

Chapter One

Vic Andrews is sitting in his living room. The blackout curtains obscure the windows of the terraced house he and his wife Louise are renting. They have been married for just over three months. The war is on but the young couple, like the rest of Britain, are still waiting for it to happen. Meanwhile they both work long hours in noisy, dirty factories.

Vic has returned home first, bringing with him a modern radio to replace their old model. He has decided to tell his wife, if she complains about unnecessary expense, that a good radio will be essential in wartime. Besides, it is Christmas soon.

He has plugged it in and tuned to a concert. The sound of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony is bringing him feelings he has never experienced before. What a wonderful new world this radio will bring to them, he thinks, as the music puts pictures in his mind like the great masterworks he hopes he will paint one day.

The war is far away.

He is at peace.

The front door that leads directly to the street from the living room bursts open. For a split second he sees his wife silhouetted against the moonlight, and then the door closes. She reaches for the light switch and he blinks against the glare as she stalks over to the radio. She switches it off.

'What did you do that for?'

'It was a noise,' she says.

Dad realised for the first time that he had a problem.

Music was always a noise to my Mother and books an unnecessary encumbrance. Second-hand books caused her particular distress as they brought dirt and germs into the house.

‘They might have been in a hospital, or belonged to someone who died of diphtheria or T.B. They ought to be baked in the oven.’ she said.

Dad was reduced to smuggling his literary finds. Whenever he could he would cycle to the Saturday Market in Handsworth where he would fill the panniers of his bike with books. He would stop for a lunchtime pint and then cycle home, sneaking the bike down the alley at the side of the house, through the back gate and into the yard, hurrying to get it stowed safely in his shed in the garden. Taking the newest, cleanest and smallest book into the house he would tell Mother ‘Nothing much today Louise, only this one’.

Mother would nod her grudging approval and Dad would go upstairs to his front room den where he would place the book on a shelf. When Mother was out he would bring in the other books and lovingly clean them before adding them to his collection.

Music, books and art were the most important things in my Father’s life and he ensured they would be central to my life too. I also had a room of my own, and the first thing Dad had put up for me was a bookshelf, where I also hoarded the reading matter Mother so resented. She must have noticed how our shelves filled, but she kept her own counsel when she realised she could not change us.

It’s a cold, wet autumn evening in 1947. I am four years and five months old. I am on the top deck of a bus, sitting between my Mom and Dad. I am watching the street lamps. As we glide by, they light every drop on the window with a rainbow of colours.

The air is heavy with damp from the drying clothes of the passengers, and thick with cigarette smoke.

We stop for a Moment and then the conductor leans over us to ring the bell to tell the driver it is safe to move off. To verify this, the conductor peers at a mirror set in the stairwell that affords him a good view of the platform.

In his hand he clutches a wooden block with a wire stretched along it. Held behind this wire are the bus tickets of various colours, each denoting the size of fare paid. Father hands over his pennies.

'Two adults and a child, please,' he says.

The conductor takes the appropriate tickets from behind the wire and places them in the slot of a metal machine he has slung across his shoulder and resting on his hip. With a swift movement he uses it to punch a hole through the tickets. This is accompanied by a satisfying 'ting'. The holes in the tickets are proof of payment. He gives them to my Father and moves on.

'Fares please,' he demands of the other passengers.

For my birthday I have been given a conductor's outfit. I have a peaked cap, a wooden block with a wire, a selection of tickets and a punch machine. On wet days when I cannot play out of doors I arrange four chairs in the front room as the seats on a bus, and I march beside them demanding loudly 'Fares please'.

Ting.

The conductor completes his upper-deck trawl and turns and walks past me to the stairs to the lower deck.

He is humming 'Don't Fence Me In' under his breath.

My Father worked in a factory as an inspector. He was a small, trim man, prematurely balding with an almost military way of talking, clipped and factual, with only a hint of a Brummie accent.

Mother was of an equal height with auburn hair that could have been her crowning glory if she had only let it, but it generally hid under a hat or scarf and was kept quite short. She had a hare lip which I didn't notice, and which nobody else noticed after their first meeting, but she carried it like a cross, sure that it irretrievably ruined her good looks. It didn't, but in later life I often wondered if Mother felt that Father was the best she could expect to get, although in terms of class she felt his family were below hers.

In any relationship there is, to some degree, the lover and the loved, and I know Dad loved Mother very much, but I don't think she loved him in the same unconditional way. She certainly never thought of herself as 'working class' as she and Dad owned their own house, but when she spoke, her Brummie accent was broader than my Father's except when she was in company or talking on the phone, when a more 'refined' voice was affected. She irritated me beyond reason whenever she used it.

The bus stops on a street of small, two-up, and two-down terraced houses. We get off and the bell tings. The driver begins his laborious task of working his way through the gears as the vehicle pulls away from the kerb.

Mother opens her umbrella and pulls me close to her side as we run through an entry into a square courtyard. The backs of the houses all face inward towards a block of six outdoor lavatories set in the middle of the yard. We splash across cobbles, followed by Father to an open doorway filled with light. It is Auntie Millie's

house. As we enter we are enveloped in a fug of cigarette smoke and the heat from the roaring fire burning in the grate of the brick-floored kitchen. Welcomes are shouted, and our coats are taken to be hung to drip dry in the pantry alongside the coats of all the other family members and friends who have made the journey to 'the do', a regular diversion from the drudgery of everyday life.

My Father is poured a pint of beer from a large blue jug. Mother is given a glass of lemonade, as she is strictly teetotal. I am given a mug of Dandelion and Burdock pop from a bottle with a screw top that has a bright orange rubber band around it.

My Uncle Jack is here. I like him a lot. He is very loud and funny and walks with a limp, having lost a leg in a factory accident. He is married to my Father's older sister Hilda, a small, quiet woman who shares the clipped vocal style of my Father and his inability to roll his Rs, but with Hilda it is near to a speech impediment.

Uncle Jack sees my Father.

'Allo Vic!' he roars. He claps him on the back affectionately. Dad reels from the force of the blow.

'Good win terday, great goal by Jackie Stewart.'

Dad nods, unable to speak as the breath has been driven from his body. Earlier I have gone to our front gate to get the sports paper from the man who walks down our street every Saturday evening yelling 'Sports Argus, Ciitty Final'.

These are the two competing sports papers. The Argus is pink, The Final is blue, and although our team is Birmingham City - The Blues - Dad prefers the pink paper. When I give it to him he remarks how amazing it is that within such a short time of the end of matches nationwide he can buy a paper with all the match reports

of the local Football League teams and up-to-date tables. Before we leave home he sits down and studies these, ready to fill in next week's pools coupon, having already checked the current week's results against the radio reading on Sports Report, a sacrosanct Moment in our week. I love the brass band signature tune... 'Da da da da Dada, Dadada da da Dada da da'

I sit on my cushion on the floor humming the tune as Uncle Jack gives Dad all the details of the afternoon's match at St Andrews.

'Gil had a good game according to the Argus.' Dad says.

'Gil Merrick was a giant, Vic. 'E could 'old the world in one 'and. Wharra goalie!'

Father nods before adding, 'Villa lost.'

The two men grin, touch glasses and drink deeply.

We had only recently moved to live with my maternal Grandmother at number 85, Kenilworth Road, Handsworth, an end of terrace house, three-up, two-down, with a kitchen, no bathroom and an outside lavatory down the yard.

My earliest years had been spent in Redthorne Grove, Stetchford. The house had a large garden with blackberry bushes at the far end. As a baby a wasp stung me as I tried to pick the fruit. I had a swing that could be hung from hooks above the patio door on hot summer days. It had a bar that could lock across the front so Mother could leave me there as she did her housework. I swung gently to and fro as time passed in a doze of heat.

I had a friend to play with, although she was much older than me. Her name was Pauline Jones. Mother had found her one day, crying at the top of our road as we returned home from shopping.

‘You alright, love?’ she asked.

Pauline cried even more.

‘What’s the matter darlin? Are you lost?’ Mother put a comforting arm around the distressed child and listened patiently as the story was sobbed out. Pauline’s Mother had just lost the baby the young girl had been so looking forward to. She wept her lost dreams into Mother’s arms.

‘I would have... loved the baby... so much... I would,’ she sobbed. ‘And I would have had... someone to play with...’

‘Oh dear, oh dear, what a shame.’

Mother thought for a Moment and then pointed to me, wrapped up warm and cosy in my pram.

‘This is Harvey. We live down the bottom of the road. You can come and see him and play, and even help me bath and feed him if you like. Would that be nice?’

Pauline nodded, wiping her nose on the sleeve of Mother’s coat.

‘Come on then. Let’s go and see your Mom and see what she says.’

Next day there was a timid knock on the front door of our house. Mother opened it and smiled.

‘Come in darlin,’ she said.

From that morning on I had an older sister, for a few years at least. I was sad to leave her behind when we left Redthorne Grove, but I was happy to be going to live at my Gran’s.

The blue jug is empty, as is the brown, and the two stone bottles.

‘Refill time!’ the men chorus.

Four of the older children are given money and a jug or bottle each.

'And don't yer go suppin' it neither.' they are told.

Bribed with the pennies to buy a packet of Smith's crisps, they walk together to the outdoor department of the public house, fifty yards down the street. This is a hatch in the wall that opens to the pavement. They knock on the hatch until it is lifted and then hand over the jugs and bottles to be filled with bitter beer, hand-pulled from the wooden barrels stored in the cool cellar. Then they slowly walk back to the courtyard, the two entrusted with the jugs staring intently at their charges to make sure no drop is spilled. The children with the stoppered bottles hold them firmly against their chests, the crisp packets dangling from their fingers.

I watch as they carefully step over the draught excluder in the doorway and hand their responsibility over to Uncle John, who has elected himself barman for the night. He takes the stone bottles first and then the jugs, pausing as he takes the one from my cousin Tony.

'I told yer not to sup it d'ain't I?'

Tony looks up at him innocently.

Uncle John smiles, takes a tea towel and leans down to wipe the froth moustache from Tony's upper lip.

'Yer a little devil.' He winks.

Empty pint glasses are filled all round. The air is blue with the smoke of Woodbine cigarettes. My cousin Tony opens his packet of crisps and searches for the blue bag of salt. He finds it and pours the salt into the packet before seeing my hungry eyes. Reluctantly he offers me the first crisp.

The noise level is rising as alcohol warms the tired bodies of men who have worked hard for six days, and the thin frames of the women who give all the best food to their children and husbands.

Auntie Norah suddenly shrieks with laughter. It's a penetrating, desperate sound, an explosion of pent-up feeling usually suppressed by the weight of the weekly bills, the effort of doing the family laundry in the communal wash house, and the continuing, never ending fight against dirt, poverty and depression. She shrieks again. Tonight she will recharge her soul ready for the coming week's battles.

Uncle Jack sits down at the upright piano and, without lifting the lid, begins to play music with his feet. It's a Pianola with a wide pedal, which powers a roller inside the body of the instrument. A wad of punched paper unfolds. Every hole is a note that catches a little lever that activates the mechanism to make the sound.

A woman's voice starts the evening's proceedings.

Other voices join in:

And I dallied and dillied, dillied and dallied.

Lorst me way and don't know where to roam...

The sing-along has begun.

Gran lived in the front bedroom. A door was built into the wall at the bottom of the stairs, so that Gran had her own personal entrance to the house from the entry that ran the length of it. She could come and go as she pleased without disturbing the three of us behind the door that led from the living room to the stairwell. At the top of the stairs was a landing with a door on the left to Gran's room. Further down on the right was the door to Mom and Dad's bedroom, and facing the door of Gran's room at the end of the landing was the door to my back bedroom.

Gran had been a seamstress all her life. She had a fine Singer sewing machine mounted on an intricate iron frame where she would sit for hours operating the foot treadle that powered the furious up and down motion of the needle. I would watch as

she skilfully manoeuvred cloth beneath it, transforming it into clothes. She had a large tin containing all sorts of strange things; hooks and eyes, chalk, a type of soap used for marking cloth, tape measures, lumps of beeswax, and a wonderful selection of buttons. She made all my clothes and Mother's dresses.

We had a lavatory, but it was down the yard next to the coalhouse. It was fine in the summer to go down there and sit on the wooden plank. Mother would cut my Father's Daily Worker newspaper into squares and then thread the squares onto string to be hung on a hook inside the lavatory door. This was our loo paper. Post-war austerity did not allow paper for toilet rolls, and the little that was available was too expensive for us. Of course Mother used Gran's pinking shears to cut Dad's newspaper, thereby giving the squares a nice serrated edge. This, she felt, put us socially above our neighbours, who used ordinary scissors or tore their paper by hand. On winter nights the outdoor lavatory was a daunting prospect, so both my parents and I had chamber pots under our beds. Gran had a commode to save her 'traipsing' outside on a frosty night. It looked like a heavy chair, but when the cushion was removed the lid lifted to reveal a porcelain lavatory that could be sat upon in comfort. I used it once when Gran had smothered it with some foul chemical cleanser, and my urine dissolved the powder into a gas that stopped my breath and stung my eyes. I coughed and spluttered for an eternity, and felt sure I would die. Gran said it served me right for being a lazy beggar, but she soon took me on her lap and cuddled me close to her ample breast until I was better.

On winter mornings we made our various processions to the lavatory carrying our waste pots like prisoners slopping out. It seemed a perfectly natural thing to do. The smell of life was all around us all the time; there were no sprays to hide it, no deodorants to disguise it, no dry cleaning, and no washing machines. From the kitchen

ceiling there hung a five-barred clothes rack that could be raised or lowered by rope and pulley. Clothes newly washed on Monday in the tub and put through the mangle in the yard were hung on the rack and then hauled up to the ceiling to dry over a period of two or three days.

The songs are really flowing now. The lid of the piano is up and Uncle Jack has disconnected the Pianola mechanism and is taking requests. He can play any popular tune with a vamping style of solid left hand rhythm which he keeps going while the right hand searches for the melody and occasionally finds it.

'Come on our Vic, gie us a song,' Uncle John asks.

Cheers and claps greet this request and then the room goes quiet as Father moves to the piano, placing his glass on the embroidered doily on the sideboard.

There is a song my Father sings that stops the show every time. For a small man he has a fine untrained tenor voice, and he can achieve that emotional catch in the throat at the beginning of a word that is the hallmark of every working class tenor in the West Midlands. Birmingham has always been an immigrant's city and so it has no real cohesive folk culture of its own to compare with so many other places in the British Isles. My Father, a leading exponent of Brummie 'Ya' singing, is the nearest we ever hear to a tradition we can call our own.

Dad clears his throat and sets his feet, raising his eyes to a spot on the ceiling. Uncle Jack plays the notes of a chord individually, with a flourish. Father takes a deep breath that suddenly gives him a startlingly large barrel chest, and then begins to sing with a sob at the first word:

Ha... Marta, ramblin' rose of the wildwood... ya...

Ha... Marta, with your fragrance divoigne... ya...

The women sit and stare pensively at the same spot that attracts Dad's gaze. Occasionally, an admiring glance is flashed at Mother who is embarrassed, as always, when Dad makes a public spectacle of himself. As she is tone deaf she cannot really tell if Dad has a good voice or a bad one, she would just rather he didn't do this sort of thing. As he hits the final high note and holds it until his face is beetroot red and the crockery rattles on the dresser, Mother squirms in her seat.

A roar of approval greets the end of the song and Dad's glass is instantly replenished. Glowing with happiness he sits next to Mother who whispers 'You've 'ad enough'.

'Oh, come on Louise, relax and enjoy yourself,' he wheedles. He goes to put an arm around Mother's shoulder, but she shrugs it off and purses her lips in disapproval.

'Refill time!' the men chorus again.

I am only four-years-old but I watch all of this intently. I can see my Mother is not as happy as my Father, and I wonder why. My Father's voice has entered my soul and I know I can hear him sing in my head whenever I want to for the rest of my life. The thought fills me with happiness.

The evening ends with a queue outside the lavatory block. The sound of music is replaced by the sound of chains being pulled and water flushing. Collecting our coats we kiss everyone goodnight. Uncle Jack gives me a threepenny bit, and so does Auntie Millie, although she can ill afford it.

We wait at the stop for the bus that connects with the last bus to our part of Brum. Now the excitement and the singing is over I am dead tired, but the fresh air keeps me awake. Dad sways in the gusty wind as the bus approaches. It grinds its way to the stop and we climb aboard. Dad slips on the platform and grabs the pole to

steady himself. Mother tuts under her breath. We sit on a double seat and I lean against her and begin to nod. Dad sits in front of us on the side-facing seat just inside the platform. Twenty minutes later he vomits spectacularly all over his coat and trousers and shoes and the floor of the bus. The volume of brown liquid is such that it splashes Mother's legs. White with horror, she apologises to the angry conductor and drags a somnolent and muttering husband off the bus at the town terminus.

This has woken me up. I stand near my parents, but not too near, as the smell is awful. The queue for the last bus gives us plenty of room, and though the bus is nearly full, the passengers manage to leave the seats near us empty. Eventually we get back home, and Mother hands me over to Gran who grimly puts me to bed. As Gran tucks me in Mother is weeping as she washes Father.

The shame of that night never left Mother. The next morning nothing was said and it was never mentioned again. It was the only time I saw my Father drunk. From that day to his last Mother counted every beer he drank in public and after four half pints she would always mutter 'That's enough, Vic' and Dad would put down his empty glass and leave it.

In his last years he became a skilful home brewer and managed to drink behind the closed doors of his den whilst Mother knitted downstairs, staring at whatever was on the television, happy to leave Dad alone because they were not in public and he could not disgrace her. The distance between them seemed vast to me. I never saw them kiss or hold hands.

When she was dying many years later Mother dropped her barrier to reality for a short while and we talked about things we had never mentioned before. Eventually I was able to ask her;

‘Did you enjoy sex Mother?’

She thought for a Moment.

‘I suppose so, as much as you can enjoy that sort of thing.’

It was the most personally revealing thing she ever said to me.

That night I couldn't help but weep for my Father and Mother. The gulf between our generations had never been highlighted for me in such a dramatic way. If only their ignorance of sex and of their own bodies could have been replaced with knowledge, they could have had so much more pleasure from their lives. But pleasure was a word that disturbed my Mother, a word she submerged and controlled with another word: duty. So she never knew what she had missed and the passion she saw on the screen or read about in books passed her by. I'm sure Dad knew what he was missing, but the boy who had been raised by an alcoholic Irish Mother who never showed him any real tenderness was happy to trade the physical side of sex for the comfort of a woman who kept a good home and cooked him decent food.

This was the home I grew up in.

Mine is not the story of a deprived and unhappy childhood. We were a normal working class family, never in debt but never able to ‘splash out’. These same roots nurtured a generation that burst onto the music world in a 1960s revolution that enriched so many lives and enabled us to live and work in ways our parents could never have dreamed possible.

We were at the right place, at the right time, and we read and we listened and we followed and we found.