

CHAPTER 1

It was 6.30 a.m. on a dark, bitterly cold morning quieted by a blanket of white hoar frost. I opened heavy eyelids. 'Margie, time to get up,' my father called from the bottom of the stairs. Minutes later he tapped on the door 'Come on, time to get up', he insisted. I answered with an almost inaudible grunt. I stretched my legs drawing them back quickly as they crept towards a chilly untouched area of white sheet at the end of the bed. Looking over the bed covers I turned half closed eyes towards the window, and involuntary shivers swept through me. From the pavements outside, street gas lamps were shooting weak streaks of light across the glass, creating delicate frost-lace patterns as fingers of ice stretched across cold window panes.

The day had begun. Getting out of a warm, cosy bed was a great effort. It took every bit of courage I had to lift the feather eiderdown and to wrap it round my body and heave it up to my ears in an attempt to ward off the icy air. Once beneath the eiderdown I used my well rehearsed skills to find and put on my warm slippers. On the way to the bathroom I scratched the frozen window with the tip of my finger nail, breathing hard onto the scratched surface. As I peered warily through the melting ice my body became racked by goose pimples, my eyes took in the cold scene of glistening frost encrusted pavements. I closed the bathroom door firmly; the air from the paraffin stove was warm and vents in the top cover reflected fern-like patterns of light and shade onto the ceiling.

Slipping from under the eiderdown I washed quickly, wiped the steam from the mirror with a towel. A dressed reflection looked

back at me. 'Not bad' I said to myself with a wry smile. A final pat to my wavy black hair, a tug of my gymslip and I was ready to start the day. I felt comfortable in the black and gold school uniform; our blazers, hats and the boys caps had a band of blue, purple, red or green, depending on which school house we were in. I was in Delves, my house colour was purple.

My father was the only person who called me Margie, to my school friends and a few select others I was simply 'Cog', a nickname derived from my failure to define this particular object, when it was drawn on the blackboard of the science laboratory. It never died, other people called me Jean. A coal fire in the kitchen range burned brightly, warm air rose to greet me as I walked down the stairs.

Ladling steaming hot porridge into a dish I covered it with brown sugar, a little milk and a lot of cream. I ate my breakfast quickly in order to catch a green Well's bus from outside the house to Harecastle station. The train left at 8.00am. Its destination was Crewe, and school. My long-suffering mother stood patiently waiting in the hall holding my satchel, gas mask, and hockey stick. She was tall, straight and elegant. 'Do hurry Jean' she said anxiously as she pressed money into my hand for school lunch and 10.00am tuck. With a kiss and a 'Goodbye mum,' I scurried out into the frosty air.

Well's bus was on time and the train was too. As I ran from the bus stop to the station, I almost lost my hat in sudden gust of wind 'Oh Heck 'it was a hard and fast rule that hats must always be worn to and from school.

The train drew slowly into Harecastle station, stopping with a screech of metal wheel on metal rail. Leaping into the carriage I was greeted by warm damp air jetting from beneath the seats as it steamed up windows and spectacles. Passengers hurried past to other carriages, opening doors then hastily closing them, in an effort to keep out the icy blast. Everyone huddled, shivered, and

wiped dripping red noses, as they pulled up their collars and blew warm breath into their woolly gloves before settling down.

I tucked myself into a corner and noticed the cold, red chapped faces of fellow passengers and I wondered what the day had in store for some of them. Workers wearing heavy boots, stretched blew their noses on red spotted handkerchiefs and yawned noisily as they swayed in rhythm to each movement of the train. Alongside them office workers clutched well worn brief cases. 'The-knees-together-brigade' were stifling yawns with frustrated sighs, tapping their lips rapidly with gloved fingers as they looked out of the window into the misty haze which hung over damp fields, before drifting through the hedges as it crept into every distant corner, painting an indistinct, chill landscape.

At two minor stations on our way to Crewe, the train picked up a daily contingent of commuters who mostly looked sleepy and grumpy. I wondered if it had something to do with the noise of the chattering students whose breathy words hung shrill in the chill morning air. The older travellers stepped sedately and with care into carriages; the younger contingent struggled with their bags calling loudly from one to the other, commenting on a recent date, or giving a shove in order to hurry the others along. Flopping into their seats, they greeted me rowdily, 'Hello Cog' they chorused. The conversation touched on the difficulties of last night's homework, as backwards and forwards we discussed what we felt was right and what was probably wrong. Everyone seemed to have found it difficult. Oh dear, maths!

We drew into Crewe station which was alive with people. There were parcels of every shape and size all of which were in the process of being heaved from guards' vans and piled high onto station platforms. Leaving the warm carriage was a cold skin-chilling experience. We made our way quickly through chattering hard-nosed porters who were intent on pulling flat-topped, open

wooden trucks by their long metal handles, to the mountains of goods which were standing on each platform. Their job was to transfer every item, including milk churns, to the part of the platform which was marked out for its on-going destination.

It was a 15 minute to walk to school, so there was no time to waste. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed the wave of a green flag and heard a shrill whistle -blow. The guard leaped back into his van, closed the door and stuck his head out of the window as the train chugged out of platform two.

His face would soon be enveloped by a cloud of steam as the engine pulled slowly and noisily away. Skipping up the steps from the platform to the forecourt, we hurried along broken uneven pavements leading to school. We deposited ourselves in the warmth of the assembly hall with some relief and time to spare, becoming lost amid the sea of boys and girls who diverted the attention of a sharp-eyed headmaster from the figure he eagerly sought to ridicule. My mother had chosen this school for me. I felt it was a drain on her finances, fees, reading books, text and note books, and of course uniform all had to be paid for.

This was in late autumn, October 1940, during the second world war which raged despite Chamberlain having given many promises to the Germans in exchange for, 'Peace in our time'. Most pavements in the streets were decorated with smoke screens. Huge barrage balloons hung high in the sky. Sirens screamed to warn of air-raids, when people would disappear into Anderson shelters, holes in the ground, and pub cellars. Others braved it out. There were slogans of every description 'Dig for victory' was one; 'Is your journey really necessary?' was another. Chamberlain had collapsed. Churchill's speeches and rhetoric kept everyone 'fired up', getting us through what appeared to be an impossible situation.

There were ration books which covered everything from food to

clothing. Imaginations were stretched as people wondered what to bake, what to sew and what to make out of the little they had. In the North West people dreaded the Germans aiming a direct high explosive hit on the station of Crewe, because its huge network of lines was a vital link with the rest of Great Britain. Crewe Works and the Rolls Royce factory were both prime targets; so many of our cities had almost been reduced to rubble.

My father became a member of the Home Guard, he took his duties very seriously and he bored my mother to tears with 'do's' and 'don'ts'; my brother cried a lot. I went to climb trees and play cricket with the local lads in nearby woods to get out of the way. Dan Bolton knocked on the door 'Coming to play cricket Jean?' he called. Nodding, 'Yes, I'm coming' I replied, whilst hurriedly lacing my shoes. There was no holding me back. 'Don't be late Jean' mother would call, with meaning. 'Okay' was my usual reply as I grabbed my cricket bat.

Most people dreaded Crewe station but I liked its distinct smell of oil, smoke, engine grease and something else which I could never quite put a finger on. I liked the jostle of the crowds, the hustle, bustle and noise which seemed to give it an air of mystery, and seductive romance. The lights of the station were dim, to some a little daunting. Trains drew into their scheduled platforms, guards gave an ear-splitting cry, 'Crewe, all change at Crewe'. Sleeping passengers shot back to life, tumbling out still drowsy onto greasy platforms. They squinted through the dim lights in an effort to spot a porter. Some sought the exit, others platform numbers for a connection to on-going destinations. Each platform had tiny shaded light bulbs squinting onto signs revealing doors to the toilets and the way to newspaper kiosks. 'Careless talk costs lives', said posters on the wall. People cupped their hands around warm mugs of steaming drinks bought from the small waiting-room cafés on every platform. As trains pulled out slowly they were chased by late passengers running with coats flying, towards the

nearest door of the train. Puffing and blowing they pulled down the door handles, leaped in and slammed the door behind them, just in time.

Massive engines coupled to passenger trains, goods carriages and rolling stock moved endlessly along the network of lines which made up Crewe junction. Smoke and jets of hot steam belched from below the engines. Passengers and troops jumped from trains at the end of their journey, leaving others to wait wearily for a little longer. Some perhaps to wait for connections which may not arrive at all. It was the norm in this frenetic hub of railway travel in the North West during the war years. The platforms were usually a heaving, moving mass of humanity. Blobs of civilian colour were interspersed with khaki, RAF blue and navy. There were posters, porters and billboards advertising everything from cocoa to sausages displayed on walls alongside platform numbers. Tension merged with staccato cries of wild excitement, some faces wore broad smiles in their expectancy, others with heads hung low said farewell to their loved ones.

In Crewe town most streets were blacked out, windows were draped with dark heavy-duty curtains to prevent chinks of light from spilling out into the night. Some cars ventured out, drivers nose to glass peered warily out of steamy windscreens into almost empty streets. Hooded headlamps were of little help. The one exception to this darkness was at the time of an air raid when brilliant fingers of light stretched from strategically placed search lights on the ground, reaching up, spreading out and penetrating the inky black sky in search of enemy aircraft. Positive sightings would result in a whip lash crack of anti-aircraft fire. Long metal barrels pointing up to heaven fired shells which split the night skies, to finally explode like giant fire crackers.

One autumn night, sirens wailed their all-clear, high explosives and incendiary bombs had fortunately failed to hit their intended

targets. A small explosion quite near to Crewe Grammar School created a flurry of activity, creating considerable chaos. Lessons were disrupted, staff were in confusion, pupils were excited and in high glee. Teachers instructed pupils, and the pupils reluctant though they might have been, followed the instructions without hesitation.

It was during this time that one day, during a period of private study, I sat on the shaded side of the assembly hall with my legs curled beneath the desk, reading, when suddenly I noticed the handsome boy a little older than myself who was sitting opposite. The sun was directing a shaft of light onto his fair wavy hair, giving emphasis to his broad shoulders and the stocky frame beneath. I gave a little shiver, it was my first inkling of how suddenly 'lightning can strike'. We lifted our heads at the same time, our eyes met and a future was born. Little did I think that this small seemingly unimportant incident would have such an impact on my future. Our eye contact was followed by the quick flick of a note from the end of a ruler, the paper was folded into a tight pellet which landed alongside my foot. With pounding heart I bent to pick it up. I unfolded my treasure carefully stroking it out over the desk top. The message in small neat handwriting said, 'Can I walk you to the station?' I looked up and he gave me a tiny smile. I was flushed, overwhelmed and in a dreadful flap. I replied without hesitation 'Yes'.

Each day after this, Jim Moss collected his green bicycle from the boys' cycle rack and walked to the top of the drive which led from the gate of the girls entrance, to wait for me. He leaned relaxed and patient by the wall, his head slightly to one side, a fair uncontrolled curl lying softly over his forehead. He never seemed to mind waiting, he said 'If I want something badly enough I shall wait, forever if that is what it takes'. Catching sight of me he winked, and his face broke into a shy smile. He

lifted his bike and walked towards me; taking my hockey stick, gas mask and satchel he tied them to his cross bar. We sauntered along in a dream walking over broken misshapen footpaths which led to Crewe station, down the luggage ramp to platform No 2. It was here that we made plans for future dates. Each day became magic.

The next day, as on all other days we walked to the station together, it was raining but we barely noticed. The headmaster had decided the whole school was to go to the cinema to see the film 'Stanley and Livingston' which he felt would be a good geographical learning curve, a diversion during the bomb disruption. Each group upper, middle and lower school walked in crocodile to the Plaza cinema. The line buzzed with excitement. Wangling seats side by side had not been difficult. Dreams began to unfold before our eyes. The big cinema screen led us into Africa, in our imagination we were exploring Africa together. The continent seemed to hold everything we loved and had so often talked about. We could visualise animals wandering in herds through wide tracts of bush country hung over by vast moody skies. There were risks to be taken, isolation and unforgiving heat, the people, their way of life and all the mysteries of their folklore. The film gave substance to our dreams and the belief that one day destiny would lead us there. 'I love you Jean Brindley' and 'I love you Jim Moss'. We were fifteen years old!

During the war our cities were devastated, Crewe on a smaller scale was part of this national picture. Sirens wailed, shrapnel fell, the streets were turned into rivers of bricks and rubble. There were smouldering 'skeletons' which had once been lines of street houses, shops and factories were standing like jagged teeth against the skyline, their very fabric lying amongst the watery debris littering the streets below. Fire engines and firemen fled in all directions in their efforts to douse flames which threatened to take hold and

devour everything in their path. Winston Churchill offered us, 'blood, toil, tears and sweat' for however long it took to win the war.

Jim, along with other boys from school was recruited into the Crewe sea cadets. I stood amongst my friends and others who went to watch them on parade, I made a point of jostling to the front. It was a jaunty, jolly affair, at times they were a little out of step as they marched down the main street of the town but Oh! we were so proud of them. They looked very smart in their naval uniforms. The sight 'fairly made yer toes curl!' In their enthusiasm they looked as though they could change the whole course of events and we went along with this image.

We walked over the fields of Cheshire gun in hand, accompanied by Rover the dog. Rabbit pie was a good source of protein and meat was rationed. We had every excuse to catch rabbits. On warm sunny days we were tempted to sit in the long cool grass as we talked and we dreamed. Sometimes Jim made me long daisy chains, putting them over my head. 'Suits you' he would say wistfully'. We sat talking of Africa, of our hopes for the future and, more relevant to the moment, of our next date. Later with fingers entwined we ambled our way home, bending to pick wild mushrooms on the way.

I loved going to the pictures even though it usually meant me waiting, with racing heart and baited breath beneath the clock at Smith's bookshop come rain or shine. The bus always seemed to be late, which threw me into a complete panic. In time the red double decker bus would appear round the corner from Victoria street and there he was, swinging on the bus rail, with not a care in the world. A smile on his face, a wink in his eye, and his curls blowing in the wind. Seeing him was the cue for me to dash to the bus stop excitedly.

Queuing at the Odeon cinema meant standing beside many other

folk in the alley which ran alongside the wall from the back of the cinema to the foyer. The wind howled relentlessly down this narrow opening. Regardless of the season, the cold air sent people jostling in the gusts of wind. I put my back to Jim and he slid his arm around my waist to protect me against the onslaught of the draught! Our chances of getting the seat we preferred were better when we were at the front of the queue. In the entrance to the foyer an attendant stood waiting to welcome the patrons; he was always resplendent in a green suit with ornate gold epaulets and trimmings of gold braid. His shoes were black and shiny. His face shone, his fair wavy hair was Brylcreemed and neatly combed back. He allowed two, four, sometimes six people at a time to approach the cash desk to buy tickets. Green clad usherettes standing at different points in the cinema switched on torches, checked the tickets and then tore them in half. They led people through the haze of blue tobacco smoke to their seats. We always chose to sit beneath the finger of light stretching from the projection room at the back of the cinema to the screen beyond. Beneath this light an intimate darkness beckoned all young lovers. We settled down in a rosy glow of contentment. I felt an arm reach over my shoulders. Here and there, girls dressed in the same shade of green carried trays secured around their neck by a canvas cord. The trays displayed drinks and goodies for sale. As more people arrived the place buzzed with excitement and chatter, which competed with shrill whistles from boys when their eye caught sight of an attractive girl. There was the noisy sound of people sucking at straws from empty bottles. Added to all this matches and lighters flared and cigarette ends glowed in the dim light.

When the show began an organ rose slowly from the dark crevice beneath the cinema screen, both player and organ picked out by a spotlight. The organist who was always immaculately dressed, played 'God save the king' with great aplomb. This was followed by assorted music for some minutes, then a burst of introductory

music heralded the film. As the curtain was slowly drawn back, the organ began to retreat into the inky blackness from which it had previously ascended.

No one ever seemed to see that special someone secreted in the projection room; the man who set the spools rolling and the screen blazing to show the latest news of the war by Pathe Gazette, together with the assorted advertisements and excerpts from films soon to be shown. There were previews of westerns, thrillers, love stories and musicals of the time. It was the age of the big band sound. We had seen Glenn Miller in 'Orchestra Wives'. At that time, there were so many soft and sweet songs. 'Serenade in Blue' became a tune with very special meaning. It evoked heart-wrenching memories of each phase in our lives, the gentleness, passion and love which always burned so brightly in our hearts.

The light thrown from the screen and projection room pierced the haze, picking out patterns of uneven lines, hazy featureless heads some upright, some side by side, others stealing a kiss. At the introduction of next week's film there was a momentary silence in the cinema, on this occasion it was to be 'Now Voyager' the theme tune was 'Wrong'. We decided there and then, that we would see it. Also coming soon was 'Casablanca' starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman; it made such an impression on us that we walked out of the cinema in a dream, especially me! In the future at some of the most poignant times in our lives, Jim, would look into my eyes and say quietly, 'Here's looking at you kid.' His delivery of this short line was so full of meaning that I almost turned to jelly.

Some Saturdays we went to the Astoria ballroom in Crewe, and sometimes to the town hall. My mother never seemed to mind or worry if I was with Jim. This was very odd, she was usually so particular as to where I was going and with whom. In those young halcyon days, we danced misty eyed to some of the tunes of the day, our looks spoke volumes. Other faces we knew from school

stood around, some alone, some with girls, a few having visited the pub were a little bleary eyed and slightly worse for wear.

The war continued to rage, changing the course of events. Churchill encouraged us to go forward, towns were still suffering, ravages of the blitz. Our risks were pretty remote compared with city folk. Danger was always around the corner, it could strike anywhere, with no warning. As summer came we took to the hills, we rode on our bicycles to Beeston and Bickerton hills. Sitting amongst the heather we picnicked on sandwiches and boiled eggs all washed down with tizer. It was a good and simple life. Caught in a summer storm, we sought shelter beneath big oak trees, or in a hole in the hedge. Always we emerged sodden, but happy.

Slowly our lives moved on to another phase. Jim's finals were fast approaching, he had chosen after completing them to go to agricultural college. Tropical agriculture would be included in his studies. We still met as often as possible, though we did not have the close proximity of the past. There were times of quiet desolation as I tried to get to grips with the changes. The green bicycle was replaced by a B.S.A. 650 motorcycle for greater ease of travel between college and home.

Due to an eighteen month age difference my exams were a year after Jim's. We became a little gloomy over events Jim asked me what I had in mind for the future. Nursing I told him. We had discussed this many times in the past, now the crunch had come. Nothing was the same, the bubble had burst, no hand turned inwards to give me chocolate when girls passed boys on the school gallery. Our 10a.m. break was no longer something to die for.

Each day I walked to the station following the same worn pathways. Now, unaccustomed to struggling with luggage, I hauled it over my shoulder only to find it would persist in slipping down, almost driving me frantic. My friends made 'sad' comments 'What a

state you are in,' 'Come back Jim all is forgiven' they muttered, helping me to heave the bag straps back into position. In the train I put my baggage onto the rack, Jim had always done this for me, 'For goodness sake buck up' Brian called from the corner opposite, 'Just hush' I replied. His brother Tony picked up my hockey stick which had fallen from the rack. 'Thanks Tony.' I smiled at him, Brian said 'Not again', he had often noticed how his brother came to my aid. I sat and stared vacantly out of the window, miles away.

Suddenly we were in Alsager. 'Cheerio Cog' they all chorused. 'See you in the morning'. 'Bye I'll look out for you'. Looking out meant pulling on the door strap which let down the window and sticking my head out. Running towards the carriage. 'Hello Cog,' they would yell, piling in and flopping down. It would be the start to another day. I was brought out of my reverie by the porter yelling Harecastle station. Grabbing my luggage, I stepped from the train and set off to walk the odd mile along the canal side, to the village of Hall Green.

A small Cheshire village, Hall Green had, at this time, a chapel, a pub and a village store which sold literally everything. It belonged to my friend Alby Pierpoint. There was a tennis court and a club house which was approached by a particularly narrow path over bad tempered Mr Maddocks' fields. A little further down the road in Scholar Green, a small village hall was a meeting place for locals. It was here that residents rehearsed and performed in light opera. Everyone gave of their best. The village audience, seated on wooden chairs, cheered and clapped with infectious enthusiasm as each participant appeared on stage to do their 'bit.'

Silence fell as the production began, broken by fervent chattering during the ten-minute interval, before the second half. At the finale the audience clapped again whilst a local dignitary handed flowers to the principal players.

Everyone enjoyed these 'get together' times, the wail of sirens doing little to quench their enthusiasm. The village hall was also used as a meeting place by the local village band. Each week they practised for the annual garden party held at Rode Hall. Music from 'The Gondoliers', 'The Merry Widow' and other such 'gems' rung out over the grounds, guests dressed for the occasion sat at small tables, ate scones and drank tea from china cups. The garden party was fun. There were coconut shies to tempt accuracy and pride, trinket stalls, lucky dips, ice cream, pop corn and cream teas. Boat trips were taken on the lake, teenage boys and girls paid their money and a boat was chosen. The boys, in a show of fierce masculine energy, rowed away from the tiny jetty, flirting madly with the girl sitting at the opposite end.

Always, as I left the house to go to this event, mother called, 'Keep out of trouble Jean.' I was never quite sure what she meant, but felt that had Jim had been with me the comment would not have been made. Those were the days! The days when in nearby Moreton Hall, a beautiful Elizabethan house, surrounded by a moat, pageants were staged. The days when the cubs and scouts, brownies and guides, paraded with the brass band, marching their way to church for the Armistice service.

Mother had given a temporary home to an evacuee, Sam. He was enjoying a different way of life and had become much more relaxed since living with us in the village. There was no blitz to fear, no blood, no sweat, no tears. He took well to the country and country ways and was sad to leave his new family when the time came. A desperate wish to see his parents helped the sadness.

With Jim at college I found other ways of whiling away my time. I visited my aunt at the Moors farm. Here, on the kitchen beams hams hung to cure; eggs, milk thick with cream and other perishables stood on a marble slab in the huge walk-in larder. One of my chores was to carry out 'baggin' consisting of tea and a basket of sandwiches, to the men working in the fields.

At this time in my life my most relaxing hours were deliberately spent in a green and verdant valley not far from my home. It was called 'Sandy Desert' and this was my bolt hole from prying eyes; the noise of people, the place I went to when I wanted to be alone and in peace. I could search my thoughts without interruption, I could daydream, sing, read, draw, paint and weave dreams in this magical place. Undisturbed on the grassy slopes I could think of the past and make plans for the future. My faithful, battered old school bag carried sandwiches and a bottle of water, or lemonade if I had pocket money to spare. Despite the heat of summer, the stream rippling through the trees at the bottom of the green slopes could be soporific and relaxing as it danced its way over stones and pebbles, swirling its way round marsh marigolds and cuckoo pints which had strayed from the banks to the water's edge and beyond. Usually I placed a piece of grass between my teeth, lying down in an effort to juggle with my uppermost thoughts. Up popped a face, it was Jim. Gazing up at white vaporous clouds scudding over a blue sky, I wondered if he too was looking up at these same clouds. We often watched and commented on the sky together. So many emotions raced through my awakening body on these occasions.

One day whilst lying there, memories came flooding back to the time of my fifteenth birthday party; mother had decided to take a group of my friends for afternoon tea to Moreton Hall. Jim was late and I had refused to move until he arrived. I could visualise it so clearly. Suddenly there he was, arriving just moments before the bus. Blonde curl bobbing he sped round the corner, deposited his bike and ran, running, puffing and blowing, full of apologies, towards us.

Still lying idly on the grass, watching the clouds, my imagination flew to the evenings when he had ridden over to the market town of Sandbach to see me, having first helped his father to wash and put away the glasses after the bar had closed. He had thought little

of jumping onto his bike, peddling like hell as he sped over the five miles of country lanes, in order to arrange a future date and give me a much awaited hug and kiss 'Goodnight.' Only to be off again, back into the darkness on his return journey, a street lamp revealing his quick wave as he disappeared round the far corner. Wistfully I gazed after him humming, 'Serenade in Blue.' On the above occasion I had been staying overnight with my cousin, her husband had an ironmongers-cum-fix-it shop in the high street. There was a narrow entry running up the side to the back entrance, in which we could hide!

I snapped out of my dreams, time to sit up, come back to reality and concentrate on my drawing. I paused from time to time to make sure the shading was in the right place, giving the effect I wanted. A bee buzzed by flicking my cheek as it passed, back again, around my head it went. I swung out my hand. It disappeared. I could not have been happier, alone with my thoughts, dreams, sketch book, pencils and a picnic. In the gentle breeze my imagination drifted to the soft touch of a hand reaching out to give me a bar of chocolate. Suddenly there was a nip in the air. I gave an involuntary shiver. 'Time to move,' I said to myself. It occurred to me to visit my artist friend she could comment on my sketching. Snapping out of my reverie I picked up sandwich paper and rubbish and stuffed it into the bag. It was now late afternoon, time to make my way home.

As I climbed over the stile I shivered again, it was becoming even cooler. I felt I needed a little constructive criticism of my drawing, work must be finished and presented to the art master within the next few days. Ambling absent mindedly along the sandy lane towards the main road and my home, I was suddenly drawn to a halt. 'Mm coffee,' I murmured to myself, as the smell of delicious percolating coffee drifted over the air. I was approaching Maria's house, she had seen me coming along the lane and was leaning against the gate. Huge tortoiseshell glasses and long brown hair

framed her dark handsome face and her slim fingers were adorned with enormous silver rings and tipped with blood red nails. In her mouth she held a delicately balanced cigarette holder; protruding from the holder was an aromatic Passing Cloud cigarette, its tip gently glowing like a fluorescent bead. Her dress as always consisted of slacks and a shirt covered by a paint slashed linen smock. 'Calling in for coffee?' she asked. 'Lovely thanks, could you give me an opinion on my drawing?' 'Sure, come on in.' We went into her tiny room in which there were seats topped with chintz covers; a small table covered with a lace cloth and set with china teacups patterned with small pink roses. Beyond this room, her cluttered studio held everything from brushes to paints, huge easels and canvases, she was a very successful artist.

We sat down and over coffee discussed my drawing. She felt it was well drawn, of good content and pleasing, there was little she could find fault with. We sat chatting in this cosy atmosphere until the bewitching crepuscular light appeared, as darkness began to fall. 'Time to say goodnight,' I feel I should make the short walk home. 'Thanks for coffee and for your comments'.

'Goodnight, sweet dreams, may see you tomorrow,' Maria chucked me under the chin, a habit of hers. I went out into the now dusky moonlight, closed the little wooden gate and continued on up the lane. Maria was a divorcee, I felt a little apprehensive as to mother's reaction on hearing of my visit to her home. My fears were unnecessary, she was dancing attention on my younger brother. I crept in unnoticed. The following day I followed my usual routine and caught the train to Crewe.

Jim, by this time, was having new experiences, meeting new people, making new friends, he was learning from a different and unfamiliar curriculum, his horizons were widening. He was enjoying college and making the most of his time there. Many opportunities opened up and were directed at him, his finals had been a great success. He

weighed up the pros and cons of what he wanted from life. His choice was to go overseas. Lurching from day to day I travelled backwards and forwards on the train to school. Life did not hold the exciting events of the past. One day merged into another, all seemingly alike with no light and shade, no quick heartbeats. Come the end of the school day, how I missed the lonely figure standing on the platform waving until the train was out of sight. I had put my head out of the window, frantically waving back, until I could no longer see him through the billowing smoke belching from the engine's chimney. Then sitting down I had read the little note scribbled for me on the back of my mirror, just before the train was due to leave, 'I love you Cog.' Those were happy days.

These days I settled into a corner of the carriage, and gazed through a haze of smoke thrown back by the old steam train. My thoughts persistently dissolved into a dreamlike quality, imagining a life with Jim. Meanwhile I had exams to pass, and my future to attend to. I had chosen nursing as a career I had better get on with 'things'. Oh how we rejoiced when the war was over. How we danced on V.E. night. The streets were full of revellers, everyone had a party and most streets had a communal party. In every conceivable hall in the country people danced, their faces wreathed in smiles, to a weary standstill.