

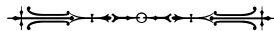
On Sundays, Frank collected me at around 10am and we went to the club's pool where we swam and sun bathed. Sausages and chips were the fare for lunch and it wasn't until about 4pm that we left. It was a fine way to recover from a late night.

I studied at the University of Ibadan and, when I was not attending lectures, taught English to kindergarten children. I greeted them with, “Good morning,” and they replied suitably, but when I came to converse with them I found they knew little or no more English than that. So I had my hands full but soon found them to be fast learners.

Tony continued to write, declaring his love and wanting to marry me – what a dilemma: Tony or Frank?

Mother’s contract came to an end, so we returned to London. I was determined to wait for Frank to come back to England. Tony was most put out and so moved to Hong Kong to be a Police Inspector. Frank returned and introduced me to his parents and we went to the Lake District where his Uncle had a hotel and where Frank was Assistant Manager. But all was not well. We lacked the magic we’d had in Ibadan so I came back to London.

I reflected.



Chapter 2

I wrote to Tony saying that I had made a mistake and he sent the air fare for me to fly to Hong Kong. I knew I wanted to marry him. I was listening to the BBC radio and heard a delightful piece of music, “The arrival of the Queen of Sheeba”, which I thought would be most suitable for my walk down the aisle.

The day I arrived in Hong Kong, riots broke out at a plastic flower factory and were the start of months of disturbances.

Tony booked me into a hotel, about one kilometre from his station at Mongkok, where he was a Police Inspector. He went to work, telling me to take a taxi at 5pm to Mongkok. So I stepped outside my nice hotel but could not find a taxi, thus I began to walk.

There was an air of agitation around and no taxis! I arrived at the police station and asked for Tony. He came to meet me asking if I was alright because riots were breaking out. He took me to the Mess, saying that where I had just walked from,

Tsimsatui (where the plastic flower factory was) was considered unsafe for me to have done so. That night he moved me into his quarters. We later discussed the wedding and I said I wanted to go ahead, riots notwithstanding. So we went to see the Rector of the Cathedral who agreed to marry us three weeks hence.

I knew no ladies to be bridesmaids so I decided to wear a large orchid thus not carrying a bouquet (eliminating the need for a bridesmaid to hand it to). From the Officers in the Mess Tony and I chose a best-man, Derick and a “Father”, Charles, to give me away. Derick organised the hire of morning suits – unfortunately they were winter weight to be worn in Hong Kong’s summer!

Riots were spasmodic.

We were driving in Tony’s car one day, when there was trouble. He told me to duck down so a European would not be seen. We were based in Kowloon, but often went shopping on Hong Kong Island. One day we returned to the mainland by ferry and walked straight into a riot. There was a police station on the nearby rise and its gates were closed but there was a policeman outside observing the rioters. Tony pulled me towards our parked car, saying, “If it gets any worse, run up the hill and the policeman will let you in.” However, the rioters fell away so we got into our car with our shopping bags.

Derick took me to a local Chinese Hairdresser where I had my hair put up in curls, asking them if they could copy it on the wedding day. They were very happy to oblige. He also took me to a baker where we ordered the wedding cake. Tony and I arranged the reception at the hotel in which I had first stayed: we were to have champagne and canapés.

More riots, meant that all police leave was cancelled. I loved Tony very much so I found it hard to suppress my fear for his

safety. The date for the wedding was upon us and I was invited to get ready at the Superintendent's house. Charles came to collect me and we had a Police escort to the Cathedral. Going up the aisle, the organist played as asked, Handel's, "The arrival of the Queen of Sheba", just as I had heard on my radio in London I found this far more suitable than the popular, "Here comes the Bride".

At the end of the reception the Manager gave us a vase of roses to take away; Charles gripped it and led the way to the waiting cars. We drove back to Mongkok with some wedding cake for the Mess.

Someone took a photo of Charles with the roses outside the police station and a truck was driving past, so it looked as if he had just got off the lorry dressed in his morning suit, roses and all!

We had been allocated a lovely Government flat under Lion Rock with a view of the runway for Kai Tak, the original airport, so we chose soft furnishings of striking blue and green for the lounge/dining room, and crimson for the main bedroom. We didn't bother with the second bedroom. Kitchen items including china and cutlery were chosen and to this day I still have the cutlery, one saucepan and two casserole dishes! We did manage to take the odd day off and, among other things, went swimming at the beautiful beaches. We also drove up Victoria Peak and gained a terrific view of the harbour.

Riots surged on and off, so when Tony told me that he had volunteered to do bomb disposal work I was extremely worried. I feared he would be maimed and I did not care to imagine how I would cope if this occurred. However, I tried not to think of this when we went to the beaches and coves on his rare days off.

It was at this time that a terrorist blew up the water pipe line from mainland China to Hong Kong leaving us with water rationing

of 4 hours every 4 days! We filled every container possible including the Amah's huge wooden tubs on the rear balcony.

Fortunately, Mongkok police station was responsible for guarding our district's water work station, so daily we drove to Mongkok and showered! Since then I have never wasted water and cannot bear to see a tap dripping!

Concurrently, I had been offered a teaching role at St Jude's School, near our flat. Not only was it very convenient, but the school was delightful. There was a lovely atmosphere and the three other teachers were very welcoming, plus the pupils were well behaved. To be candid, I loved it all.

One evening when Tony was working, I was listening to the radio when the announcer said that there was a police squad where a bomb has just been disarmed and he asked the Inspector his name and he said "Tony Harrison" What a surprise!

The riots continued and I developed renal colic which was treated at the hospital. Subsequently, I became ill with another kidney illness - pyelonephritis, and that took a long time to improve. However, when I had recovered, Tony and I decided we would try to have a baby. As it happened, I fell pregnant within two months and we were thrilled. There were no ultra-sounds in those days so we were unable to tell whether the baby was a boy or girl; but I was determined to have a boy and we named him Philip. (We liked the abbreviation of Phil too.)

I was very unhappy now in Hong Kong, with no end to the riots in sight, so Tony and I made plans to return to England. We bought a house in Billericay in Essex and furnished it. I chose to have a home birth and was allocated a lovely midwife named Mrs Richards.

My labour started at 7am on the 23rd of May, 1968, and at 10:45 am Mrs Richards delivered Philip, weighing 8 lb 4 oz.

He was a wakeful child and my Mother gave him brandy to quieten him on his first night – that didn't work! He spent night after night in our bed.

I was unable to leave him to cry as he turned blue if I did, so life was one long juggle. Solids didn't pacify him and he was at his happiest in my arms when I sang to him. We decided, pretty quickly, to have another child and get this 'baby business' over and done with. Philip slept in our bed so we could all get some sleep. He was very smart at potty use so by the time he was twelve months, he was clean and dry.

Philip was christened in the Parish of Great Burstead. He was an angel and did not cry at all during the service.



*Philip's christening, Dr Margaret Fisher
(his Godmother) holding him – 1968*

For his first birthday, we took Philip to Regents Park Zoo (London Park Zoo), which brought back many childhood memories for me. My Father frequently took me to Trafalgar Square to feed the pigeons when I was quite young. We would then go on to Regents Park. Before these outings, my Mother would make us delicate egg sandwiches for our lunch. Those were the days of camel and elephant rides, and when you could feed the animals. My Father always allowed me to feed the egg sandwiches to the elephants and this was an unspoken secret from my Mother. I have no memory of what we ate in their place. It wasn't until I was about 35 years old that I told my Mother the fate of her egg sandwiches.



Dr Mavis Stanhope, Nicholas' Godmother – 1969

Tony and I had chosen Nicholas as the name for our second baby, who was delivered at home, on August the 8th 1969 – weighing 8 lbs. Much to my relief it was a boy! For the first 4 weeks after his birth, we had an au-pair which was very good for me. Two weeks after she went home to Belgium, Nicholas slept through the night but Philip still slept with Tony and me. We had Nicholas christened as well, with Mavis as his GodMother.

Tony had been studying externally for a chemistry and zoology degree which he passed with second class honours. When Nicholas was three days old we took him and Philip to Falmouth in Cornwall by the sea.

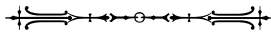


Three generations: Uncle Frank, Philip, Sue, Aunty Adelaide (Sue's Mother's sister) and Nicholas

We had perfect weather and the boys were on their best behaviour. On the way back we called into Exmouth at the invitation of my Aunty Adelaide and her husband Uncle Frank who both had retired from their farm in Dorset. We had a lovely time with them - Aunty Addy is always so good with children.

One evening, when Philip was 14 months, unexpectedly at 6pm he was in his pyjamas, holding his bear and looking extremely tired!

I was amazed and put him to bed – and for the first time, he slept through the night in his own bed! From then on that was how it went – at last he was sleeping!



Chapter 3

Life went on happily for the four of us when, in July 1970, Tony was offered a job in Lagos, Nigeria, working for a pharmaceutical company. So, after he accepted, we let the house and literally packed our trunks and flew to Africa. Major and Company was happy that I had experience in Nigeria and knew what to expect.

The flight from London's Heathrow to Lagos took six hours; Philip slept all the way and I gave Nicholas a bottle. We flew with B.O.A.C. (British Overseas Airways Corporation) and when we arrived at the customs hall with our cases, the Officer would not let us through. I told Tony that the Officer wanted a dash (tip) which tended to be the case throughout the country. So, once money had changed hands we were on our way.

The company provided us with a large house in Palm Grove, Ikeja, a few kilometres from the city of Lagos and where many expatriate families were situated. The entrance to the house was through French windows alongside a large carport, surrounded on two sides by raised flower boxes.

The doors led into a huge lounge/dining area adjoined by a kitchen with a pantry, and a powder room. Beside this was an impressive staircase leading to a corridor, off which were three air conditioned bedrooms, a bathroom and separate lavatory and shower. Opening off the third bedroom was a good sized balcony (over the carport). And running the length of the house beside the stairs was a covered area with railings at either end. In the wet season, washing could be hung to dry here.

I asked our neighbour's steward (cook, cleaner etc) to find me a good worker and he recommended Desmond, who was an Ibo from Eastern Nigeria. Desmond had a pleasant disposition and proved to be a hard worker. I made it very plain to Desmond that he was always to tell me the truth, and that, for example, if he dropped something and it broke, he must never lie and was to always tell the truth.

The next thing I did was to employ a local carpenter to make two gates for the top and bottom of the stairs to prevent Nicholas from either climbing or falling down them.

I began to make some friends who were living in Palm Grove. In particular were Anna, my neighbour, and Myra, a German lady, whose husband managed the Barclays Bank branch where we banked. They told me that there was a kindergarten that used to be run by Sandra, one of the Mothers but, she was soon to have a baby, and had ceased running the school. I told them of my experience in Ibadan and that I was keen to re-start the school, so they introduced me to her and I organised our driver to collect the small tables, chairs and equipment. I sent a letter to all the houses in Palm Grove telling them about the re-opening of the kindergarten.

I received a promising response to my letter and it turned out that I was to expect 10 children on the following Monday morning.

We had brought many toys with us including a slide, which proved useful for the kindergarten.



Sue's kindergarten in Lagos, Nigeria

It was, however, clear to me that I could not take care of Philip and Nicholas while I was running the kindergarten, so I asked Desmond to find me a nanny. He found Felicia, a tall Ibo girl who spoke good English. She came to see us one evening and I had told her that I would employ her. Desmond promptly took her into the kitchen and said to her, “Never lie to Madam. If Madam will kill you, she will kill you, if Madam will let you live, she will let you live, but never lie to Madam!” Thus was Felicia’s introduction to our household. The boys took to her well and spent several days with her before my kindergarten opened.

With the addition of Felicia, we now had a staff of 7, which included Clement, the gardener, Michael, who opened the tall gates to the drive and three watch-nights (guards) who patrolled the compound at night. They were provided by the company and comprised an Ibo, a Hausa and a Yoruba – the idea being that if one fell asleep, the others would report him as they were opposing tribes. The system worked very well. It was interesting watching these people – they all carried things on their heads. Desmond would emerge from the house with a load of washing on his head, Clement would carry a box of weeds on his head and the watch nights all arrived bearing bowls of food on their heads.

We had purchased a rubber paddling pool for the boys and I was surprised to see Philip take a pot of water from the pool and try to balance it on his head too. He had obviously been observing the staff closely.

Occasionally, I arranged with Tony to have the car and driver so I could visit a nearby garden nursery – so I was able to purchase plants for our garden. Clement kept the garden neat and tidy and was encouraged by the arrival of new plants. Anna gave me many cuttings which perplexed Clement as he was sure they would not grow without roots.

The kindergarten ran from 9am till 12 noon and I had arranged toys, including the slide, on the carport base (there was no oil or dirt) and the tables and chairs upstairs on the covered balcony. I was quite excited on the first morning, as I welcomed the children and their Mothers. The latter left quite quickly and I was pleased that there were no tears.

We commenced with play, the slide being highly popular. Then we went upstairs and drew pictures on individual blackboards; we paused for drinks and fruit and went on to singing a variety of songs. Finally we pasted coloured paper shapes onto A4 sheets.

The time went quickly and, at 12 o'clock, the Mothers returned, anxious to learn how their offspring had settled in. Sometimes I would give the children material with which to make collages or pre-cut shapes of animals to paste onto paper. This was combined with teaching them to count up to 10 and to copy their own name.

I went out to the garden nursery one day, and on my return, Daniel, the driver and I noticed that the hibiscus hedge, which bordered the compound and the road, was stuffed with coloured plastic bags. So once inside the house, I asked Desmond to have a look at the hedge.

Desmond reported to me that the plastic bags were Michael's lunch bags and that he had told Michael to remove them. One black mark!

One of Major and Company's agents was Dennis, who represented Ethicon, a suture company. He was a happy go lucky Australian and he often joined us for a drink at the Ikeja Hotel. He told us about Australia and suggested we settle there when Tony's contract ended. At this time we did a bit of sight seeing around Lagos travelling to the Ikoyi River among other places.

When Dennis learned that I had taken squash lessons while Philip was a baby and which continued after I had given birth to Nicholas, he suggested we play squash in the afternoons. He collected me and we played in a concrete court, without a roof, right in the middle of a golf course. After playing, we had lemonades in the club house then Dennis drove me home.

Tony bought a small boat, which we used on Sundays. Desmond had a day off, so we packed a cold box with drinks and sandwiches and motored around the creeks where we found a small beach with many small crabs on it which proved ideal for the children to play on.

We invited Dennis to join us on Sundays, so he brought with him some beers and a portable tape recorder with tapes that we played while motoring along; songs such as Simon and Garfunkle's "Bridge Over Troubled Water" and a good selection of The Beatles' music. We had a lot fun.

One Sunday, we returned to the house to find Michael missing. No amount of calling out his name could raise him. So I climbed onto the car's bonnet, over the gates and opened them. Michael must have heard the sound of the motor, and he appeared from the rear of the house. He was obviously surprised to see me. I asked him where he had been and sheepishly, he told me he had been sleeping. "Well," I told him, "a gate watch who sleeps on duty is no use to me." He began to speak but I held up my hand, "You're fired," I said, and turned my back.

The next evening Desmond said that Joseph, one of the watch nights wanted to speak to me. I queried this and Desmond told me that Joseph was Michael's Uncle.

I went to the French windows: "Good evening Joseph," I said. "I come to beg for Michael's job."

"No No," I replied, "Michael was sacked because he had been sleeping."

"Yes, Madam," answered Joseph, "I beat-um and I beat-um proper, I beat -um for back, for leg, for arm and he will never do it again. I beg for his job Madam."

I thought for a moment then I said, "You are sure Michael will not sleep again."

"Yes Madam."

"Well I will have him back, but if he sleeps again, you will loose your job too."

Joseph looked pensive, so I urged: “Go away and think about it as you have to be sure.”

Joseph said, “Good night Madam.” And left. He was obviously not convinced about his effect on Michael!

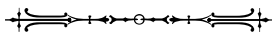
Next morning, I could see Michael on duty at the gates and commented on this to Desmond. “Yes Madam,” he said “Michael showed me his arms and legs and back where his Uncle had beaten him.”

“Let’s hope he has learned his lesson.” As I recounted my conversation with Joseph, Desmond grinned.

So, life continued with Tony enjoying his contract. As I enjoyed my kindergarten and social life. Representatives from Pfizer in England came out and we hosted several evenings with them. This included taking them to a night club in the heart of Lagos where we danced merrily.

On such occasions Desmond baby-sat for me, taking a straw mat outside the boys’ room, he lay down and rested, listening in case they should wake.

Tony’s contract came to a happy end so I closed the kindergarten as nobody else wanted to run it. We flew to Geneva and hired a car and drove to Gunten a village near the town of Thun.





Sue stroking a lion cub in Switzerland, outside a zoo