

CHAPTER ONE
Paperback Novel

Proud Hearts & Strong Wills

Pene Thornton

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To Ben

Who always knew me better than I know myself

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Matthew.

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Any remaining spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors are mine.

CHAPTER TWO

Prologue

Craven Buildings, London 1900

The room was hot and airless, as she lay on the bed trying to master her emotions. She could hear the children in the room next door, especially when Iris, the eldest daughter, tried to keep them quiet. She knew she should move but the weight of her emotions and deep, deep tiredness made her legs disobedient to her will or did she really want to move?

Someone was in the corridor – was it him? No, the footsteps were too sharp and precise. When he came to the door it was slow, deliberate steps. It was a neighbour, probably off to use the shared privy.

Must remember to get Iris to clean it before any of us use it, she thought; the thought skittering across the surface of her mind; while below emotions seethed and boiled waiting his return.

Iris peeped around the door, “Anyfing you need, Mum?”

“Keep the little ones out of here!” She said, her voice harsher than she intended. Iris disappeared quickly, not before she had seen her daughter’s bottom lip caught between her teeth in concern. She heard a sudden wail, then a slap and silence. Must have been the youngest, Junie. Not the youngest now but still the youngest; she corrected herself. Iris must really be concerned if she slapped Junie. Junie was just two years old, blue – eyed and dark curled hair, everybody’s favourite.

God, she prayed, send Charley home soon, get this over with. I’m so tired.

She must have dozed for a while as she woke with a start at the sound of a door opening, suddenly drenched with sweat. It was Iris with the midwife.

“I just popped in to see how you were, Mrs Thomas.”

“Get out! Leave me alone! I don’t need you meddling in the affairs of me and mine!” She was shouting now, she was dimly aware of Iris’ eyes filling with tears, the sound of the little ones next door beginning to snivel, a sudden quiet behind the walls on the other side of the room. The midwife turned on her heels and flounced out of the room.

“Iris,” she commanded, “get me a cup of tea.” At least the appearance of the midwife had roused her from her lethargy.

Iris made to go over to the fireplace. Her mother stopped her. “No, its alright, I will get my own. Is William home yet?” she questioned as she swung her legs off the temporary bed and stood up.

“No, its early yet,” replied her daughter.

She looked for her purse, opened it and scabbled about for a few coppers. Giving them to her daughter she said,

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Here, take these and get some chips for supper and a bit o' fish if there's enough" Iris looked surprised, it was a rare occurrence when her mother got food cooked elsewhere. "Run along, don't take all day", her mother scolded. Iris didn't need urging a second time and disappeared out of the door as quickly as she could.

Alone again and on her feet she started to pace, her anger and other emotions she didn't want to name threatened to break her grim self-control. The pacing didn't do much for her agitation.

The room was small, no more than four paces wide and five long and sparsely furnished and with six children there wasn't much leftover for furnishings. They could only afford the two rooms in the mean three storey building in central London. It was all she and Charley had known all their lives. They would be like a fish out of water away from the perpetual hum and bustle of London. There were six other families living in the building, all sharing the same outside privy but each family could do their own cooking – if they wanted to. Agnes was a firm believer in home cooking, trying to feed them all at least one meal a day. There was always a fire in the hearth above which a large black kettle or pot hung always simmering. Even in summer, it was June, the fire was kept going. Good food and spirits of salts was her recipe for six healthy children and she meant them to stay that way.

A sudden spasm in her stomach made her pause in her furious pacing. Tears threatened; she clenched her jaw and willed them away. This was not a time for weakness.

More steps in the corridor outside. This time it was Iris and William. William was the eldest and the only one with certainty of work. At 14 he was employed as an errand boy at the grocers along The Strand. It was a good job. He was well muscled for his age, although not tall, as his job meant he was carrying baskets of groceries of varying weights all day. The grocer often supplied the theatres in the area and William kept his family amused at the end of the day with stories about the actors, chorus girls and the impresarios.

As her eldest children entered so did the smell of the food Iris was clutching to her chest. From William's expression, Iris must have told him what had occurred today while he was at work. She set her jaw and hardened her expression, telling Iris to feed William and the other children, she didn't want any herself. "And there's no need to leave any for your father, I doubt he'll be hungry when he comes home. William, wash up then eat. You must be hungry after working all day."

He must have realised from her expression that she was in no mood to listen to any argument from her eldest son as he did as he was told without argument, even going so far as to offering Iris help with the younger ones. They quickly went into the bedroom next door, leaving her with the rare luxury of solitude. She sank into the chair by the fire, gazing at the flames in a reverie.

Roused by a touch on her shoulder, she realised that her husband had come in to their small home without her hearing him. Caught by surprise she was unable to subdue the anger and grief that welled up inside her. She sprang out of the chair and seizing his shirt front pulled

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him around with unconscious strength so he was unable to avoid the poignant sight on the mantelpiece.

CHAPTER THREE

Hendon 1937

The door bell rang.

“I’ll get it, Ma,” called Rosie as she entered the hall from the kitchen, drying her hands on her apron as she went to answer the summons.

“Iris!” she exclaimed in surprise as she opened the door and saw who was standing outside. “Come in, we weren’t expecting you. Ma”, she called as she welcomed her older sister in to the flat.

“Ma, Iris has come for a visit.” In an aside to Iris she whispered, “she is in the sitting room, go in and see her while I put the kettle on; but I warn you, she is not quite herself today.”

Iris stuck her head around the door to the sitting room.

“Mind if I come in, Ma?”

“Iris!” exclaimed her mother in delight as she struggled to sit straighter in her chair. “What a delightful surprise. I wasn’t expecting you today, was I?”

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Iris heard the tiniest amount of doubt in her mother's voice and buried her concern at the back of her mind to discuss with Rosie later.

"No, you weren't expecting me. I thought I would surprise you. Rosie is making tea so I will sit in this chair here with you while we wait for her to bring the tray through."

Iris bent over to kiss her mother's cheek in greeting while taking her hand then sat and looked at her.

"When did my mother get so frail?" she thought, "she was always so strong."

Iris remembered the time years ago when her mother thwarted her dream of going to secondary school. She sighed. Her mother looked at her, "What's the sigh for, Iris?"

"Sorry, Ma. Just remembering the time you told me that I couldn't go to secondary school."

As her mother looked at her, her eldest daughter recognised some of the familiar steely will in her mother's regard.

"You know perfectly well my girl that with the sudden change in circumstances that happened at that time I couldn't afford let you further your education. As it was, I let you go to school as long as I could."

"I suppose it might have been different if I had won the scholarship," said Iris with another sigh.

"If I was you, I wouldn't waste my time on what-might-have-beens," said her mother tartly. "You haven't done too badly for yourself despite the setbacks. You've a nice house, a good provider in Hubert and Peter whose as clever a boy as I have seen. Don't waste your time regretting, duck." Her mother reached over and took Iris'

hand in hers. "I did the best I could. I wish there was a way to send you to secondary school but there wasn't and that is the end of it."

Just then, Rosie entered bearing a tray which she put it down on the table and started placing cups in saucers. Iris got up to help her sister empty the tray.

"Plates?" she queried.

"I bought some crumpets on the way here," Rosie answered. "I know it's June but it is such a gloomy day I just fancied some. So nice with a bit of butter.

Whoops, they are under the grill now. I had better run and rescue them before they burn."

Rosie was out of the door before she had finished speaking. She soon returned with the tray filled this time with the teapot and a plate piled with several crumpets.

"Here, Ma, let me help you to a crumpet while Rosie pours the tea."

"I want one of the bottom ones where the butter has dripped through from the ones above," said her mother rubbing her hands in anticipation.

Her daughters exchanged rueful glances, "I bet Rosie had her eye on that one," said her sister. "There is no use denying it, Rosie, even if I hadn't known you all your life those couple of years you lived with us taught me a lot about you."

Agnes saw Rosie give Iris a hard look, which Iris didn't see or ignore. "Hmmm, I wonder what that is about. Well, I suppose one of the girls will tell me if they think I need to know," she thought.

As they sipped their tea and ate the crumpets the girls kept their mother up to date with the small doings of their

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children and husbands. Both Iris and Rosie had good reports of the business the brothers-in-law had bought together.

“I suppose Junie will tell me how William’s business is going when she comes for supper tomorrow.”

“Do you miss working for William, Ma,” asked Rosie.

“It took some getting used to when I stopped working a year or so ago. I had spent most of my life working and it was hard to get used to the change. But just recently, I have been feeling so tired that I couldn’t have worked even if the little kiosk was still open.”

Her children glanced at each other, reading concern in each others eyes.

“There is time for a rest before lunch, if you want, Ma,” offered Rosie.

“No, but I might have forty winks on my bed after lunch. Now tell me, how is Rowena doing at her first year of school?”

Rosie laughed. “She has taken to it like a duck to water. She was always slightly jealous of Rita and Colin and now she is happy. So happy in fact that last weekend she was playing schools with her dolls and teddies. She had them all lined up in front of her and she was teaching them their alphabet. You know, I wonder of she will be a teacher when she grows up.”

“Plenty of time before that. Now, Iris, how is that Peter of yours getting on?”

Agnes could see her daughter swell with pride. “He is doing very well at school. Going to Grammar School is really good for him. Hubert would like him to learn a trade, be a motor mechanic like he is but I think he is more suited to a desk job. I wouldn’t like him to come

home all dirty and oily like his father. Not that I will say anything against Hubert, he is very good at what he does and I am sure that the business with your Jim wouldn't be as good without him, Rosie, but we want something better for our boy."

"We all want something better for our children, Iris. I am so proud that you are able to give him the education I wanted for you but could never afford."

"I know, Ma." Iris saw the tears in her mother's eyes and took her hand and squeezed it. "We are so proud of what you did for us and how you kept the family together. We couldn't have asked for a better mother, you know."

Rosie, her eyes welling with emotion, nodded her agreement and hugged her mother.

"Well I am getting sentimental in my old age," said their mother as she wiped her eyes and sniffed. "Now Rosie, I have a bit of ham and some mustard and cress so how about some ham and cress sandwiches for lunch. Iris, you can stay can't you?"

After lunch, having made sure her daughters had taken charge of clearing up, Agnes was persuaded to go to bed for a nap.

"Ma may be feeling tired but that doesn't stop her being in charge of her kitchen, does it."

Rosie and Iris were speaking softly in the kitchen so as not to disturb their mother.

"Iris, what was all that about you not being able to go to secondary school?" asked Rosie.

"I suppose you were too young to remember." Iris sighed, "A few days after Dad died, Ma got a letter saying I hadn't got a scholarship to secondary school. She

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explained to me that without the scholarship, she couldn't afford to send to the school."

"So if he hadn't died, you could have gone?"

Iris shrugged, "Who knows." She paused in the middle of drying a plate and looked thoughtful. "It was a difficult time. I think Pa was drinking too much. I don't want to talk about this now," she said firmly. "Have you seen Elaine recently? How is William?"

Rosie accepted the sudden change of subject and they chatted amicably about their elder brother, his business and his wife.

In her bedroom, as Agnes drifted off to sleep, she remembered the day Iris was told she didn't get her scholarship.

CHAPTER FOUR

June 1900

It was still light as she got home and all the children were still up. They were all eager to eat another meal so the problem of keeping the left over food from the pub was partially resolved. She spread dripping over slices of bread, added some meat and soon they were all tucking into thick, hearty sandwiches while the children told their mother of the events of their day. Agnes listened with interest, made remarks when appropriate and generally appreciated the normality of her family life after the dramatic events of the past few days.

But she wasn't able to completely relax yet. When the younger children were settled for the night, Agnes turned her attention to the letter that Iris had bought home from school yesterday. Opening and reading it, she felt a knot of dread form in her stomach. She was going to have to disappoint her eldest daughter. The letter informed her that Iris was eligible to attend the secondary modern school but missed the chance for a scholarship. Without that scholarship, Agnes could not afford to send her

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daughter to the school. It was just too expensive. It was a doubtful prospect when Charley was alive, now he was dead it would be impossible.

Agnes explained this to Iris, hurt by the disappointment in the girl's eyes. Agnes explained that the family could not afford to send Iris to the school and wait until she was 16 for her to get a job. "I'm sorry but I just can't afford it. Even when your father was alive it would have been touch and go whether we could afford it. But now he is no longer with us, your going to a secondary modern is out of the question. You can stay at school until you are 14 and then get a job but until then I need your help with the younger children."

Agnes knew her voice sounded harsh but couldn't help it. She had had a long day. On top of so much happening in the past few days, Agnes was feeling bone tired and emotionally numb. Much as she hated to disappoint any of her children, she had no emotional energy left for anyone, not even herself.

Iris was hurt, angry and was ready to make an emotional scene. "You killed dad," she blurted out. "You good as killed him! I hate you. You hated him and killed him. That's why I can't go to the secondary modern."

Agnes stood and slapped her sharply across the face. "Don't you ever talk to me like that. And don't you ever say such things again."

Iris was pulled up short by the sudden violence from her mother. She had known violence from her father, not directly but had seen him come home drunk and hitting her mother but she had never been slapped across the face before. Agnes was startled herself. She had prided herself on never raising a hand in anger against her children and

now she had taken a step too far. The two females stood looking at each other for a long moment than the spell was broken by the sound of the door opening and William entered.

“What is going on?” Even he could feel the tension in the room.

Little Junie was snivelling unnoticed and the boys were unnaturally quiet.

“I have just told Iris that she cannot go to the secondary modern because we can’t afford it. I think the events of the past days have gotten the better of us.” That was as close as Agnes got to apologising.

“Iris, I don’t know why you were expecting to be able to go,” William said in his pragmatic way. “It should have been obvious to you that we couldn’t afford it. I warned you not to mention it after our Pa was taken to hospital. Now, what is there to eat, Ma? I’m starving”

Glad of the opportunity William had given her to move and ignoring her bone aching weariness, Agnes bustled around getting William food and tea.

He told her of his trip to his father’s brothers. “They were shocked, of course, and they will let the others know and be there for the funeral. But they didn’t seem too concerned about us.”

He was still a bit naïve. Agnes was glad that William was still a little damp around the ears. “If they were too concerned they were probably afraid that we would expect them to support us. They don’t know you like we do,” she hastened to add as she saw him bristle with indignation. “Anyway, it’s a good thing that they won’t be sticking their noses in our business. I’m not sure I want your father’s

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family getting too involved with us. There are some that is not as good an influence as they should be.”

With that enigmatic pronouncement Agnes looked around for her mending basket. She ignored Iris, let her and William talk about her and the school if they liked, Agnes didn't have the energy to renew the debate and she was ashamed of her actions. Slapping Iris was not a way she would have handled the matter before Charley died.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hendon 1937

“Rosie, you see Ma more often than I do, how does she seem to you?”

Rosie sighed, “if you had asked me that yesterday, Iris, I would have said same as usual but...” She paused as she thought, “today she is different. Less sure of herself, not herself, I would say.”

The sisters looked at each other.

“She didn’t eat much lunch either, again not like her.”

“It was good ham, though. Ma always did know how to shop well.”

“Taught us everything we know,” agreed her sister with a grin.

Rosie cocked her head and rose from her chair saying, “I think I can hear footsteps. I wasn’t expecting any one but I’ll just check. Don’t want to disturb Ma’s rest.”

She left the room, leaving the door slightly ajar.

Iris heard the front door open and an exclamation, hastily smothered from Rosie. Voices were just audible but Iris couldn’t make out the words.

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The door opened and Rosie ushered in their sister-in-law.

“Elaine! This is a surprise. I didn’t expect to see you.”

“Hello Iris,” said Elaine as she bent to kiss her. “That is exactly what Rosie said. I was passing, well in the area anyway,” she corrected herself, “so I thought I would drop in and see Ma. Where is she by the way?”

“Having forty winks.”

Elaine raised an eyebrow in query.

“Yes, I know. Iris and I were just saying that it wasn’t like her before you came. She seems, I dunno, not her usual self. Do you agree, Iris?”

“Hmmm, yes I have to agree with Rosie, Elaine. There were flashes of her usual energy and sharpness of mind but ... she seemed, I dunno, unsure of herself. Can’t put my finger on it and I don’t think I can explain to any doctor but not her usual self about sums it up.”

Elaine looked perturbed. “I just might give William a ring and ask him to drop in on the way home. He might bring Junie and George with him.”

“I think you should tell him to bring them,” retorted Iris.

Elaine looked at Iris and saw concern in her sister-in-law’s face and realised that her sharp words were a result of worry about her mother. She smiled at Iris .

“I don’t have your way of managing William. I will tell him how concerned you both are and that will do the trick.”

“I have to pick the children up from school soon but I haven’t seen Junie and William for a few weeks and can’t remember the last time I saw George, let alone Charlie,” Rosie said wistfully and looked speculatively at her sister.

“Iris,” she began, “do you think Peter would mind babysitting his cousins if I leave them with him and come back here?”

Elaine could tell by Iris’ change of expression that her sister’s request did not suit her and before Iris could reply said, “Rosie, I have just had a splendid idea. How about I collect your three from school and take them back home where Harry can keep an eye on them. He likes his cousins, he told me that they make him laugh; especially Rowena. Then I will come back. They can stay all night if need be, there is plenty of room. Let me ring William, then you can ring Jim and tell him what is happening. How does that suit?”

Rosie spontaneously got up and hugged Elaine. “Thank you, oh, thank you. That would be wonderful.”

Elaine left the room to make her telephone call.

“What a kind and generous person Elaine is and hasn’t she made William a good wife,” prattled Rosie oblivious to Iris’ glower. “What are you going to do about Peter?”

“Peter has his own key to the house. When you ring Jim, I will ask Hubert to leave work early so Peter isn’t left on his own for long.”

Rosie was a bit surprised that Iris would make a request of her husband Rosie wouldn’t dream of asking Jim but she knew that Hubert would do as he was told. Both of them were devoted to their son. No, she mentally corrected herself, that wasn’t quite right. Both she and Jim were devoted to their children but Peter was the centre of Iris and Hubert’s world around which they revolved. We have a more balanced attitude towards our children, she thought to herself taking care that her internal conversation was not reflected on her face.

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Elaine came back saying, “Your turn, Rosie. William will leave as soon as the shops shut and he suggested ringing Charlie and bringing him, Junie and George without my saying anything.”

It wasn't long before Rosie was back and Iris bustled out.

“I know Ma doesn't like the telephone and doesn't use it but I am really glad that William insisted on installing it when she moved here.”

Elaine looked at her curiously, “how do you know she doesn't like the telephone? Did William tell you?”

“No, he didn't have to. Jim and I knew ages ago. When she came to look after Rita when Colin was born. Jim asked her to phone him at work when there was any news.” Rosie laughed. “In the end, the midwife obliged and rang Jim which was a good thing because Ma wouldn't have done. Might have done if it was a calamity,” she mused, “but the safe arrival of a baby wasn't important enough to make her use the dangerous new fangled machine!”

CHAPTER SIX

Drury Lane 1925

Early one August morning Agnes was awoken by a pounding on her door. George bought word that Rosie's baby was arriving.

"Jim rang the shop in Leicester Square, Charlie answered the phone then went over to Kingsway where he found me. Jim says can you come as soon as you can, the midwife says the baby is on its way. Charlie says it is ok for me to drive you to Rosie's house. He said he would tell William and Junie will know what to do about the Kiosk," George gabbled with anxiety.

"That's right, son. Now, just wait while I get dressed and put a few things together." She saw him shifting his weight from one foot to the other and twisting his cap in his hands.

"It'll be fine, George. Babies don't come that quickly and the midwife knows what she is doing." Seeing that wasn't relieving his anxiety she added, "It's just got light outside, we will be at Rosie's in plenty of time for Jim to get to work. Don't worry, you are doing really well."

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Those words seemed to do the trick so she hurried to the bedroom and dressed. As she was dressing, Junie entered.

“Oh, tea,” exclaimed Agnes. “Just what I need. Did you hear, Rosie has gone into labor and George has come to take me to Rosie’s house so Jim can go to work, I suppose.

“Well, what else is the man to do,” replied Junie. “At least it will take his mind off what his wife is doing. Now, don’t worry about a thing. Since we had our chat after Charlie and Vi’s wedding, William and I have it all sorted out. Mary has been working in my shop so she knows the ropes and is getting quite popular with the customers, I might add. So I can start at the Kiosk this morning. I’ll pop by Leicester Square on my way to let Vi know she is in charge. I’m not going back to sleep so I will be ready nice and early.

Give Rita a big kiss and a hug from me, won’t you.” Junie left and Agnes hurriedly finished throwing a few necessities in a bag.

As she came out, finishing pinning her hair up, George sprang to his feet.

“If you could just carry this bag down to the van for me, George, I’ll just say goodbye to Junie then we can be on our way.”

“Bye, Ma,” called out Junie from behind her bedroom door. “I’m half dressed so I won’t come out. Give William or Vi a telephone call and let us know how Rosie does, won’t you.”

Agnes made a noncommittal noise in the back of her throat. You won’t get me using one of those new-fangled machines, she thought following George down the stairs.

George got her to Mill Hill before Jim left for work. He looked relieved when he opened the door to them, George followed Agnes to the door, carrying the bag containing her necessities.

“The midwife is upstairs with her,” was their greeting as he ushered Agnes in. “Can you ring me at work when there is news. I, I,” he hesitated. “I know you don’t like to use the machine, Mrs T. But can you try, when the baby is born, just so I know...” His voice trailed off.

Agnes smiled and patted his arm. “I’ll do my best. Now, have you had your breakfast. Well, I expect you will want to be on your way now. George, do you want a cup of tea before you go back? No, I’ll just put the kettle on for myself. Now about so you can say goodbye to Rita, Jim, before you go to work. Don’t worry about what time you get back this evening. I will have something in the oven and I’ll put Rita to bed at the usual time. Just don’t phone because I won’t answer.”

After Jim had closed the front door behind him, Agnes lifted Rita out of her highchair where she had been eating her breakfast. Balancing the child on one hip, she climbed the stairs and put her head around the bedroom door.

“How is she doing? Anything you need?” she asked the midwife. Agnes was comforted to see that she was a mature woman who oozed confidence.

“She’s doing really well, Mrs ... Thompson. Won’t be long now and you will have another little one in the house. I have everything I need, just got to help Rosie do the work. I will give you a call when you can come back in.”

Agnes took the hint and went downstairs.

She tried to keep herself occupied with Rita and the household chores but her mind kept returning to Rosie

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upstairs. Agnes was also mindful to hide her anxiety, wouldn't do to have the child fretting.

Her relief was considerable when she heard the midwife call. Agnes grabbed Rita and hurried upstairs. There was no mistaking the new arrival, she could hear the howls of protest before the midwife summoned her.

Nudging open the door, she saw her daughter propped up in bed looking tired but happy. Rita squirmed in her arms at the sight of her mother so Agnes lowered her onto the bed. In the cot beside the bed was the source of the noise. All Agnes could see was a shock of black hair, a mouth wide open and what else she could see of the face was bright red.

"My goodness!" she exclaimed. "What a pair of lungs."

The midwife slipped out of the door and Rosie raised her voice to say, "thankfully, he is a boy. We wouldn't want a girl that noisy, eh Rita. Hang on, Ma, don't lift him yet. The midwife has 'ideas' about babies. I asked her to phone Jim, as I knew you wouldn't want to. When she has done that, I think she is ready to go. Then you can get him."

"I just want you to have enough peace to get some sleep. Actually, I think you both need some. Rita and I will go for a walk. Oh, I can hardly hear myself think!"

Rosie grinned and the midwife returned to say goodbye.

As soon as they heard the front door close, Agnes scooped the newborn out of the cot and placed him in the crook of his mother's arm.

"Let him have a bit of a feed, duck. That will quieten him. The boys always needed more feeding than you girls. Yes, just needed to be held. Rita and I will let you

sleep for a bit. Want to feed the ducks, lovee? Come on then, let's let Mummy get some sleep."

It was mid-evening before Jim got back. Agnes had made herself comfortable in the living room listening to the radio. She got up as Jim let himself in the front door. She greeted him in the hall.

"Sorry, I am late, Mrs T. The lads at work wanted to help me wet the baby's head. I'll just go up and see Rosie."

Agnes had been keeping his dinner warm on a plate on top of a gently simmering saucepan of water. She carefully removed it and placed it on the table as he clattered down the stairs. He looked a bit surprised to see the meal but sat down and started to eat.

Jim chewed and swallowed a mouthful before speaking, "Sorry, I have just realised that I am really hungry. I wasn't expecting dinner. This is very good, by the way. Rosie is tired, I left her sleeping, but happy. Rosie wants to call him Colin, so I expect that is what he will be called," he said with a grin. "He weighs 9 pounds and he has a good set of lungs on him, Rosie said. Will you be able to stay for a few days so Rosie gets a rest?"

Agnes smiled. "Don't worry, Jim. It's all been worked out, I am staying here for as long as I am needed. Junie is working at the Kiosk and Vi is managing the Leicester Square shop. Her cousin, Mary, has started working there as well. I hope William realises how lucky he is because Junie had it all worked out before she suggested the staffing solution to him."

"I like the way your family all works together."

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“You are part of the family now, remember,” Agnes gently reminded him. “I took Rita for a walk in the pram this afternoon. That Flossie of yours is a good dog. She doesn’t let anyone come near the pram, does she. And her tail is always wagging. There were dogs in the building where we lived before we were moved to Drury Lane but they weren’t good natured like her. They were dogs I was afraid to let the children near, nasty vicious brutes.”

“Springer spaniels are good dogs. Being gun dogs I always think they are bred to get on with other dogs and people.”

“She does like to be with people,” said Agnes as she scratched Flossie behind the ear and was rewarded by a quick lick.

“I don’t think I’d have another breed with the children. We haven’t had a moments trouble with her and Rita, even when Rita was going through the stage of crawling and grabbing anything she could get her hands on. I think Flossie had her ears tugged and lost a couple of handfuls of hair but never even growled. Mind you, she soon learned to leave the room when Rita got going,” he said with a rueful laugh. “She’s not stupid, either. She also knows that sitting near highchairs means a reliable source of food.”

“Yes, I have noticed that anything on the floor is hers,” said Agnes with a laugh

He pushed his chair back from the table. “Thanks for supper. I really needed that.”

“Why don’t I make you a mug of cocoa and you take it to bed. Get an early night. You look as if you didn’t sleep much last night.”

“That was an understatement! If you don’t mind, I could really do with an early night. But I don’t want ...”

Agnes interrupted him, “Jim, you are family. You need an early night, I am used to being on my own in the evenings. but I won’t be alone because Flossie will be with me, won’t you Floss.” The dog enthusiastically thumped her tail on the floor. “And I will see she does her business before I put her to bed in the kitchen. Don’t worry, Rosie and the dog have me well trained.”

“You and me both”, admitted Jim with a grin.

“Now away up the wooden hill to bed with you, Jim Wolesley, before you fall asleep on your feet.”

Next morning, Jim found Agnes in the kitchen helping Rita eat her breakfast with Flossie patiently waiting under the highchair.

“Did you sleep well?” she enquired. “I wonder if you can ring William and Junie, well Junie first, and let her know about Rosie and Colin while I get your breakfast.”

Jim did as he was bid, having been warned by Rosie that her mother wouldn’t use the telephone.

On Saturday, Agnes anticipated a flux of visitors. She sent Jim to get ham and cheese while she made a cake.

“Oh, you had better get some beer. I know Hubert doesn’t drink very often but William and Charlie will expect to wet the baby’s head. And the ham and cheese is for sandwiches to soak up some of the beer. You can’t have visitors and nothing to offer them. You had better be gone soon, because I will need you to carry chairs up to your bedroom. They will need somewhere to sit when they are seeing Rosie and little Colin, won’t they?”

Jim did as he was told, although it was obvious he didn’t understand what the fuss was about.

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Junie was the first to arrive, coming by the underground from Leicester Square. Quickly, followed by Charlie and Vi. Answering a knock at the front door Jim found William and Elaine on the doorstep.

Elaine squeezed his arm as she entered. “Gets a bit overwhelming, doesn’t it, the way this family gathers. Never mind, you will get used to it,” she said quietly as she passed him by on the way to the stairs following her husband.

Junie came down saying that she was getting tea and beer if anyone wanted it and passed into the kitchen. Her laugh rang out and Jim put his head around the door to see his daughter sitting in her highchair, hair and face covered in raw cake mixture.

“Rita is learning to lick the bowl,” her aunt said through her laughter. “Come on Rita, lets help Grandma clean you up so you can say hello to your aunts and uncles. There’s the door again, Jim!”

After a while, Rosie decided that the bedroom was too crowded so she shooed everyone downstairs while she got dressed.

Agnes had made sandwiches and she and Junie put them on the dining table, together with a jug of beer, a pot of tea, milk, sugar, cups and saucers. She sent Junie back to the kitchen for plates and napkins just as the men arrived, each carrying a chair.

Iris sat with Peter on her knee, Rita was popped in her highchair with Flossie lying in wait beneath her. Everyone else either sat or stood and talked until Rosie arrived, carrying Colin. Jim held out a chair for her, Agnes put a plate of sandwiches in front of her, “you need to keep your strength up,” she said.

When Rita began to get fidgety Junie volunteered to take her to the park. Agnes offered to go with them and take Flossie who, she pointed out, hadn't been walked that day.

Jim was concerned that they should stay but Junie said that she wanted to get out into the sun and as she spent all her working week indoors she was going to make the most of the good weather.

"Besides which," she pointed out, "You have duties here as host. It will be a pleasure to stroll to the park, not a chore at all."

Agnes agreed with her and offered to take Peter as well. Iris agreed and so Agnes and Junie led a push-chair expedition to the park remembering to take some bread for the ducks.

In the distance, the chimes of an ice cream van could be heard. Junie left Agnes with Rita and Peter sitting on a bench seat in the park while she went to the van.

"You spoil the children," said her mother when Junie returned bearing cones for all.

"That's what Aunts are for. Now Rita and Peter you have to sit still between me and your Grandma while you eat your cone. Mummy and Daddy don't want you getting your best clothes dirty. There's a good girl and boy."

"Everything going well at the Kiosk?" asked Agnes between licks.

"Mmmm, the sun is melting the ice cream too quickly. Yes, Ma, the Kiosk is getting on fine despite your absence." Junie's eyes sparkled with laughter as she glanced at her mother. "Although, many of your regulars

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have asked after you. I have explained that this is only temporary while you attend to family business and that you will soon be back. You are planning to return, aren't you," she asked.

"Yes, I am not ready to retire yet. Besides, what would I do? I know I'm in my sixtieth year but I still have a few years of work inside me. Besides, what would I do for money? You still see injured soldiers selling matches on the streets. I don't want to join them trying to earn a living from what is little more than begging."

"Ma," Junie sounded genuinely horrified. "You can't possibly think that we would let you live like that! After the way you scrimped and saved to bring us up. Never, ever think that way. We are family as you frequently point out and it works both ways you know. We look out for you as well as you looking out for us." Junie attacked her remaining ice cream. "Just wait until I tell William what you have been thinking," she muttered.

"Don't threaten me with your brother, my girl. Anyway, that's besides the point. I am not ready to retire, yet. Here, Rita, let me wipe your mouth with my hanky. Sit still now, while I get you clean. Don't want to return you to your Mummy and Daddy looking grubby, do we?"

"Don't want to let Jim know that we have been eating ice creams you mean," said Junie in an almost whisper. They laughed together.

"Come on, Rita. Time to go back to see your parents Here Peter, take my hand and Rita, Grandma will put you back in your pram. I'll take Flossie and lets see if the uncles and aunts are still there.

Flossie, come here. No! No! Leave those ducks alone. Argh, wet dog! No! Now I have wet paw marks on my

skirt! Oh, well, I expect Jim will have an old towel to dry you off with when we get back. Stop laughing, Ma. I hope this skirt isn't ruined. It's not funny, Peter. Your Grandma's setting a very bad example. Peter, it is bad manners to laugh at the misfortune of others."

"Rosie told me that the dog finds water irresistible but I didn't believe her until I bought her and Rita here one day," said Agnes still grinning but she got her laughter under control. "Don't worry about your skirt, I am sure the marks will brush out and if they don't, I will wash it for you. And Rosie and Jim have a quite a collection of old towels for just this purpose. You wouldn't believe how many towels it takes to get her dry. Good thing she enjoys being rubbed dry. Come on, everyone, time to go back."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hendon 1937

Iris returned and Elaine soon left.

“It was kind of Elaine to take the children,” remarked Rosie as she heard the front door close behind her sister-in-law.

“Well the house is big enough,” replied Iris. “Too big for them and Harry if you ask me.”

“William wanted a house that reflected how well his business is doing, I expect,” said Rosie mildly. “Do you remember that weekend when we all went house hunting and William and Elaine showed off the house they were going to buy? That was a fun time,” as she smiled in memory.

“And the Christmas we spent there,” Iris reminded her.

“Iris, I’m surprised you remembered! I thought you weren’t that taken with the party. It was the time I found out I was pregnant with Rita and you were very pregnant with Peter,” she added hurriedly.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Drury Lane 1923

The conversations at the regular Sunday lunch began to revolve around topics related to the newly opened housing developments in and around Edgware and Mill Hill. William, Elaine, Rosie and Jim were comparing notes on houses they had seen in Mill Hill when Iris loudly announced to the assembled family that she was pregnant. Not a moment too soon, in Agnes' opinion, as she thought it would be just days before everyone could guess. Iris' news effectively divided the women from the men as Elaine and Rose turned their attention from the conversation that their husbands were having to Iris. After expressing their congratulations, Rosie impulsively asked Iris and Hubert to accompany her and Jim on their house hunting expedition next Saturday. Iris replied a bit huffily that they couldn't afford to buy in that sort of area but Hubert looked disappointed. Rosie looked hurt and Jim offended but Agnes could see that Iris was not embarrassed. Elaine made a valiant attempt to change the subject by asking Iris whether they were hoping that

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the baby was a boy or a girl. Iris replied that she and Hubert were hoping for a boy but would be happy to have a girl. Hubert made agreeing noises.

“That reminds me, Ma,” said William. “Elaine and I thought of asking you to come for a drive with us after church next Sunday. We are thinking of buying a house in the area north of Mill Hill and wondered if you would be interested in looking too.

“It would be nice to give you a treat by taking you out to lunch as well,” added Elaine.

Agnes demurred, she wasn’t sure, what would the others do if she went off gadding about.

“Ma,” said William. “Everyone is old enough to look after themselves for one day. Aren’t you, Iris? Junie has agreed to look after Harry for the afternoon and it wouldn’t do George and Sadie any harm to have lunch two weeks running with her parents, if that is what they want to do.”

“Well put it that way, William ... yes, why not,” said Agnes. “It will make a very pleasant change.”

Agnes was aware that Iris was glaring at her elder brother who studiously avoided looking at her.

“I know, Ma! We can all meet up somewhere in the area,” Rosie clapped her hands in her enthusiasm. “Then afterwards Jim and I can show you where we are thinking of buying a house.”

“I have heard that there are some good pubs in the area so we will call in and see if we can’t have lunch in one of them. Not that it will be a patch on what we have here, Mrs T.” Jim indicated his plate on which the remains of a

generous helping of a roast beef dinner awaited his renewed attention.

Jim and William were discussing possible venues for lunch next Sunday. Agnes briefly overheard snippets of their conversation. The criteria seemed to be how well the publican kept the beer in the various establishments rather than the quality of the food they provided. Agnes hoped that the choice they made provided good food to compliment the beer. She was beginning to look forward to the outing. During a discussion with Elaine to agree on a suitable time to pick her up, Iris grudgingly said that as everyone was going house hunting next week so they, meaning her and Hubert, may as well go as well. If Iris expected a more enthusiastic response than Agnes's low key 'that will be nice, dear' she was doomed to disappointment but Hubert looked pleased and joined the conversation with Jim and William.

It was agreed that the three couples embark on their own househunting expeditions on the Saturday and then compare notes over lunch on the Sunday. William was insistent on this, that Agnes would accompany him and Elaine. They were all to meet at The Rising Sun between Mill Hill and Totteridge at 1pm.

Next Sunday, William arrived to accompany Agnes to the car. He handed her into the back seat, next to Elaine, tucked a rug around her legs, closed the door and went around to the front of the car and cranked the handle until the engine caught. As they pulled smoothly away from the kerb, Agnes commented to Elaine that she felt like a queen. Elaine squeezed her hand as William

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commented that she deserved to be looked after and that while she was in his car she would be treated like royalty.

They were soon out of the West End and heading towards the Edgware Road, the A1 and all points north. William joked that they could just keep going and finish up in Scotland. Agnes and Elaine were horrified, although for different reasons. This expedition was the furthest north Agnes had been in her life and going as far as Scotland, which her imagination populated with red headed drunks who spoke an incomprehensible form of English, was not her idea of a quiet Sunday drive.

As they approached their destination, Agnes looked about her with interest that became tinged with concern. She got glimpses of large houses set back from the road and half hidden by hedges or gates.

“This is where you are thinking of moving to!” she cried in dismay. “William, Elaine, it is so posh. This isn’t the area for the likes of us. Everywhere is so, .. so ...” Words failed her.

William stopped the car and turned in his seat to face her. Seeing her distress, he reached out and took her hand.

“Ma, I think the word you are looking for is separate, or set apart, very different from the area we live in now. But this area is where successful business men and their families live. And thanks to you, Elaine and the rest of the family, I am a successful businessman. I am even thinking of joining the Freemasons, I’ve been approached but I have put them off for the time being, one thing at a time.”

Elaine smiled fondly at him. Turning to Agnes, she said “The school we want Harry to attend is near here. If we live here it will mean that he won’t have to board and can

attend as a day boy. William and I are agreed that we don't want Harry to board; but we do want him to have a really good education."

Agnes looked around at the half hidden houses and kept her thoughts to herself. "It's your choice," she acknowledged. "When you are hobnobbing with your posh friends just don't forget where you came from."

William laughed, "With Iris as my sister, do you really think that is likely? She won't let me forget."

Agnes smiled in acknowledgement. "Well, son, you had better show me the reason you bought me here. "

William and Elaine exchanged a look, then he turned and let the clutch out and drove a further few hundred yards and turned into a side street.

"I told him you would guess that we had an ulterior motive for bringing you here."

William had driven up to an imposing wrought iron gate that stretched across the driveway, preventing their onwards journey.

"Well, this is it, Ma. This is the house we have made an offer on. I've made arrangements with the Estate Agent to meet us after lunch so you can have a look see, if you are interested," he added, concerned that she hadn't said anything.

Agnes was staring out of the car window, struck dumb by the house visible through the rungs of the gate.

"My word, son. You don't aim your sights low, do you." She was still staring at the house, two storeys but large enough she reckoned to fit the tenement building in which William was born.

"Not since the war, Ma," William said softly. "Taught me a thing or two about living for now that did." Elaine

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bent forward and touched him lightly on the shoulder. Without looking William reached up and covered her hand with his, squeezed then let go.

“Look at the time! We had better get a move on if we are going to meet the others on time. Not that we have far to go,” he added as he pulled out into the road once more.

Seated at a large table in the cosy saloon bar of the pub with a glass of what she was forced to admit was very good beer, Agnes was getting over her shock caused by seeing where William and his family intended moving. Iris and Hubert had just arrived. Leaving Hubert at the bar with Jim and William, Iris came to join the women.

“Elaine was just inviting us to view the house they plan to buy,” cried Rosie to her sister before Iris even had had time to undo her coat.

“Rosie, give Iris a moment to get settled,” Elaine gently chided her sister-in-law.

Unabashed, Rosie continued, “It’s just down the road, currently vacant and they are going to buy it complete with the furniture. Can’t wait to see it. What did you think of it, Ma?”

But Rosie didn’t give Agnes a chance to reply before she was asking Iris whether she had found a house she liked.

Iris replied in a repressing tone that everything they had seen was too expensive.

Rosie ignored Iris, having lived with her most of her life, Rosie was impervious to Iris’ put downs.

“Yesterday, Jim and I saw a house we liked in Mill Hill. If you would like to go home with us, Ma, we can drive past so you can have a look at the outside. Now where are those men? Are there any menus, I am starving!”

During lunch it was agreed that everyone should accompany William and Elaine to view the house. Rosie invited Agnes to come with her and Jim in their car and so after lunch Jim handed her into the back seat with as much ceremony as William had shown. He tucked a rug around her knees in spite of Agnes' protests that they were not going far.

During the short drive, Agnes commented that she had not seen this much greenery for years.

"Do you remember the holidays we had in Kent before the war?"

Rosie made a noise that had she not been stylishly dressed and seated in smart motor car, Agnes would have called a snort.

"Ma, those holidays, of which there were two as I recall, were hard work picking hops. I can still feel the blisters! Jim, did you ever go on a working holiday?"

"Not that I recall," he answered cheerfully. "Mostly, I was left at boarding school during the holidays."

Agnes was shocked. Shocked that any mother could send her son to boarding school then leave him there for most of the time. She was rendered speechless for a moment which gave Rosie an opportunity to express her surprise.

"I didn't know. You have never said anything about this before."

"Well, the subject hadn't come up before. I was much happier at school, anyway. The head of my house at school used to invite me to live with his family during the holidays when I couldn't go home. You know Arthur, who was my bestman at our wedding. Arthur is his son and we

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are really good pals, as you know, and have been since we went to school together. His grandmother had a place on the Norfolk coast so we used to spend our summers there. That is where I learnt to shoot and fish. I really did prefer to be there than with my mother.”

This was the most Agnes had heard Jim speak about his family and childhood but felt it was not her place to ask further, even though she wanted to know why he was more at home with his friend’s family than his own.

“Ah, here we are,” Jim said as he followed William’s car through the now open gates and stopped the car along side William’s. He got out of car and had the back door open before Agnes finished untangling herself from the rug. He extended his hand and helped her out. Hubert was following and parked besides Jim. Meanwhile, Rosie had exited on the other side and joined William and Elaine at the front door.

A young man was waiting at the door, looking slightly nonplussed by the arrival of seven people when he was obviously only expecting two or three at the most.

William introduced the Estate Agent as Mr Edwards and explained to him that some of his extended family were interested to view the property.

Mr Edwards opened the front door and ushered them inside. He then explained that he could leave them to wander around on their own and could William drop the keys off to him when they had finished.

Agnes had to work hard to control her expression, her entire flat could fit in the entrance hall! Surely not. No, she thought, not quite. Set back from the doorway but in the centre of the entrance hall rose the staircase to the upper floor. A gallery ran from the top of the stairs three

quarters of the way around and she was just able to glimpse doorways opening off it. She followed Rosie and Jim as they entered the first room on the left. William was expounding the features of the drawing room as he called it. Sunlight streamed on through the mullion windows under which a seat with thick red cushions was fashioned so that it followed the curve of the bow front. Rosie had tucked her hand around Jim's elbow and was listening intently to her brother's spiel.

Out of the corner of her eye, Agnes could see Iris surreptitiously lifting a dust sheet covering a sofa. Her eyes widened slightly as she let the sheet drop back in place. Agnes resolved to ask Iris what she had seen as soon as she had an opportunity to get her alone.

Elaine moved to Agnes' side and taking her arm suggested that they slip away. "William is giving the others the Grand Tour but I thought you might be more interested in seeing the kitchen. I might even be able to make us a cup of tea," she whispered conspiratorially.

Agnes and Elaine slipped discretely away.

The kitchen was at the back of the house, with a window that overlooked a sadly neglected kitchen garden. Elaine, following Agnes' gaze, mentioned that late autumn was not the best time to view the garden.

"It is a pity that there have been no planting of cabbages and brussel sprouts this year. But I have plans for next spring," she added.

"William is definitely buying this house, then?"

Elaine smiled. "He has quite set his heart on buying it. We have made an offer for it. So, yes, he is definitely buying the house." As if she was reading her mother-in-law's mind, Elaine added, "I think I will be happy here as

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well. There is also enough room outside for Harry to run around in. It feels as though he is growing too big for the flat above the shop. I really don't know how you coped with all your boys."

"Life was very different then. I don't want to think how I would cope if I had to do it over again. Now, lets try and make that tea you promise me."

Agnes was impressed with the modern electric stove, especially when they turned on one of the electric hot plated and discovered that the electricity supply had not been turned off.

"No milk," muttered Agnes. At that moment Rosie and Jim entered the kitchen and were quickly dispatched to buy some. Agnes joined Elaine in her hunt for tea, a teapot, cups and sugar. Agnes opened a door to reveal a small room lined with shelves holding crockery, including cups and saucers, various metal canisters which Elaine opened and inspected. She soon found one that contained sugar cubes and a smaller one containing tea. Fortunately, the tin containing the sugar must have been airtight so the cubes were still usable. Amongst the crockery was a sugar bowl into which Elaine tumbled the cubes. Meanwhile, Agnes had found a tray and laying it on the table, the two women quickly filled it with their finds.

Just as the kettle was beginning to whistle signifying that the water was just about to boil, Jim returned holding a half full milk bottle in triumph, a laughing Rosie in his wake.

"He went next door and charmed the maid into giving him the milk. Honestly, Ma, I don't know how he has the cheek." Rosie's admiring glance at her husband belied her words.

“Shall you be having a maid, Elaine?”

“Gosh, I hadn’t thought about that, Rosie. William has talked to the fellow who used to do the garden and he is willing to resume. But a maid will need thinking about.”

Agnes had her own views but would remain silent until, or if, Elaine asked her advice. Rosie was about to reply but Elaine had decided to take the tray laden with tea paraphernalia through to the others. Jim motioned her to lead the way and took charge of the tray.

Elaine led the way to the drawing room, the first room they had entered on being let into the house. She whisked the dust sheets off the furniture revealing two modern chintz covered sofas and four matching chairs.

“Put the tray on the side table, would you, Jim.” She moved to the door and called out, “William! Iris! Hubert! Tea is ready!”

Sit down, make yourselves comfortable. Sorry there is no fire lit but that will change when we move in.”

“You have not doubts, then,” said Jim. “This house is a certainty, then”

“I am absolutely determined to buy this house, old man,” said William as he entered the room and took a proprietorial stand leaning his arm along the mantelpiece.

Rosie giggled, “Honestly, William. Standing like that, you should have a pipe or cigar in your hand.”

“Not until we move in, Rosie. Then I might indulge, if Elaine doesn’t object.” Elaine smiled at him and put a cup on the mantelpiece.

She then handed cups out to all saying “you have been very quiet, Iris. What do you think of the house?”

“I think you are getting ideas above your station, William Thomas” said Iris spitefully. “This house is too

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grand for the likes of us. People around here will find out where you are from and have nothing to do with you, see if I am right”

“You are entitled to your opinion, Iris,” relied William, mildly. “I don’t happen to agree with you. I have already introduced us to the neighbours and they seem very pleasant, friendly people. I am sure we will have no trouble fitting in. As I explained to Ma before lunch successful business men live in this area, successful business men like me. That is why I think that we will have no problem fitting in. The people who live in this area have more in common with us than you think. Just because someone lives in a big house doesn’t mean they are any different. They have surrounded themselves with more space, that is all.”

“Don’t forget the airs and graces they give themselves,” Iris replied

“Iris,” William said sharply, “I don’t expect to find everyone here agreeable, nor would I expect everyone to find me pleasant company. However, that is their loss, not mine. We are going to live here and be happy here in spite of what you think.”

Iris looked sulky and sat with her arms crossed in front of her.

Elaine waved the teapot around, offering more tea, clearly embarrassed at the reaction to her innocent enquiry.

“Any one fancy seeing more of the house,” asked William. “Come on then, I will show you upstairs.”

Rather ungraciously Iris and Hubert made their goodbyes and left.

Rosie indicated that she would help Elaine with clearing away the tea things and that her mother should go with William and Jim to view the upper level of the house. While they were in the kitchen, after making admiring noises Rosie advised Elaine not to worry about Iris' remarks.

"She is just jealous of William's success. She can't help it. She doesn't want anyone to have more than she has. We all ignore her and I suggest you do the same. She will come around, especially if you invite her to a party or something."

"Actually, William and I were thinking that if we were settled in time, we invite all the family to celebrate Christmas here. Ahh, no need to ask if you approve the idea," said Elaine with a smile as Rosie hopped up and down with excitement.

William and Elaine ensured that all was cleared up and the house was left in good order. Once more Jim handed Agnes into the rear of the car. After making sure she was comfortable Jim started the car and they left on the next stop on what Agnes was beginning to think of as a tour of the wilder reaches in the suburbs of North London.

Jim was a fast driver but confident so Agnes was not apprehensive and within 20 minutes the car was pulling up outside a bow fronted semi-detached house. Rosie had told Agnes that they were in a suburb called Mill Hill and never having ventured this far north before, Agnes had been looking around her with curiosity.

The house stood in a gently curving street, set back from the pavement with enough room for a lawn behind

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the small hedge. The houses in the street were of same design but owners had stamped their individuality on their property by the use of paint or by the design of the front gardens.

“Not as grand as the house we have just seen but we are sure it will suit us”, said Rosie as Agnes peered out of the window.

“We haven’t made an offer yet. I plan to do that tomorrow,” said Jim. “We have decided that a garage for the car will have to be built on the side and the path will have to be enlarged.”

“I think the garage should go the whole length of the house so that you can store the lawn mower, tools and have a space to make your fishing flies,” said Rosie. She turned to Agnes.

“Sorry we haven’t got the keys so we can’t show you through but our negotiations are not as advanced as William’s. But I wanted you to see where we will be buying. It will need repainting and I don’t like the wallpaper but we can replace that. There are three bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs. I am never living in a house without an indoor toilet,” said Rosie with a shudder at a memory of her early childhood. “And there is a garden. Jim wants to have a vegetable garden, don’t you dear.”

“Yes, and I want to grow some flowers. There will also be room for the children to play. We are really looking forward to having a house and garden. You have been very silent, what do you think of the place, Mrs T?”

Agnes was thinking that as the house was smaller she was less intimidated by it than the house William was

buying. However, she wasn't going to say that so she thought for a moment,

"I like it. It is more ... compact than William's. But won't you be lonely, Rosie, with Jim away at work all day and not knowing anyone in the area. All your friends are in the West End."

"I have thought about that, Ma. This is a new area so mainly young couples have bought the houses so I shouldn't have too much trouble making friends. Don't forget that we have been living in Maida Vale for a while so I have a bit of experience of living away from the West End. Jim is so longing for a bit of dirt he can call his own. I don't think he can stay in the flat much longer." Rosie smiled fondly at her husband.

He grinned back at her over his shoulder.

"Well, ladies, have you seen enough. The sun is going down so we ought to be making tracks."

They dropped Agnes off at her flat, declining her offer of tea saying that they should be getting home as it was the start of the working week tomorrow.

Agnes let herself in to her home and automatically put the kettle on before taking her hat and coat off.

The flat was silent and felt empty. Agnes felt on edge and unsettled. Without thinking she made herself a pot of tea. As she sipped her hot drink, she thought about why she was feeling the way she was. Agnes smiled ruefully to herself as she realised that viewing the houses today had reinforced to her that her children were moving away. They were leaving the area they had lived all their lives, in fact leaving the area where their grandparents and their grandparents had been born, lived and died. No

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wonder she was feeling unsettled. She consoled herself with the thought that at least they were not going too far, even though North London was like an undiscovered country to her.

Having put her mind at rest, she put the radio on, settled her glasses on her nose, got herself comfortable in her chair and picked up her latest library book.

Much to Rosie's delight, William and Elaine were as good as their word and hosted the Christmas festivities in their new house. Her eldest son and his wife insisted on collecting Agnes from the Kiosk at close of business on Christmas Eve and driving her to their house. She was given half an hour to settle in the guest room before Harry knocked on the door. Coming in he announced that he had come to escort her down to the drawing room so he could show her the 'biggest Christmas tree in the whole world!'

Laughing at his enthusiasm, Agnes allowed her grandson to take her by the hand and lead her downstairs. As they descended he pointed out the greenery his mother had hung over the pictures in the hall and solemnly informed her that he had made the paper chains that Dad had put up in the drawing room.

He preceded her into the room and dragged her up to the tree so she could admire it and pointed out all 'his' presents piled up at its foot.

Elaine swiftly came over, taking Harry by the hand told him to "say goodnight to everyone. No, Harry. It is past your bedtime. You have shown Grandma the Christmas tree and you did promise to go to bed straight away

afterwards. Father Christmas only comes when you are asleep,” she added rather desperately.

“Harry, it’s time you got to bed. Be a good chap and go with your mother.” His father’s words forestalled any further pleading or tears on his son’s part and he was swiftly taken upstairs to bed by Elaine.

She soon returned. “He fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow,” she said. “I think it was a big day for him. Sit over here by the fire, Ma. Jim, you have been talking about making a hot drink with beer and a poker, come over here. I have a jug of beer and the poker is heating in the fire. Is there anything else you need?” At Jim’s request she fetched sugar, nutmeg, brandy and sufficient cups to go around. Jim stirred a couple of spoonfulls of sugar into the beer and added a good gulp of brandy. Removing the poker, with its tip glowing red, he thrust it into the jug. A quantity of steam was generated and Jim quickly removed the poker and poured the contents of the jug into the waiting cups. As soon as he finished pouring Rosie grated nutmeg onto the top of the mulled beer. Swiftly, Elaine handed the cups out so the beer was not allowed to cool.

When everyone had a cup in hand, William proposed a toast, “To our expanding family. It is our pleasure to welcome you all here for the first of what we hope will be many Christmas’ together.”

Amid laughter, they sipped. Agnes, comfortably seated by the fire, drew breath and looked around her. Iris must be at least eight months pregnant by now, she thought as her gaze swept over her eldest daughter. She is undeniably pregnant and beginning to look uncomfortable seated on one of the sofas as her swollen belly rested on

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her legs. Agnes grimaced in sympathy. Her gaze moved on and next came to rest on Rosie and Jim. Jim seemed to be more solicitous than usual and Rosie looked ... glowing. Agnes putting two and two together thought that soon she may be given advance warning of an happy event. As they had moved into their house last month, Agnes didn't think it would long before Rosie got pregnant, but she wasn't expecting it to be so soon. At least she was younger than Iris and should have an easier time. Agnes understood the frustrations experienced by her eldest daughter, being denied furthering her education by the death of her father, the war taking her fiancée from her and the time it had taken for her to allow room in her heart for Hubert. But she didn't make things easier for herself by her prickly nature, thought Agnes, hoping that the arrival of the baby would soften some of her mental spikes.

Charlie was accompanying Junie on the piano as she softly sang carols. Junie hadn't bought one of her young men with her but Agnes suspected that one would come to collect her on Boxing Day. Here was a young woman at the prime of her life when she should be having babies showing no inclination to settle down and have any. Agnes was torn between beginning to despair of her and envying Junie her carefree life. After all, thought Agnes, when I was her age, I had three little ones, with more to come.

William's voice in her ear disturbed her reflections. "Ma, is everything alright? You are very quiet."

She patted his hand, "I was just thinking about how different my life was. Don't misunderstand me," she added quickly. "I wouldn't wish things to be different but I never

imagined that my eldest little boy would end up here, in a house like this. Nothing is wrong, just having you all around me has made me reflect on the past.” She raised her voice, “Now, Elaine, what needs to be done for tomorrow. Come along Rosie and Junie, we need to get to the kitchen and get ready for tomorrow’s lunch.”

Assembled in the kitchen, Elaine asked Rosie and Junie to prepare the vegetables while apologising that none had come from the garden. The girls laughed and assured their sister-in-law that home grown veg was not on their list of Christmas essentials. Agnes watched Elaine gradually relax as the familiar banter between the sisters reassured her that although her surroundings had changed, the family relationship remained the same.

Agnes suggested that they have a scratch supper to minimise the disruption to preparations for tomorrow’s feast and put Elaine to work making ham and cheese sandwiches, something to soak up the mulled beer. Agnes set herself the task of finely chopping onions and bacon, adding sausage meat and chopped parsley, sage and thyme. Rolling up her sleeves, she plunged both hands into the bowl and began to blend the separate ingredients into the familiar poultry stuffing. Much to her delight, Elaine had decided on having a goose as the centrepiece of the feast. She had also bought a couple of chickens and a fine leg of ham. It was that ham that she was now slicing for sandwiches. Agnes gazed at it with a thoughtful expression on her face at the same time as her hands were mixing and blending the stuffing.

‘You know, Elaine. When I was working at The Lamb & Flag we used to bake a ham at this time of the year.

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Would you me like to do the same to that one this evening?”

“Oh, yes please,” chorused Rosie and Junie. “Elaine, have you ever tasted Ma’s baked ham? Say she can do it, please,” they begged. “If you don’t say yes, I will tell William,” said Rosie, “and he will be very disappointed,” added Junie.

“In that case, how can I refuse. If you don’t mind, Ma. Tell me what you need and I will get the ingredients together.”

Under Agnes’ direction, Elaine carefully removed the skin from the ham but leaving a generous layer of fat. She scored the fat in a diamond pattern and at every intersection the the diagonal lines stuck a clove. In a saucepan, she heated brown sugar with mustard and honey.

“Don’t let it boil,” cautioned Agnes. “You just want to get it to pouring consistency so it runs easily over the ham. Now put it in the pantry. Then we can pop it in the oven tomorrow for half an hour or so while the potatoes are cooking until it gets nice colour.”

After she put the ham in the pantry, Elaine took a couple of large plates full of ham sandwiches to the increasingly boisterous drawing room.

On her return, Elaine fetched two large chickens that had already been plucked and cleaned and some bacon rashers. Washing the stuffing from her hands, Agnes began draping the bacon over the chicken breasts. She then filled the neck cavity with the stuffing and placed half an onion inside each bird. Placed on a rack in a roasting tin, they were ready for tomorrows oven. Elaine and Agnes eyed the goose. By mutual agreement, they

decided that the bird needed very little preparation, just a rub with salt to ensure a crisp skin.

“How are you girls coming along with the vegetables?” enquired Agnes.

“Potatoes, peeled and quartered,” answered Rosie, indicating a large saucepan waiting on the largest hotplate.

“Brussel sprouts and carrots in these pans,” said Junie.

“All that is needed is the steamer for the pudding and a small saucepan for the gravy,” said Elaine. “Thank you for all your help. Shall we go through and join the others?” She ushered them through to the drawing room as Rosie was saying “I hope they haven’t eaten all the sandwiches, I am starving. You beasts,” she exclaimed on seeing the empty plates. “You have eaten them all leaving narry a crumb for the workers.”

William laughed at her dismayed expression and moved away from the mantelpiece revealing a loaded plate.

“No one is going to starve at my house! Help yourselves, workers. I hope you have prepared us a feast for tomorrow, love.”

“Like you said, William. No one is going to starve,” answered Elaine. “Now, have you had enough to eat. I have some mince pies in the pantry.”

“Sit and have a sandwich or two,” replied her husband. “I can get them.”

Elaine looked sceptical, as well she might because William called her a few moments later.

They came back together, William bearing the plate of mince pies.

After they had eaten their fill Charlie suggested a game of charades which was vetoed by his sisters who declared

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themselves either too tired or it was a game for Boxing Day not Christmas Eve.

Jim and Hubert began roasting chestnuts, Hubert using his penknife to score the flat sides and passing them to Jim who placed them on a metal shovel which he put on the embers. Soon the room was filled with the sweet, earthy aroma of the cooking nuts. When he judged them done, he withdrew the shovel and emptied the contents on newspaper. Rosie and Junie peeled them in short bursts dropping them as the hot shells burnt their fingers. Soon there was enough shelled, roasted chestnuts to pass around, the soft just cooked flesh contrasting with the harder more well done, an uncharitable soul would have called them burnt, bits.

Agnes reflected that Jim was a man of many parts, the more time she spent in his company, the more he surprised her.

Soon William suggested that Elaine have an early night and Agnes persuaded him to go with her.

“After all, you are going to have a very early morning, if I am any judge,” she said. “And hasn’t Father Christmas got to visit,” she reminded. “Let’s all have an early night. I don’t think it will do any of us any harm.”

Jim, Charlie, Rosie and Junie were sharing a room. Iris had already retired complaining that her legs ached so Hubert made his goodnights and quietly crept into the room they were given.

Agnes shut the door and looked around her. The bedroom was very neat and cosy. Elaine had thought of everything, even leaving a couple of books besides the electric lamp on the beside table. Agnes realised she had the unexpected luxury of reading in bed. Turning down

the covers, she discovered that a hot water bottle had been inserted and had been warming the bed prior to her arrival. Agnes felt very spoiled and quickly got dressed in her nightgown and slipped between the sheets, positioning the hot water bottle so that her feet rested upon it. Despite the anticipation of reading in bed, it didn't take long before Agnes realised that she had read the same paragraph several times and it still wasn't making any sense. She turned off the light, rolled over and the next thing she knew it was morning.

For a moment she stared at the unfamiliar curtains then she realised where she was and that she had been woken up by a knock on the door. She turned over to see the door open to admit William in a paisley dressing gown with tousled unbrushed hair bearing a cup emitting tendrils of steam.

"Thought you would like a cuppa in bed, Ma. It's about half seven and you were right, we have been awake for ages. Someone has given Harry a drum," he said grimly. "We couldn't stop him from playing it any longer." The sound of wood on metal started to reverberate throughout the upper floor.

William hurriedly placed the cup on the bedside table and left closing the door behind him. Agnes heard him admonishing Harry to keep the noise down. Welcome to the joys of parenthood, son, she thought.

Agnes appreciated the unaccustomed luxury of lying in bed sipping tea and reading but she was not used to such inactivity. Presently, she heard footsteps on the landing and noticing that they were descending the stairs decided

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to get out of bed. Logic told her that Elaine was up and about and going into the kitchen so Agnes, feeling rather naughty at still being dressed in her night attire, hurried to join her. In her experience a Christmas Day cook needed all the help she could get - especially one with numerous houseguests, even if they were family.

Sticking her head around the kitchen door, Agnes discovered that it was not Elaine as she had assumed but Junie.

“Merry Christmas,” she greeted her daughter.

“Merry Christmas, Ma. I thought I would give Elaine a treat and make a start on breakfast.”

“Aah, you aren’t used to lying in bed, either. What were you thinking of cooking. Shall I lay the table?”

“I noticed that there were two chaffing dishes on the sideboard, shall we see if there are some methylated spirits and if so use the dishes to keep a proper cooked breakfast warm until every one is ready?”

“Sounds a real posh idea, like I have been reading in some detective novels recently. Lets see what is in the pantry before we decide.”

They found enough bacon to last for at least two breakfasts together with kidneys and some sausages.

While Junie started frying the sausages and preparing the bacon and kidneys, Agnes hunted for methylated spirits then filled the little spirit lamps under the chaffing dishes.

She had just finished lighting the fire in the dining room when Elaine came in to see what she was doing. Together they finished laying the table for breakfast and rejoined Junie in the kitchen.

“Scrambled eggs, Elaine? Oh, there’s enough fat in the pan, lets have fried bread as well. Scrambled eggs for certain then, don’t want to fry eggs with the bread. If I put the eggs on a very low heat, they will take a while to cook so everyone should be ready when they are. Got a chaffing dish ready, Ma, and I will put the sausages, bacon and kidneys in to keep hot.”

The smell of bacon and coffee soon drew everyone from their bedrooms and into the kitchen. Elaine ushered them out to the dinning room and on her return suggested that Agnes might like to get dressed for breakfast. Agnes gasped with horror as she realised that she was so caught up with the breakfast preparations, she had forgotten she was still in her dressing gown and her hair in its nighttime plait. She fled up the stairs, quickly washed her hands and face, dressed and wound her hair up into its customary bun positioned at the nape of her neck.

She was the last to arrive in the dinning room and found that the others were already eating.

“Merry Christmas, Ma,” they chorused. William darted around to pull a chair out for her, Jim was at her elbow enquiring whether she would like tea or coffee. Harry, urged by his mother, carefully carried a plate to her on which he had put a little of everything that had been laid out on the sideboard.

By universal agreement it was decided to leave opening presents until they had returned from church. Agnes could see from Elaine’s far-away look that she was calculating cooking times for the meats in relation to when they could reasonably expect the church service to be finished.

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“I think the goose will have to go in the oven before we leave,” she said softly to Agnes. “Do you agree?”

“Yes, and the chickens can go in as soon as we come back. The goose can rest a bit longer if it needs to without spoiling. What time are you planning for us all to sit down to dinner?”

“About 2 which will probably mean 2.30.”

“Good job we have had such a good breakfast,” said Rosie. “I have eaten so much, I won’t want to eat another thing for a while. Having a late dinner means that it will be dark by the time we will be ready to have the pudding. I do like to see the pudding flame. Will you be making the brandy butter, Ma?”

“Rosie, I thought you couldn’t eat another thing,” said her husband. “All you have done is talk about food.”

“I can talk about food anytime,” she answered, stressing the word ‘talk’, “but talking and eating are two very different things.” She pushed away her plate then got to her feet and collected the plates from those who had finished and took them into the kitchen. She was joined by Iris who took charge of the washing up, directing Rosie to dry.

After breakfast was cleared, it was time to get ready and leave for church. It was an unquestioned assumption that all members of the family attend the morning service. William offered to take in his car any who didn’t want to walk but it was a clear, crisp morning so he had no takers.

“We need to walk off the breakfast on the way there and work up an appetite for lunch on the way back,” said Junie as she walked with Rosie and Jim. “Oh! I am enjoying being all together again. Sometimes I am so busy, I hardly even see Ma. The only person I see

regularly is William and George, of course, but we usually talk about business. This is a delightful interlude,” she said as she linked arms with Rosie and Jim. They were walking behind Iris, Hubert and Agnes who in turn were walking behind William, Elaine and Harry. William was doffing his hat and wishing a cheery “Merry Christmas” to all they passed.

After walking for about fifteen minutes they arrived at a charming, country lynch gate. They entered and walked up the gravel path to a modest church as the bells began to remind all of the imminent start of the service. Once inside, they were squashed together in a pew as the church was already quite full and seating was at a premium.

It was a traditional Christmas service, ending with a rousing rendition of ‘Oh Come All Ye Faithful’ complete with descants enthusiastically sung by the choir of men and boys. Afterwards Elaine and Agnes hastened back to the house, William, Harry and the rest of the party returned at a more leisurely pace. William spent some time chatting with other churchgoers until Harry’s impatient tugging on his hand reminded him that for his son at least, the main event of the day was yet to come.

They arrived back at the house in time to find Elaine coming out of the kitchen, smoothing stray strands of her hair back in place.

She forestalled Harry’s rush to the living room where the tree was by asking him to help her and his grandmother by bringing the dish of cocktail biscuits that was ready on the kitchen table.

“We have to look to the comfort of our guests, then when everyone is in the living room and the drinks and savouries are handed around, we can open the presents.

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And careful! You don't want to spill them," Elaine warned her son as he grabbed the dish and made to rush away.

Agnes, straightening from bending to put the chickens on the oven said she would accompany Harry into the living room to make sure he didn't spill a biscuit. "I shall tell your Dad to hurry up with the drinks so we can start opening presents," she whispered conspiratorially to her grandson as they walked from the kitchen.

He looked up at her and catching his glance, give him a ghost of a wink.

They entered the living room to find everyone seated or gathered around the fireplace in which a good fire blazed, occasionally popping, spurting or emitting sparks causing Harry's aunts to check their stockings.

Harry did as he was told and passed the dish of cocktail biscuits around before pleading with his father for his presents.

"You have to wait for your Mother to come in from the kitchen, me boy. It wouldn't be fair to start without her, now would it."

Harry sighed, put the dish on the coffee table and ran out of the room to the kitchen. Finding his mother about to take her apron off he began to tug her towards the door.

"Wait a minute, Harry," exclaimed Elaine. "Let me take off my apron, you won't make me go any faster if you grab my hand like that. I need to remove the apron. Now stop being silly and wait!

There now, that's better. Now you can take my hand and lead me to the living room if that is what you want."

The entrance of Elaine and Harry was greeted with shouts of encouragement and joy. Obviously, Harry wasn't the only one who was wanting to open his presents.

William beamed at his extended family. "As head of the household I will take the onerous duty of present distribution. Now, I will need a helper, thank you m'boy." Harry eagerly scrambled to his feet from his seated position next to his mother, obviously not wanting to give anyone else the opportunity to volunteer.

"Now, Harry my able assistant, I will select the present, read the label out loud and you will give it to the lucky recipient. The first present is for ... Harry. Ah, did I mention that able assistants had to wait until all the presents were delivered until they opened theirs. No?"

There was good natured laughter at disappointment on Harry's face.

Rosie and Junie chorused their pleas to Harry's father to let him open his present. Harry looked up to his father, silently pleading his cause.

William relented but warned that Harry had better be quick if they were to get the job done before lunch was ready.

"I don't want my lunch burnt and I daresay that your mother and grandmother will have something to say if this takes too long and there is a danger of kitchen catastrophes."

Harry set about ripping the wrapping paper with gusto causing his grandmother to exclaim at the waste.

"Now, Ma. You know how it is with boys, the presents can be opened fast now or slowly later - but I don't know as how even you will be able to make Harry wait that

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long!” said William with a grin. Agnes smiled her acknowledgement of the truth of this remark.

“Cor! Thanks Uncle Charlie. Look, Dad, a real screwdriver and pliers. Now I can help you fix things around the house.”

Rightly interpreting his wife’s meaningful look to get a move on, William became more selective in his choice of presents to distribute and Harry was kept busy delivering a gay assortment of parcels to his adult relatives. Soon every female had a small stack of carefully smoothed paper besides their feet. Unlike Harry they knew better than to rip presents open; the paper would be reused. The presents to the adults were predicable, Rosie gave every female a pretty silk scarf and every man received a silk tie. Iris looked slightly disapproving as she shook out her scarf.

“Liberty’s! We don’t all have money to waste on fripperies and I don’t know when Hubert will get ...” Hubert forestalled anything else she might have said by gently putting his hand on her shoulder. “It’s lovely, Rosie. Thank you,” he said simply. Iris sniffed but said nothing.

Rosie was indignant, “I bought them in the January sales! I thought they looked very pretty and I had to fight several women for them,” she added.

“Ohh, it’s lovely, Iris. William, can you find my present from Rosie. I want to see what she has picked for me,” cried Junie. “And see if you can find Elaine’s and Ma’s while you are at it,” she instructed.

Soon most of the parcels had been distributed. Harry was eying a particularly large parcel that William had left until last.

“Now, I think that’s all done. Thank you, Harry,” said his father.

“Dad, there is one left,” said the boy, hopping from one foot to the other. “Who’s it for? Is it for me?”

“Now, Dad,” said Elaine. “Put the boy out of his misery and give him his present.”

“Here you are, Harry,” said William, handing the last package to his son. “Merry Christmas from your Ma and me.”

Harry accepted the present with eyes as wide as saucers. “Gosh! Thanks” He knelt down where he was to unwrap the present, revealing a large box.

Glimpsing the illustration on the lid, he gasped, “Mecchano. It’s mecchano. Mum.” Rendered speechless he would have started building there and then but was forced back to reality by his mother who sprang out of her chair, calling for help in the kitchen. Agnes, Rosie and Junie rushed out in her wake. William calmly offered his brother and brothers-in-law another drink.

Rosie came back bringing lemonade for Harry and Iris. “Elaine was worried that the meat would be over cooked but every thing is fine,” she assured them all. “Ma is insisting that the meat is rested and supervising the roasting of the spuds. Another half hour and all should be ready.”

It was testament to Agnes’ years of experience cooking to a deadline at The Lamb & Flag that within 10 minutes they were invited to enter the dining room and seat themselves. William sat at the head of the table. In front of him was an enormous tureen and a stack of soup bowls. With a flourish, he lifted the lid and proceeded to ladle the hot and fragrant liquid into the bowls which were

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passed around the table. Elaine, Agnes and Junie joined them. When all had a bowl in front of them, William issued the invitation to pass the bread and start while it was hot.

The hot meats and vegetables were bought out and duly admired. William, as was his right at the head of the table, carved with panache and distributed the portions with generosity.

During a lull in the conversation, Junie was heard to ask Rosie why she and Jim hadn't given each other a present.

"That's because we pick her up tomorrow," replied Rosie.

"Pick who up?"

"Our present to each other, Ma. A spaniel puppy."

"A puppy! Can I come with you, can I go with them, Mum? Can I? Can I?"

Elaine looked helplessly at William.

Jim came to their rescue, "Of course you can come but I'm not sure it will be fair on the puppy. Remember she will be leaving her mum and brothers and sisters. Goodness knows what she will think when we take you home and she is left alone with us. It might be a better plan if you come and meet her at the end of the week when she has had a chance to settle in and familiarise herself with our house and garden. She will want to play with you and it will be much more fun."

Harry looked at his uncle, "I suppose it is like one of the boarders. He can't go home at Christmas and has to stay at school. Mr Carter, our housemaster has invited him to Christmas dinner. Ma says he can come and play with me one day during the holidays. Maybe he would like to

see the puppy,” he added with a sideways look at his mother.

Agnes was shocked, “how can parents not want their child with them?”

“Maybe the boy is more comfortable left at school. After all, Mrs T, as he is a boarder school will be more familiar to him than his parent’s house”, replied Jim.

Agnes stared at him but one look at his closed face made her refrain from pursuing the matter further.

Elaine told Harry that she would take him to see the puppy later in the week, choosing to ignore his suggestion of expanding the party, and smiled her thanks at Jim.

“Good idea of your mother’s, m’boy. Why did you decide on a spaniel, Jim?”

“I had the idea that I can train her as a gun dog. Some friends of mine have a shooting lodge in Suffolk and I can always find a farmer who would like a hand to control rabbits. And Rosie”, he looked fondly at his wife, “would like some company at home during the day when I am at work. Spaniels are good companions. I like the idea of knowing she has a protector when I am not there.”

“Can you teach me to shoot, Uncle Jim?” Harry asked between mouthfuls.

“Now, Harry, stop pestering your uncle. One thing at a time. He has just invited you to see the puppy. Now, stop eating so fast. You are going to have to wait until we are all finished before you can leave the table; and that won’t be until after the Christmas Pudding,” cautioned his mother.

“Talking of puddings,” said Junie, “will you be able to help up us make next year’s puddings tomorrow, Rosie”

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“I had planned to. Jim and I don’t have to leave until after lunch tomorrow, do we.”

“We only have to go to Barnet to pick up the puppy so it won’t take long. Leaving after lunch will be fine, if that is not overstaying our welcome,” added Jim.

He was assured by both his host and hostess that it was no trouble at all.

“Well, it seems as though we should have played Charades last night,” said Junie. “I have to leave after lunch tomorrow as well. I have to be back at work the day after tomorrow.”

“Enough talk of work. This is a holiday and I for one don’t intend to think of work for at least one day. Now, who is ready for seconds. More goose, Hubert. Maybe you can fit in some more chicken, Jim. Another potato, anyone?”

William was assured by his sisters that they for one were leaving enough room for The Pudding.

Agnes eyed the remaining vegetables with a practiced eye. “Reckon we will have enough leftovers for bubble and squeak tomorrow lunchtime.”

“There are times when I don’t understand this family,” said Hubert. “How can you talk of future meals when you haven’t finished this one?”

“I agree with you, Hubert,” said Jim. “As I have often commented to my wife, it is very difficult to be planning what one is to eat next before the current meal has even finished. And why are you making next years Christmas puddings tomorrow?”

Unabashed, Agnes replied, “Well, my lad, when you have as many boys as me, you will learn that there comes a time when their appetite for food is insatiable. It pays to

plan ahead as you never know when a hungry corner needs to be filled.

Christmas Puddings taste better if they have time to mature. I have always found it easier to arrange making them on Boxing Day while Christmas is on my mind. Later in the year, Christmas always seems so far off, its so easy to put off making them until it is too late.”

Charlie and William nodded enthusiastically.

“You have never tasted one of Ma’s puddings, Jim. Never tasted one like it, just you wait and see,” added Charlie with fervour.

After this endorsement, no one could be persuaded to eat anymore meat or vegetables and the women bore remains of that course off to the kitchen.

Looking around the room, William announced that as the head of the family it was his responsibility to entrust one man with an important task. Solemnly, he took his time, eyeing each one of them as if evaluating their suitability for the task he had in mind. His eye settled on Harry.

“Are you old enough for this very important job, I wonder.”

Harry returned his father’s gaze , squirming a little in his chair as if to make himself look older and responsible.

“Harry, I appoint you ‘Keeper of the Light’. It is your job to stand by the electric light switch and turn off the light as your Grandmother carries The Pudding from the kitchen. Turning off the electric will mean that the only light in this room will be these candles,” he indicated the candles burning brightly on the table. “Enabling us to better appreciate The Pudding in all it’s flaming glory. Harry,” he stood and moved over to his son and laid his

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hand on Harry's shoulder. "Harry," he repeated, "are you tall enough for this task?"

Harry rose and went over to the light switch, standing by it to prove he was up to the job. William opened the door and peered down the hall towards the kitchen.

"Keep your eyes peeled, m'lad and turn the light off when you see The Pudding leave the kitchen.

Now, Jim, Hubert, Charlie let me recharge your glasses."

Harry allowed the adult conversation wash over him as he concentrated on the kitchen door. He heard an exclamation and applause then the kitchen door was opened and his grandmother began her stately progress along the hall. He turned off the light and swiftly returned to his chair, bouncing with excitement.

"Dad, Dad, she's coming," he cried.

"Who is she? The cat's mother?" His father said automatically.

There was no time for Harry to reply as Agnes had reached the dining room, placing the Pudding in front of William. It was a truly magnificent sight. Looking large enough to satisfy everyone, dark, round, blue flames dancing over and around it, smelling deliciously inviting and topped with a sprig of holly.

Scrapping of chairs announced that the honour guard of women had seated themselves.

"Well, Ma," said William as he he rose to stand with knife and serving spoon in hand. "This is all very well, but where is everyone else's?"

He boldly cut into the magnificence and cut generous portions for all. Harry handed the filled plates around

and Elaine encouraged everyone to help themselves to brandy butter and custard as they desired.

Agnes eyed the jug of custard and made a mental note to make trifle for lunch tomorrow; the brandy butter was by far the most popular.

At length, most of the company pushed their chairs away from the table while some discretely loosened their belts.

“My word,” Jim said with awed respect in his voice. “My word, I have never eaten anything like that. Rosie, if it means that we can eat as well next year, you have my permission to rise early tomorrow to make next year’s puddings.”

Rosie laughed, “Now who is looking ahead. I am surprised you can move, Jim Wolesley, you have eaten so much let alone think about what you will eat next year,” she gently chided her husband who smiled fondly at her.

“Lets move into the living room while the ladies clear the table,” invited William.

Harry instantly began to badger his father to help him with his mechano set.

Charlie, taking pity on his brother, volunteered himself. Harry immediately grabbed his uncle by the hand and pulled him towards the living room. Charlie lowered himself to the floor with a groan and directed his nephew to bring the tools he received as presents. Their two heads were soon bent over the box happily debating what to make.

William and his brothers-in-law settled themselves in the comfortable armchairs by the fire. William said he would rest quietly while he digested and spreading his handkerchief over his face he was as good as his word. Jim

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and Hubert made desultory conversation for a while until the soporific effect of a larger than normal meal made itself felt.

Meanwhile in the kitchen, Iris, Rosie and Junie insisted on washing and drying while Agnes and Elaine sat.

“Ma, you sit and rest. Elaine can sit and tell us where things go. There is nothing worse than trying to find where your favourite knife or bowl has been put by a well meaning helper,” said Rosie. “Besides, you and Ma did most of the cooking so you deserve the rest. Iris, you can sit as well, if you want to,” she said kindly plainly ignoring the mountainous pile of dirty dishes.

“I am quite able to pull my weight, Rosie,” said Iris with asperity. “In fact the baby seems quieter when I am on my feet.”

They finished clearing up and everything was put away to Elaine’s satisfaction and tea for all had been made. Rosie opened the door the suspiciously quiet living room to find Harry was the only one in the room awake. She crept back into the kitchen.

“They are all asleep, except Harry,” she reported. “Let’s have a cuppa here. We can play cards or something.”

In unspoken agreement of Rosie’s plan, Elaine and Agnes pulled out two chairs from around the table and Junie tiptoed into the dining room to get one for herself. She returned giggling, “It’s not quiet anymore, Rosie. I am surprised Harry can hear himself think for the sound of snoring!”

“I doubt Harry will notice much that is unrelated to Mechano. Now where did I put that pack of cards,” said Elaine as she went to the dresser. “Ah, here they are.

Shall we play Newmarket? There is a second pack here from when we were playing with Harry. The four picture cards are ready to go.”

An Ace, King, Queen and Jack from the other pack were placed in a row in the middle of the table. Elaine emptied a large box of matches in front of Agnes.

“You be the banker, Ma, and we’ll play for matches and the glory of winning!”

Agnes asked Iris who was sitting on her right to give every one except herself twenty matches while she dealt all the cards from the first pack.

When each had their stake of matches and cards, Agnes called play to begin by reminding them to put into the kitty and place their bets on the picture cards.

It didn’t take too many hands before Iris, Rosie and Junie began bickering. The little mound of matches in front of all the players except Agnes the banker and Rosie began to diminish. Rosie had just won a game and was gathering the matches she had won. “I don’t know how you manage to win Rosie,” exclaimed Junie. “I can’t make out the system you are using”

“Oh, I don’t use a system, I just place the bets of the cards that I feel are right,” replied Rosie airily.

“Lucky in cards, unlucky in love,” muttered Iris. Rosie shot her a sharp look. “I can’t help it if I am lucky. My game again, I think.”

“Now then, girls. Little birds and all that. Iris, would you like to be banker, now. I’ll see if I can break Rosie’s run of luck,” said Agnes

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Shortly afterwards, Jim wandered into the kitchen. He stood behind Rosie and looked at her cards over her shoulder.

“Driven out by the sound of the snoring, Jim?”

Jim grinned. “It’s pretty noisy but I came to see what you were doing and if there was another cup in that pot, Junie”

“it’s a bit strong,” Agnes said as she put a cup in front of him. “We are playing Newmarket, your wife is on a winning streak. Do you want to join in? Rosie, give him some of your matches as a stake. Now, Jim, see of you can change her luck.”

Rosie uttered a half hearted protest but divided her pile of matches, pushing the smaller pile in front of her husband. When Iris dealt the next hand, she included Jim in the deal.

Jim swore that it was beginners luck that saw him win the next game.

Looking at the pathetically few matches in front of her, Elaine commented that she would soon be out of matches.

“Oh well, you could always make another pot of tea when you are free,” commented Junie.

“Manners,” corrected her mother as she scooped her win towards her. Junie looked unrepentant as Rosie explained to Elaine that when it came to cards, they were a very competitive family and gave no quarter.

“You should have played with us before the war. Not only was Charlie competitive, he was extremely hard to beat. But he is not the same now,” she added sadly. Her sisters murmured in agreement.

“He was lucky to come out of the war the way he did, love. There were many that didn’t come home at all or

were so maimed it doesn't bear thinking about," Jim reminded her.

"William won't talk about the war, either. It's as though he has buried the memories and can't talk about them in case they escape or something," said Elaine.

Rosie reached out and squeezed her hand. "Men don't seem to be able to talk about it at all. You knew Charlie before the war, Elaine. He was such fun and full of life. He is so much quieter now. It makes me sad to think about it."

"We can only hope and pray that the old Charlie returns over time," said Agnes. "Come on, buck up! It's Christmas and the war ended over two years ago. Elaine, put the kettle on; let's make a pot of tea. A cuppa, slice of Christmas cake then Charades after supper will round off the day perfectly. Jim, go and see what Harry is making and wake the boys up." She soon got everyone bustling around, the momentary gloom passed by.

Good as her word, the next morning, immediately after breakfast had been eaten and cleared away Agnes started to assemble ingredients for the Christmas Puddings.

Iris and Rosie were seated on opposite sides of the kitchen table. Iris was picking over the dried fruit removing stalks and other detritus unwanted in the finished product. Rosie was volunteered for the job of preparing the suet. She had vehemently protested her unsuitability for the job, that Iris or Junie were deft with their fingers and better able to disengage the small lumps of suet from the protective skin. All appeals fell on deaf ears. Her sisters were particularly hard hearted.

"Rosie, you know perfectly well that I did it last year, this year it's your turn and next year Junie will do it. Just

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get on with it and stop wasting time. The sooner you begin, the sooner you will finish.”

On the other side of the table, Agnes and Elaine each faced a large mixing bowl.

Agnes shot Elaine a look that she correctly interpreted as ‘don’t say a thing’.

Rosie took one look at her Mother’s studied indifference, heaved a massive sigh and started on her allotted task. Junie was by the sink, cutting calico into squares on the wooden draining board.

William put his head around the kitchen door, took one look at the industry there and announced that the menfolk were off to have a walk.

“Will you take Harry with you?” asked Elaine.

“It’s not that sort of walk, besides it is too wet outside,” replied her husband as a gust of wind drove the rain against the window. He quickly closed the door to prevent hearing the comments from his mother and sisters.

“Drat that boy,” said Agnes. “He is old enough to know that all the people in the house have to have a stir of the mixture before it is cooked. Now I am going to have to wait until they return before I start the pudding cooking.”

Elaine smiled. “I think he has forgotten that we have a telephone here.”

“What’s that got to do with mixing the puddings?”

“Well, Iris, I can just ring the pub and ask them to tell our menfolk to come home.”

There was a moments silence, then Junie gave a shout of laughter and the rest joined in.

“That will teach them to leave us to do all the work. Good idea, Elaine. Oh, I wish I could see their faces when they get the message.”

Agnes wiped her eyes with the edge of her apron.

“Come on girls, lets get a move on, we need to get these finished and a trifle made before lunchtime. Now, Elaine, do you have any objection to Bubble & Squeak with cold meat and trifle to follow for lunch?”

“Not at all. With Jim, Rose and Junie having to leave after lunch, it seems a really good idea. Iris, you and Hubert are welcome to stay. Does Hubert have to go to work tomorrow?”

Iris indicated that they were thinking of departing after lunch as well.

“Junie, why don’t you stay tonight and go back to town when William takes Ma tomorrow morning. I am sure he plans to leave early enough for opening at the usual time. At least stay for supper. There is so much food and you would be hard pressed to find anywhere open this afternoon. The same goes for you and Hubert, Iris. Why not stay and leave after supper?”

“Don’t you have one of your young men champing at the bit to pick you up?”

“Rosie, you make it sound like I have a veritable string of admirers! No I didn’t make any arrangements with any young man, mine or otherwise.

You are right about the food issue, Elaine. The more I think of it, the more sense it makes to return with William tomorrow morning. So, thank you, I would love to stay another night.” She then spoilt her grown up persona by spinning on her heel and sticking her tongue out at Rosie.

Iris also agreed with the wisdom of leaving after supper so with that settled Agnes suggested that Junie should start chopping the brussel spouts and carrots that were left over from yesterday.

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“Iris, when you are finished picking over the dried fruit, you can mash the left over roast potatoes. Mind you remember to remove the outer crispy bits. They don’t mash well,” Agnes added as a general explanation. “And then pick over the carcasses of the chickens. Might as well make a bit of stock with all the fowl carcasses. It’ll make a nice soup for tonight.

Now, girls, let’s start mixing these puddings. Elaine, will you fetch the bottle of Stout that I bought with me. It’s in my bedroom. What? With all the men in the house I wasn’t going to risk it being drunk. We will also need some brandy. It’s the stout that gives the pudding such a lovely dark colour and the brandy helps it keep.

That’s the way, it’s got to be stiff enough to hold together in the cloth but moist enough so that it drops from the spoon. We are almost ready for everyone to have a stir. Do you want to use the phone, Elaine? Rosie, can you fill that large pot with water and start heating it. Should be boiling when the puddings are ready to be cooked.”

Agnes left the two bowls of pudding mixture on the table as she began the search for trifle ingredients.

Elaine came back into the kitchen with a rueful grin on her face.

“No need to look like that. William is old enough to know better than to leave the house when Christmas Puddings are being made. Or Charlie should have reminded him,” Agnes added as an after thought.

“Anyway, it is nearly time for lunch so they should have been coming back soon. And at this time of the year you wouldn’t want to leave too late in the afternoon, would you Rosie? You will need some light to see the puppy.

Now, have you got a bowl for the trifle. I always like glass myself. I think it looks very pretty when you can see all the layers. That will do very nicely, thank you. Junie, can you open that tin of Fruit Cocktail and then drain the fruit. Don't need all that juice but some of it maybe useful if the cake is a bit dry," she mused. "Rosie, slice two bananas, there's a dear. Iris, whip the cream, please."

Agnes deftly tore a stale sponge cake into pieces, using half of them to line the base of the pretty glass bowl. Then she liberally sprinkled the cake pieces with sweet sherry and some of the tinned fruit juice. A generous layer of Fruit Cocktail came next and half of the banana slices. A layer of custard was added then the process was repeated. Finally, the cream was spread over the top.

By this time Harry had joined them and was staring wide-eyed at the bowl.

"Would you like to decorate it, Harry," asked his grandmother.

"Coo, yes please. I had trifle when I stayed with Williams before the end of term. His mother used jelly when she makes hers," he said scornfully as he carefully placed the cachous on the billowy surface of the cream. "I was very polite, Mum but it wasn't half as good as Grandma's. Or yours," he hastily added.

Elaine laughed and Agnes ruffled his hair.

"I don't hold with using jelly myself but I know some that prefer it made that way," Agnes said graciously.

"Mum, can I invite Williams to tea next term and show him how a real trifle tastes?"

"If you are sure my trifle is good enough, I suppose so," replied his mother, tongue in cheek.

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“Oh, you are a much better cook than his mother. She is very la-di-da and doesn’t do her own cooking. They have a cook but the grub isn’t as good as yours. Can I have a biscuit while I go and play with my Mecchano?”

“No biscuits this close to lunch. Your Dad and Uncles will be home soon and then we will eat. You have done a lovely job of decorating the trifle. Run along and play with your Mechano, lunch won’t be long.”

“Harry, before you go, just give this pudding a quick stir, duck” said his grandmother.

“Don’t forget to close your eyes and make a wish as you do it,” added Junie.

“And don’t tell us what you wish else it won’t come true,” chimed in Rosie.

Harry did as he was bid, sticking his tongue out of the side of his mouth. Rosie hovered nearby, ready to rescue any mixture that might escape the bowl in Harry’s effort to stir with his eyes closed.

The sound of footsteps outside the kitchen window heralded the arrival of the men returning from their ‘walk’.

They entered with a gust of wind, coats and hats damp from the rain, trailing the smells of smoke, tobacco and beer.

“Now then,” demanded William. “Who is responsible for that phone call? Which one of you put Elaine up to it.”

Agnes calmly wiped her hands on her apron and replied that it was her and “you and Charlie are both old enough to know better than to leave the house when I was mixing Christmas Pudding. Now you are here, you can each have a stir for good luck. And if William had chosen

to forget, then you should have reminded him, Charlie Thomas. And when you have finished, I suggest you wash your hands because lunch will be ready in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

Chastened, the men duly lined up for their stir then clumped off to wash their hands as instructed.

Agnes caught Elaine's eye and grinned conspiratorially.

Jim and Rosie left soon after lunch and only the promise that Harry could visit the puppy later in the week prevented the boy from leaving in the car with them. Rosie wound her window down and waved her handkerchief until she could no longer see them. When the car had disappeared from sight the remaining family turned and walked back to the house.

Elaine declared that "us women deserve a rest, like you men had yesterday afternoon." William uttered a half hearted protest then magnanimously offered to wash up the lunch things, with Hubert's and Charlie's help, he quickly added.

"Come on, Ma," said Junie, drawing her mother's arm through hers. "Lets go and bag a chair by the fire. Can you bring us some tea, when you have finished clearing up, please." She flashed her brother a cheeky grin. "Come Elaine and Iris, don't give them a chance to change their minds!"

"Really, Junie," said Iris as she settled herself in a comfy chair, "you shouldn't give your brother cheek like that. He works very hard, I'm sure ..."

She was interrupted by a vehement exclamation from her youngest sister.

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“And we don’t? I work nearly as hard as William does but I don’t have Elaine to run around after me. Why should we always run around clearing up after them. Ma has worked her fingers to the bone but I didn’t see any of the boys offering to cook for a night, or tidy, do the washing or anything. Fair gets me riled thinking about it sometimes.”

“Now then, Junie. Don’t go getting het up over a little thing like that,” said her mother and managing at the same time to forestall an equally irate outburst from Iris.

She sighed, “Fact is, the unfairness has crossed my mind once or twice but I couldn’t see a way to change things. Things were difficult after your father died and I found it easier and quicker just to get on and do what needed to be done. It’s different now I am more or less on my own and I really don’t mind lending a hand when needed.”

“I think things are different now we have moved here.” Elaine spoke in a low tone. “Obviously, I don’t see as much of William as I did when we lived over the shop. I don’t feel as involved in the business as I did. We used to talk over the days events or I would tell him about the customers we had during the day but now he comes home much later and by the time we have eaten dinner and I have cleared up,” she gave a rueful grin and glanced at Junie as she spoke. “Yes, after I have cleared up there doesn’t seem any time at all before it is bed time. It is quite lonely during the day when Harry is at school.” She gazed at the fire and didn’t see her sister and mother-in-law look meaningfully at each other.

“I am fully occupied in taking care of Hubert,” said Iris as she complacently ran a hand over her swollen belly.

Elaine turned and smiled at her. "And you will be much busier and tireder soon."

The women were making desultory conversation when William wheeled in a fine wooden tea trolley. He had covered the topmost tray with a fine linen cover and piled fine china cups and saucers, a silver teapot with matching covered hot water jug, milk jug and sugar bowl. Junie, seated nearest the door and catching sight of the laden trolley exclaimed "What! No slices of lemon." Then caught William's eye and grinned. "A very handsome set, brother. Did you buy it recently? Nice tea set as well."

"I needed some driving practice so after I dropped Harry off at school one day, I drove to St Albans," said Elaine, somewhat defensively after glancing at Iris. She went on, "I stopped for tea and the waitresses were using trolleys which struck me a a very good idea for here as it saves several trips from the kitchen to the sitting room. I mentioned it to William and ... "

"And I happened to be passing Maples & Co on Tottenham Court Road the next day and believe it or not they had this trolley in their window. Nothing but the finest for my missus" William finished up.

"Well," said Agnes. "What a stroke of luck. It is a very nice piece of furniture. Practical too. Now, shall I pour the tea?"

A bit later, Agnes and Junie slipped out of the room, leaving Elaine and Iris dozing in front of the fire. They passed William, Charlie and Hubert in the hall donning overcoats and wrapping scarves around their necks. Agnes raised an eyebrow in William's direction.

"Thought us chaps would go for a walk,' he volunteered. "Walk off lunch, raise an appetite for

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supper,” he added as they made their escape through the door.

Junie snorted, “more like a walk back to the pub,” but she spoke knowing they were out of earshot.

“Leave them alone,” urged her mother. “Each of them is a worker and they deserve a bit of relaxation. Lets go to the kitchen and make a start on the vegetables for supper.”

As they washed and peeled potatoes, Junie raised the subject of Elaine’s obvious loneliness. Speaking in a low tone to ensure that they would not be heard in the sitting room, Junie began by saying “I guessed that Elaine was finding the move here a bit difficult but I didn’t realise ‘til she spoke this afternoon just how isolated she feels. Do you think you should have a word with William?”

“I don’t hold with interfering between a man and his wife, never have, never will. So no, I am not going to have a word with him. If needed, William and Elaine need to work something out between them. No, Junie, my poking my nose in what’s nobody’s business but their own won’t help. I’ve had enough experience in my lifetime to know that.”

“But there must be something we can do, some way of involving Elaine in the business so she feels part of it again.”

Junie, noting that her mother didn’t object to this idea, racked her brains for a way Elaine could be part of the business while they worked in silence.

“Mr Bamforth, the bookkeeper, has been saying that he wants to retire for a while now. William keeps persuading him to do the books for one more month at a time. I wonder if he has considered keeping the job in the

family”, Junie mused. “Do you think we need anymore potatoes?”

“No, that should be enough. Let’s roast them and do brussel sprouts and carrots again with cold ham and pickles. Do you think Mr Bamford will be willing to teach Elaine? And will Elaine want to learn?”

“I think I should suggest the idea to William. If he suggests it to Elaine, she will do it. What’s good for the business is good for him is her thinking. I will just have to persuade him that it is his idea. So this isn’t interfering?”, she asked.

“Not to my way of thinking. You have provided an answer to a problem that will affect the business; that is, the imminent need to find another bookkeeper. You are not interfering between a married couple.”

“A finely judged line,” commented Junie with a shrewd glance at her mother.

Again they lapsed into silence as they worked and both looked around as they heard footsteps in the hall and Elaine entered the kitchen.

“I might of guessed that I would find you here,” she said to her mother-in-law. “I must have dozed off. Thank you for starting on supper. What would you like me to do?”

Agnes told her what she planned for the meal and Elaine suggested cold christmas pudding and cheese for afterwards.

“I think there is enough trifle for Harry, if he would like it,” said his grandmother with a knowing grin.

Elaine and Junie snorted in unison at the thought of Harry turning down what he frequently vowed was his favourite pudding.

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“I’ll collect the trolley, just time to wash up and then lay the table. Do you know where the men are? What’s Harry doing, he is suspiciously quiet.” Elaine bustled off to look for her son after Junie told her that the older men had gone for a walk.

The sound of clattering china proceeded Harry bursting through the door making heavy work of pushing the tea trolley.

“Mum asked me to bring this through”, he said. “Even though I was quietly reading my new Eagle Annual and not annoying anyone.” He looked around, “where is Uncle Charlie? He promised to help me some more with my mechano.”

“He’s gone for a walk with your Dad and Uncle Hubert,” replied Junie. “I can help you, if you like.”

Harry looked at her dubiously. Junie could see that he was thinking ‘but you are a girl’ but to his credit he didn’t say it out loud.

“Tell me what you are building and how I can help. Come on, lets make a start and see how we go,” she urged.

Harry left with her. The doubt he felt that his aunt would be of any help at all was evident to his mother and grandmother. They both stifled their laughter until he had left the room.

“Has Junie been listening to the Pankhurst women? She is very outspoken about the place of women these days,” asked Elaine.

“No, at least she has said nothing to me,” said Agnes with a sigh. “Don’t ask me where she gets her ideas from. She’s always been a free thinker and a free spirit come to think. You know,” she went on, lowering her voice, “just

between the two of us, I sometimes think she may be right. There might just be more to life than childbearing and the drudgery that goes with it. Don't get me wrong," she added quickly before Elaine could say anything. "I don't regret for one minute having any of my children, even little Dulcie who got away, no I don't regret it at all. But I sometimes wonder how different the world would be if women had a larger place in it. But thinking about something isn't going to get the job done and there is washing up to be done then a table to be laid."

Those that were going into town got an early start the next morning. William dropped his mother at the kiosk as it was getting light, then took Junie to the shop in Leicester Square.

"Give some thought to what I said about the bookkeeper," she said as William unloaded the bags containing their overnight things from the boot of the car. "You have taught me that it's important to use someone that is trustworthy in such a position."

"Leave it with me, Junie. I have told you that I will think about it." With that she had to be content. Turning she opened the shop to the embrace of the familiar tobacco fragrance but seeming stronger than usual because the shop hadn't been opened for two days.

CHAPTER NINE

Hendon 1937

“Rosie, everyone will be arriving here from work in a few hours and there is nothing to feed them. The boys expect to be fed when they come to see Ma. Well, she always has something for them, even if it’s only fruit cake.”

“You are right, Iris. We can’t feed working men fruit cake for dinner. Lets see what Ma has in the larder.”

The sisters moved into the kitchen.

“Dinner?” queried Iris. “That’s a bit posh. Comes from marrying above your class, I suppose. Tea is good enough for Hubert and me,” said Iris as they both peered into the larder.

Rosie chose to ignore Iris’ needling and focus on what, if anything, was going to be the foundation for their evening meal. After all, she reflected, I had a lot of practice biting my tongue when Jim and I were living with Iris a few years ago.

“Hmm, carrots, onions, potatoes, flour, bit of lard. Rosie, what do you think? If one of us pops to the

butcher and gets a bit of stewing steak and we make a stew.”

“And dumplings. A stew is a good idea ‘cos if none of us is hungry, it can be reheated later and dumplings won’t take long to cook.”

“A bit of mash as well to fill stomachs.”

Rosie found her purse, “Iris, do you want me to go to the butcher?” knowing that her sister wouldn’t offer to spend the amount of money necessary to buy enough meat to feed even the immediate family.

“I will start peeling and chopping the vegetables,” offered Iris.

Rosie smiled to herself as she let herself out of her mother’s flat. One thing about knowing your older sister all your life is that her behaviour is so predictable, it rarely disappoints. Then she sighed, sometimes it felt like Iris was continuously punishing her brothers and sisters for thwarting her dream of going to Secondary Modern school. It wasn’t even as if we were old enough to realise what was going on, especially Junie who was only two at the time, she thought, as she walked to the shops.

She soon returned, calling out to Iris as she entered the flat and went through to the kitchen.

“I’ve just looked in on Ma who still seems to be asleep. Thought I would take her a cup of tea in a minute,”

Rosie, had taken off her coat and was wrapping a pinafore around herself. “That’s a very good idea, fancy a cup myself. How about I start browning the meat while you put the kettle on. The butcher very kindly cut the meat up for me so I only have to toss it in a little flour. Ohh Iris, do you remember when Ma used to make stew and put oysters in?”

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“She didn’t make the stew for us. That was when she used to bring home left overs from the Lamb & Flag,” Iris reminded her. “Rosie, don’t you remember anything?”

“Hey, Iris, I am six years younger than you. When did Ma start working at the pub?”

“Just after Pa died.”

“I was only six then. How do you expect me to remember as much as you. Honestly!” she exclaimed.

In the bedroom, Agnes was roused from sleep by the bickering coming from the kitchen. She couldn’t distinguish the words but a memory from the past was awoken.

CHAPTER TEN

London 1900

Before going to the hospital, Agnes made her way to the vicinity of Covent Garden. The Lamb & Flag was not in the immediate area of the Market but on the outskirts. Just far enough away from St Giles that the appearance of the curate would not be expected. Anyway, if she was working there, she would be out in the kitchen and unlikely to be spotted. A hint of a smile played around her mouth, she was thinking that that was the sort of reasoning that Iris employed with her fingers crossed. Thinking of Iris reminded her that she had promised to read the letter Iris had bought home from school yesterday afternoon. Why did everything happen at once! One thing at a time, she must concentrate on getting a job, then Charley, then Iris.

She knew there was no guarantee that she would get a job at the Lamb & Flag but she hoped that her previous experience and the fact that her mother had worked there would work in her favour. As she walked, she was so

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desperate she attempted a prayer, “Although God wouldn’t listen to the likes of me,” she muttered to herself. Instead of praying she found herself having a one sided conversation with God, or the being she thought of as God. Not a benevolent all-seeing, all-loving, white bearded father figure, but an indifferent deity, one who let humanity get on with their lives without intervention, allowing them to make their own mistakes. She started by telling God that she hadn’t intended Charley to drink the Spirits of Salts. She just wanted him to acknowledge the consequences of his actions, to stop his drinking so that things could go back to what they had been when they first married and were happy, poor but happy. She wasn’t a socialist, she didn’t mind being poor. She knew what socialists were because sometimes in the early years of their life together, when he was still working as a printer, Charley used to bring home spoiled copies of a pamphlet he had set. They were useful for putting under the mattress. It was a trick she learned from her mother as it seemed to help keep the bed warmer, providing a barrier between the mattress and the cold that seeped up through the gaps in the floorboards. Sometimes she read them as she was waiting for William or Iris to fall asleep when they were babies. Charley’s boss wasn’t too fussy who he accepted jobs from, so long as they paid so sometimes Charley would bring home spoilt copies of pamphlets paid for by a group he called the Bolsheviks. That was how she knew what socialism was, and she wasn’t one of those who followed the writings of the German Jew, Marx. So no, she wasn’t a socialist she knew her place in the scheme of things, how did that hymn go? ‘The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate.... All things bright

and beautiful.' "Rosie's favourite hymn", she thought, hearing again the childish treble that had entertained them all only a few weeks ago.

So God knew that she didn't intend for Charley to take the actions he did and she hoped that Charley would forgive her for what she had done. She then let God know how desperate she was to keep the family together and to help all her children get a start in life so they wouldn't live as she and Charley had done. This was the substance of her plea to the deity; don't let my babies be taken from me.

Suddenly she was aware that she was at the entrance of the pub. Not wanting to draw too much attention to herself she went around to the kitchen door. She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and went in. She walked in to chaos. Not the chaos of a busy yet organised kitchen but the disorder of a kitchen that had no one in control. There were a brace of chickens lying unplucked amid a heap of vegetables, a haunch of beef dripping blood on the floor, a pile of washing up teetered dangerously in the sink. Nowhere was there a sign of control, of a plan, of any organisation. She grabbed a passing girl, "What's going on here?"

"Ere, let go of me. Wot's it to you anyway? Who are you?"

"I came to see if there was a job as a cook going, looks to me like there is. Is Mr Dickson still the landlord? Where is he, I will go and offer my services? What do you do here? Well, if that is your job, start with the pile of

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washing up in the sink and when you have finished that, you can help me prepare the vegetables. Run along.”

With that parting injunction, Agnes moved off to the snug bar to see if she could find Mr Dickson. He must be getting on if he still runs the pub, she thought. As I remember, he wasn't a young man when I was helping out with my mam. She soon found him, not the older man of her memory but one nearer her age.

“Mr Dickson? I am Agnes Thomas and I am looking for a job as a cook. I used to work here when old Mr Dickson ran the pub and my mother, Susan Clements, was the cook. I was wondering what had happened in the kitchen. I came in that way and it seemed in such a mess. I hope you don't think it too forward of me but I told the girl to start on the washing up as there seemed to be plenty of it.”

Mr Dickson took a long look at her. He saw a woman old before her years, not an uncommon sight living and working where he did; women worn out by constant childbearing and poor diet. She had deep black circles under her eyes but he was struck by the energy and intelligence in her blue eyes. Her hair, scrapped back and held in place with too few pins and threatening to escape beneath her tatty straw hat, was of indeterminate brown and the bits that had escaped had been impatiently tucked behind her ears were curly and undisciplined. He remembered her mother; or rather he remembered her cooking fondly. He looked like a man who would have fond memories of food and drink as his stomach was threatening to pop his waistcoat buttons.

“I remember your mother,” he said. “Do you cook as well as she did?”

“Better,” came the reply before Agnes could stop herself. She didn’t believe in puffing yourself up as she would have put it but she desperately needed a job and Mr Dickson looked like a man who appreciated good food, just like his father had. “My mother taught me everything she knew and I have had a bit more practise since then” said Agnes, surreptitiously crossing her fingers hidden in the folds of her skirt as she spoke.

“My previous cook left yesterday after serving lumpy gravy; I won’t have it in my establishment. We have a reputation for our food here, one that I am not going to lose. Start right away and if you are any good you can come back tomorrow. Sunday is the only day we don’t serve food.”

Agnes opened her mouth to say that she couldn’t work today but said nothing. Charley wasn’t going anywhere and they needed the money.

“What are you waiting for, woman? The food won’t cook itself.”

She turned and moved rapidly back the way she had come, rolling up her sleeves as she walked.

“Right, you’ve made a start.” Agnes said to the girl who was going through the motions of washing the pile of pates and pots at the large, deep sink. The sink may have gleamed white once but it didn’t at the moment.

“You can’t get through that lot with cold water. That’s no good at all. You need some hot. Is there a copper? Well, lets get a fire started underneath it for some hot water and stoke up the oven, we have lunch to get ready. Yes, you are stuck with me for today and many more days to come, I hope. My name is Mrs Thomas and your

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name is? Right, Maud lets roll our sleeves up and get to work.”

While Maud saw to the boiler, Agnes sorted through the food piled on the centre table. Roast beef, roasts were popular and chicken pie. Pies always went down well when her mother was cook and their popularity hadn't changed, but with only two chickens, she had better make that chicken and vegetable pie. Instead of individual pies, she would make four large, deep ones and serve the pies in slices.

The oven, which was never allowed to go out, would soon be hot enough for the meat to roast so she got that ready first. A nice piece of beef, whoever had bought it knew what to look for. Agnes secured a piece of beef fat on the top side of the slab of beef, that would save her having to baste it every quarter of an hour. That ready, she set aside a large quantity of potatoes for roasting in the meat juices in a couple of hours time. She put the beef in the oven, said a few encouraging words to Maud to buck her up, they had a lot to do in a short time and moved on to plucking and drawing the chickens.

It had been a few years since she had had an opportunity to prepare a chicken but her hands knew how to pull the feathers out without her consciously thinking about it. How she used to rail against preparing birds when she helped her mother, how glad she was of the experience now! Soon the birds were lying on the table plucked but otherwise intact. Maud watch in astonishment as Agnes lit a candle and after first securing it held and rotated first one of the chickens and then the other.

“The light singes off all the down that maybe left behind after plucking,” Agnes explained. “Makes the skin taste better, too. Right, now to the smelly, messy part. Open the door, lets get some fresh air in before we start. Are there any fly papers here?” This question was in response to the droning of two or three flies that made their way in through the now open door. When told that the handyman, George, could be prevailed upon to hang some from the ceiling, Agnes made a mental note to find him and get it done this afternoon.

Fortunately the chickens were fresh so didn't smell as bad as they could have done. Quickly chopping off the necks, then skinning and boning the birds, all the while complaining about the dullness of the knives. Agnes reserved the neck, which she quickly skinned, the livers, hearts, kidneys and the chicken carcasses. These she put in a pan with a roughly chopped onions and carrots, covered the contents with water and set on the stove.

“That,” she announced “is going to form the basis of the inside of the pies and gravy for the outside. Now, keep your eye on it and when it starts to boil, let me know. Now, how is that water of yours getting on. Come on, let's get a ewer and I will help you carry it back to the sink.”

Soon Maud was up to her elbows in suds, scrubbing at a variety of saucepans. Agnes, her reservations about the knives notwithstanding, was standing at the table peeling, chopping and dicing vegetables. The kitchen began to lose its air of disorganisation and chaos as it was filled with purposeful activity and the enticing aromas of roast beef and simmering chicken stock filled the air.

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As fast as Maud set a cleaned pan for draining Agnes seized it to fill with the chicken meat that she had cut into bite sized pieces, adding diced onion, carrot and potato. Splashing a generous quantity of stock into the pan, she set it to simmer slowly. It being summer, a quantity of new potatoes were quickly scrapped clean and added to another pot, covered with water and put aside until they were needed.

Time to make the pastry, it had to rest and she didn't want to be too hot. Her mother was renowned for her pastry but she had told Agnes that hers was even better. Agnes never had really hot hands, not even when immersed in the washtub on the hottest day in summer. Her mother had told her that cool hands were the biggest asset when it came to making pastry. As today was a big test, she didn't want to leave anything to chance. When the pastry was made, rolled into a ball and covered with greaseproof paper to rest, Agnes was about to take the pastry to the cellar to rest when she remembered the potatoes. On being told that here was no mint, Agnes tsked, then asked after parsley. She set Maud to chopping the bunches of parsley that were soon discovered while she set off bearing the ball of pastry in search of the cellar.

Seizing the large, metal sieve and handing to Maud to hold over a large bowl, Agnes removed the pot containing the chicken carcasses and drained the liquor through the sieve into the bowl. Setting the stock aside to cool, she next turned her attention to finding tins suitable for the chicken pies.

"Maud, remove the pan containing the chicken pieces, please, and when you have a moment, start top and tailing

those runner beans. Oh, but pod those peas before you do the beans please. I want to put them in the pies for a bit of colour.”

Agnes paused to assess their progress.

“Puddings, I haven’t thought about the afters. There’s no help for it, Maud. We need a cup of tea!” Agnes backed up her words with action. She soon had the tea brewing in the pot. She saw that Maud had done as she instructed and was about to start shelling the peas.

“Here, pass those over, I will do them while drinking my tea and thinking about the afters. You get on with the beans. Sit down while you do them, girl. You need to take any opportunity to take the weight off your feet in this business. Now what did the previous cook do to keep the customers happy, indulge their sweet teeth?”

Maud seemed incapable of working and talking, her hands stopped working while her mouth worked and visa versa, but she answered readily enough. “She made many suet puddings and sometimes fruit pies. There should be a couple left from yesterday in the cellar.”

“Good, because in my opinion, it’s a bit too warm for suet pudding. But if we have some prepared suet” Maud indicated that they had, “I can quickly knock up some spotted dick, jam roly poly or treacle pudding. Do we have any jam, sultanas or treacle? It’s alright, Maud, just tell me where it is, I need to know my way around.”

Maud indicated a door that Agnes hadn’t had time to notice before. She got up and opened the door to discover a well-stocked pantry.

“Maud, don’t let me forget condiments for the beef, we will have to have mustard and horseradish sauce. Now, let me finish the peas and my tea. How long have we got

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before lunchtime; what time do they start ordering? About noon, so we have about an hour and a half. That's the peas finished, can I leave you to finish the beans. No, keep seated, no need to get up until you have finished the beans. As they are runners, do we have a bean slicer? Good, then when you have finished top and tailing them, pull them through the slicer, then they will be ready."

Agnes next fetched the pastry from the cellar. Bringing it back to the kitchen, she proceeded to roll it out and fill the pie tins. The filling was still too hot so Agnes made the decision to only use a pastry lid. She was concerned that if she lined the tins with pastry and the filling wasn't cold then the pastry bottom would be soggy and unpalatable. So, she was going to have pastry left over. She thought for a minute and going over to the pantry spied a large tin of treacle. All she needed now was stale bread, ah ha, she found some and she could make treacle tarts. The sweetness of the treacle should disguise the fact that the pastry wasn't sweetened. Treacle tart and jam roly-poly, she thought, would fill hungry working stomachs nicely.

Now with the pies done, the next job should be to make the jam roly-poly and make sure the remaining vegetables were prepared.

"Maud, now you have finished the beans, can you peel plenty of potatoes so they can be roasted to go with the beef. And put a large pot of water on to boil, will you. I want to partially cook the potatoes before I roast them, cuts down on the roasting time. I need to make the gravy for the beef and custard for the pudding. Still plenty to do." Agnes opened the oven to check the beef, nearly done. She found large carving plate and set to warm in

the warming oven so that it would be ready for the beef. Time to make the batter for the Yorkshire puddings. It would be a good idea to serve them with the beef making it go further as she wasn't sure how long it would last.

She quickly made the pudding batter, mixing flour, eggs and milk together, seasoned with salt and pepper. As taught by her mother, she left the batter to stand. She decided that the oven needed to be hot for the pastry so she would make individual Yorkshire puddings as they were ordered. Slightly more work but Yorkshire puddings were not known to keep warm particularly well and it was important that the pub's clientele enjoyed the food she cooked. She was a hard worker who took pride in her work, however menial it might be to some. If a job is worth doing, it's worth doing well; an adage that had been instilled in her from birth.

Mr Dickson put in an appearance, possibly drawn by the cooking smells from the kitchen.

In answer to his query she told him the menu, Roast Beef and Yorkshire pudding, chicken pie, served with a choice of roast or boiled new potatoes, beans and carrots; treacle tart, jam roly-poly or cold fruit pie, with or without custard to follow. He grunted in approval, lifted the lids of a couple of pots, signalled his satisfaction and left saying that she obviously had things under control so he would leave her to it.

“Come on, Maud! No time to be standing on our laurels, there is still much to do.”

The next hour passed in a blur for both women as puddings were made, sauces and condiments prepared and vegetables put on the boil. Then the orders started coming in and they worked even quicker. Plates going out

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full began to come back empty. Maud moved to the sink to try to get ahead of the steady stream of dirty plates before they overwhelmed the room.

The only way they kept an idea of the time was when the orders for desserts outweighed the orders for pie or beef. Eventually, the orders slowed to a trickle and then stopped. When Maud was able to see the sink again, Agnes thought it was time for another cup of tea and sudden hunger pangs reminded her that they needed to eat as well. She checked that Maud was nearing the end of the washing up and told her that when she finished, they would eat. Agnes knew the unwritten rule that all kitchen staff ate what was left over. She went up to the bar looking for Mr Dickson. She checked whether he had eaten, and whether the bar staff needed food. She was informed that it was the house's custom that they all sat together to eat lunch in the public bar, usually around this time. She bustled away to get the Yorkshire puddings ready, using the last of the heat in the oven.

Maud told her that the previous cook just used to pile the food on plates but looking around, Agnes found sufficient serving dishes so she set them to warm with enough plates while cooking the last of the Yorkshire pudding batter. Poor she might be but she knew the right way to do things. She was beginning to remember the routine from her experience working here before her marriage.

It was a relief to sit down, it would have been a pleasure to eat the good food but she was thinking about her five children at home and Charley in the hospital. She noticed that Mr Dickson and the rest of the staff seemed to appreciate her efforts from the kitchen. All the bowls were

emptied and Maud ferried them back to the kitchen. She came back with the left overs of the puddings and warmed custard. Agnes made to remove the skin from the custard but was stopped by Mr Dickson who informed her that in his opinion, the custard skin was the best bit.

Eventually, he finished eating. Undoing his waistcoat buttons he declared that her cooking passed muster and the job was hers. "What are you cooking for dinner?"

Agnes gulped. She was so busy getting through lunch, she hadn't given dinner a thought! Mr Dickson must have seen the consternation in her face. "It's not as busy as lunch and should all be over by eight o'clock."

Of course she would do what was expected of her, after all she needed the job but she didn't expect to be working a full day today.

"Mr Dickson, I didn't expect to be working today. Can I take an hour to go home and explain to my children where I am and why I won't be home tonight?"

Briefly she explained that her husband was in hospital and she had five children at home. Although Mr Dickson was sympathetic to her plight and permitted her to go home for an hour and tell her children where she was, she could not escape cooking for the dinner clientele. Mr Dickson was a businessman and he sensed that her cooking would add to the reputation of his pub and he didn't intend to let that go. Later, as she was going he took her to one side "I understand that your life is difficult at the moment and if it makes it easier, you can take home enough food to feed your children for one meal a day. I would prefer it if you took home what was cooked but wasn't sold on the day. Dinner is not the rush that lunch is. It should be ready by 6 and finished by 7pm. It's 3

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o'clock now, if you are back by 4.30pm you should be finished by 7.30 or 8pm."

She was grateful for the offer of the food, it would be a great relief to know her children's bellies would be filled once a day. She would make sure that they were well filled as she rather resented Mr Dickson telling her to use food that had already been cooked and not served. She wouldn't dream of doing anything else. Although, if she was honest with herself, she wouldn't dream of taking any food unless she had permission; but she could resent how that permission was given.

She pinned her hat to her head and left the Lamb & Flag to tell the children, most of whom would be coming home soon, the news.

True to his word, dinner was not as hectic as lunch. She only had to cook one meat dish. Maud performed stoically and helpfully pointed out that the meat and vegetables for the next day had to be ordered the day before. Unfortunately, she pointed this out after 7pm when all the best butchers and grocers were shut. Agnes sighed and resolved to come to work tomorrow by way of the butcher and greengrocer even though it meant leaving the children earlier than she would have wanted. She was forgetting, she had told the children that she might not come home that night as she planned to sit at her husband's side for most of the night. "Charley, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to forget you," she whispered to herself as she hastened towards the hospital as fast as her tired legs could carry her. At least the children would be well fed tonight as she had taken home left over beef, Yorkshire puddings and vegetables to supplement the mutton stew left over from yesterday. The boys would be delighted

with the left over treacle tart and jam roly-poly. It was a good job that Iris was so responsible and kept the younger ones in line.

Dawn was just breaking as she got home. The children were still asleep and no one marked her arrival. Still bone weary, she thought she would sit for a minute, resting her arms on the table, she bent her head to her arms and promptly fell asleep. This time she awoke in familiar surroundings aware that she was being stared at. It was Junie, the youngest, solemnly gazing at her. Agnes reached out and drew the little girl onto her knee and gave her a hug. Junie snuggled up to her and they dozed together until Iris came out and joined them.

Agnes reached out an arm and drew Iris to her. It was a rare moment of affection that Agnes could spare for the two girls. All too soon it was over. Agnes lifted Junie off her knee, asking Iris to get the others up while she got water.

She went outside and drew two buckets of water from the tap outside the building. Nodding in greeting to a neighbour she hefted the brimming buckets up the two flights of stairs back to their two cramped rooms. Some of the water was poured into the kettle hanging over the fire to heat for tea and washing water. Yet more water was used for washing their faces and hands. This was a practice Agnes insisted upon, however much the boys protested at times. Agnes scrubbed the faces of the younger children's until their cheeks glowed red. The older children, bought up in the same regime had quickly learnt to wash themselves to their mother's satisfaction as early as they could. When their hands and nails had been

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inspected and passed for cleanliness, they were allowed to take their place around the table.

Steaming mugs of tea before them and thick slices of dark bread on chipped plates in front of them. As a special treat, Agnes allowed them to spread dripping that she had bought home the previous afternoon on their bread.

“I have several things to tell you,” began Agnes. “I am sorry you haven’t seen much of me for the past two days but I have had to prepare for the future. I was at the hospital when your father died last night.” She looked at each of them in turn beginning with the eldest, William, then Iris, Charlie, Rosie, George and Junie. She didn’t expect George and Junie to understand the impact that statement would have on their lives and the hardship that might come but she owed it to them all to protect them from the harsher realities of life for as long as she could.

“There has to be an inquest on Monday but the funeral will take place on Tuesday. The baby that died will be buried with your dad. Yesterday I went to see about a job. I went to a pub where I used to work before I married and as luck would have it, they needed a cook very badly. That was where I was all day; then I went to the hospital to sit with your father until he died. Now, this job means that I will be able to bring food home which means that you will be well fed and it will save us money.”

William had been growing restless during this speech and blurted out “I can support us. I’m the man of the house now. It’s my job that will put food on the table.”

Agnes looked him, really looked at him as she felt she hadn’t for years being distracted by babies following one after another. She saw the man he would become

beginning to emerge from the boy he had been. She also saw the sincerity of his commitment. “William,” she began gently. “William, we will need your contribution for a while yet. But the children and you are my responsibility, not yours. I have to provide for you all. You have the rest of your life ahead of you, it is not right to saddle you with the responsibility at this time of your life.” She reached out and grasped his hand. “Son, I will depend on you to look after your younger brothers and sisters, especially your sisters. I will not be able to be home for them as much as I was before ... before the accident to your father. I am going to have to rely on you and you, Iris, to be around when I am working. It is going to be difficult at times but if we all pull together we will stay together. Now, I have to let the family know what has happened. William, can you go to your Uncle George and Uncle William on your father’s side in Clerkenwell after work. I will see my Mother and sisters and hopefully, they will tell my brothers. I will go after work so I don’t know what time I will be back.

I will need to go to work soon. Iris, I will leave you in charge of your younger bothers and sisters but I should be able to drop in some supper on my way to my relatives. You should have enough food for lunch. Rosie, Charlie, George and Junie, duck, Iris is in charge when I am not here, so do as she says without argument.”

They all nodded their agreement, the younger ones picking up on the solemnity of the moment and being more subdued than usual.

Agnes got up to splash her face with cold water. She still felt bone tired but had to go on. She was solely responsible for them all now and she would have to do

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what she could to make sure that they all survived this difficult period. It was probably fortunate that she was too busy and preoccupied with the arrangements for her new job and the funerals to dwell on the events of the last few days and her part in precipitating her present struggles. On the other hand, she couldn't have gone on much longer the way things were going.

She had married Charley because she thought he was different to her father and she was desperate to get away from home. Her father had been, while he was alive, a bully, a drunkard and had made her mother's life hell. Agnes was the youngest of eight children and according to her older sisters, had been spoilt and not had the harsh upbringing they had. Agnes thought that was immaterial, while admitting that her older brothers and sisters had protected her to some extent, nothing had protected her mother from the regular beatings doled out by her father when he came home drunk after work. Her father was now dead, and unlamented, her mother lived with her eldest sister, Susan and foolishly, to Agnes' way of thinking, missing her husband.

She couldn't bear to see her Charley going down the same path and treating her as her father treated her mother. That was not the man she had married, although she had discovered soon after they married that Charley was a weaker person than she was, hadn't got the strength of character that she had. But they muddled through, and there was no denying he loved his children and wouldn't raise a finger to them, it was up to her to chastise them when necessary. If only he hadn't lost his job and had to begin portering at the Garden; that was when it all

started to go wrong. She sighed and rammed her hat on her head, almost ready to leave for the Lamb & Flag.

“Now, remember, don’t tell anyone where I am. If anyone comes to the door, tell them I am out; I wouldn’t want you to tell a lie, but don’t tell them where I am. You can say that I am letting our relatives know the news and that you are not sure when I will be back. Come on, William, we can leave together. I need to let Mr Dickson know about Monday and Tuesday. Hopefully, the young Maud can do the two days, if I organise her.”

She gave each stay at home child a quick kiss and Iris an extra hug to let her know she appreciated the girl’s help and left with William.

Thursday at the Lamb & Flag was no different to the previous day. When she had directed Maud to light the fire under the cooper and stoke up the range she went in search of Mr Dickson. She found him drawing a pint for himself in the Snug bar. She told him about Charley, the inquest and the funeral. She assured him that the inconvenience would be as minimal as she could make it. “In the circumstance, Mrs Thomas,” he said, “in the circumstances, it is the least I can do to let you have the two days off, especially as I do acknowledge you stepped into the breach so ably yesterday. In view of that, I will pay you for half a day for Monday and Tuesday; a gesture of goodwill, you might say.”

Agnes was surprised at his generosity and thanked him as well as she could. This conversation also gave her the opportunity to ask how much she was to be paid and, just as important to her, when. They came to terms, Mr

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Dickson agreed her wages at a slightly higher rate than she was expecting, particularly taking into account his generous offer of the left over food she could take home. She was also to be paid on Saturday evening, which meant that she would have a little money to take home.

Agnes asked him which traders, butcher, grocer, greengrocer etc he liked to deal with and had accounts with. He gave her a detailed list including who to do his business with at each establishment. He also asked her what she intended to offer for lunch. Agnes replied that she would answer that question when she had visited the butcher and greengrocer to see what was fresh. He seemed delighted with this answer and offered her a glass of mild on the strength of it. Agnes thanked him but declined saying that she needed to be off to see what to buy without delay. Telling Maud to make a start on peeling potatoes and carrots she departed to see what was available for lunches and dinners for the patrons of the pub.

She went first to the butcher. The shop looked promising, the outside was festooned with braces of rabbits and chickens, freshly caught by the looks of them. Inside the sawdust was clean and liberally strewn on the floor to soak up any blood that may be spilt. The beef looked dark red, well marbled, the fat yellowing with age.

Agnes caught the eye of the butcher, a plump, prosperous looking chap wearing, Agnes was pleased to see, a clean blue and white striped apron over his white jacket and a straw hat set at a jaunty angle. She complimented him on his fine establishment and fresh wares. She introduced herself and explained that she had started working for Mr Dickson of the Lamb & Flag.

She was immediately invited through to his inner sanctum, settled in a chair while a cup of tea was bought by one of the butcher's apprentices.

Mr Jones the butcher was proud of his reputation as an honest purveyor of fine meats to the local pubs and other food outlets on the area. He particularly liked doing business with Mr Dickson as the licensee of the Lamb & Flag both appreciated to eat good food and knew what to look for in the raw ingredients. He quickly established that Mrs Thomas was possessed of an equally good eye. They soon settled on an agreement whereby Mr Jones sent two each of his two finest roasting meats of the day, four fat hens or rabbits or similar fowl or game meats; whatever was fresh and in season. As a favour to his new business acquaintance, Mrs Thomas, Mr Jones would ensure that the fowls or game would be cleaned just before delivery. Agnes agreed but asked that the fowls have their heads left on and their hearts, liver and kidneys delivered with the birds. Mr Jones agreed to this even though it meant that he couldn't foist off a bird that was slightly less than fresh. However, he respected her housekeeping skills while making a mental note to keep an eye on what was sent to her. He had a feeling that she wouldn't accept what she was sent without question as the previous cook had. Agnes departed the establishment after exchanging cordial and respectful farewells with Mr Jones. Both respected each others acumen and both privately resolved never to let their guard down in their business dealing with each other.

Next stop was the Market. Mr Dickson favoured one particular stall, so Agnes headed directly there. Where the butcher, Mr Jones, was rotund and prosperous looking, the

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stall holder, Mr Smith was thin, tall and stooped. The fruit and vegetables, however, were in very good condition, again Mr Dickson had proved his knowledge of raw foodstuffs and his appreciation for quality ingredients.

In Mr Smith Agnes discovered someone who remembered her mother when she used to work for Mr Dickson's father when he was licensee of the Lamb & Flag. He also liked tradition and was more than happy to discuss her requirements for the next few days. It had been a good season for asparagus, or sparrow's grass as Mr Smith liked to call it. The vegetable was in plentiful supply and a good price. Agnes agreed to a quantity; she also stocked up on the staple vegetables, potatoes, carrots and onions. She was tempted by some lettuce, tomatoes and cucumbers; a bit of cold food in the middle of summer wouldn't be unwelcome and it would be easy for Maud to prepare on the two days Agnes was away. She arranged for regular delivery of the staples and whatever Mr Smith thought was good value on a daily basis, except Sunday, of course.

Finally, she visited the fishmonger that Mr Dickson preferred and arranged for two large cod or an equivalent weight of other fish if the cod wasn't available every Friday.

That bit of business over, she hurried back to the kitchen to let Maud know what she had arranged. Agnes explained to her over a bit of a sit down and mug of tea that she wouldn't be coming to work on Monday or Tuesday and the reason for her absence. Maud seemed to grow rather apprehensive at the thought of the responsibility of the kitchen being in her hands for those

two days. Agnes explained her plan for most of the preparation to be done in advance.

“I hope the weather will stay warm for the next few days so people will appreciate cold cuts and salad vegetables. I have asked the butcher to send us double the usual quantity of meat on Saturday so we can cook it while the oven is hot, then all you have to do on Monday is slice it. However, I think you will also have to do some hot vegetables, but you will be able to cope with that. What I will also do is make extra pastry and leave it in the cellar with stewed fruit, there were some lovely blackcurrants and gooseberries at the market this morning which I have asked to be delivered. Some can be made into fools; nonsense Maud, it is very easy, just make a custard with added cream and fold the stewed fruit into it and cool. Nothing could be easier. You can use the pastry for pies, fruit and savoury. If the weather looks like breaking, make a shepherds or cottage pie. There is a mincer here, isn't there? I think that is all organised, plenty of ideas and possibilities, you will be fine. Now, we have lots to do so let's roll our sleeves up and get started.”

Agnes left work on Saturday afternoon confident that all that could be done, had been. Maud was less apprehensive than she had been at first and Agnes was sure she could cope. She told Mr Dickson of the planned menus for Monday and Tuesday and while he wasn't sure about cold cuts and salad vegetables he agreed with her plan and promised to keep an eye on Maud and help if necessary. Privately Agnes agreed with him about the salad vegetables, in her opinion working men needed hot food and plenty of it in their bellies to keep them going.

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However, she reflected, what the pub was to offer on Monday and Tuesday was better than might have been if she hadn't arrived the previous day. Nor was she confident that Mr Dickson would help Maud himself. He would keep an eye on the kitchen because it affected his business but Agnes didn't think he was the kind to roll his sleeves up and get his hands dirty. It would be more likely that he would send one of the bar staff if things really got in a mess which would be of little help to Maud as Agnes had already formed the opinion that because of a lack of experience, Maud hadn't developed the organisational skills necessary for the smooth running of a commercial kitchen, or any other kitchen come to that. Sending one of the bar staff would mean that Maud would have to assign tasks and work out priorities for herself and her helper; Agnes didn't see that happening. The worst that could happen was that Maud would have no one to help her if she needed it because all the staff were busy and Mr Dickson couldn't spare any one.

She also left with her wages comfortably weighing down the pocket in her skirt. Contrary to her expectations, as well as paying her for Thursday, Friday and Saturday Mr Dickson had added 'a bit extra' and checked that she was taking food home to her family. He had explained that the extra was because she didn't have to have worked for the Friday and Saturday and it was his way of showing his appreciation. Agnes thought that it was to make sure that she stayed. She knew her worth and what was rightfully hers that her Mother used to warn her would lead her into trouble as she 'got ideas above her station.' As far as Agnes' experience went, if you let people walk over you they did. It was important to know your worth to your

employer, do your best, do more than was expected of you, find out the ins and outs of the business and be honest. If those qualities weren't appreciated, find an employer who did appreciate them. At the moment, Mr Dickson appreciated her and getting a job at the Lamb & Flag was a godsend.

When she checked that the smaller children were tucked up and finally asleep in bed next door, Agnes lowered her tired, aching body into a chair at the table. Iris pushed a fresh cup of tea in front of her. If Agnes had been less tired, more alert, she would have recognised Iris' action as a gesture of reconciliation, but Agnes was too tired to realise that the table had been cleared of the remnants of their last meal. She was grateful for the tea, though. She fished in her skirt pocket for her wages. "Iris, fetch me the money tin from the mantelpiece, will you."

Iris did as her Mother asked her. Agnes counted out a few farthings and put them in the tin. "Rent money and incidentals", she said as the coins rattled to the bottom of the tin. William emptied his wages onto the table. "Here you are, Ma", he said pushing the small pile of coppers towards her.

"No, I am not taking it all," said Agnes, her voice hard with steely determination. William knew better to argue with her but couldn't help himself.

"It's my job to support the family now that Pa has gone," he said with equal determination. "As the oldest male, I am now the head of the house, Uncle William said so."

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“Your Uncle William is no better than he ought to be. Filling a boy’s head with responsibilities that he wouldn’t take on himself.

William, I want you to have more of a future than working to support me and your brothers and sisters. And that means saving your money.”

Seeing his jaw set with determination, Agnes added “If you won’t do it, I will. I will take your money as you are so determined to give it to me and it is up to me how I dispose of it. Iris, I’m sorry but this won’t get you to the school. William is earning money now but he has his future to think of. I hope you will find a good man to marry who will be able to provide for you, that’s your future. But right now we have to get through the next few days.

Charlie, you need to get to bed and make sure you don’t wake Junie, Rosie and George.” Agnes waited until Charlie had gone into the bedroom before continuing her conversation with her two eldest children. “We need to go to church tomorrow, all of us. The parish will help us but we need to do our bit as well. The younger ones can go to Sunday School, we all have to appear willing. Then on Monday, I will go to the inquest and the funeral on Tuesday. Your grandmother, my mother, and aunts will be here on Tuesday morning to prepare food for after the funeral. Mr Dickson has given me the two days off so I don’t have to go to work.” Agnes finished the thought in her head “even though we could do with the money.” “So,” she continued aloud, “Iris, as I don’t know how long the inquest will take, I would like you to be responsible for taking and collecting Charlie and Rosie to school on Monday. They will have to go on Tuesday morning so

they don't get in the way of the preparations. I will write a note for their teacher so they can go the funeral on Tuesday afternoon."

"What about the little ones?" Iris queried. "Will you ask Mrs Shaw to look after them?"

Agnes thought for a moment. The reality of the situation was that Mrs Shaw was as poor as they were, if she wasn't she wouldn't be living next door. Mrs Shaw wouldn't mind the children without asking for payment too much longer. Agnes would do the same for anyone in her situation, give of her time freely during the immediate crisis but once that time had passed, well, time had to be paid for. She couldn't afford to pay Mrs Shaw to look after Junie and George on a regular basis, not if she wanted to give William a future. There just wasn't enough money coming in.

She saw William and Iris looking at her expectantly. "They expect me to come up with an answer straight away," she thought. A surge of anger mixed tinged self-pity momentarily overwhelmed the tiredness. "I didn't want this," she wailed on the inside. "It's too hard, I have to make every decision. I don't want to live like this!"

She sighed "I will think of something," was what she told her children. "I will go to bed and sleep on it."

The next day they all dutifully went to church. The children's faces had been scrubbed until their skin glowed red and they were dressed in their best even though it meant that the younger children were dressed in their older siblings hand-me-downs which weren't new to start

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with. However, Agnes was careful to patch and darn the rents and holes caused by the wear and tear of energetic children as they happened so there had been no extra work involved in getting them turned out that morning. A good job as it turned out because she had awoken later than she intended and still her body craved rest. She had struggled to keep awake during the sermon and even though she sat ramrod straight, she was sure that the curate spotted her eyes involuntary closing on several occasions as the priest droned on. Part way through the service Charlie, Rose and George went to a side room for Sunday School. At four, and even Agnes would admit a bit 'slow', George was a touch on the young side for the school but he worshipped his older brother, Charlie, and wanted to do everything he did. Rather than have the remainder of the service drowned out with his screams Agnes allowed him to accompany his older brother and sister to the room set aside for the school. Agnes was left with William, Iris and Junie who she had on her knee. Fortunately, Junie's wriggles and general toddler restlessness kept the sleep at bay and for the rest of the service Agnes was able to remain awake without difficulty.

George was the first to burst through the door when Sunday school was ended, waving a booklet in one hand.

"Look, Ma, look," he shouted excitedly. "I've got two stickers and the teacher stuck them in here. One was for being a good boy." Some of the other churchgoers turned and smiled indulgently at the enthusiasm of the small boy. Others he had jostled in his desire to show his mother his achievements were not so charitable.

“Have a care, George,” she admonished. “Show me in a minute.” Agnes apologised to the men and women he had shoved aside then duly admired his stickers.

The three children chatted about what they had been taught at Sunday school all the way home.

After a rudimentary lunch William and Iris persuaded their Mother to have forty winks as they put it. Agnes made a feeble protest but was easily overruled by her determined eldest son and daughter. The forty winks turned into a sleep of more than two hours, Agnes awaking haunted by a nameless dread with her heart pounding and sweat drenching her body. It took her sometime to gather her wits, the process being helped by Charlie putting his head around the door and telling her that a cup of tea was waiting for her.

She entered the main room to find Iris and William setting up the bath. Iris explained that their normal routine of a bath on Saturday night had been forgotten yesterday so they thought it best to have one today. Iris was pouring the last kettle full of boiling water into the hip bath that had been set in front of the fire. William pulled the screen around and told his mother that she was to be first in the water. Agnes thought of protesting but the thought of the beneficial effect of the hot water on her aching body stopped her protests before they could be articulated.

The bath was everything she hoped for but conscious that others were to follow and not wanting the water to get too cold for them she couldn't linger as long as she would have liked. After she got out and hurriedly dressed behind the screen it was time for William to take his turn and after him the rest of the children in strict age order. When

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they were all finished it was time for supper followed by the bedtime routine. During supper, Iris asked her if she had a solution to George and Junie's daytime care. Agnes could see that the girl was thinking that she was to be removed from school so she could look after them.

"No, Iris, I won't hear of you leaving school. It's bad enough that you can't go to the secondary modern but I won't hear of your education being further sacrificed. We can't afford to pay someone to look after them, even if I knew someone I would trust to do the job. No, they are going to have to stay here, or rather on the bed and not make a noise. So I will ask Mrs Shaw for one last favour to mind them tomorrow while I go to the inquest but after that we are on our own."

Agnes didn't like the idea of going to bed in last weeks sheets but knew she wouldn't have time in the next few days to wash them – or to do any washing most like. So before they went to bed she and Iris 'topped and tailed' the bed linen so it would feel cleaner against their skin. Laundry was another thing she was going to have to organise.

She felt as though her head was full of details only she could arrange. Taking advantage of the quiet in the room after the younger children were in bed, Agnes found a scrap of paper and licking the lead of a pencil stump she began to write a list of things that had to be done on one side and a list of accounts on the other.

Income she put at 20 shillings per week from herself and 10 shillings from William making a total income of 30 shillings a week.

Outgoings occupied more lines: schooling, rent, food, clothes; she tut tutted to herself as she wrote that line. Boys were much more expensive than girls when it came to clothes and shoes, much harder on everything in general. She seemed to be always patching or darning the boy's shirts or trousers until the original fabric of poor George's clothes, the last recipient of the hand-me-downs was barely discernible.

She included a line entitled Savings. Agnes had decided from the moment that William had offered his wages to keep the family that she would save half of every penny he gave her so that when he needed money in the future she would be able to give him something. Against the word Savings she wrote 5 shillings.

Thanks to Mr Dickson, food was not going to be a major expense. Taking into account the food she would be able to take from the kitchen, the family should be better fed than they would have been if she weren't working in the pub. The generosity of Mr Dickson meant that there was the potential for a small surplus, and she did mean small, a copper or two a week at most, but if put aside it would pay for an occasional day outing for them all.

She felt much better for doing the family budget and was able to go to sleep with an easier mind than she had for a day or so. However, she was apprehensive about the next day's events but so tired not even her fears for the forthcoming day could prevent her falling asleep when her head hit the pillow.

Monday morning, around dawn Agnes was awoken by the restless stirrings of George who always woke early and

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was unable to lie motionless while the others in the bed slept. She pulled him to her and lay there trying to keep him still while she reviewed the business of the day. Today was the day of the inquest, which Agnes dreaded. She was worried sick that she might be found guilty of abetting Charley's ... she struggled for a word then realised the only name she could call his death was suicide. That's it, she thought, I have driven my husband to suicide. I suppose it is a better word than murder. I have murdered my husband so that my children may get on in their lives. She breathed in sharply as she realised that she could be accused of murder, and to think I was worried about being accused of abetting his suicide. Oh sweet Jesus, help me. I only did it for my little ones. She thought of the church and the statue of Mary she had seen there yesterday. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our deaths. I didn't mean Charley to die so help me, I didn't. I just wanted to wake him up to the harm he was doing to the children. A tear leaked out and ran down her cheek. She clutched George to her, he squirmed and threatened to disturb and wake the others. She began stroking his hair to quieten him and he again settled, sucking his thumb. It was not a practice she encouraged but she was grateful for the opportunity to lie there and glad he was content to lie with her.

She heard Big Ben strike six times and knew she should be getting up. Those that were going to school and work had to get ready and she had to cross the hallway to ask Mrs Shaw to mind George and Junie today while she was at the dreaded inquest. It was alright for her mother to say not to speak of the reason Charley swallowed the Salts

but she couldn't help thinking about it; and the poor wee thing needed a name.

Big Ben struck the quarter hour. Now she really had to get up. Easing George aside, she swung her legs out of the bed, her bare feet feeling for her shoes. George copied her actions. Together they left the two dingy and airless rooms, went along the hall and down the stairs to the privy. Agnes sloshed a generous amount of Spirits of Salts down and around the redolent toilet pan. With a brush, she vigorously cleaned the toilet pan, taking care to brush the seat as well. Seizing a bucket of water, she splashed the water on the seat and down the pan. Only then did she allow George to enter and relieve himself even though he had been hopping impatiently while she cleaned the toilet.

She sent him back to their rooms to get the others, Agnes standing guard at the toilet door. No one else was going to use the facility and benefit from her industry until the rest of her family had done what they needed to do. This was the way she had been taught by her mother and it had benefited her and her siblings. It was all part of doing what you could for your children, providing them with the best possible start.

Breakfast was tea and slices of day old bread. Agnes cut the bread in thick slabs to fill the children's stomachs. She cut more slices for their lunch, a sandwich for each child with a scape of dripping between the slices. Meagre fare it was true, but better than they had been having before she had got her job. However, it would have to be bread and nothing tomorrow as the dripping had all been eaten. William refused to take a sandwich saying that he would get something for himself. Agnes gave him a hard

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look, which he returned with wide-eyed innocence. “I hope you aren’t thinking of going without,” she said, her hands not stopping slicing and spreading. “You will need something in your stomach at midday. You are still a growing boy. If I find that you are going without ...” She didn’t finish her treat but shook the fist holding the knife at him.

He grinned and gave her a quick hug “Oooh, I’m quaking in my shoes. Don’t worry! Gus, me china, knows this place where you can get a meat pie and peas very cheap. Thought I would give it a go today.”

“Don’t use that cockney slang here. You are still young enough to be on the business end of a slap for cheek. You had better get going, you don’t want to be late.”

William left laughing, his boots clattering on the wooden floor. Agnes continued with her task but with a smile on her face, a sight the other children hadn’t seen for days.

“Iris, Rosie and Charlie! Hurry up! You don’t want to be late for school. I hope you have all washed properly. Charlie, let me see you hands.” Agnes also checked behind his ears before allowing him to get his lunch and rush off with his sisters. Which left George and Junie.

Seizing a damp cloth she scrubbed at their faces until they were pink.

“You two sit there quietly while I see if Mrs Shaw can look after you until Iris comes back from school.”

She quickly went to the rooms next door and asked Mrs Shaw if she would mind looking after the two youngest for one last time. Agnes explained that she needed to go to the inquest and couldn’t take them with her. Mrs Shaw agreed but added that if Mrs Thomas expected her to do

it after this “they would have to come to terms.” Agnes had predicted this and would have done the same of the circumstances were reversed

“I regret, Mrs Shaw, that I am unable to afford to pay for your time in future.” She added that Charley’s funeral was tomorrow and that she would be holding a wake afterwards. “I would be pleased to see you there.”

Mrs Shaw said that Mrs Thomas was very kind, that she, Mrs Shaw had intended going to the funeral and would attend the wake afterwards. Agnes knew she would, not wanting to turn down the offer of free food and drink, as she would have accepted the same had the circumstances been different. They were both too poor to turn away the offer of free food. In a moment of compassion Agnes also extended the invitation to Mrs Shaw’s children. After all it would save Mrs Shaw the expense of feeding them tomorrow night.

Agnes returned to collect George and Junie. Taking a child’s hand in each of hers she took them the few paces to Mrs Shaw’s door where Mrs Shaw was waiting. She took them inside and Agnes was left to get herself ready for the inquest.

Once again Agnes put on her ‘Sunday best.’ The skirt had started out in life coloured black but the washing it had received over the years had rendered it dark grey. It was not only faded but also discretely darned in places. It was ‘Sunday best’ because it had fewer darns than her every day skirt. A blouse that had seen similar use over the years completed the outfit. As it was summer, instead of a coat Agnes pulled a dark coloured shawl over her shoulders. After ensuring that her hair was pinned up as well as she could manage with too few pins, her dark straw

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hat was skewered into place with a hatpin, Agnes was ready to set off for the inquest.

Exiting Craven Buildings she walked to where she could get an omnibus to Westminster Council offices where the inquest was being held. Agnes had never been there before, in truth she went 'up west' and beyond very infrequently. For all her married life she had lived in the theatre district, never straying as six children in fourteen years of marriage had constrained her to staying near home. Before she was married at eighteen, she had been too busy earning a living and being the youngest in the family was called on to help mind her nephews and nieces when her sisters wanted to have a night away from their children. By marrying Charley when still quite young and in the face of her father's disapproval she had been told that she would get no assistance from her family while he was alive. She hadn't, her sisters and mother, terrified he would find out, didn't try to help her behind his back. By the time her father had died, Agnes was too used to coping on her own to ask for help. Her musings were interrupted as her surroundings broke into her awareness. The omnibus had entered 'the West' and it was a very different area for where she lived.

Craven Buildings, home to the Thomas family for the past eighteen months, was located in a warren of small, mean, refuse strewn streets. Home to the Thomas's and at least a dozen other families who all lived in two, or those who could afford to pay for the luxury of space, three rooms not counting the half dozen single occupied rooms. It was noisy, damp, fetid in summer, smoky in winter, in short a slum tenement building. In contrast, the omnibus

was taking Agnes through a very different area. The omnibus had just passed Charing Cross and was turning into Whitehall, a wide thoroughfare, wide enough to enable faster hansom cabs and even speedier carriages to overtake the lumbering omnibus without crashing into the oncoming traffic. Agnes could see those carriages and hansom cabs were moving around the omnibus coming in the opposite way. The road was lined by tall buildings reflecting the power of Britain's empire, stolid, slightly intimidating government buildings. On the pavements a bustle of dark suited men in bowler hats hurried into the buildings to begin their working day. A group of horseguards clattered past, mounted on glossy black horses, glowing white breeches and red jackets trimmed with gold. The sun reflected off their metal helmets, the horse tail decoration bouncing jauntily as they trotted back to their stables.

Agnes got off the omnibus at Parliament Square. Crossing over the Square to Victoria Street, trying to avoid stepping in the piles of horse dung and dodging the traffic, passing Westminster Abbey on her left on the other side of the road. She felt small and insignificant, dwarfed by the tall buildings, intimidated by her surroundings. She had to walk quite a distance until she came to the Westminster City Hall. She was anxious at the start of the day when she woke up but by the time she got to the City Hall she was experiencing butterflies in her stomach, hot, bothered and her emotional state was not helped by being out of her familiar surroundings. She slowly walked up the steps leading to the interior of the imposing edifice that was the Westminster City Hall, a walk that required

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all her mental strength. Once inside Agnes gathered her resolve and approached the Enquiries Desk. The young man tried to ignore her for as long as he could do without seeming too impolite, Agnes waited patiently. He actually did her good, even though he didn't mean to. Making her wait gave her the time and excuse to get angry and her nerves disappeared as her ire rose.

He finally acknowledged her and indicated with a weary hand motion where she was to go. Agnes thanked him politely and went in the indicated direction.

The inquest was being held in a large room, on the first floor of the building. It was lit by tall windows that ran the length of one side of the room letting in plenty of bright sunlight which also warmed the room to what was a tolerable temperature now but would become intolerable before lunchtime. A man, a clerk Agnes supposed from his attire, was struggling to open one of the windows. A large wooden desk and two chairs were set in front of the windows and a mix of benches and chairs filled the remainder of the room. Several people were already seated on the chairs, Agnes recognised the young doctor who had treated Charley at the hospital. She also recognised one of the women as the nurse who had been so kind to her. Fortunately for her nerves, Agnes didn't see that the nurse recognised her nudging the doctor at her side and indicating Agnes' presence with a nod and a whisper in his ear. Agnes did not recognise the other people already assembled in the room.

She sat gingerly on a chair near the back, not wanting to draw attention to herself, her anger dissipating as

quickly as it had come leaving her again feeling ill at ease in these unfamiliar surroundings. She replayed the conversation with her mother in her head. “No one is to breathe a word about what drove Charley to drink the Salts. It is a secret to be kept between us here. The official story is that he drank the Salts by mistake, while he was drunk.” Agnes knew the sense of her mother’s words and while resolved not to tell of those dreadful events leading up to Charley’s homecoming couldn’t help replaying them in her head. She closed her eyes but the image of the poor dead baby loomed into focus. Agnes opened them again to dispel the image of the child. She focused on one of the beams of light coming in through the windows. The light showed up the dust in the air, the motes dancing in the breeze coming from the window that the clerk had managed to open. More people were coming into the room and choosing their seats and the level of general hubbub rose. Agnes took surreptitious peeps at the people around her. The gentlemen of the press had begun to arrive and by their glances towards her it would appear that Agnes was occupying one of their chairs.

One of the older men sat besides her, his nose the most prominent feature of his face, fligid from Agnes couldn’t guess how many years of hardened drinking. Leaning towards her he said in a quiet voice “If you are a witness, duck, you should be sitting nearer the front.” Agnes knew he was trying to be kind but she caught a whiff of his breath, stale tobacco and cheap spirit fumes. She was suddenly strongly reminded of Charley, that was how he used to smell when he returned from one of his drinking bouts. Agnes moved quickly, accidentally catching the

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pressman with her elbow. Muttering an apology, Agnes fled towards the front of the room.

Just as she seated herself, the same clerk who opened the window indicated that all present should stand for the Coroner. The session had begun. Charley's was not the first cause of the death to be determined. As the session droned on and the room, despite the open window, grew hotter, on more than one occasion Agnes caught herself nodding off. She was jerked to her senses when she heard Charley's name. As she understood the coroner had just determined that Charley had died as a result of drinking the Salts by mistake while inebriated. Her testimony was not required! Nor was it judged a suicide! She got to her feet and made for the exit before anyone could change his or her mind! It wasn't until she was seated on the omnibus on her way home that she realised how relieved she was. It felt like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders and her mind was the lighter for it. The funeral was tomorrow but she had the support of her mother and sisters for that event and a funeral was not the unknown quantity that the inquest had been. She had been to plenty of funerals in her life and knew what to expect; but an inquest! She had never been to one of those before and sincerely hoped she wouldn't have to again.

After calling in to the church to leave a message for the curate that Charley was definitely not a suicide and could be buried with the church graveyard with the baby, Agnes arrived home before school had finished for the day. In theory she now had a choice between collecting George and Junie from Mrs Shaw or not. In reality, there was no choice at all. When she had removed her hat, Agnes went

across the corridor and knocked on Mrs Shaw's door. Declining her offer of tea, Agnes sincerely thanked Mrs Shaw for her kindness in looking after George and Junie, "They was no trouble" and hoped she would see her tomorrow at the funeral and the wake.

Collecting her basket of clothes to be darned or patched and a stool, she followed George and Junie downstairs to the outside of the building. Passing the toilet and washroom, Agnes opened the gate in the brick wall that led to the lane way outside. While George and Junie played in the lane with other children of similar age from Craven Buildings and similar tenement buildings that backed on to the lane, Agnes sat and worked steadily at the pile of darning. With six children, three of them boys, there were always holes to be darned or patched before the garment was handed down to the next in line. Agnes sighed as she shook out the next garment to be darned, a dress last worn by Rosie. "Some girls," Agnes reflected as she threaded her needle. "Some girls are as heavy on their clothes as boys." Rosie was more of a tomboy than Iris and her over dresses were always getting torn. "I will have to teach her to do her own mending," thought Agnes. "That should learn her to take a bit more care." She glanced up from her needlework to check on George and Junie. They were playing with some other children, with snotty noses Agnes observed with a sniff of contempt at their mother, in small puddles of water not yet evaporated in the heat of the day. Not that the sun shone brightly in this area. Although it was summer the chimneys around the city were still in use and created a pall of smoke that diluted the rays of the sun. The lane

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way was mean and narrow and did not attract the sun except for a couple of hours around midday during the height of summer.

Judging the time by the angle of the sun, Agnes reckoned that it was near to the time the schools finished for the day. Calling to George and Junie she got up to go. It would be nice to meet them at the school gates and walk home with them for the last time. From Wednesday she would be back at work and wouldn't be able to indulge herself like this. She also made a mental note that it was nearly the end of the school year so Iris should be able to look after the younger ones until the new school year begins on September. Without looking behind her she went through the gate rightly assuming that George and Junie were following her.

At supper later that day, Agnes explained to all her brood gathered around the table that they had to leave school at lunchtime the next day to attend the funeral of their father and the baby.

"I thought that the baby should be buried with a name. Before she was born, your father and I liked the name *Dulcie* for a girl. So *Dulcie* is what she will be called, *Dulcie Thomas*." Agnes felt the pricking sensation behind her eyelids and willed the tears away. The children looked upset enough, she must remain strong for them.

George asked if he would see Dad there?

"Don't be so stupid, George," said Iris quickly before Agnes had a chance to open her mouth. Agnes saw George's eyes fill with tears. Agnes hadn't been sure that

George was too aware of what the funeral meant, now she knew he didn't.

"I'm not stupid. I want to see Dad. I want my Dad," wailed George.

Not for the first time, Agnes wished her eldest daughter wouldn't be quite so quick with an answer. Agnes pulled George onto her knee and wiped his face with a not quite white piece of cloth that served as a handkerchief.

"George," she said gently trying to get him to hear her above his sobs, "George, Iris doesn't think you are stupid. Yes, I know that is what she said but she didn't really mean it." Agnes looked sternly at Iris to stop any denial Iris might utter. "We are all a bit upset at the moment and say things we don't mean. You won't be able to see your dad tomorrow. Your dad has gone to heaven to live with Jesus. We will be going to Church tomorrow afternoon to say goodbye to him during a service called a funeral. Your aunts and uncles will be there, maybe your cousins too. His body will be in a box called a coffin at the front of the church. After the service the coffin will be carried to the graveyard and put in a deep hole and covered with earth." To her consternation, George just sobbed harder. At length Agnes managed to discover that George was upset because he thought his dad was being buried alive. She could have kicked herself for giving too much information. She had forgotten that he wasn't as quick as the others and need simple explanations. Agnes explained again that his dad was in heaven with Jesus. Eventually, Agnes managed to calm him sufficiently that he could go to bed and sleep.

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With Junie and George tucked up in bed, Agnes was left with Charlie, Rosie, William and Iris who all had different reactions to their father's death. She had noticed that they were all sleeping better. Obviously, not being awoken by the arguments that used to ensue when Charley senior got back from the pub and her cries of pain and pleas, had been beneficial. Agnes knew that Iris resented the changes that her dad's death had caused, particularly thwarting her plans for her education. Agnes wanted her children to have a better future and knew that education was the key. She had instilled in each child the importance of being able to read, write and do arithmetic. She was especially mindful that the girls got a chance of a decent education. She didn't want any of them to be trapped as she was chained to a life of poverty by pregnancy after pregnancy. She feared that the girls would be enticed into prostitution like many girls in the neighbourhood. She encouraged the boys to look out for their sisters and Charley's death wasn't going to change that! It had seemed that Iris had taken her teaching to heart and had expectations that, alas, were not going to be met. Agnes fully supported her ambitions and was sorry that they wouldn't be fulfilled but short of a miracle, there was nothing she could do. Charley's death didn't alter the fact that Iris would not have gone on to the secondary modern school even if her father were still alive. There just wasn't the money, that's all there was to it. Agnes hoped that in time Iris would realise that and stop holding her, her mother, responsible for closing her education opportunity.

Rosie and Charlie were upset by their father's death but Agnes thought that Rosie in particular would flourish. She wasn't old enough to remember him before he started drinking regularly and Agnes could see that she was scared of the unpredictable moods that his alcohol consumption caused. One day she could do no wrong, the next day she could do no right. Now he would no longer be coming home, Agnes could see how Rosie would benefit. Charlie's hero worship of William meant that he echoed everything William did or thought. William had been trying to protect her from his father's drunken rages, so naturally, Charlie had turned against his father as well. Unlike his younger sister, Charlie was old enough to remember life before his father found refuge in the bottle and like William had been angered by the change in him.

While Agnes had been mulling over her children's immediate reactions to their father's death her hands, which were never idle, continued to ply the needle, patching and darning her children's clothing. Only when she could barely see to rethread the needle, did she get up and light a candle. The cheap tallow made a dim but sufficient light to sew by. Iris had made a pot of tea and they all had large, thick pottery mugs of the hot liquid.

"Arrangements for tomorrow." Their mother's voice cut through the usual sibling bickering with which they occupied their leisure time.

"Iris and Rosie, I would like you to help your grandmother and aunts when they arrive in the morning. They are coming to arrange the food and drink for the wake so if there is any fetching or carrying to be done, I want you two to volunteer. William, I would like you to

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meet with your uncles on your fathers side and arrange who will carry the coffin. I would also like you to meet the curate in the morning and check that all is in readiness for the service. You had better do that first, before you see your uncles. I will keep an eye on George and Junie. Goodness knows, I won't be seeing much of them from Wednesday onwards. After the service, when every one comes back here, I want you, Iris and Rosie to offer people food, William and Charlie, you are to see that everyone has a drink and another if they want it and there is sufficient. I won't have anyone saying that they didn't have something to eat and drink. None of you will been to any family funerals before so I will tell you this so you aren't surprised or shocked tomorrow. It's probable that some of your aunts and uncles will start a bit of a sing-song. They don't mean any disrespect by it, and I am not saying that it will happen but I have mentioned it in case it does." Iris and William exchanged a glance. They could tell that their mother was under a bit of emotional strain.

Shortly afterwards, Iris volunteered to help Rosie and Charlie to bed. William went with them, taking one of their small stock of tallow candles to light their way.

While waiting for first Charlie then Rosie to use the privy William and Iris talked softly about their mother and what tomorrow might bring.

"Clearly Ma is a bit anxious about the funeral. It seems like it's the thought of all the relatives being there. I've never thought about it before but we don't see them very often."

As usual it was Iris who started the conversation.

“I dunno,” said William. “Haven’t really thought about it before either, but you are right, Ma does seem a bit bothered by it. Come to think of it, she hasn’t spoken to any of Dad’s family; she has sent me instead. Maybe,” here William stood a little taller, “maybe it’s because I am now the man of the family and it’s what men do.”

Iris snorted as only sisters can and ignored the remark by using the distraction of helping Rosie check that there was no bogeymen lurking in the privy.

They discussed the matter while Rosie used the facility but reached no further conclusion beyond Iris telling Charlie that what they were discussing was of no interest to him and he was not to mention anything they said to his mother. Charlie knew better than to argue with Iris. It was always easier to do what she said, less painful too.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hendon 1937

Agnes was roused from the reverie by Rosie offering her a cup of tea. Agnes struggled to throw off the remembrance of times past and for a moment couldn't make herself understand who Rosie was and what she wanted.

Agnes caught the look of concern that crossed Rosie's face and hastened to reassure her.

"Sorry, duck. Was thinking about the early days after your dad died. Took me a while to get my bearings. Now, did you mention tea? That would be nice. No, no, I'll get up. You know me, don't hold with napping during daylight. Haven't done this for years. Can't think what has got into me."

Rosie helped her mother get out of bed, her words not reassuring her at all but putting her concern about her mother to the back of her mind.

"Come into the sitting room and I will bring your tea while you sit in the chair. The boys and Junie will be

arriving later so Iris and I are in the kitchen making a stew in case they are hungry,” she said brightly.

“No, no, Ma, sit down we are nearly finished. Look, I’ll bring my cup out with yours and sit with you while Iris finishes in the kitchen.” Rosie’s voice had got louder so Iris could hear in the kitchen.

“Stay there, Rosie,” she called. “I will bring a tray so we can all be comfortable together.”

Iris entered bearing the tea tray, dispensed cups of the hot, brown liquid and soon they were sitting and sipping comfortably together.

“There’s some bread in the larder,” Agnes said, “if you want to make the stew go further.”

“Actually, Ma, Rosie’s going to make dumplings later.”

Agnes clapped her hands on delight, “Lovely! I haven’t had dumplings for years,” she exclaimed.

“Before you came in to to get me, Rosie, I had been thinking about the past, specifically about the time just after your Pa died. Do you remember the funeral, girls. Well, Iris,” she went on, “I expect you do ‘cos you were older. How much do you remember Rosie?”

“I haven’t thought about it for years,” Rosie replied. “Was that the one with the horses?”

“No, that was Grandma’s,” replied Iris tersely. “Honestly, Rosie, how could you forget, the big coffin and the little coffin and the tension afterwards.”

“Remember she was only six,” said Agnes reproved her eldest daughter mildly. “Yes, Iris is right, the horse drawn hearse was arranged by one of your uncles.” Agnes sighed at the memory. “He always was given to dramatic gestures. Funny you should remember the tension, Iris.

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Neither my side or your father's family approved of each other, let alone us marrying."

Agnes' wander down memory lane was interrupted by the return of Elaine. Rosie sprang up to get another cup.

"Hello, Elaine," said Agnes as Elaine bent to give her cheek a quick peck. "How nice of you to drop in. I was just reminding the girls about the funeral of their father and sister."

Elaine gave Iris a quick glance who shrugged.

"Bit before my time, Ma," she replied. "I didn't meet William until a few years later. What about the funeral?" she asked as Rosie placed a full cup before her. "Thanks, Rose"

"Ma was reminiscing," Iris informed her.

"Did you have any trouble with the children," Rosie asked Elaine.

"No, they were good as gold and thrilled that Harry was their babysitter. Even Rita, who was beginning to think that she was old enough to look after herself at home changed her mind when I told them I was driving them to my house so they could stay with Harry."

Rosie cast a quick look at her mother and was relieved to see that Elaine's remark had gone unnoticed and she was looking away into the middle distance.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Craven Buildings 1900

The day of the funeral dawned bright and clear. Clear because a cleansing breeze from the South had blown the usual smoke haze northwards.

Agnes awoke and dragged herself out of bed and mechanically went down the stairs to clean the privy and fetch water as she had done every morning since she and William had taken Charley to the hospital. That was the time she missed her husband, or rather the man she had married not the man he had become over their years of married life. Fetching the water for the household was the chore he had done every morning, in winter he bought the coal for the fire up as well. She had been reluctant to allocate the chore to William as it was another acknowledgement of her loss but soon she would have to, her strength would only last so long. When she was working again, from tomorrow in fact, she would have to get his help as cooking was such physical work, she would need all her strength for the kitchen.

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Another surge of anger got her back up the stairs with the water in two heavy pails, one in each hand. If only Charley hadn't been so weak and started drinking, he would still be alive today. In her anger she was sure that he would have retained his job as a printer and they would have been better off, not in this building, living too close to others who were down on their luck.

A tousle haired William greeted her entrance, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

"This will be your job from tomorrow," Agnes said harshly in her anger and she put the pails none too gently on the floor so the water sloshed over the top and puddled on the floor.

Irritated by the spill Agnes grabbed a cloth to mop up the water and William seized the opportunity to flee the room. Iris was right, he thought, Ma is bothered by the funeral. He loved his father but since that night he and his mother take him to the hospital he hadn't missed the tension while they waited for their father's return to the family; uncertain of how much he had had to drink or his mood. He hadn't missed hearing his parents argue; or his mother's cries of pain or muffled sobs later in the night after another beating by her husband's fists. It had made him feel powerless and very angry with his father for treating his mother that way.

By the time he returned to the room, his mother's attention was occupied by his younger bothers and sisters. Hearing him enter she turned and smiled at him, her previous anger had evaporated as quickly as it had come.

By way of apology she shoved a thick piece of bread at him. He noticed that a thin smear of meat jelly coated

the top of the bread, a peace offering guaranteed to appeal to a 14 year old boy. “You don’t want to be late, even though you are only working a half day.” William grabbed his cap and giving his mother a quick peck on the cheek was on his way to work in less than a minute. The others were staying away from school to help with the preparations for the wake.

Charlie was given instructions on what furniture to move where while Rosie wielded the broom. Iris took the rug outside and was soon engaged in beating the dust from it. While her older children were engaged in a whirlwind of activity, Agnes took the opportunity to get the youngest two washed and dressed. She then laid all the Sunday best clothing on the bed, ready for when it was time to change for the service. After that she used some of the precious water to mop the floor, before Iris brought the rug back from it’s cleaning.

Throwing a fresh tablecloth over the top of the table, hiding the scratches, heat stains and general wear and tear, she and Iris set out all the cups, saucers, plates and glassware in her possession. Sending the children out to play with instructions not to get too dirty, Agnes sat down with a cup of tea and surveyed the room.

She had done as much as she could but nothing would disguise the shabbiness of her surroundings. She and Charley rarely had two pennies spare to rub together during their marriage but in the past 2 years they had reached the lowest point, the next step being moving to the East End. Agnes vowed that whatever happened, she would never allow that to occur, not while she had complete control over the household income. Since the

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drink had got a grip on Charley, he drank most of what he earned, only giving her just enough money to cover the rent and a bit of food. She had struggled to make the rent every week but they were still here, and poor as their surroundings were, at least they had a roof over their heads.

She dreaded the thought of meeting Charley's family this afternoon. They had always thought that Charley had made a mistake in marrying her and blamed her for driving him to drink. In fact, she thought, his mother seemed to blame her for everything that went wrong in Charley's life. In her mother-in-law's eyes, she was never good enough for him. Her own mother had a contrary opinion; Charley was never good enough for her. No wonder she dreaded the two families meeting this afternoon. Another cause of resentment that had festered over the years was her mother's disparaging remarks overheard by Mrs Thomas on learning that four of her children had died when young. Her mother, who had never lost a child, held strong opinions on cleanliness and the raising of babies and was scornful of another's standards of cleanliness if she discovered that their child had died young. Agnes' stomach knotted with anxiety. Sitting and thinking never did any good, she thought and resolutely got up from the table, grabbed some clothing from the darning pile and went out to find her children.

Her mother and sisters arrived just before lunchtime, bearing full baskets that Iris and Rosie rushed to carry up the stairs. They set the baskets on the table and awaited instructions. After their grandmother and aunts had

removed their hats, the children endured being kissed by all the relatives, the usual comparisons with their cousins and exclamations of how they had grown. They were dismissed to their own devices while tea was taken and the adults discussed plans and gossip that the children were not allowed to hear.

Agnes and her mother and sisters were workers so when they had drunk their tea, they began by moving the meagre furniture to the walls. When the table was moved baskets were unpacked. Susan and Annie began cutting and buttering bread for sandwiches, passing the slices on to Agnes and another sister who filled them using the contents of the baskets; cold beef, lamb and cheese and pickle. Iris and Rosie were called back and given the task of boiling fresh eggs and replenishing tea. “Thirsty work” said their grandmother as she topped a beef covered slice of bread with another buttered slice of bread. She cut the sandwich into four triangles and arranged them neatly on plates, some provided by Agnes and some her relatives bought with them.

Slabs of pork pie and veal, ham and egg pie were also laid out on plates, “For those good for nothing Thomas men,” said Agnes’ mother. She caught Agnes’ askance look, “Well they are. I don’t suppose they have offered anything but their absence.” Agnes thought her own family had been a bit slow to offer assistance but said nothing. She was very grateful for their help now, especially looking at the array of food her mother and sisters had bought with them.

Agnes also thought her daughters were unnaturally quiet.

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“I don’t think Iris and Rose need to hear that about their uncles,” she said quietly to her mother. Unfortunately, Agnes had forgotten that she was talking to her mother’s deaf ear, a legacy from a cuff around the ear delivered when her father was in one of his drunken rages. Her mother carried on regardless “ It was one of the reasons I opposed your marriage in the first place,” quite forgetting that the opposition had come from her husband. “I always thought Charley’s character was weak; mind you, you are strong minded enough for two. Just like him to swallow the Spirits and die leaving you with all the children. Who are a credit to you,” she added quickly, “but it will make life very difficult. But there you are, you made your own bed, now you have to lie in it.”

Agnes saw that Iris’ eyes were getting wider and wider and to prevent her hearing any more of her grandmother’s disclosures about the past and her opinions, Agnes firmly suggested to Iris and Rose that they collect any of their brothers they could find, feed them and then all get ready for the church. Agnes rescued some meat crumbs and put them between slices of bread. She gave them to Iris and Rosie as she pushed them out of the door.

“Here, take these and find your brothers, then get cleaned up. Don’t forget the Spirits of Salt for the privy,” Agnes called to their backs. Turning back to the room she caught the eye of Betty, the sister she was fondest of, Betty rolled her eyes heavenwards. As Agnes drew near Betty softly said “she does that to my children as well. She would never have let us hear as much when we were younger.” Susan nodded in agreement, “Since father died she doesn’t seem to mind what she says to anyone. She

.....” Susan was interrupted by her mother who had just become aware of the three of them standing and whispering together.

“We were talking about what drink we were going to get, Ma,” said Agnes thinking quickly. “I thought that I would get some jugs of beer from the pub close by on the way back and some lemonade for the children. Are yours coming?” She addressed her sisters. As Agnes was the youngest and knew the rest of her sister’s children were older than hers and all were working, she wasn’t surprised when they shook their heads, but their husbands were coming. They would be at the church and the wake afterwards. Agnes was vaguely gratified that they had taken an afternoon off work as she knew that they would lose half a day’s wages for their observance. Her three brothers, William, Bert and James and their wives, Sally, Lily and Violet, would also be at the church and returning afterwards.

Her mother agreed that collecting the drink on the way back was a good idea. “No spirits, mind,” she said. “I don’t hold with gin at wakes, makes everyone too maudlin.” Agnes assured her that there would be no spirits

Agnes declined the offer of lunch; her stomach was knotted with tension and the thought of food made her nauseous. She watched the others eat as she made more tea. She was fond of them and grateful for the way they had rallied around but she felt removed from them. As the youngest there was always some resentment from her older brothers and sisters that she had had it easy. According to them, she was lucky that she hadn’t been beaten every day for petty reasons that only she had been

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allowed to get away with. Agnes felt that her parents had been quite strict enough thank you and were not as liberal as her siblings imagined. She could still remember the pain as her father's razor strop caught the back of her legs as she squirmed out of his grip. It had taken her sometime to learn to get out of his way when he came home drunk and spoiling for a fight.

Later, as she had learnt to read she found a perfect escape from her surroundings. That was something else that made her different from her brothers and sisters; she always had her nose in a book. It helped her escape the drabness of her day-to-day existence. When she was younger, she favoured romantic novels, in which a dashing hero would sweep a maiden off her feet and the hero and heroine would live life happy ever after. When she and Charley had wanted to marry, her mother had said her reading habits had got her into trouble. Later, Agnes realised what she meant but by then it was too late. She missed her reading and would never again read romantic novels but had no time in which to indulge; perhaps when the children were older she promised herself.

It was time to check that the children were ready. It hadn't taken Agnes long to get herself ready, she had very little choice in what to wear. Her Sunday best, the same clothes she wore to the inquest yesterday were worn again. William had returned earlier, in time to join his grandmother and aunts in a little something at lunchtime. His eyes, like his brothers and sisters, bulged when he saw the table groaning under the weight of the food waiting for their return from the service. He lined up with the rest of the family for the inspection, hands held out for

finger nail checking. She also made sure that they each had a clean handkerchief. Agnes knew they were poor, but she was determined that no one would find fault with the way her children were turned out.

She led the way to the church, with her children two by two, hand in hand behind her. Her mother and sisters followed. People in the normally busy street, stepped to one side to let them past, men removing their hats in a mark of respect. Agnes had had no idea that so many people in the neighbourhood knew that Charley had died and that this was the day of the funeral.

They entered the church and walked down the aisle to the front pews. Her mother and sisters joined their respective spouses seated behind the front pews. Agnes nodded to her brothers and their wives and acknowledged her brothers-in-law who were seated with their wives. Agnes led her brood to the front pew where they knelt and bowed their heads in prayer. Seeing the two coffins, large and small, side by side, and not having any other distractions made Agnes face the reason they were all there. A tear trickled down her cheek as she mourned the loss of her youngest child. A stifled sob caused her to look along the line of her children to see who was crying. Iris, with tears streaming down her cheeks, noisily blew her nose. Agnes thanked god that she had remembered to issue them all with clean handkerchiefs. In fact, it wasn't just Iris who was crying, she seemed to have started them all, except William who was visible struggling to hold the tears back and present a manly front.

Apart from the one tear, Agnes couldn't cry. Her heart was heavy but there would be no release of emotion for her. It was as though she had been so busy for the past

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few days being strong and concentrating on making sure the family remained together she was now numb. She heard muffled sobs and the sound of noses being blown from around the church but she continued to kneel, ramrod straight and dry-eyed. Junie sidled up, Agnes still on her knees, put her arm around her and held her tight. Junie laid her head on her mother's shoulder, sighed heavily and went to sleep. Agnes envied little Junie's ability to sleep anytime, anywhere and wished she could emulate her. No peace for the wicked she thought and hastily apologised for such thoughts in church. At that moment the priest swept in and the funeral service began. There was no money for such fripperies as an organist so hymns were sung unaccompanied, the congregation for whom this was not an unusual event, sung the familiar tunes lustily.

In no time at all, it seemed to Agnes, the service was over. William joined his uncles to carry his father's coffin outside. To her horror, Agnes remembered that she hadn't arranged little Dulcie's coffin to be carried. While she stood, with Junie propped on her hip, still fast asleep, paralysed with uncharacteristic indecision, Charlie moved out of the pew along to the small coffin containing his stillborn sister, with five of his male cousins joining him, they hoisted the little coffin aloft and slowly paced out of the church following his father's coffin. As the remainder of the congregation filed out after the coffin's, Agnes noticed that many of the women dabbed at their eyes with handkerchiefs, the sentimental sight of the small coffin borne by boys who were children themselves tugged at their heartstrings. Only Agnes seemed impervious to the emotion.

Following the coffins they walked to the far wall that enclosed the cemetery, both coffins were ceremoniously interred together in the same plot. "It is fortunate," breathed her mother in Agnes' ear, "it is fortunate that Charley wasn't declared a suicide, it is far less awkward this way." Agnes looked straight ahead and said nothing. There was nothing to say, even a pauper's grave was better than she could have expected for a suicide.

At length the priest finished, closed his missal and invited those that wished to cast some earth upon the coffins. Agnes led the way, her children following. Afterwards, on the way back home she quietly thanked Charlie for arranging the bearers for Dulcie's coffin. He said that William had suggested he do it and helped him make the arrangements. Agnes made a mental note to thank William when she next had the opportunity.

Her sister, Betty, had offered to get the beer and lemonade so Agnes gave her some money and Iris and Rosie went with their aunt to act as bearers. Agnes led the way home, still carrying Junie. Most had accepted the invitation to return to their home, although the priest, asked out of politeness, had declined. All the Thomas relatives had accepted, however, and all of her side of the family, the Clements. As they arrived in the room, it seemed to shrink with so many inside. The Thomas's and Clements kept to separate clusters on the room, there was no intermingling of the different families. Both sides claimed Agnes' children as taking after whichever parent was of their family. Agnes' head was feeling like splitting, she remembered that she had felt the same way on one

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particular hot, humid and still day until a thunderstorm had formed almost overhead. Agnes felt the same way now, waiting for either side to break the tension that had been forming in the room since they all arrived. There, that was it! A raised voice, a sudden scuffle, heated male voices, a sudden exit of several of the men. It seemed that one of her brothers had knocked one of the Thomas brothers causing him to spill his beer on his wife's skirt.

It was her brother William who had caused the offence. His wife, Sally, was telling anyone who would listen that it was an accident but the men had gone outside to deal with the supposed insult without their womenfolk. Agnes prevented her boys, William and Charlie, from following their uncles with a look and shake of her head. To provide a distraction, she asked Charlie to play the piano. He obediently sat and began to play in his quiet competent way one of the popular tunes of the day. Agnes went to sooth her mother-in-law who was determined not to believe that the jostle was an accident. Sally was determined to go after her husband but Agnes' mother, her mother-in-law, held her back.

"Better to leave the men to it," she said speaking with the voice of experience. "sit down with a nice cup of tea. Iris," she called, "put the kettle on, duck, and make us all a nice cuppa. I'm sure you could do with one, Mrs Clements." To Agnes' amazement her mother went over to her late husband's mother, sat next to her and started to chat. Her mother gave her a swift look to prevent her inferring. Agnes was not privy to what they were discussing as she was engaged in pouring oil in the form of food on troubled waters. While Iris made the tea and Charlie played the piano, she and Rosie circulated with

plates of sandwiches. William was delegated to charm the aunts on both sides.

After a nice cuppa and some sandwiches, “lovely spread, Mrs Thomas,” and “you done him proud, dear,” commented some of the guests as the women settled in groups for a cosy talk about children, “never had it as tough as we did,” men, and gossip, ‘had you heard about Mrs So-and-So down the way.” Agnes encouraged Charlie to keep playing the piano and kept an eye on the rest of her children. William was anxious to go to see what the men were doing. His grandmothers both advised him that they had probably trooped off to the pub and not to worry. Agnes was surprised that her mother and mother-in-law agreed about anything. Hearing them agree had not eased the knot of tension in her stomach, rather she was now more convinced than ever that an argument between them was imminent.

Iris pushed a cup of tea into her hand and Betty invited her to sit. Agnes sat on the edge of the chair. “Whatever is the matter, Aggie? You look like you are waiting for a calamity,” observed Betty. Agnes explained about her apprehension regarding her mother and mother-in-law. Betty understood but said softly so no one else could hear, “didn’t Mother tell you? No, she wouldn’t have done. Why can’t we talk to each other in this family? She told me that she was going to be especially nice to Mrs Thomas, as no one deserves to lose a son that way. Not that she blames you,” said Betty quickly. “Sure, nobody could have predicted what he did. And Susan pointed out that Mrs Thomas had lost most of her daughters and her daughters-in-law aren’t what you would call very nice to her. So Ma began to feel sorry for her and resolved to be

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on her best behaviour.” Agnes glared at her mother’s back. “Nice of her to tell me,” she muttered. “Well, you know what she is like,” said Betty. “She’s not one for giving anyone an easy way out.” The sisters were prevented from commenting further on their mother as their sisters-in-law joined them.

Being joined by their sisters-in-law meant that they indulged in general chit-chat, mainly about their children. Neither sister would dream of discussing family business with what they termed an outsider, even if they were married to a brother. To be truthful, Agnes wouldn’t dream of discussing her troubles with any family member – she had been told that she was too independent for her own good before but had never forgotten that they had not wholly approved of her marrying Charley and didn’t want to give anyone the opportunity of saying “I told you so.” Also the habit of independence was too ingrained in her to break suddenly so she would never confide in any member of her family.

Over the general hubbub in the room Agnes became aware that her mother’s voice. She was instructing William to find out what had become of his uncles. “They have been away long enough,” she was saying. “I want you to find them, William and tell them that their mothers are asking after them and would welcome their presence here. There is still beer to be drunk and food to be eaten.” She turned back to her companion, “I do so hate waste, Mrs Thomas, don’t you?” They continued their conversation. William went to his mother for confirmation that he should go. “Yes, I heard; you should do as she asks. But thank you for checking with me.” Agnes followed him out

of the room, “and thank you for arranging with Charlie the bearers for Dulcie’s coffin. It had slipped my mind and it was a very thoughtful thing to do.” William blushed at his mother’s words. She didn’t offer her praise lightly so the few words she had just spoken to him meant a lot; but he was 14 so he grunted in reply and sped on his way.

He was soon back and went straight to his grandmothers, spoke a few words then came and found his mother who was chatting to her neighbour, Mrs Shaw.

“I found them all in the pub. They hadn’t had a fight; Uncle William offered to buy them a pint each instead. They looked like they had been having a good time. But they are coming back now,” he added quickly wanting to avoid the implication that a good time was not being had with his mother – or if having a good time was not allowed at a wake. “I have told the grandmothers,” he added unnecessarily. His mother smiled at him and thanked him for running the errand. “Have you had enough to eat, if not help yourself to another sandwich. Have you and your children had sufficient to eat, Mrs Shaw?” Agnes turned back to her neighbour and William recognising the dismissal went to the table to refill his plate.

Agnes was concerned that Mrs Shaw and her brood might be going hungry and feeling that she owed her neighbour for looking after Junie and George, she urged Mrs Shaw and her children to eat more before the beered-up men returned from the pub and finish what food remained. She got Iris and Rosie to hand round more sandwiches to those who were still there.

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The men returned, the sound of their boots on the stairs and the bare wooden floorboards in the corridor outside the room heralded their approach. Agnes had arranged the remaining pies on the table so they were visible as the men entered. She knew from bitter past experience that alcohol fuelled men's appetites and hoping that the pastry would sop up some of the beer in their stomachs before the alcohol reached their heads. The men's voices were loud and good-humoured. So, thought Agnes, they are still at the merry stage, they haven't had enough drink to magnify any more family hostilities or imagined slights. Unnoticed, she hid the remaining bottles of beer so no more consumption could be encouraged. She was beginning to tire of the whole occasion and wanted people to start leaving. To her relief a few people began to approach her and say their goodbyes. Once a few started to leave it acted like a reminder to others and the farewells snowballed until within half an hour only her mother, sisters and their husbands, Mrs Thomas and her son Fred and his wife remained. Her son had promised to see his mother home, his wife didn't bother to hide her annoyance about this and they soon left, much to Agnes' relief. She hadn't wanted to be left alone with her mother-in-law imagining that the lady would blame her for the death of her son and add to the guilt already weighing on Agnes' shoulders.

Her mother called Agnes to her side. "Mrs Thomas has a certain amount of sympathy for your situation." Her mother lowered her voice and went on, "Of course, I didn't tell her what you had told us earlier. I merely said

that it was unfortunate that Charley was too drunk to notice that the bottle he drank from was not beer. And her sympathy does not extend to offering any practical help.” Her voice regained its normal volume. “Of course your family will do what we can, you only have to ask, my dear.” Agnes heard the unspoken reproof in her mother’s voice and knew that any help if asked for was unlikely to be forthcoming. She had indeed made her bed and now she was lying in it.

Soon the room was empty of visitors. “At last!” exclaimed Agnes as she wearily sank onto a chair. “Iris, I could do with a nice cup of tea while I sit for five minutes.” Iris did as her mother asked her and soon a steaming cup was beside her. Agnes had taken the opportunity to send some of the children out to play; they had vanished quickly needing no second bidding. She was left with Iris, William and Junie who was accommodated on her knee.

“Well, I think that went off well, everyone was well fed and there were no real fights to speak of. Thanks both of you; you were a great help to me today. I don’t think it would have gone so well without your efforts.

William, you are nearly a man now, it is time to warn you about your uncles on your father’s side. They talk big but do little. Don’t be taken in by their talk, my boy. I’m sure they mean well but remember, if they promise they will do anything for you and you believe them, you will probably be disappointed.”

She held up a hand to stop any reply William might have been preparing to make. “I am just warning you,

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that's all. I don't want to see any dream or hope you have ruined by promises your uncles didn't keep."

Agnes took a sip of her tea. "Iris, I'm sorry this will be hardest on you. From tomorrow, I am going to rely on you to help with your brothers and sisters as I am going to have to go back to work. There is only a week or so before the summer holidays and then your final year of schooling. I suppose that other people would make you leave school to look after the younger ones but I think it is important that you get as much schooling as you can before finding a job, even if you are a girl. It is still important for girls to be able to read and write and do arithmetic." Iris got the impression that her mother's last words were not so much addressed to her but sounded as though they were part of an old, well rehearsed argument she had had with someone else.

Agnes went on, "I want you to stay at school for as long as you can, even if it means that George and Junie stay home alone for a while. Then you will have to get a job; we will need your wages. But in the meantime, I know I said that I would be able to send the washing out but I've had to rethink that and I don't think we will be able to afford it, even with what William is giving me. It's going to be hard for you, Iris. William and I are going to be working six days a week so you are going to be in charge." Agnes sighed, "You will have to grow up quicker than I would have liked, all of my children; but that's life."

Tears threatened again but Agnes gave a large sniff and rose to her feet. "Let's get this room back to normal, then I will do something I haven't done for a few days. I haven't read to you all for ages and I think its high time we

get back to our usual routines. Iris, fetch the others in and we can do this together and it will be done in no time.”

With all the family pitching in to help the debris from the wake were soon cleared away and the room returned to its shabby familiarity.

Agnes read to them from Charlie Kingsley’s “The Water Babies’ continuing where she had left off before their world had changed. Long into the night, while her children slept around her, Agnes lay awake worrying about their future. She was not at all sure she could manage the task of bringing up the family alone. They faced many dangers, of which the break up of the family or the girls being lured into prostitution was only the tip of the iceberg. At length Agnes fell into a deep, dreamless sleep of exhaustion that was all too short as the bells of St Clements woke her to what was going to be the routine for the rest of her life.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hendon 1937

“The night’s are beginning to draw in,” remarked Rosie as she rose to close the curtains. “I wonder how long before the rest arrive.”

As she spoke, there was a clatter of footsteps outside and William stuck his head around the door.

“Hello everyone.” He entered the room, walked over to his mother, bent to peck her cheek saying as he did so, “I ran into Charlie so have bought him too. Junie and George were already with me.” He glanced at his wife, who shook her head discretely. “George was giving us a spin in my new car so when I saw Charle, I thought the more the merrier.” He nodded to his sisters, “Iris, Rosie,” and went over to his wife. They stood speaking softly together as the other siblings exchanged greetings.

The three sisters went to the kitchen, ostensibly to make a fresh pot of tea but as soon as the door had been shut Iris and Rosie started speaking at once. Rosie gestured to Iris to be the first to speak.

“I came to visit Ma on the off chance and Rosie was already here.” Rosie nodded in confirmation. “Ma doesn’t seem to be herself which is why I decided to call you all here.”

“She was talking about Pa’s funeral before you came and asking us what we remembered.”

“That doesn’t sound like Ma,” Junie confirmed. “I can’t remember the last time she talked about the past. Can’t remember the funeral either.”

“I’m not surprised!” exclaimed Rose. “It was so long ago and I got it confused with Grandma’s.”

“Anyway,” said Iris firmly taking control, “neither Rosie nor I can put our finger on it but we are worried about Ma. We have made arrangements for our children so we can stay with her this evening. Just the family like it used to be years ago.”

“What Iris means is that Elaine has offered Harry as a babysitter for my children. She thinks that Peter is old enough to look after himself, or at least until Hubert gets home.”

“Elaine has always been helpful. In fact, I regard her as my fourth sister,” said Junie, avoiding looking at Iris who didn’t look pleased with her sister’s words.

Junie was spared any comments Iris may have made by the appearance of William.

“How’s the tea coming, girls,” he said as he came in. “I think Ma could do with another cup and I know Charlie and I need something to settle our nerves after George’s driving.”

Junie laughed. “He is not a bad driver. It’s just he is so used to driving the delivery van, he drives all vehicles like that. Don’t worry, William, the kettle is about to boil. Has

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Elaine told you why we are here? Rosie and Iris were just telling me that Ma doesn't seem to be herself."

"What do you mean, Iris?"

"Well, William," Iris began.

"She has spent most of today talking about the past. And she had a nap after lunch." Rosie's concern was evident. "Sorry, Iris, but I have spent more time with her today than you have."

"Hmmm, having a nap in the afternoon doesn't sound like her at all. Anything else?"

"She complains of feeling tired," admitted Iris. She and William exchanged looks.

"Better get her another cup of tea and see if that helps," suggested Junie. "Can you carry the tray, William, I'll follow with the teapot."

"This family," remarked Charlie when they were all settled, "runs on tea."

"Of course," replied his mother. "It's all very well these days with running water but when you were little, all the drinking water had to be boiled so the sooner you could all drink tea the better."

"Speaking of running water. Hey, Junie, George, do you remember the move to Drury Lane. I bet you do, Rosie, you were so excited about the water coming out of taps indoors that you couldn't wait," said William.

"You'd be excited too, William Thomas, if you had to lug those heavy pails up two flights of stairs every morning," was Rosie's reply.

"There was gas light as well," Iris reminded them.

"And the theatre," added Charlie.

Pene Thornton

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Craven Buildings 1903

Days merged into weeks, weeks in turn became months, summer mellowed into autumn, autumn became cooler, wetter and evolved into winter. Spring was heralded by the flower sellers around Covent Garden offering first snowdrops then daffodils to passers by. Soon it was the first anniversary of Charley's death and Dulcie's birth and their funeral. Then before anyone had really noticed another year had passed.

Agnes' time passed in the endless drudgery of daily life. Monday to Saturday was spent at work, hurrying home every evening to feed her family, catch up on some of the endless mending and other domestic chores in the evening. Saturday evening was bath night and Sunday a theoretical day of rest with the morning spent at Church and the afternoon spent doing the family wash. It took the combined efforts of all three females, Agnes, Iris and Rosie. Agnes maned the copper, Iris and Rosie turned the mangle that squeezed the water from the wet washing. Oft times the drier that hung in the ceiling of their main

room was strewn with drying washing. Especially in winter the building was damp, water streamed down the inside of the windows and everyone developed coughs.

Agnes was too tired, worn out by the toil of her daily existence to take much notice of her everyday surroundings. It had been tiring when her husband was alive but keeping the family together while working a full week was exhausting. Iris bore the brunt of the day to day chores and Agnes could not have gone on without her. When Iris left school and got a job as a waitress the extra money she brought home was welcome and Rosie took over the tasks that Iris had done, a big responsibility for an eight year old but she did it cheerfully. When she could, Iris kept a stern eye on her younger sisters and made sure that the chores were done to her satisfaction. If she was a little harsh in the encouragement of her sisters no-one complained so Agnes was not aware of how Iris kept the younger children in line.

William was now sixteen, going on seventeen and no longer an errand boy. Mr Goldschmidt, who owned a tobacconist, took him on to work behind the counter. Unlike some of her neighbours, Agnes had no qualms about William working for a Jew. In her eyes Mr Goldschmidt was a good employer who was giving her eldest boy an opportunity that many wouldn't give him because of his age. He allowed William to take the Christian holidays and he had the Jewish ones as well as Mr Goldschmidt closed the shop for the major festivals of Hanukkah, Passover and Yom Kippur. Agnes had reason to be grateful that William's employer was a religious man. He closed the shop at nightfall on Friday so he could be home in time for the evening religious observances and all

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day Saturday, so William came home early on Friday nights in winter and didn't work on Saturday. Agnes had negotiated with Mr Goldschmidt to allow William every second Sunday off so he could go to church. Initially, he wanted to dock William's wages by one day every fortnight but, encouraged by his mother, William proved himself such a hard worker and his cheerfulness and charm with the customers brought in extra money, Mr Goldschmidt soon forgot that idea.

With William and Iris working and bringing in money, Agnes found the extra money to be very useful. Charlie and George were always going through the knees of their trousers, Rosie too was growing and Junie was no longer the baby she was. In fact, Agnes was thinking of sending Junie to school in September. True, she wouldn't even be four years old but it wasn't uncommon for children younger than five to attend school, nor to leave before they were fourteen either so Junie wouldn't be on her own as the youngest in the school. Sending her to school would certainly relieve the anxiety Agnes felt every day when she went to work. She left Junie plonked in the middle of the bed with instructions not to move until her sister came home. Last year Junie had George for company but this year he was at school and she was left alone. Junie was a bright, inquisitive child and Agnes was always worried about what she would find when she came home. The fact that no great disaster had occurred did nothing to ease her mind. Agnes knew it was the price that must be paid if the children were not to be taken into care by the authorities but she would be glad when Junie was old enough to go to school.

So it was these fears that kaleidoscoped through her mind when she came home one evening to find an official envelope awaiting her arrival. Agnes assumed that officialdom had somehow discovered that Junie was alone in the home most days and the letter was notification that she and the rest of the children would be taken away.

Agnes saw the letter sitting on the table when she came home from work. She was tired, work in a kitchen was physically exhausting and planning what was to be on the menu each day was mentally tiring. Rosie took the bag of leftovers and scurried to put a cup of tea in front of her mother who had sunk down in a chair at the table. Agnes reached for the letter with a hand whose trembling gave away her inner fears. Rosie, innocent of what was going through her mother's mind said, "Mary said that they got a letter from the Council yesterday saying that they would have to move 'cos this building is going to be knocked down." Agnes dimly heard Rosie's voice but beyond registering that it was another 'Mary said' didn't pay too much attention. Mary was Rosie's best friend and seemed to talk an awful lot as Rosie seemed to repeat every word she spoke to her largely uninterested family. Therefore, when Agnes heard those words 'Mary said' she automatically tuned Rosie out.

With trepidation Agnes opened the letter. At first the large imposing letterhead didn't register so convinced was Agnes that it was informing her that officialdom had discovered the family's secret and that her children would be taken from her as punishment for driving her husband to his death. Rosie, looking over her mother's shoulder, read the letter and squealed, "I told you, I told you! We are moving!"

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The noise in her ear jerked Agnes back to reality and while automatically telling Rosie that reading letters addressed to her mother was rude and not behaviour to be condoned, Agnes read the letter that was in her hand not her imagination.

The letter informed Agnes that the Westminster Council was planning to demolish Craven Buildings to make way for a new road. However, the council were planning to rehouse them with their fellow inhabitants in flats owned by the Council on Drury Lane. Residents were invited to a public meeting to be held Monday evening next week.

Agnes was wary of any seeming generosity on the part of officialdom, being of the firmly held belief that the less 'they' knew about ones business the better. She made a mental note to see Mrs Shaw and discuss the matter at the earliest opportunity that night.

Thus it was that instead of sitting down with the customary pile of darning after the youngest were settled in bed and a couple of chapters of the latest storybook read, Agnes left Iris in charge of the remaining children and went to see Mrs Shaw. After the usual enquiries were made regarding the health of their respective families, refreshments were offered and a cup of tea accepted Agnes introduced the reason for her call. Mrs Shaw had received a letter but hadn't had time to read it. Perhaps Agnes could read it to her so they might discuss the contents. Mrs Shaw was happy to have her oblige.

The contents of Mrs Shaw's letter were the same. Mrs Shaw had heard rumours that this was happening so she

was not surprised to have the rumours confirmed. Mrs Shaw had a sister who lived in a council flat and was looking forward to the enforced move. She explained the benefits to Agnes.

“She has her own indoor bathroom and toilet, gas light, two bedrooms so the boys sleep in one room and she sleeps with her daughters. And another room to live in. So much space compared to here. She pays the rent weekly to the council man who comes around to collect it, the Council whitewashes the flat every two years and she can’t be thrown out on the street at the whim of the landlord. And that’s not the best part. She has running water, from a tap, inside! It’s a step up, that’s what it is,” ended Mrs Shaw triumphantly.

Mrs Shaw had certainly given Agnes something to think about. Perhaps the move was not such a bad thing after all. A step up was what she wanted for her family so maybe their luck was changing. However, she wasn’t sure she believed Mrs Shaw about the running water; that seemed too good to be true. When she let herself back in to her home, she discovered that William was home and only he and Iris remained up. She wasted no time in telling her two eldest children the substance of her conversation with Mrs Shaw. Iris was even more cautious than her mother but William thought that Mr Goldschmidt might have heard something about it. “I overheard a conversation he was having with a regular customer, an official looking cove. They were talking about a new road and the business opportunities it may produce. I can ask him more about it tomorrow,” he offered.

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Agnes went to sleep that night thinking about the luxury of an indoor toilet. She secretly thought that Mrs Shaw's sister was exaggerating; surely no Council would provide indoor toilets and running water for all the flats that were inhabited by poor families such as hers.

When Rosie found out that it may be possible that the new flat would have running water from a tap indoors and an inside toilet she declared that moving would be the happiest day of her life. Iris was scornful, pointing out that this was based on something Mrs Shaw had said about where her sister lived. "And we all know that Mrs Shaw is a liar."

Iris considered the matter finished but Rosie, whose job it now was to carry the heavy, brimming buckets of water up two flights of stairs every day, wanted to believe. When Agnes returned from work that evening Rosie brought up the subject of the meeting about the demolition of the Building and the relocation of the residents.

"Ma, you are going, aren't you?"

Agnes having had a busy day wasn't in the mood to think about it but Rosie was persistent and Iris hadn't yet returned to put a stop to her 'nonsense'. In the end, to silence the child, Agnes said she would go if William came with her; thereby condemning William to the same nagging she had endured.

In the face of his younger sister's persistence, William good-naturedly agreed to accompany his mother to the meeting. As it was to be held in the church hall, William suggested that Agnes call in and collect him from work on the Monday evening.

Agnes wasn't sure about the move to Drury Lane. As she explained to William she was concerned that the location of the flats, opposite the Theatre Royal, would put the girls, Iris, Rosie and Junie, in peril of prostitution, even more so than where they lived now. Agnes was sure that the Theatre was a den of vice and she was alarmed that the girls may be seduced by the, to her mind, tawdry life they would see from their window.

William rightly pointed out that they had no choice but to move.

"If us boys continue to look out for the girls, they will be alright, Ma," he said reasonably. "It's what you have taught us, after all. We have to look after one another if we are to survive as a family. We have done alright so far, no reason why we can't continue to be alright."

Agnes understood the sense of his words but they did nothing to ease her concerns.

That Monday evening Agnes had enough time to drop at home the usual left overs from lunch at the Lamb & Flag; find Rosie, who was playing in the street with her best friend Mary while keeping one eye on Junie; instruct her to keep the boys away from the food until Iris got home. She then went to meet William at the tobacconist as they had arranged.

When she arrived, Mr Goldschmidt spied her and insisted that she come through to his office and share a cup of tea.

"Very capable boy you have there, Mrs Thomas" he said as he ushered her through the doorway and shut the door. "He is a credit to his mother. "

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“I’m glad he continues to give satisfaction, Mr Goldschmidt,” Agnes replied, showing none of the pleasure his words gave her.

Over tea, Mr Goldschmidt discussed the forthcoming development with her. Naturally, he was cautious about the possibilities that may arise for expansion of his business. Although the tobacconist would not be directly affected by the demolition of the nearby narrow streets, he wasn’t sure that business would improve. Rather he was thinking that his business would be adversely affected because there would be fewer residents passing by. Hearing him speak about his fears for the future of his business immediately made Agnes concerned for the future prospects of William.

“I am sorry that you don’t think that the future for this business is not looking so bright. Does that mean that William should be looking for employment elsewhere. I am only trying to find out what is best for him, you understand.”

“Mrs Thomas, I quite understand your concerns. Naturally you want to do the best for your son. I am sorry that my thoughts about the future have caused you to be concerned. No, William is a great asset to my business. As you know, because of personal tragedy I have no children of my own. I have come to look on William as the son I never had. I know business is business,” Mr Goldschmidt shrugged his shoulders and spread his arms. “But the good God willing, Mrs Thomas, as long as I draw breath, he will always have a job. “

His words went some way to ease Agnes’ concerns but not enough to prevent her from mentioning their conversation to William as they walked to the meeting.

“Ma, Mr Goldschmidt is cautious in business. We have spoken of the future prospects and my opinion is that he will move his business to the new road when it is built. That would make the most sense. But we will see. I have learnt a lot from him and hope to keep learning in the future. Now, don’t worry about me,” he said as he opened the door of the Church hall for her to enter. “Lets see what the Council has in mind for us.”

The Church Hall was half full when they arrived. Rows of chairs faced a raised platform on which three council officials; Agnes assumed by their dress they were officials, were sitting behind a table. The men were dressed in suits and ties, that marked them out in this gathering, and their trilby hats were ranged neatly in a line on the table. Their audience were not as genteelly dressed. Shabby but clean for the most part was the preferred dress for them, like Agnes and her son William. Agnes and William found seats in a row that included their neighbour, Mrs Shaw.

Shortly after they were seated, the meeting began. The middle of the three men on the dais cleared his throat and waited for the hubbub to die down. In the respectful hush that followed his throat clearing he spoke in a quick, low monotone that Agnes found difficult to follow. She was not the only one, the sounds of boot shuffling and swishing of fabric caused by wriggling for a better position told her that others were experiencing the same difficulty in discerning what the council official was talking about.

One man, near the front, stood up, his hat respectfully held in his hands. One of the officials indicated to his companion that a member of the audience had arisen. The council official paused and looked at the man over his

pince-nez. The man in the audience assumed that the pause was for himself to fill and explained that many in the Hall were having difficulty hearing what was being said and could the gentleman please speak louder.

With the air of one greatly put upon the official resumed his monotone, slightly louder than before. The audience realised that this was as much as they were going to get and each attempted in their own way to improve their opportunity of hearing what was being said. Many at the back gave up completely and left the hall, the noise of their departure adding to the hearing difficulties of those remaining.

Agnes discerned that what was in the letter was true, they were to be rehoused because the road, or rather narrow lane, in which they lived was going to be demolished to make way for a much larger road. It was also true that they were going to be rehoused in Drury Lane. Agnes spent a moment or two worrying about what that would mean for her girls.

She was relying on William whose hearing was more acute to pick up the subtleties of what that meant for the housing they were to be given. He suddenly grinned and whispered, "Rosie will be thrilled, there will be running water and there will be a toilet on every floor!" Agnes couldn't believe her ears and thought William must have misheard. He also whispered that they were to be moved by November.

The officials bought the meeting to a close quite soon after that. The audience were given no time for questions; it was made quite clear that the meeting was to give what information the council decided was necessary. As most of what they heard was in the letter they received, Agnes

and William concluded that the purpose of the meeting was to ensure that those who could not read were informed as to the contents of the letter. Although how the illiterate among them were to find out about the meeting was never explained.

Agnes and William discussed the proposed standard of the housing as they walked home from the meeting. Agnes was beginning to believe that it was ‘a step up’ as Mrs Shaw had said. She also began to imagine life with an indoor toilet, to be used solely by the family and others on the same floor. With fewer people using it, there shouldn’t be such a long queue at the more popular times of the day. Although she would never tell anyone, after seven births, she didn’t have the ability to ‘hold on’ as she once had so it would be a relief in more than one sense to no longer have to share a privy with so many. Running water would also free the girls from much heavy carrying and Agnes smiled at the thought of Rosie’s excitement when it was confirmed that she would no longer have to carry water. Agnes also thought of Iris’ reaction when she finds out that Mrs Shaw’s predictions were accurate. It was not often that poor Iris had something go her way, Agnes thought, so she was glad for all her children’s sakes that their surroundings were going to change for the better.

As they walked home, William told Agnes what she had missed and he had heard. The reason for the running water and other luxuries was that the building they were moving to was the first of what the Council hoped was a improved model.

William spoke as they walked along the street together, “As far as I could gather the cost of the building was

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donated by a philanthropist who wanted those who lived in poverty to experience something better in their lives.”

Agnes snorted, “Ah! That was why the officials were so unhelpful. They probably disapproved of us having the opportunity to move to a building where our lives may be made a bit easier.” Agnes knew she was poor but believed that she and her family shouldn’t be treated any differently because of their circumstances in life. Not for the first time, and definitely not the last, she felt a wave of anger at the injustice of life wash over her.

By the time they arrived home, her indignation had evaporated during the brisk walk; William had a youthful energy that Agnes struggled to keep up with.

The younger children were in bed and only Iris was up by the time they got home. Rosie must have been keeping herself awake because she came out of the bedroom immediately they got in, even before Agnes had a chance to remove her hat.

Rosie’s delight on hearing confirmation of the prospect of running water was everything that William had predicted and then some. Even Iris caught some of her excitement but soon found the opportunity to try to bring Rosie back to earth.

“Get back to bed, Rosie. Can’t you see that Ma needs a rest from your pestering? It’s too late for you to be up. Back to bed!”

“Yes, do as Iris says, Rosie. It’s late, you should be asleep.” Agnes spoke gently but such was her authority, Rosie obeyed her and skipped back to the bedroom. Agnes had to hide her smile at the exuberance of her young daughter.

“Thank you, Iris for looking after the children this evening. It was useful to go.” Agnes and William then told her about the meeting. They laughed together about the low voice of the official and admired the bravery of the man who spoke up. Iris shared their indignation at the treatment those attending the meeting had received at the hands of the officials. She pointed out, it really would make no difference what their opinion was, the move was going to happen whether or not a local official or three approved or disapproved, they had the letter telling them so.

The day of the move got nearer. Iris would curb Rosie’s excitement by saying that she was waiting for a letter to say that the Council had changed their minds. One day an official letter did arrive. Iris almost had Rosie convinced that the contents of the letter were to inform everyone that the Council had changed its mind and they would not be moving there. Rosie vehemently declared that the Council wouldn’t do such a thing. The argument ended with Rosie running out of the room in tears. Rosie met Agnes on the way home from work. To be met on the way home by one of her children was uncommon, when combined with her tear stained cheeks Agnes’ immediate thought was that some disaster had occurred. After assuring herself that all her children were in fact in good health, Agnes was told the reason for Rosie’s upset.

“Rosie, neither you nor Iris is going to know what the letter says until after I have read it. Then I will read it to you if you need to know what it says,” Agnes said firmly. “As you are here you can help by carrying this bag.”

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Agnes listened with half an ear to the stream of chatter Rosie kept up for the remainder of their walk home.

As soon as Agnes had removed her hat, she opened and read the letter. She snorted as she finished reading. "Well, girls. It would appear that we will be spending Christmas here after all. No, the council haven't changed their minds, Rosie. There has been a delay and we won't be moving until the New Year. No, I won't have a cup of tea just yet, Iris. I will go and see Mrs Shaw and tell her what the letter says." Agnes replaced her hat and walked across the hallway.

Mrs Shaw offered her neighbour a cup of tea in exchange for reading her copy of the letter.

When Agnes returned the girls had set the table for supper and were busy emptying the contents of the bag. Rosie was given the task of rounding up her brothers who were playing in the street. While she was out, Agnes had a quiet word with Iris asking her not tease her sister so much. Iris said that she was doing it for Rosie's own good. Agnes sighed and made Iris promise that she would be easier on the child. Rosie and her brothers burst into the room before Iris replied; Agnes forgot their conversation in the hubbub of her daily life.

The year marched on; Christmas came and went. Shortly after they had seen in the New Year. Agnes asked William to see his uncle and ask to borrow his porter's barrow. "It will be very useful to carry everything to the new place. Ask him if we can borrow it next Sunday afternoon. You can assure him that he won't be asked to help but I will be able to give him a couple of bottles o' beer for the lend of it."

When William returned he told her that his uncle had agreed to the lend only after William told him that he wouldn't be needed to help and that he would be given the beer for his trouble.

“Well, I wouldn't like to speak badly of anyone but that James is an idle fellow, no good for anything. Still, we have the barrow which is as much help from him as we will need.”

Agnes had debated long and hard with herself as to whether the move would justify them missing Church for that one Sunday. In the event she decided that there was just too little time to pack up and move in half a day so they would have to miss the church service for that day only. As it was, from the beginning of that week, Agnes had herself and the children wrapping the few ornaments, glasses and crockery other than for their immediate use in newspaper she had garnered from the Lamb & Flag. The wrapped crockery and glassware were packed into a tea chest, also obtained from the Lamb & Flag.

The Sunday dawned clear and cold. But Agnes had woken them up long before dawn. By the time the sun had risen, the bed had been striped, spare clothing wrapped in a sheet. The tea chest had been filled with the remaining crockery, the kettle and pot removed from the fire and the fire extinguished. Each family member had their allotted jobs and as the two rooms emptied so the pile of their possessions at the door mounted.

One of the last jobs was for the two eldest boys to dismantle the large iron bed. They had a bit of difficulty separating the bed head and foot from the frame. Damp and the fact that it hadn't been dismantled for a few years had made the metal fuse together. Charlie despaired of it

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ever coming apart but William was determined and disappeared to find a hammer or brick with which to persuade the metal to part. He returned bearing a stout hammer and with a determined glint in his eye returned to the bedroom, shutting the door behind him. Some banging and subdued cursing followed by a shout of triumph and a metallic crash. The two lads emerged, carrying the bed head and foot that they proudly leaned up against the pile of possessions. They went back to the bedroom and returned carrying the bed frame and bore it out of the rooms and laid it flat on the barrow. The bed frame was the first to be loaded on the barrow and was followed by the girls and their mother each carrying as much as they could. Leaving George and Junie with strict instructions to remain on guard over the barrow that was slowly filling with their possessions, the remaining family members trooped back up the stairs and returned with more of their possessions.

William realised that some order needed to be imposed on the growing pile on the barrow and ordered that most of what was piled there be removed and put on the pavement. "Keep our stuff away from the others. Don't want confusion," he called to Charlie. Rosie was delegated to keep an eye on the pile on the street. Just because their possessions were old and few didn't mean that they wouldn't be attractive to some of their more light-fingered neighbours.

When the barrow had been repacked to his satisfaction, Rosie, Iris and Charlie were sent back upstairs for more while Agnes was persuaded to remain with the smaller ones and oversee the operation.

“I don’t want you worn out before lunchtime, Ma,” William told her. “We still have to unpack and sort things out.” Agnes realised the sense of his words but found it difficult to stand back and let William take charge. However, George was getting bored and Agnes caught him just as he was about to disappear with other children whose parents were moving. Agnes caught him by the collar and made him run and help his older brother and sisters fetch their remaining goods from the flat. “Take it carefully!” Agnes shouted after him, “I don’t want anything dropped or broken.”

William caught her eye, “Might as well have saved your breath to cool your porridge,” he said with a grin, quoting one of her favourite sayings back at her. Agnes grinned back at him, shook her head and muttered, “boys” under her breath.

Soon all was loaded onto the barrow without mishap, despite George’s puppy like enthusiasm for the task and they were on their way. William was in charge of pushing the barrow, with Charlie on hand to provide additional strength when required, going around corners for example. William had perched Junie on top of the barrow and she was squealing with delight. Rose and George walked behind the barrow, ready to retrieve anything that fell and Agnes brought up the rear. Everyone was in high spirits as they joined the line of other families making their way to their new homes.

Iris had been left behind to guard the family piano, William having decreed that the instrument deserved to travel alone and in style. He and Charlie would come back as soon as the barrow was unloaded to collect it.

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Without too much misadventure they reached Drury Lane and their new home on the second floor. Parking the barrow outside and leaving George and Junie with instructions to yell really loudly if anyone so much as looked at the barrow, each of the remaining family members took hold of a possession and trekked up the stairs to their new home.

When they had arrived and shed their burdens Agnes sent them back again for more, as she remained inside to decide where everything went. A couple of trips and their meagre possessions were in their new home and the barrow was empty. William and Charlie left to fetch Iris and the piano. When they returned and had manhandled the piano up to the flat, she despatched William and Charlie to return the barrow to their uncle and gave William some money to buy the promised beer. They had made an arrangement to return the barrow to Covent Garden, where their uncle James worked. Fortunately, they didn't have far to go, as Covent Garden was closer to Drury Lane than where they lived previously so they returned sooner than Agnes expected.

"You did find him, didn't you", she queried as they entered. They assured her that, yes they had found him, returned the barrow and gave him the beer without incident. With the naivety of youth Charlie said, "We didn't want to stay and I don't like him very much. Is there any lunch?"

Agnes had been concentrating on organising her brood and getting their possessions to their new home in one piece so food was the last thing she had considered. Charlie's question reminded her that she had not taken lunch into account and looking around at her children she

realised that they were all hungry, then her own stomach rumbled, reminding her that she like all of them hadn't eaten since before daybreak.

Before she could reply, William announced that they were going to the nearest chophouse and it was to be his treat. Agnes looked aghast and started to demure, muttering about the expense but William insisted. "I've thought about this, Ma, and my mind is made up. So come, lets wash our hands and go!" And so they did, although Agnes made them wash their faces as well.

Agnes didn't like the look of the nearest chophouse so they walked a little further to the next one that met with her approval. The steamy interior smelt of roasted meat and boiled cabbage, the steam caused rivulets of condensation to run down the inside of the window. There was freshly strewn sawdust on the floor and one empty table remained. The table had no individual seats but long benches either side. The family quickly slid along the benches either side of the table. Agnes insisted that they arrange themselves so that the younger children sat next to an older brother or sister and Junie sat nearest to her. Agnes was determined that her family behave well and not disgrace themselves even though their experience of eating out was minimal. Once seated, they looked around. The place was busy and noisy, a typical establishment of the area. Most of the customers were single men, some concentrating on eating but many others sharing exuberant conversations with their neighbour, some even turning around and conversing with those on the table behind them. There were few families like their own but, reflected Agnes, not everyone has such a hardworking and generous son as her eldest. She was

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looking at him as she thought this and a small smile crossed her face but was quickly hidden when her thoughts were disturbed by a slatternly woman come to take their order.

“We will each have the cheapest meal you have,” Agnes said before the women had a chance to speak and it was said with such determination that neither the waitress nor William protested. “And tea, we would all like tea,” Agnes added. The waitress eyed her and told her that tea and bread and butter were included in the cost of each meal. She then indicated that they should help themselves to mugs, small plates and cutlery from selection on the table against the far wall. Iris and Rosie got up to collect the necessary items for each family member. Iris also remembered the salt and pepper. Agnes inspected the cutlery and plates for cleanliness and allowed that they might be used while conveying that she didn’t think the place quite came up to her standard.

Soon they each had a steaming plate in front of them and generous slabs of bread with which to mop up gravy. There was no question that every scrap on the plate would be eaten and then every plate wiped clean with some of the bread. The thought of any food being thrown away ensured that even the bread and butter plate was left empty. The boys always could be relied on to have one more empty corner that needed filling.

At last every plate was empty and there was no more tea to be drunk.

“Thank you, William”, said Agnes. The other children chorused their thanks.

“Back to work, I think, even though I could do with a nap after all that lunch.” Charlie pointed out that the bed wasn’t put together, let alone made.

“That’s why we had better get going,” replied Agnes pushing herself erect. Her children echoed her actions and they trooped out, leaving William to settle up. Agnes explained that it was impolite to watch while someone paid the bill, “You girls had better remember that,” she urged them. Iris and Rosie looked at each other wondering who would buy them meals. Rosie was about to ask her mother what she meant when Iris said “she doesn’t mean now, you idiot! Ma meant in the future.” As Rosie loudly protested to all and sundry that she wasn’t an idiot, Agnes led them back to the new home and the further unpacking and sorting that faced them.

Having decided that the bedroom was the first room to concentrate on, William and Charlie were called upon to rebuild the bed. This was achieved in less time than it had taken to take the bed apart and in no time at all the mattress was placed upon the bed frame. Rosie and Junie were left in charge of making it.

Meanwhile, Agnes investigated the range. To get a fire started she used some of the newspaper that Iris had removed when she had unwrapped crockery then carefully placed small pieces of coal that Charlie had bought for her on top of the burning paper. As those embers caught, she carefully put larger pieces of coal on top then not wanting to overwhelm the embryo fire with coal she closed the door.

Just as she was asking Charlie to fill the coal scuttle, she heard Rosie wailing in another room.

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Thinking that some accident had befallen her daughter, Agnes quickly went in search of her. She found Rosie standing in the middle of the room, sobbing her heart out. Rosie flung her arms around Agnes and held on tight. In between sobs she told her mother that Iris had told her this was their bedroom but there was no bed so they would have to sleep on the floor. She wasn't upset about having to sleep on the floor but she didn't want to sleep without her mother. Agnes reassured Rosie that she wouldn't be sleeping without her mother and it hadn't been decided whose room it was. "It is not healthy to sleep on the floor so until we get another bed, we will continue to all sleep next door," Agnes asserted loudly enough to be heard in the next room.

Dusk came early as it was January and the clear day meant that there would probably be a frost that night. As if in confirmation the temperature outside was rapidly falling. They had been so busy that they didn't realise how cold it was but with most of the unpacking done, the bed made and their meagre sticks of furniture arranged in the living area Agnes realised that the range was only just making a difference to the temperature in the room. She asked Charlie to put more coal in the furnace and looked around for the candles. Iris, seeing what her mother was doing, said, "What is this for?" As she spoke, she pulled the string hanging from a lamp in the ceiling. "Hang on!" exclaimed William. "You have just turned the gas on. Better let it clear away before we use a naked flame to light the lamp. Don't want an explosion before we have spent one night here. He took charge of lighting the lamp. Light flooded the room. They gasped in surprise! "To

have this much light...,” said Agnes in amazement and was dimly aware that there were other exclamations from those in the room. Charlie darted to the bedroom and before his mother had finished shouting at him not to touch with his coal blackened hands had lit the light in there. Agnes caught him and dragged him back to the kitchen sink. “Wash your hands before you touch anything else,” she admonished. “William, turn that light off in the bedroom,” she ordered. “I don’t want to waste the gas. Don’t know how much it is going to cost. Iris, put the kettle on. I think we all need a cup of tea.”

After they had had their tea and Agnes had stopped Rosie from turning on and off the tap in the kitchen “But, Ma, I just wanted to check that the water was there” she announced that there would be some new rules.

“As this place is new, I want it to look as good for as long as possible. That means that I don’t want grubby handprints over everything. Rosie, as you don’t have to carry water anymore, you will be responsible for making sure that the walls are clean every week.

The kettle will be kept on the range, half on, half off the small hot plate and it will also be your job to see that it doesn’t boil dry.” Rosie knew from her mother’s tone of voice that it would be useless to argue. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Iris smirk. However, Rosie was more than happy with the arrangement. As she didn’t have to haul the family’s water needs everyday, washing walls once a week was a small price to pay.

“Charlie, you will be responsible for filling the coal scuttle and keeping the fire in the range alight. I had better find out which coal man delivers here. We don’t want to run out in the coldest part of the year.

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No one is to be the last to leave a room and leave the light on. I don't want to pay for lighting a room that no one is using. And there is to be no idle turning on and off of taps," Agnes looked hard to the younger children as she spoke.

"We will still have to clean the toilet as we did at Craven Buildings, but at least it is indoors and only those of us on this floor will use it."

The sound of banging, tramping of feet, shouted instructions, children wailing and sporadic cursing continued for the next few hours as other families settled in to their respective flats. There had been a couple of knocks on the door from less organised neighbours to borrow tea or a cup of milk or sugar. Agnes gave freely if she could knowing that there may be a time when she had to rely on the generosity of her neighbours.

They all sat down to a scratch supper, bits and pieces that had been left over from the previous evening. However, because of the magnitude of the meals at lunchtime, no one felt the lack. As Iris said, it was very satisfying to be sitting down to a meal in their new home with everything done. But as Agnes pointed out some things had to be put off because of the move, like the weekly wash for instance. It had to be done but not tonight, she said quickly. "Rosie, you will have to start heating the copper when you get home from school tomorrow. Charlie, you will help her light the fire, Iris and I will help you finish off when we get home. You may have to get George and Junie to help with the mangle." Agnes looked around the room. She noticed with satisfaction that there was a clothes hoist hauled up close to the ceiling to one side of the range. "Look," she said

pointing to it, “we will be able to use that to dry the washing.”

Agnes saw Junie and George nodding off. “With this gas light there is no telling what the time is. Right, you two, time for bed. Rosie, Charlie, follow them, you both look tired as well. I think we can all do with an early night. Quickly, get ready for bed and I will come and read to you.” With a remarkable lack of protest, the younger children scampered off to get ready for bed.

The family were all tucked up in bed and asleep early for the first night in the new home. It had been a long day for them all and despite the new surroundings, they all slept peacefully, even Rosie who was notorious in the family for talking during her sleep. She had been especially vocal in the week or so leading up to the move. Many a night the rest of the family had been awoken by her muttering and shouting. Most of what she said was unintelligible but enough was discernible for Agnes to think that it was upcoming change that set off the nocturnal chattering. She hoped that once they had all settled in, Rosie would become less restless during the night so they could all once more have a good nights sleep.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hendon 1937

“Ahh, the theatre, Charlie. Gave you your first job, didn’t it,” said Rosie. “And you helped me get the dresser job for Mrs Drummond. I’ve always believed that Ma wouldn’t have allowed me to take the job if you hadn’t helped. Is that right , Ma?”

“No, Rosie, it was nothing to do with me,” said Charlie, hastily. He turned to face Agnes, “Honestly, Ma, Rosie has it wrong.”

“That’s alright son,” said Agnes. “Your name made it easier for me to get in through the stage door to see Mrs Drummond but following our talk together, I have always known that Rosie got the job on her own merit. That nice young man that you had the music hall act with, Charlie, what was his name ... Peter, wasn’t it?”

Charlie nodded in confirmation

“He was a lovely young man. What became of him?”

“He died in the War, Ma,” Rosie said softly with an anxious glance at Charlie.

“Are you sure, Rosie? I thought that was Peter, Iris’ fiancée. He died in the War.”

“Yes, my Peter died but Charlie’s Peter died as well. Oh, so many young men died in the War and the ‘flu after it. No, no, I’m ok to talk about him, Rosie. I’m very happy with my Hubert and I wouldn’t have had Peter,” Iris said with a certain amount of satisfaction in her voice.

Charlie was sitting with his head lowered and his hands between his thighs. George got up and patted him on the shoulder.

“You alright, Charlie?”

Charlie looked up and raised a hand to pat the hand that still grasped his shoulder.

“I’m fine, George, don’t worry. I was just thinking about the fun Peter and I had. Oh, we had some laughs together, including some I never told you about, Ma,” he said with a smile.

“I’m sure you did, m’boy. And I am glad you saw fit not to tell me. I’ve had enough grey hairs because of you boys over the years, don’t need anymore.

Mind you, William, you have caused me the least worry, even when you decided to buy the business from Mr Goldschmidt.”

William raised an eyebrow in query. “Didn’t know you had that much faith in me, Ma”

“I have always had faith in you, son. And you had the good sense to marry Elaine,” she turned and smiled fondly at her daughter-in-law.

“Don’t think I would have made a success of the business like I have if it wasn’t for Elaine. And you as well, Junie and George,” he added hurriedly.

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“Oh, William! I am sure I wouldn’t have such responsibility if I wasn’t working for you,” exclaimed Junie.

“And I wouldn’t have the van to drive,” added George. “I really like that van.”

Their mother smiled benignly around the table. “I am so proud of the way we all rallied together to help William get the deposit to approach Mr Goldschmidt to buy the business.”

“Too true, Ma. I couldn’t have done it without the help of all of you. I have never and will never forget what you did,” his voice shaking slightly with emotion.

“Hmmm. We might have helped you get a start, but it was your hard work and vision that built the business, and don’t you forget it. I’m not sure that anyone other than Elaine maybe, had your confidence to open the shop in Leicester Square,” said his mother with a certain amount of asperity as she glanced at Iris.

William caught the glance and replied, “I think I need someone to express their doubts in my ideas; if only to make me look at the idea again. Closing the kiosk and taking space in Selfridges is an example. I wouldn’t have closed the kiosk if you were still willing to work there, Ma. But when you wanted to retire, it was time to look at the business again. Then the opportunity to open in Selfridges came up and I just felt that the time was right to make a change. I had a feeling for a while that women were more comfortable with shopping in a department store and that they were becoming bigger buyers. Guess it is something to do with emancipation, eh Junie.” He grinned at his sister who grinned back.

“Glad to see you have finally realised the truth of what I have been saying for a couple of years.”

William looked thoughtfully at her.

“What are you thinking now?”

“I’m not sure ... It’s just a thought but I may be too removed from the customers. Might have to think about doing a day working at the counter of all the shops. Well, now is not the time to talk about it. Remind me to talk it over with you during our weekly meeting, Junie. Any more tea in the pot?”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Drury Lane 1906

There was not a great deal of adjustment necessary now that they had moved. Most of their immediate neighbours had moved at the same time and had been relocated in the same building. There was the range to get used to, Agnes swore it was burning more coal than the fire at their old place used to. However, no one else complained as the rooms were much warmer and although the children were not aware, the lack of condensation was much better for their health.

Now that Junie was going to school, Agnes' fears about the authorities taking her children from her were very much eased. However, they were replaced by fear about the temptations of the area.

She had run into Mrs Shaw on the landing as she was coming home from work a few days after they had completed their move and had accepted an invitation to have a cup of tea.

“Don't get me wrong, I am grateful to the Council for allowing us to rent a better place than we left behind,”

Mrs Shaw nodded in agreement. “But I wish it was in a better area. I worry about my girls coming home from school or work, with the theatre so close.”

“I know what you mean,” Mrs Shaw replied. “You never know who they might bump into or what they may see. Their heads can be turned so easily at their age. You are lucky that you have the older boys to keep an eye on them.”

Agnes remembered that a panicked horse had killed Mrs Shaw’s eldest child, a boy, a few years ago. She felt sorry for Mrs Shaw and knew she was lucky to have William and Charlie to help keep her girls safe. However, she was a realist and knew that her girls were prettier than Mrs Shaw’s and therefore, she believed, were more at risk from being inveigled into prostitution.

Their talk turned to happier topics. While Mrs Shaw gossiped about the neighbouring families, Agnes had the idea to ask her to keep her ears open for anyone who had a bed to sell.

“Naturally, I wouldn’t want to benefit from someone else’s misfortune, so I am willing to pay a fair price. And a spotters fee to you, of course,” Agnes added, as though it was an after thought. She had heard that Mrs Shaw liked to use her contacts and knowledge of the families that lived in the building to make a little money to ease her family’s way through life. At least Mrs Shaw was fair and didn’t take advantage of a sellers need for quick money and force the price down; unlike some Agnes had heard about.

As she walked across the hall to her flat, she heard the sound of the piano being played accompanied by singing

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and laughter. She recognised Charlie's voice but not that of the other male voice.

She opened the door and stepped into the room. Charlie was seated at the piano but broke off playing as he became aware that she had entered. Next to him on the seat was a fair haired lad who scrambled to his feet at her entrance. He had bright blue eyes, a snub nose covered in freckles.

"Hello Ma," said Charlie by way of greeting. "This is Peter, who has moved here too. He has asked me to go into business with him. After school, of course," he added hastily as he watched his mother's reaction to his words.

Agnes took her time removing her hat and coat, using the time to think. She moved towards the range, "Like a cup of tea, boys? Have a cup of tea and tell me about this business you are proposing, Peter"

She handed cups and saucers to Charlie who dutifully laid them out on the table. Agnes busied herself making the tea and because she knew boys of their age were always hungry, cutting thick slabs of bread on top of which she spread a thin layer of dripping.

She saw out of the corner of her eye, Peter open his mouth to speak but Charlie gave him a quick nudge in the ribs with his elbow and Peter thought better of speaking.

When they were seated around the table and he was passed the plate containing the bread he thanked Agnes. She thought he looked half staved and indicated that the boys finish what was on the plate between them.

"Now, tell me about your business that you want Charlie to join."

Between mouthfuls of bread the boys told her of Peter's plan. When Peter faltered or wasn't clear enough Charlie added details.

Eventually, as the boys ran out of steam, Agnes spoke, "What you are saying, Peter, is that you have the concession outside the Theatre opposite to sweep the streets clean of droppings from the horses pulling the fine carriages that belong to the theatre goers. If Charlie and you form a partnership you think you will earn more tips because of the patter and singing you have planned together. You will share the tips and after paying for the site will split the remaining money 50:50. Have I got the gist of the idea?"

The boys looked at each other then at her, "Yes," they chorused together. Peter added "We have to sweep every evening from 7pm until about 8.30pm and then from about 10.30pm until all have gone home; and Saturday afternoon, of course for the matinee. We have Sundays off," he added as an afterthought.

Agnes looked at the two expectant faces. "What do you think, Ma? Can I join Peter? I will give you half of what I make and the rest will go towards piano lessons. What do you say? Can I?" Charlie beseeched her.

"I've just come from Mrs Shaw's; her son was killed by a panicked horse when he was doing something similar. It can be dangerous." The faces of the boys fell and they opened their mouths to protest but Agnes held up her hand to stop them. "Yes, it can be dangerous but I trust you to be careful and look out for each other. There's no denying that a little bit extra will come in useful, but I will see if there is enough in what you give me, Charlie, to cover the piano lessons. You will need whatever else to

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cover the extra shoes you will need. And I don't want to see your schooling suffer. If you get a bad report at the end of term, I will put a stop to this venture. Now then, young Peter," she asked as the boys jumped up and started to caper in joy, "I want to meet your parents, or Mother at least, so give me your address."

Peter glanced at Charlie and after getting his assurance that she wouldn't let him join until she had met Peter's mother, gave his address with obvious reluctance.

"As it is not far," Agnes announced, "I will quickly visit now, before supper. Tell Iris where I have gone when she comes home," she instructed as she pulled on her hat and coat.

Agnes was correct; it wasn't far. The next landing in fact but the flat faced the opposite way to theirs and the contrast between the living conditions of Peter's family and hers made how they lived look like they were rich.

The door was opened to Agnes' knock by a young, snotty nosed child who was barely dressed in a loose fitting shift and bare feet, even though it was the middle of winter. Agnes thought that the child's unseasonal clothing probably accounted for her runny nose but kept her thoughts from showing on her face as she entered the flat. The first thing she noticed was that there was barely a stick of furniture in the room, then that it was very cold. A slatternly looking woman was slumped in the only chair, a bottle of spirits by her side on the bare floorboards.

"Who are you?" demanded the woman, whose slurred speech indicated to Agnes how she had been spending the afternoon. This was confirmed when she lifted the bottle to her lips and took a hearty swig. Wiping her lips with

the back of her hand, she offered the bottle to Agnes, saying that it was too keep out the cold. Agnes refused, “No thank you. Are you the mother of Peter?” she enquired.

“What’s it to you if I am? What ‘e done? And who’s askin’ ? ” The alcohol was obviously making her belligerent. She shouted at the child who was starting to whimper.

Agnes was beginning to get angry at the obvious neglect of the child and started to wish she had never come, but she was there so she mentally squared her shoulders and stated her business. It was clear that Peter hadn’t told his mother much of what he was doing so Agnes kept the details brief. “I just wanted to meet Peter’s family to let you know that I supported their attempts to make money by sweeping the street outside the Theatre.”

“Who do you think you are, coming here with your ladi-dah ways? Our Pete doesn’t need your approval.” Her voice started out slurred but rapidly became incomprehensible as Agnes hurriedly left.

When she got back home, she invited Peter to stay to supper. “I think it might be a good idea if you both come back here between working, I don’t want you neglecting your schoolwork and I will be able to see that you aren’t.”

When Agnes spoke firmly, Charlie knew not to argue further. Again digging Peter in the ribs to forestall any comment that might be made, Charlie agreed with her. “When are you boys thinking of starting?” she enquired. Peter answered that now that Charlie had her permission, they were thinking of beginning tonight. Agnes didn’t comment but kept her admiration at Peters entrepreneurship to herself.

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Later that night she told Iris some of her feelings. After describing Peter's home and his mother, she said "I can understand why he wouldn't tell his mother much of what he is doing. I could see that she was only thinking of the extra money he might make in terms of what more spirits it would buy. It makes me so angry when I see poor little children like that one, who are neglected through no fault of their own. It fair makes my blood boil. So I think that we may be seeing more of Peter of an evening. No wonder the poor boy looks half starved." Iris began to protest that there was barely enough food to feed them all, let alone another mouth but her mother silenced her. "There is never enough food with growing boys in the house, but we have sufficient. If I have to buy an extra loaf of bread now and then, well we can afford that. Never let it be said that mine or any friend of my children starves for want of a slice or two of bread." Iris heard the finality in her mothers voice and knew her mind was made up so that further argument was useless, but while she knew the futility of further argument it didn't mean that she liked the situation. She lay awake while the others gently snored around her and thought how she could change her mothers decision.

The boys worked well together. The family were entertained every night while the audience were in the theatre as the boys practised their songs or worked at a comedy routine to entertain the line of people waiting to take their places to watch that night's performance. As their experience and confidence grew so did their tips until they realised that they were earning more from

passing the hat around the queue than they made sweeping the street.

Agnes made sure that there was always enough food to feed Peter without anyone else feeling they were going short. Not that he seemed to gain any weight, Agnes concluding one evening as she watched them work from the window that he was one of those naturally skinny people, he would probably always be on the thin side all his life even though he ate as much as Charlie or William. Even Iris was won over, although it took a while but soon she was laughing with the rest of the family over some of their routines.

Charlie and Peter sought out William to ask his advice, Charlie having boasted to Peter about William's business acumen. William advised them to give up the sweeping part of their enterprise. "You are earning much more from entertaining the theatre crowds than you are getting from tips for keeping the streets clean. I have a feeling that the new motor cars will begin to outnumber horse drawn carriages so the future in street sweeping may be limited. There seems to be more motorcars on the streets during the day. Someone said in the tobacconist that there will be a garage selling petrol in the new road soon. So if you boys are making more money by entertainment you should give up the sweeping. Besides," he said to Charlie "it will make Ma happy if you do. She thinks street sweeping is a dangerous job."

"I dunno," Charlie said. "Some of our audiences are mighty fearsome!"

Agnes was heartened to know that they had decided to give up the street sweeping side of their business. She was

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even more pleased to hear of their success at entertaining the pre theatre crowds. She resolved to save a farthing a week until she had enough to treat the family to an evening at the music hall. She and Charley had gone a couple of times years ago when they were courting and had really enjoyed themselves. There had been so many acts that if one wasn't funny or the singing wasn't very good, the next act was beginning before much offence could be taken. She thought the older members of the family deserved a break from their usual routine of work and drudgery so it was with a sense of anticipation that she approached Mrs Shaw a few months later to ask if she would mind the younger children while the rest of the family went out one evening to the music hall.

They agreed a date then Agnes' next task was to persuade Charlie and Peter that they take an evening off. She knew they would be reluctant because they would lose an evening's tips but William advised that she suggest it would make sense if they thought of the trip as seeing-what-they-could-learn-from-the-competition. When the idea was put to them in that way, they readily agreed and got quite excited about the expedition.

Peter was inclined to argue that they all went to one of the music halls in the East End, like the one in Tower Hamlets. He pointed out that the Halls there attracted the superior acts because of their popularity with the local population. Agnes let his argument run its course but remained adamant that they go the Palladium. Peter gave up arguing, after all he was aware that Agnes didn't have to include him in the party. Later he asked Agnes why she wouldn't go the halls in the East End. Agnes explained

that those who lived ‘up the West’ would never visit the East End “that is where the really poor people are.”

When the appointed day arrived, the older members of the family were careful to keep their excitement under control but George and Junie, aware of the change in routine and told they would be left with Mrs Shaw, were disappointed to be left behind.

They took an omnibus to the Palladium, the most popular music hall theatre in the West End of London. Rosie, who hadn’t travelled by omnibus before, stared at everyone and everything. Iris commented that it was a good job they didn’t have far to travel as Rosie’s eyes were as round as saucers and it would be unfortunate if an ill-wind blew and they stayed that way. Rosie was too busy absorbing all the sights, colour and movement. The pre-theatre crowd; the sheer number of people walking the pavement, most who looked as though they knew where they were going; some just loitering at street corners. Rosie didn’t hear the comment by her sister, she was so absorbed in people watching.

After five stops it was time to get off, they had arrived at Leicester Square. Agnes made sure that Rosie wasn’t left behind in her enchantment with the novelty of omnibus travel. The little party made its way to the Palladium and joined the queue for the cheapest seats in the theatre, up in the ‘gods’. During the wait for entrance, a song-and-dance man and a magician entertained the queue. Charlie and Peter were not impressed by the magic tricks and refused to allow Agnes to put any money in the hat passed around at the close of his act. However, she could

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see that the song-and-dance man impressed them. A couple of times during his act, they whispered to each other and both watched him intently for the duration. Again, Charlie did not allow his mother to put any money in the hat but both he and Peter had obviously talked about what they should do beforehand and Charlie casually threw in a florin. Later Charlie whispered to his mother that after a talk with William, the boys decided that anything put into the hat should be counted as a business expense.

Having gained entrance to the theatre, they began the long climb up the stairs to their seats. The boys and Rosie were impressed that their seats were so high up and they could see practically everything and everyone in the theatre.

So she could keep an eye on her, Agnes made sure that Rosie sat to one side of her, and Iris the other. She made sure that William was seated next to Iris so there was no possibility of a stranger sitting himself next to her. With Charlie and Peter next to Rosie, Agnes was assured that her girls would be safe and not be accosted by strange men. She then permitted herself a modicum of relaxation, as much as she could with an excited nine year old seated next to her.

They hadn't been seated long when the boxes either side of the stage began to fill with men and women in furs and jewels. Both sexes waved to friends and bowed to acquaintances in the stalls. Rosie was watching them and in response to a question Agnes began to say that the occupants of the boxes were there in part because they wanted to be seen when Rosie's attention was distracted by the gradual dimming of the lights.

As act followed act in quick succession even Agnes was distracted from her vigilance. She forgot her worries about money, her children, her job, especially during one of the comic acts. If she had been told before about the act she would have thought it too risqué, especially for the younger children but seated in the theatre she had no opportunity to object. Glancing either side of her, she noticed that Iris seemed to get the double entendres but Rosie looked bemused. Satisfied that the young girl still had some measure of innocence, she saw that Charlie and Peter were sniggering at the jokes. She sighed and momentarily felt sorry for herself. Why couldn't Charley be there to share the burden of bringing up the children? Then she mentally shook herself and remembered that Charley had not been much help in the years before he died. Due to his drinking, he had been a hindrance rather than a help. Anyway, Agnes reminded herself, feeling sorry for yourself didn't get anything done. With that she resolutely turned her attention back to the stage and willed herself to enjoy the rest of the show.

On the way back home in the omnibus, William and Iris talked quietly together about which acts they preferred. Rosie, practically falling asleep, leaned against the comforting warmth of her mother and Charlie and Peter excitedly discussed ideas they had come up with following their experiences during the evening. Their youthful energy and enthusiasm provoked disapproving stares from some of their fellow passengers or weary smiles from others. Agnes felt compelled to restrain them before they thought of trying out some of their ideas on the captive audience. However, before she could say

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anything, William had stretched over the seat and laid a constraining arm upon his brother's shoulder. He leaned over and whispered a few words in Charlie's ear then sat back in his seat. Charlie turned bright red and became silent even in the face of Peter's promptings. By the time Peter gave up trying to get a response from Charlie, it was their stop. William lifted his sleepy sister, Rosie, from besides his mother and carried her off the omnibus. Instead of fully waking her, he decided to carry her back to their home, the heat of his body protecting her from the cold of the night.

In the days and weeks that followed, the trip to the music hall was deemed a success. Charlie and Peter worked on their repartee and songs incorporating some of the ideas they had picked up from watching the acts on the stage. They also added some of the newer songs to their repertoire. Charlie picked out the tune on their piano, often Peter made up new verses and tried them out on the family, fine-tuning them before taking the songs to the street. Both boys thanked William for encouraging them to give up the street sweeping and for persuading them to go to the music hall for the evening. In their eyes William's reputation as having a brain for business was enhanced. William, Iris and Agnes appreciated the time away from the ever-present drudgery of their existence. The escape offered by a few hours in a darkened theatre watching the entertainment was a greatly appreciated luxury in their otherwise impoverished existence.

Unknown to her mother, Rosie began to spend a fair proportion of her time watching the lane that led to the stage door of the Drury Lane Theatre opposite from the bedroom window. If Agnes had known the daydreams of

her young daughter, she would have been concerned because Agnes, like most of the world at that time, thought acting was one step away from prostitution.

Following the success of the first trip to the music hall, William or Charlie arranged a subsequent visit every couple of months. It was a welcome break, although the youngest two children, George and Junie did not appreciate being excluded from the activity. Agnes considered staying behind with them and allowing William and Iris to take Charlie, Peter and Rosie but William and Iris wouldn't hear of it. Peter was also included in the party because Charlie wouldn't hear of leaving him behind. In Charlie's opinion the first visit had been so beneficial to their act Peter had to be with him so they experienced the acts together.

Apart from the trips to the music hall the life of the Thomas family followed an established pattern. Agnes, William and Iris worked most of the days of the week, church and Sunday school took up a good proportion of their Sunday. The labour intensive activity of washing and ironing took up most of the remaining leisure time of Agnes, Iris and Rosie. However, as she grew older, Junie was called upon to lend a hand, helping Rosie to turn the mangle or make sure the contents of the copper were kept submerged in the boiling water. Although she lacked the experience and strength of the older girls, Junie's help shortened the time they all spent on the chores.

One evening when the smaller children were in bed, Agnes was sitting in their one comfortable chair struggling

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to read the book she was holding and not fall asleep when she was fully roused by a knock on the door.

She struggled to her feet and moved quickly to open the door before the caller felt it necessary to bang on the door again and surely wake the sleeping children. Agnes gestured sharply at Rosie who had been daydreaming while looking out of the window at the theatre opposite, to remain where she was.

She reached the door and flung it open just as the caller had raised his fist to bang on the door again. She recognised him as her brother, William.

“Get your hat and coat, Aggie,” he said. “Ma has been taken bad and she is not expected to last long.”

Turning without thinking she told Rosie to mind the children and to tell the others when they got in that she had gone to sit with her mother while she grabbed her hat and coat. Then she left with her brother.

“Wait for me, Will. I can’t walk as fast as you,” she cried out as she hurried through the pre-theatre crowds, pushing and shoving people in her haste. Her brother stopped and waited for her. When she caught up with him, she tucked her arm through his.

“Sorry, Aggie. I was told to fetch you as quickly as possible so that you would be able to say goodbye before she goes.”

“She has been bad before and is still with us,” said Agnes.

“It’s not the same this time,” was all her brother said and she was unable to get much more out of him so they hurried on in silence.

When they arrived, Agnes breathless from the fast walk, could see that it was not like the last time. Her mother appeared shrunken and aged, her thin, wrinkled hands stuck out of the voluminous sleeves of her nightgown and her arms were laid at her side on the outside of the bedclothes. She appeared to be asleep but a thin line of drool had escaped from the corner of her mouth, the track it made lay glistening in the lamplight as it made its way down her chin. One of her sisters gently wiped it away with a piece of rag.

It appeared as though her mother had stopped breathing but as Agnes thought that, her mother drew a shallow, gasping breath.

“How long has she been like this,” she whispered. Her sister, Betty, answered in a similarly low tone, “Susan found her slumped over the table about two hours ago. We sent William for you as soon as we could. There seems no point in calling the Doctor, I don’t think anyone can do anything for her. Her breathing is getting slower and more irregular. I’m glad you were able to come before she passes away. Bert, has gone for the priest.” Agnes looked at her sister, who shrugged. “I know, I know. He is unlikely to come out to the likes of us but Bert needed something to do.”

Betty sighed and Agnes knew what she meant. Of all of her brothers and sisters, Bert was the one who seemed to love his mother most and who defended their mother from their father during his frequent drunken rages.

Another ragged breath escaped from their mother’s lips.

“I hope he returns soon,” murmured Betty. “I don’t think it will be long now.”

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Almost as she finished speaking, they could hear the sound of hobnail boots outside the door. The door was flung open and their brother burst into the room, shattering the quiet that had previously existed. Striding over to the bed, he flung himself on his knees, took his mother's frail hand between his large and weather beaten hands.

"He wouldn't come, that b.... priest." He was openly sobbing as he clasped his mothers hand. "He refused to come."

Agnes moved around so she could put a hand on his shoulder, small comfort but it was the best she could do.

"Bert, Ma is slipping away, don't let the last thing she hears is the sound of your sobs," she said in an effort to quieten him. Bert's sobs eased but tears still rolled down his cheeks.

From the bed came the sound they recognised, their mother's last breath. Her children gathered around the bed reacted in time-honoured ways; the women covered their faces in their aprons and their brothers sank to their knees, clasped their hands together and bowed their heads. They remained like that for some time, occupied with their own thoughts until Betty moved first. She went over to the kettle and began making a pot of tea. She softly spoke to her eldest brother, William. "We need to start laying out the body, will you men go and have a drink or something to give us time to do what we have to do."

William gathered his brothers and they trooped off, making sure that Bert didn't look or go back.

Betty poured tea for Agnes, Susan and herself, then refilled the kettle so the water would be hot when it came time to wash their mother's body.

The three women worked together to strip then wash the body, remake the bed with fresh linen and dress her in a clean nightgown. They arranged her in the bed, her long grey hair falling either side of her face, her arms outside the covers but straight down her sides.

When they had finished and regarding the body of their mother they remarked how peaceful she looked now that she had departed this life. Just then, Agnes heard the church clock chime the hour, 6 am.

“My goodness, is that the time! I must go and get the children ready for school.”

She hastened away; back to Drury Lane to rouse her family from sleep she greatly envied them, feeling the loss of her night’s sleep.

Yesterday she had a busy day planned for today. It was near the end of the month and she and Mr Dickson usually sat down and went through the month’s accounts before Mr Dickson paid them. Agnes had planned to visit the butcher, Mr Jones as she hadn’t been very happy with some of the meat he had sent recently. She wanted to see him before the quality deteriorated to the extent that she had no option but to send it back. That was in addition to the normally hectic hours in the kitchen preparing lunch and dinner. Having no sleep the night before was not going to help at all!

When she entered the kitchen, Maud had her hands in the sink, preparing the potatoes. Hearing Agnes enter, she turned and offered to make the tea, she also suggested that Agnes “looked all in” and suggested that she sit for five

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minutes while she drank her tea. Agnes briefly explained that her mother had died and she had been up all night so perhaps she could sit for five minutes. Maud had become very competent during the few years since Agnes began working at the Lamb & Flag. So trusted had Maud become that Agnes felt relaxed enough to entrust the days cooking to her and promptly fell asleep in the chair.

Maud let her sleep. When Mr Dickson came looking for Agnes who hadn't appeared at the appointed time, Maud told the publican that she had had no sleep as her mother had died overnight. "She is just having forty winks, sir. I have everything in hand for lunch. I'm sorry she missed your meeting." As Maud moved to wake her, Mr Dickson stopped her. "No, let her sleep a little longer. I can see her tomorrow. When did you say the funeral was?"

"Sure I don't know, sir. Don't think she said. "

"Well, no matter. I am sure Mrs Thomas will let me know and I am sure she will tell that you can cope if she has to take some time off."

Maud dropped a curtsey but Mr Dickson had already turned and left the kitchen. Maud looked at Agnes and decided to let her sleep. Mrs Thomas has been good to me, she thought, and I can do most of the necessary on my own. I will wake her later.

So it was that just before the lunchtime rush started, Maud woke Agnes who was ashamed to discover that she had slept through her appointment with their employer. Maud assured her that Mr Dickson had not wanted her woken, "He even asked if I knew when the funeral would

be,” she said. Agnes had to confess that she didn’t know but assumed it would be in a day or so. She sipped the reviving tea that Maud had thoughtfully made for her as she listened to Maud’s progress report. At the end of it she thanked Maud for letting her sleep, “as there is no denying that I needed the rest but I really should have been woken when Mr Dickson came.” Maud opened her mouth to say that he had prevented her from rousing the sleeping woman but was distracted by the start of the lunchtime rush. Both women moved around the kitchen and each other with practised ease, the length of time they had worked together made for greater efficiency. Each had their tasks to do that meant they could serve the meals without time wasting. With the orders coming thick and fast there was no time for further conversation.

At the end of the rush, as was their custom, Maud made tea and they both sat down to have a break. Because of their habit of constant tasting and as much as because they worked with food, both women were not in the habit of eating lunch either at the before or after the rush.

Agnes had taught Maud that one of the necessary cooking jobs was to taste the dishes during preparation and when they were cooked. She had said that it was essential to check to see if more salt or pepper was needed as the dish was finished but it was also useful to taste during the preparation to ensure that it would have the desired taste. “There is no point in cooking something when you don’t know how it is going to turn out. You must have an idea in your head how you want the finished dish to taste. Even something as simple as Toad-In-The-Hole must be made with good sausages, the batter must be risen and crisp; that means it must be properly made.

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Gravy is as important or more important than the vegetables as it covers the food on the plate. Bad lumpy gravy detracts from the rest of the food. Cooking is hard work and it is not worth wasting time on bad ingredients.”

Reflecting on the conversation that took place sometime ago reminded Agnes that she needed to see the butcher. She resolved to see him on the way home and said as much to Maud.

“I don’t like his new delivery boy, much. I don’t trust him. The quality of the meat seems to have gone down since he started and he is often late. Well, later than John used to be, anyway.” Agnes had been aware that Maud had an interest in the former delivery boy but didn’t realise that he had been replaced. She filed the information away to mention to Mr Jones a little later.

As Agnes hurried to see the butcher she reflected that it was perhaps better that she had missed her appointment with Mr Dickson. It might be more effective to have a chat with Mr Jones and leave Mr Dickson for later if the problem was not resolved.

Mr Jones welcomed Agnes with his usual good humour. He was surprised to see her and said as much. He invited her behind the counter, into the back room to have a cup of tea. Agnes settled herself and began to explain the reason for her visit. As she told the butcher about the declining quality of their order she could see that he was genuinely surprised. Knowing that he was naturally garrulous, Agnes pressed on before he could expound too much and told him that not only was the meat declining in quality but the order was arriving later on the morning. “In fact,” she said in closing, “if it arrives much later, I will

have to send it back as I will have been forced to source the meat from elsewhere in order to get it cooked in time for lunch. This is not something I want to do as you have been supplying the Lamb & Flag for years and Mr Dickson has been very happy with what you have supplied in the past. That is why I came to see you today to see what the problem is and whether we can resolve it before Mr Dickson gets involved.”

“What you have told me, Mrs Thomas, comes as a complete surprise. I am grateful you came to see me before talking to Mr Dickson. I can’t understand why you have found such a change in quality. I have been using the same stall at Smithfield for years and no one has complained until recently. Come to think of it, another long time client has cancelled their regular order; I got the letter informing me today. I am at a loss to explain it.”

Agnes sensed he was genuinely perplexed. “There is also the matter of the order arriving later in the morning,” she reminded him. “Maud, the kitchen maid, informs me that you have a new delivery boy and that the problems seem to have started shortly after he did.” She rose from her chair, “I really must go. I only popped in to let you know what is happening so perhaps I can leave the matter with you. I hope it will be resolved soon. I am seeing Mr Dickson after lunch tomorrow and will let him know that we have discussed the matter and that a solution will be found soon.”

Mr Jones scrambled to his feet while assuring her of his desire to find the answer as soon as possible, if not before.

“I hope to see you when I bring your order myself tomorrow morning. Thank you for bringing your

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concerns to my attention. I can assure you that I will look into the matter.”

Agnes left the shop with his assurances ringing in her ears. On the walk home she thought about the changes that had happened since the new delivery boy started. Mr Jones had mentioned that the new delivery boy was his nephew; Agnes wondered whether he was selling orders destined for the Lamb & Flag, and other customers, and substituting meat of a lesser quality. That would account for the decline in quality and the lateness of delivery. She wondered what Mr Jones would do to resolve the matter and was glad she didn't have to make the decision herself. Mind you, she reflected, none of her children would dare to mount such a deception; they had too much respect for business.

When she mentioned the incident to William later in the day he agreed with her that the nephew probably was responsible for the declining quality of the meat for the reasons that Agnes surmised. He was duly appalled that Mr Jones' nephew would do such a thing to his uncle's business.

“How could he abuse the trust of his uncle in that way?” he exclaimed.

Agnes's heart swelled with pride at her eldest son's defence of the butchers business. At least her children knew right from wrong and were trustworthy. Not that any relative of theirs had a business but she could be assured that if any of her children were to be offered a job by a relative, they would behave honourably.

Before her talk to William she had gathered all the children together and told them that their grandmother had died overnight. Although the news was unexpected,

no one was very upset and George got quite excited about the possibility of missing half a days schooling. His sudden yelp and glower at Iris made Agnes suspect that Iris had kicked him under the table to make him show a little respect. Secretly she could hardly blame him for relishing the prospect of missing school for half a day. Agnes was aware that as George was a bit 'slow' he did not really enjoy school. She even admitted to herself that they rarely saw her mother, their grandmother, so it was not unreasonable for him to see her death in terms of how it would affect his life. However, she agreed with Iris, proper respect should be shown.

Later that evening she received a message that her mother's funeral was to be held the day after tomorrow and she was to contribute to the funeral feast. She had expected to contribute something but she was racking her brains as to how to afford it. She was not going to use the money she set aside from William's contribution to the household expenses and even with the money she and Iris bought in she only just made ends meet. Agnes sighed and decided to go to bed; she was too tired to think about it.

The next day saw Agnes arriving at the Lamb & Flag at her usual time. She was just directing Maud to put the kettle on so they could have a cup of tea before starting the lunch preparations when there was a knock on the kitchen door. Opening the door revealed Mr Jones the butcher grasping the delivery basket. Agnes indicated that he should enter and pressed a cup of tea on him.

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“Thank you, Mrs Thomas,” he said as he sank into the proffered chair. “Don’t mind if I do. It’s been a long time since I was a delivery boy and I had forgotten how much cycling and walking was involved. I’m quite puffed and a cup of tea is just what I need. Its very kind of you,” he went on “considering the trouble you have been put to by that no good son of my sister. Yes, I confronted him in front of his mother about my unhappy customers and he confessed that he had been selling my good meat to a friend who substituted inferior meat. She gave him a good what for I can tell you but I can’t keep him on. And although I promised to deliver your order today, I am a delivery boy short for tomorrow.” Out of the corner of her eye, Agnes saw Maud open her mouth as if to say something but she closed it again as though she had thought better of it. Agnes felt she owed the girl a favour for letting her sleep yesterday so told Maud that she wanted her to get some more milk and could she go now. Maud needed no second urging and quickly left pulling on her coat as she went.

He pulled a package from his capacious pocket. “Now we are alone, Mrs Thomas, I would like you to have this as a token of my appreciation of our conversation yesterday.”

Agnes declined the package saying that she had only done her duty and that Mr Dickson as owner of the public house should be the recipient of Mr Jones’ generosity.

“No, Mrs Thomas”, the butcher corrected her. “Of all my delivery customers, you were the only one to tell me what was going on. The Lamb & Flag isn’t my only long

standing customer defrauded by my nephew. It has been a real eye opener doing the deliveries this morning, I can tell you. I reckon it is thanks to you that I still have a business and because of the work I have done this morning it won't take that long for me to regain my customers trust. It was you who came to see me yesterday, not Mr Dickson so I want you to accept this as a small token of my appreciation. Thank you for the tea, I am much revived but must finish my deliveries. I can only hope I find someone reliable soon."

Agnes saw him out and secretly thought that he would be getting a visit from his former delivery boy before the day was out if Maud had anything to do with it. She unwrapped the package that Mr Jones left behind and smiled as she revealed the contents; a generous quantity of chuck steak and several lamb kidneys. Now, if she could buy a pint of oysters on the way home she would make special steak and kidney pies tonight. If there were no oysters available, then she would make ordinary steak and kidney pies. She started the preparations for cooking lunch, much relieved that she could now afford a decent contribution for the funeral feast. As she might have thought, but didn't, maybe honesty was its own reward but a little acknowledgement is always gratefully received.

Maud soon returned and started helping Agnes. Agnes did not question her, waiting for the younger woman to tell her news in her own time, if at all. It was after all, no business of Agnes'. After a while Maud said, "I think we might get our old delivery boy tomorrow." Agnes looked at her. Maud continued, "I went to see John and told him that Mr Jones needed a reliable delivery boy. But that it

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was up to him to swallow his pride and go and ask Mr Jones for his job back. He was a bit reluctant at first;” Agnes raised an eyebrow, “but I persuaded John that Mr Jones had made a mistake in putting him off but he was unlikely to make the same mistake twice. It’s not as if John likes his current boss, he was always going on about how decent Mr Jones was to him.”

“Talking of tomorrow,” Agnes said, “I have my mother’s funeral to go to and I don’t think I will be able to come to work. I will tell Mr Dickson when I see him later but I thought I would tell you first. I know your younger sister is not working at the moment and thought you might like to see if she can do your job tomorrow. I will recommend to Mr Dickson that you be in charge so obviously you won’t be able to do the work of two people.” As she was speaking, Agnes had been concentrating on lining a dish with pastry that she was going to fill with a steak and mushroom stew she had made the day before so until she looked up at her Agnes was unaware of the effect her words had on Maud.

“Don’t stand there gawping, girl,” was Agnes’ immediate reaction. “I speak the truth. We have worked together long enough and you are perfectly capable of running the kitchen. True, you lack my touch with pastry but that can be got around. And just for practise, you can decide the meat and vegetable order this afternoon while I am seeing Mr Dickson. After all, you will be doing cooking so you may as well decide what will be on the menu.”

Good as her word, Agnes left the kitchen after lunch had been served to find Mr Dickson leaving Maud to work

on the orders. Agnes thought her presence would intimidate the girl and make it easier for her to ask for help. If she, Agnes, was not there then Maud was going to have to work things out for herself.

She tracked Mr Dickson down to the Snug bar where he was holding court with a couple of his cronies. Catching sight of Agnes he motioned her to wait. Rising he bid his companions farewell saying that he had to attend business matters. Walking out of the Snug he led Agnes upstairs to his quarters and invited her into the parlour. Indicating that she sit, he lowered the kettle over the fire saying "I understand that it is your custom to have a cup of tea after the lunch service is over. So please join me in a cup while we talk."

Agnes was surprised that he knew their habits but recognised that he must be aware of what is going on with his staff. Bearing that in mind she began by telling him about the declining quality of the meat. She told Mr Dickson the whole story as he made the tea, even going so far as to admit that she had gone to see the butcher. Mr Dickson gave her a sharp glance. "Well, I thought it the right thing to do, after all he had been supplying this pub for years so it seemed only fair that I tell him and see if he knows what is going on," Agnes said as she accepted her tea. "He delivered our order this morning and as it turns out his nephew had been substituting the meat for that of a lesser quality." In answer to his question, Agnes was able to assure Mr Dickson that the nephew had lost his position. Agnes then told her employer that Mr Jones had given her steak and kidney as a reward for going to see him. She offered the meat to him but Mr Dickson just laughed and told her that she should keep it. Agnes was

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secretly relieved as she didn't think she could afford the alternative. She went on, "Mr Jones has assured me that we shall not be inconvenienced again and I believe him. He is too concerned that his business will fail if he loses too many customers."

Mr Dickson agreed and he thanked her for taking the action she did. "It would be a shame if a supplier of such long standing had been dismissed without an opportunity to redeem the situation," he said. "I am pleased you went and had a talk to him first before finding another butcher to supply the pub."

Agnes then took the opportunity to tell her employer that her mother's funeral was on the morrow. Mr Dickson approved the arrangement she had put in place and after some further discussion relating to the kitchen, Agnes was dismissed and returned to Maud who had finished writing out her order. She asked Agnes to look over her work and see if she agreed with what Maud had planned. As she glanced over the planned menu for the next day, Agnes confirmed that Mr Dickson approved the arrangement she had made for tomorrow. She also approved the orders Maud had planned and suggested the girl drop them off on the way home.

Agnes returned home via Billingsgate Fish Market where she had successfully bought a pint of oysters. Just as she was arriving home she spied Rosie playing in the alley to the side and called her over, "I need you to help me make the filling for the pies for tomorrow. Come along." Rosie came as bid, even offering to carry the bags for her mother. Agnes gladly shared them with her.

Together they climbed the stairs that led to their flat, Rosie chattering about the events of her day.

After removing their coats and making her customary tea, Agnes and Rosie sat either side of the table. Rosie's responsibility was dicing the onions, carrots, parsnip and swede that were going to make the vegetable component of the pies. Agnes diced the meat and cleaned and chopped the kidneys. As they chopped and diced Agnes related the circumstances that led to Mr Jones giving her the meat. During the telling Rosie asked whether she told Mr Dickson about the gift. "Naturally," Agnes replied. "I felt it due to him so of course I told him. He laughed and told me to keep it. And very handy it is to have it. I'm not sure how we could have made the pies without it. As it is I am padding the meat with the vegetables but at least there will be enough to go around and they will be filling as well. It was also good luck that I went to Billingsgate when I did as I found a stall that was selling the oysters at half price to sell them all before closing.

Now, Mr Jones has left the suet on these kidneys. Shall we use it to make a suet pudding or hot water crust pastry for the pies?"

Rosie thought for a moment, although her hands kept working, "I think we should make a savoury suet pudding for supper so the boys won't eat so much meat or bread." Agnes laughed to see the serious expression on her daughter's face, "You are so right, lets fill them up! I would like you to make the pastry for the pies tonight. It can rest overnight. Mr Dickson has given me the day off so I can make them first thing in the morning. I will make the pudding now, then I will make the pie filling." While

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Agnes was acknowledged to make the best pastry in her family, she placed Rosie a close second, certainly Rosie made better pastry than her aunts and sister. Junie was still too young to try but Agnes didn't think she would come near to Rosie. Even now Junie's hands were too warm. Agnes reckoned that good pastry needed to be made with cold ingredients and cool hands with a light touch.

Good as her word, Agnes stoked the range as soon she got up the next morning to get the oven hot enough to cook and brown the pastry. The children went off to work or school with the aromatic scent of cooking in their nostrils. Breakfast was the usual bread and dripping but the smell of baking carried the promise of better fare later in the day – that is if they were able to get past the ravening hordes of cousins and adult aunts and uncles.

Agnes had arranged for Iris and William to meet the younger children at school at lunchtime and accompany them over the river to Southwark where the funeral was to be held. She herself would leave for Southwark as soon as the pies were cool enough to carry. There would be plenty to do to get the funeral repast prepared and the room organised. She owed it to her sisters to help get things ready, as they had helped her when Charley had died.

When she arrived at the building where her mother had lived, she met Betty and Sarah as they were arriving. "How is Bert coping?" asked Agnes of Betty.

"Not too well," came the reply. Betty added in a low tone "as you will see for yourself, shortly." Before Agnes had a chance to question her sister's statement, the door to her mother's flat was opened and she saw what Betty

meant for herself. The door opened to reveal Bert slumped in a chair, an overturned, empty bottle of spirits on the floor by the chair. The room stank of cheap gin and unwashed man. As Betty went to throw open the windows, even though the temperature outside was near freezing, Agnes put down her basket on the table and roughly shook her brother to rouse him. She was irritated at his weakness and annoyed at the extra work he would put his sisters to. “Bert, wake up,” she loudly said in his ear. “Wake up!” As Bert blearily opened his eyes and looked at her Agnes continued “Get up, have a wash and shave for goodness sake. Hurry up!” as she spoke she seized him by the ear and pulled. Bert had no option but to follow his ear, protesting as he did so. Agnes was deaf to his pleas. Retaining a good grip on his ear, she marched out of the room and down to the water pump at the rear of the building. Furiously pumping water with one hand, she forced Bert’s head under the stream of icy water until her hand was too numb to hold on to his ear. She let go and Bert pulled himself upright and out of the way of the water.

“My god, woman, what has got into you,” Bert got in first. “Aggie you have no right to treat your older brother like that. I am soaked through,” he added belligerently as he was now aware of the hangover competing with a headache from the cold water dousing he had just received.

Agnes was shaking with anger “How dare I, how dare I?” she spluttered. “How dare you use our mother’s death to go on a drunk. And in her flat! As if we haven’t got enough to do this morning, we have to clean up after you! You say you loved her, is this how you want her

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remembered?” She threw the words at him, anger at the injustice of life almost overwhelming her. “We have been slaving away looking after our families, preparing food for this afternoon and you ... you, get drunk!” Agnes was too far gone in her own grief and anger to see the effect her words were having on her elder brother. His own grief and shame about his recent actions took his fight away and he slumped down against the wall, tears of self-pity rolling down his cheeks.

Just then, Betty arrived. Sizing up the situation, she gave her sister a quick hug, “go back upstairs, Sarah has made us all a nice cup of tea. Go and have it before it gets cold. I will see to Bert.” She went over to Bert, putting a hand under his arm she hauled him to his feet, “come on Bert, lets finish the job of getting you presentable.” Agnes heard no more as she had gone inside.

Sarah took one look at her sister’s tear streaked face and handed her a cup of tea. Removing her hat and threadbare coat, Agnes took a sip of the reviving liquid and with a sigh asked what needed to be done. Sarah handed her a broom and indicated that the rug needed beating. “If you want to pretend it’s Bert, it might be more profitable than shouting at him. Yelling at him won’t change him, hasn’t done so yet. He takes after Pa, but without being so nasty with his fists,” she added. Meaning that like their father Bert met any emotional crisis through the bottle.

Agnes took the proffered broom, gathered up the rug and left the room without a word. She knew Sarah spoke the truth but she was still too angry to acknowledge the justice of what her sister had said. She went downstairs,

hung the rug over the washing line strung between the wall of the building and the privy and beat the dust from the rug with gusto, her rage giving her strength.

As the dust billowed from the rug, carried away by the thin, cold wind and she became warmed by her exertions, Agnes' rage left her. But, as she said to Betty later as they laid out the funeral feast, she still despised Bert for his weakness. Betty agreed with Agnes that Bert's behaviour had led to extra work for them but sided with Sarah's opinion that Bert was too like their father.

"That's the way he is, Aggie. You will just have to accept it."

The clatter made by hob nail boots on the stairs announced the arrival of the first group of the grandchildren. Soon more arrived and their mothers were engaged in making sure their offspring didn't sneak food from the table. They were given thick slices of bread topped with a scrape of dripping, provided by Agnes, and told to eat outside and not to get dirty. William and his cousins of similar age were despatched to the nearest pub for bottles of beer and instructions that if they saw their father or Uncle So-n-so they were to be told that they should make their way to the flat quickly. Iris was given various tasks to assist her aunts and Rosie and Charlie were dragooned into making sure that they and their cousins stayed out of the way of their elders while ensuring that they didn't get into trouble and remained clean and tidy at all times.

The gang of cousins were the first to burst into the flat with the news that a horse drawn hearse was pulling up

outside the building. "The horse has black feathers on its head and everything!" an excited youngster exclaimed to the assembled adults. Betty and Agnes exchanged glances, Betty's containing a warning to Agnes not to say anything. "Bert, did you order the hearse?" she queried. Bert was spared an answer by a knock on the door, which upon opening revealed a tall thin man, dressed in a black frock coat and holding a black trimmed top hat to his stomach. He inclined his head solemnly as he enquired as to whether this was the Clement's residence. At the appearance of the undertaker, there was a flurry of activity; coats and hats were found and donned. Iris was despatched to chase up any children that remained outside and to get them lined up and waiting behind the hearse. Meanwhile inside the undertaker nailed the lid on the coffin and Bert, his other two brothers and three brothers-in-law shouldered the coffin and once they had the weight of it bore it slowly out of the flat and, not without some difficulty, down the stairs and out to the waiting hearse.

Once the coffin was placed in the hearse, the immediate family lined up behind it, their children behind them and any friends or onlookers who wanted to join the procession tagged on at the end. They set off at a slow walking pace, following the hearse pulled by the black horse who had a knot of black ostrich feathers tucked in the headband of its bridle. Agnes, embarrassed by the ostentatiousness of the outfit glared at Bert's back as she followed him in procession. "I hope he doesn't expect me to help pay for this circus," was one thought that went through her head as they processed through the streets of Southwark on the way to the church. With a mental shake, she directed her thoughts to other topics.

After the internment they went back to their late mother's flat for the funeral feast. The sisters brewed tea, William opened bottles of beer for his uncles, older male cousins and others who preferred that form of refreshment. Iris and Betty's youngest daughter were the same age and found themselves guarding the food from inquisitive little hands. Iris enlisted Rosie and Charlie's help to hand around plates of food to their elders who had fallen into groups of similar mind where they comfortably exchanged news and family gossip. "Charlie," hissed Iris, "make sure the men get the pies first to soak up the beer. Get Uncle Bert to eat before he has any more to drink." Iris recognised a bad hangover without prompting from her mother or anyone else.

In time, when all had eaten and drunk their fill, even the young boys, families began to drift away until only Betty, her youngest daughter, Sarah, Agnes and Agnes' children remained. "Well, it looks like we have been left to clean up. Come on, many hands make light work." Left overs were given to the boys "come on eat up, duck" said Betty as she cleared a plate of sandwiches. "Can't waste good food. Charlie, George, finish these scraps of sandwiches." The boys hastened to oblige. Their Aunt Betty was not one to argue with being a bit quick with her hands if she thought boys needed any kind of painful encouragement towards better behaviour. Out of the corner of her eye Agnes caught Charlie wink at George and she wondered what that was about then, stifling a yawn, thought that she really didn't want to know. Betty was right, many hands did make light work and before too

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long they were calling goodbyes to their relatives as they departed into the frosty air on their way back home to the northern side of the river. On the way home, Agnes told Iris that they should expect a porter to turn up tomorrow. "I have inherited the linen and cloths belonging to my mother. Betty has the table and chairs and kindly offered to arrange for the material to be bought over if I share a portion of the portage costs. If he arrives before I am home from work, pay him from the money in the teapot on the mantle. I'm that weary I could sleep for a week. A good turn out but why Bert had to arrange for that hearse I will never know." They chatted about the day as the omnibus clattered northwards. Soon it was their stop and off they trooped. Iris, noticing that Junie was falling behind, hoisted her up on her hip as they trudged home.

Back to the normal routine the next day and when Agnes saw Maud when she arrived at work, her first concern was how the previous day had gone without her. Maud dismissed her query in a few words; she had had nothing that she couldn't cope with. Her real news, which she was bursting to tell; "Mr Jones has a new delivery boy!"

"Well, we thought that John might get his old job back, didn't we," Agnes was matter-of-fact. She didn't have any emotional energy left from her own life to involve herself in the emotional dramas of others.

"No, it is not John! That same day as I went to see him, he went to see Mr Jones to ask whether he could have his old job back. But Mr Jones wouldn't give it to him." Against her will, Agnes found herself being drawn into the drama and exclaimed about the news.

Maud continued, glad she had an appreciative audience, “that’s what John thought. Then Mr Jones offered him an apprenticeship! When John said he couldn’t afford to pay for it, Mr Jones said that he expected that and that Mr Jones would pay him delivery boy wages while he was an apprentice. Mr Jones told John that the offer was in appreciation of his honesty and other good qualities. What do you think of that?” It was obviously a rhetorical question as Maud went on, “John came to see me after he had seen Mr Jones and asked me to marry him. Well, we will get married when he has finished his apprenticeship. But we are engaged now!” Agnes could understand why Maud was bubbling over with excitement. It was a fine turnaround in her fortune. In the space of three days she had gone from having no hopes of marriage to receiving and accepting a proposal of marriage and one with fine prospects. Agnes was happy for her and said as much but directed Maud’s thoughts to the here and now as they had work to do.

Again life settled into its normal rhythm; the years past almost without Agnes registering them. Every so often she would get a shock as she suddenly became aware that the faces around the table were not the young children and toddlers but were becoming young men and women. William was now a young man of 24, still working for Mr Goldschmidt at the tobacconist; only now he was managing the new shop that Mr Goldschmidt opened in the Aldwych. He was also stepping out with a girl named Elaine. Agnes approved of her, she also approved that William was taking the relationship slowly, not rushing

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into marriage as she and Charley had done. Iris was also seeing a young man named Peter. He had been vetted by the boys and given grudging permission to step out with their sister but Charlie or more usually George accompanied them when they went out together. Iris didn't like to be chaperoned but George was dogged in carrying out his promise to William that he would stay with his sister and Peter to ensure that 'nothing happened'.

Charlie and his friend Peter still had the music hall sideline but they had progressed from playing to the waiting ticket holders outside to actually performing on stage. They had a nice line in repartee and with Charlie's piano playing and their singing; both boys had fine tenor voices, if not the most popular act on the bill, they were developing a name for themselves.

Rosie was 16 this year and having left school at 14 was working for a dressmaker. With only Junie and George left at school, times were not as hard as they were when she first started working at The Lamb & Flag nearly 10 years ago. Junie was doing very well at school. When younger she had won a prize for handwriting; the book 'Alice in Wonderland' by Lewis Carol. All the family were extremely proud of her achievement, especially Agnes who wanted all her children to be a success. As for George, well, everyone knew he was 'slow' but he did his best and that was all that Agnes asked of any of her children. She sometimes worried about what would become of him but was consoled by remembering that William and Iris had both assured her on several occasions that the family would watch over him.

So it was one blustery February evening when Agnes had battled her way home against a wind that seemed to blow through her; after the supper things had been cleared off the table that William bought Agnes a cup of tea. Junie, who was sitting at the table sucking a pencil while she thought about her homework was encouraged by her brother to do her homework elsewhere. She joined her sister, Rosie, at the window overlooking the theatre without too much fuss. Agnes, wondering what William wanted to say supposed that he had asked Elaine to marry him and was about to tell her the good news. She composed herself to express the required felicitations. Agnes thought that William had probably waited long enough to ask her, he was a manager of a shop now; a better position than any of her family, or Charley's family for that matter, aspired to. Such was her expectation that his actual words took somewhat longer to sink in.

"You are thinking of what!" she exclaimed. The girls over by the window turned and looked at them. William glowered at them and they quickly turned away.

"Not thinking, am going to but I need to raise the deposit."

"William, tell me what went on this afternoon from the beginning," said Agnes firmly.

"As I said before, Mr Goldschmidt wants to sell.

He called a bit later than usual this afternoon and suggested that I close early as he had something to discuss with me. That in itself was unusual enough for me to start thinking what he was going to say. I mean, he never closes early, since I have been working for him. I can't remember closing early!" William exclaimed.

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He went on, “anyway, I did as he said and shut up the shop. Then he produced a bottle of whiskey and told me to fetch two glasses and poured us each a drink. Well, you know he can take his time and beat around the bush but it is best not to hurry him. I just hoped he would get around to what he had to say quickly. Then he came out and told me that he wanted to sell up and would I like to buy the business from him. I tell you, I needed that drink. I had no idea that he was thinking of selling let alone moving back to Germany. I told him I hadn’t the money. He made me an offer; if I could raise 200 pounds as a deposit and then send a payment of 100 pounds to him every month until the asking price is paid the business was mine. The business makes enough money to cover the monthly instalment and I know I can run the business but where will I get the 200 pounds to pay Mr Goldschmidt the deposit?”

“If that is really what you want to do, I have 100 pounds for you. It’s your money,” Agnes explained quickly. “It is money you gave me that I have saved. I had thought of giving it to you when you got married but this is perhaps a better investment in your future.”

William was momentarily speechless. “Ma, I had no idea you were doing this,” he blurted. “That money was given to you, to make things easier for you.”

“Aren’t you glad I saved it instead. You are now halfway to getting the deposit. What did you tell Mr Goldschmidt?”

“I told him I would talk it over with you. He thought that was a good idea. I said I would let him know my answer after that.”

“You already know that you want to buy it,” Agnes replied. “Why did you tell him that?”

“I needed time to think. It was a really sudden, I had no inkling that he wanted to sell. Oh, I know he had had a niece from Germany stay with him. Apparently, he had had no contact with his family for years. Then he got a letter from his sister’s daughter telling him that his sister had died some ten years ago but she only managed to trace Mr Goldschmidt when her father died last year. So she came and stayed with him for a few weeks and she left last month”.

“He must be missing his family greatly to come to a decision to sell his business so quickly,” mused Agnes as Charlie burst noisily into the room, with George close on his heels.

“What’s for supper, Ma? George and me is hungry enough to eat a horse.”

Agnes rose from the table, “We have already eaten but there is mutton pie that I have been keeping warm for you. Is Peter coming?”

“No, I’m meeting him at the theatre. Hello, William. You are home early,” observed Charlie as his mother bustled around getting the brothers their supper.

“Mr Goldschmidt has offered to sell me his business. But I need to raise the deposit of 200 pounds.”

Charlie whistled through his teeth. “That’s a tidy sum. I have 30 pounds you can have, if it helps. You got anything, George? I’ve been teaching George the finer points of bottle collecting and he is learning well, aren’t you Georgie?”

George fumbled in his pockets and pulled out a few coppers; “You can have these, William”, he said.

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William smiled and said “Keep them for me, George. I might need them soon. Thanks, Charlie. I will take you up on your offer; but I will pay you back, I promise you. Just can’t say when. Mr Goldschmidt is asking for a deposit of 200 pounds and monthly instalments of 100 pounds until the business is paid for.

Ma, I’m going out to see Elaine, tell her about the offer and see what she has to say.” With that William left, pulling on his coat as he went, holding his hat in the other hand.

“Charlie, I didn’t know that you had saved 30 pounds,” said Agnes. “When did you start? How long have you been saving?”

“Bin a while now,” Charlie replied as he swallowed a mouthful of pie, mindful not to talk with his mouth full. Twenty, he may be but his mother was a stickler for eating proper and no elbows on the table!

“I have been putting a few coins by every week. Thought it might come in handy sometime,” he said, in his matter-of-fact manner.

“It is a good thing to help your brother. I’m proud of you. And I am proud of you, George,” Agnes added quickly. It was a fine gesture of George’s but all the family knew that he was unable to save; not that he was earning very much as he was still at school.

A while later Iris came home. Agnes bought her up to date with William’s news, not forgetting to tell her of Charlie’s contribution. Iris seemed thoughtful as she offered to make a pot of tea.

Iris had just poured the tea when William returned. He joined his mother and sisters at the table. Charlie had left for the music hall, taking George with him.

“What did Elaine say about your news,” his mother asked as Iris pushed a full cup of tea towards him. William removed a quarter bottle of whiskey from his jacket pocket and added a generous slug of the amber coloured liquid to the hot tea.

“I need this, it’s been a day ‘nd and half. Anyone else like a drop?” William left the bottle on the table.

“What did she say you asked, Ma? She only took me to her dad and told him that he should give me the money he had been saving for her dowry. Her dad said that he wasn’t giving any money away, Elaine argued with him and the upshot is that we are getting married next month. As we are now engaged, tomorrow her dad will give me the money that he has put aside for Elaine’s dowry. Ma, it’s 50 pounds. With that, the money you have saved for me and the money Charlie’s offered, I’ve got 180 pounds.” William sat there looking rather stunned as Agnes included a wife into the equation. “Are you sure you want to marry Elaine? You aren’t just doing it for the money?” Agnes was concerned that he knew what he was getting into.

“I was going to ask her to marry me, Ma; just not so soon. We had a brief talk about the business before we saw her father and she thought it an opportunity too good to miss as well. I never thought her father had so much money planned for her dowry. Can Elaine come to supper tomorrow night; I think we will have much to discuss,” he asked aware that he was understating the amount of planning they would have to do.

Iris, who had been quiet all evening, suddenly spoke up “I have some money saved that I will lend you. But it will have to be paid back,” she warned. In answer to the

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surprised look on her mother's face, she explained "I have been keeping a little money aside for when I marry. It's not much, only 10 pounds but you can borrow it if you need to."

Rosie added, "I have 5 pounds to lend you as well."

William looked thunderstruck. "I had no idea you girls had savings too," he said. "That's nearly the whole amount Mr Goldschmidt wants for the deposit."

"If you want to add 5 pounds from your wages this week instead of giving me any money you will have gathered the whole deposit this evening," said his mother.

"And got yourself a wife," added his eldest sister with a smile.

William added another slug of the spirit to his cup and raised it. "Thank you all," he said. "Long live the Thomas's!" he toasted them all before drinking. "The trouble with adding whiskey is that it cools the tea, any more in the pot?"

It had been a busy month reflected Agnes as she sat one evening simultaneously darning one of Charlie's socks and listening to George read haltingly from his schoolbook. Goodness knows, William and Elaine must have found it hectic with a wedding to organise and, more importantly, where they were going to live. Agnes had put her foot down. She had told William that there was no room for Elaine to move in here when they were married. "I'm not having Charlie and George sharing our room. Not with them the age they are."

William had looked puzzled.

“Oh, for heavens sake, William. You are dense sometimes. Ma means that you and Elaine must have a room to yourselves. For you to do that,” Iris felt compelled to spell out what Agnes had been content to hint at. “For you to do that,” she continued, “George and Charlie would have to move in with us girls and Ma. Surely you can see that it is not right?”

William had conceded the point, although to be fair to him, remembered Agnes, he had not asked if Elaine could move in with them after the wedding. She had broached the subject herself, just to remove any thought that William might have. As it was, at the last minute, Mr Goldschmidt had come to William’s rescue. The flat above the tobacconist on Kingsway had become vacant and William had persuaded Mr Goldschmidt that renting it to him made more sense as he would also be able to keep an eye on the shop after hours. He had even persuaded Mr Goldschmidt to reduce the rent in lieu of the extra service he would be performing!

When William told her of how he had bargained with Mr Goldschmidt Agnes was proud of his business acumen but concerned that his employer might be offended.

“Don’t worry about it, Ma.” William had said, “He expected me to bargain with him. I knew and he knew that I was always going to move there but the form had to be observed. Now all I have to worry about it getting a few sticks of furniture together.”

Agnes had left William and Elaine to solve that particular problem. She had told him that she didn’t expect anymore of his wages from him every week and expected that, sensible man that he was, he would make

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use of the money to put towards some furnishings. Agnes had asked Elaine if she wanted to take any of the linen that had been inherited from her mother but Elaine was a sensible girl as well and had been assembling a 'bottom drawer' for years. Beyond buying them a few bits and pieces for the kitchen from Berwick Street market, Agnes left the two young people to their own devices.

The wedding had been a quiet affair. They had used the Registry Office at Marylebone where over twenty five years ago Agnes and Charles had married. Present were William's immediate family, Elaine's family and Mr Goldschmidt who declined to come to the wedding breakfast afterwards. William said that he was pleased to be invited to the ceremony, though. It was probably a good thing that Mr Goldschmidt hadn't attended the party afterwards, Agnes thought. Elaine's father obviously shared the common prejudice against Jews. Agnes sighed over her darning. There had been a few incidents at the tobacconists recently and she was looking forward to the time when the shops would be owned by William and he could change the name of the proprietor to one that was less inflammatory.

Now William was wed, Iris was becoming more assertive. She had always been mindful of William's position as eldest but with him moved out of the household, Iris was manoeuvring to take his place. Agnes knew, but didn't want to involve herself, that she was pressuring William to repay her the money she lent him for the deposit on the business. Agnes was aware that Charlie had lent William more than Iris but was sanguine about when he was repaid. She had no doubt that William would work out a solution with Iris; not

necessarily the one she wanted but one she could live with non-the-less. That was not her only problem. Maud would soon be leaving her position at the Lamb & Flag for the very best of reasons, she was soon to be married to Jim, the ex-delivery boy now apprenticed to Mr Jones the butcher. While Agnes was happy for her, and Maud had suggested her younger sister as a replacement, the thought of training someone new was emotionally daunting. Agnes sighed again.

“Very good, George. Your reading is coming on.” Agnes encouraged her youngest son. He did seem to be making slow but steady progress. Just then, Rosie burst into the room looking as if she would burst.

She exclaimed “Ma, you have no idea what has happened! I have been offered a job as dresser at the Theatre and I start next week!”

Agnes contemplated the sock she was darning as she took in Rosie’s news.

“When did you apply for the job?” Agnes asked her daughter.

“Oh, I met an actress sometime ago when she came to have a dress made and she asked me to be her dresser this afternoon. Isn’t this exciting. She is such a nice person and so beautiful. Her husband is nice as well in a gruff sort of way.” Rosie prattled on, so full of her news that she wasn’t aware of her mother’s growing disapproval.

“No, Rosie, you can’t suddenly change jobs just because you have been offered one by an actress. Who is she? No better than she ought to be, I’ll be bound. You are a respectable girl and have will have no business working for the likes of ‘actresses’.”

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At her mother's words, the light went out of Rosie's eyes.

"Please, Ma. Mrs Drummond isn't like that. She's respectably married. Please, Ma." Rosie was nearly in tears now but Agnes would not relent.

Sometime later, when Charlie came home, Agnes was aware that he and Rosie had their heads together. Charlie had told her that Mrs Drummond was not that sort of actress but Agnes was adamant that Rosie would not change jobs.

The next day, just before five, when Agnes had been home from work for about a quarter of an hour and contemplating making a pot of tea, there was a knock on the door. Agnes opened it to find a well dressed woman standing in the outside. "Good afternoon, I am Mrs Drummond. I hope you are Mrs Thomas." She held out her hand, "Would you mind inviting me in, I would like to talk to you about Rosie." Agnes stepped aside to allow the other women to enter.

"Please sit at the table", she invited. "I was just about to make a pot of tea, will you join me?" Mrs Drummond nodded her assent as she removed her gloves, put them neatly in her hat and sat at the table as instructed. Agnes hid her nervousness in bustle as she made the tea. She was so flustered by the unexpected visitor that she forgot to use the best pot and realised she had made the tea in the everyday chipped brown earthenware pot as she placed it on the table.

"Lovely," exclaimed Mrs Drummond when she saw the pot. "I have one just like it at home. Nothing beats a cup poured from a well-used pot. I am sorry for the surprise

visit but I ran into Charlie last night and he told me that you had forbidden Rosie to take the job as my dresser. I admire your determination to look out for your children but I wanted to meet you and assure you that I only have the best of intentions for Rosie. She has a skill with a needle and a lovely natured girl, such a credit to you, Mrs Thomas. I offered her the job as my dresser because I like her. My old dresser is marrying and moving away, so I really am desperate to find someone soon. I can appreciate your concerns about Rosie being on the fringes of my profession but I can assure you that I will look out for her as if she was my own daughter.” Agnes sympathised with Mrs Drummond over the necessity to find a new dresser as her current one was getting married, a situation she herself was experiencing. Agnes was also finding it difficult to remain so steadfast in her opposition to Rosie’s change of career in the face of Mrs Drummond’s obvious gentility and charm. Mrs Drummond continued their conversation, “Of course, Charlie will also be able to keep an eye on her. Nothing much happens in the theatres around here that Charlie doesn’t get to hear about.” Mrs Drummond laughed, a melodious tinkle of amusement. “Charlie likes to know what is going on.”

They chatted on, the contrast between them forgotten as they talked about Agnes’ children; Mrs Drummond dressed in the latest fashion sharing tea with Agnes who was dressed in her stained and patched work clothes.

At length, Mrs Drummond drained her cup and got up to leave. “I won’t keep you any longer, Mrs Thomas. Thank you for the tea and for listening to me. I will leave it up to you now to do the best for Rosie. I am delighted

to have met the mother of Rose and Charlie.” With that she donned her hat and gloves and made her way to the door. Silently, Agnes let her out and closing the door sat again at the table and contemplated their recent conversation. She was annoyed that Rosie had gone behind her back to get Mrs Drummond to visit when Agnes had expressly forbidden the girl to enter her employ but waited until Rosie arrived home.

Rosie recognised the perfume that lingered in the room as soon as she entered.

“Did you ask Mrs Drummond to visit,” accused her mother as she closed the door.

“No, Ma. I haven’t seen her today. I had no idea she was going to visit you; honest.”

“It must have been that Charlie,” muttered her mother remembering their heads close together the night before. They must have cooked up something between them, she thought. In the face of Rosie’s persistent questioning all Agnes would only say was that she seemed to have charm and to just wait until Charlie came home.

When eventually Charlie did arrive home, Rosie had exhausted herself questioning her mother and was yawning in a chair. At the sound of the door handle turning she roused herself and rushed to see if it was her brother.

“Charlie,” something in their mother’s voice made Rosie stop mid-sentence and closing the door, Charlie went over to his mother.

“I had a visitor this afternoon. An unannounced visitor. Did you ask Mrs Drummond to call to persuade me to change my mind and allow Rosie to work for her.” Agnes’

anger made her spit the words out. "How dare you think of going behind my back."

Charlie paled slightly in the face of his mother's anger.

"I bumped into her yesterday morning just before lunch time and she told me that she had asked Rosie work for her. I said that I knew but didn't think you were going to let her. I didn't suggest that she visit you. She is pretty determined and used to getting her own way, she probably thought a visit was a good idea."

Charlie surreptitiously scrutinised his mothers face, "She is a nice person, got a strong will which she has had to have to get ahead as an actress with no funny business. Ma; Rosie has been smitten by the theatre bug since we moved here. Mrs Drummond is ok and will look out for her and her reputation will help protect Rosie. Maybe, if Rosie works for her and finds out that the theatre is not the glamorous world she thinks it is, she will outgrow the attraction."

Agnes humphed; somewhat reassured by Charlie's explanation of events and swayed by his argument but unwilling to let him and Rosie know that. She also didn't want them to know that she liked Mrs Drummond and admired the strength of the woman's character to get what she wanted in the charming way she had.

"Time for bed, Rosie," was all she said. "You have a job to go to in the morning."

On her way home from work the next day, Agnes passed the Stage Door of the Drury Lane Theatre. She paused and on impulse asked the elderly man at the Door if Mrs Drummond was in the theatre. On being told that she wasn't, Agnes went on her way, crossed over the road

and went home. But the impulse that caused her to stop at the Stage Door hadn't left her so she hunted around for a sheet of paper and a pen. Not finding a pen nor ink she settled on pencil, wrote a quick note, folded the paper over and addressed it to Mrs Drummond. She quickly went out of the flat and over the road and thrust the paper into the hand of the Stage Door porter. "Please see that Mrs Drummond gets this when she arrives," the doubt and anxiety about her action making her sound haughty. The porter was about to argue with her when Charlie, catching sight of his mother in the unexpected surroundings of the Stage Door, came to see what was going on.

"Hello, Ma," he said cheerily. "What are you doing here?"

Before Agnes had the chance to reply, the porter recognised Charlie. "Why didn't you say that you were Charlie's mother?" he asked. "I will see that Mrs Drummond gets the note as soon as she comes in."

Both Charlie and Agnes thanked the porter for doing his job. During the short walk home Charlie tried to discover the contents of the note but Agnes remained close lipped. "You will have to wait until I tell Rosie. It is about her future. Then she can tell you" was all she would say.

As soon as they arrived home, they met Rosie at the door.

"Ma has just dropped a letter for Mrs Drummond in at the Theatre. She won't say what it says until she tells you," Charlie said to Rosie as they entered the flat. "So ask her what it is about, there's a good girl."

"Ma?" queried Rosie.

“Make me a nice cup of tea, will you, duck I was run off my feet today and I need to sit down for a minute.”

Rosie, knowing that her mother would say nothing until she had the steaming cup in front of her hurried to do her bidding, her apprehension about what her mother could have written to Mrs Drummond causing the sensation of butterflies in her stomach. She hopped from one foot to another while waiting for the tea to brew.

“As Charlie told you I have written to Mrs Drummond,” began Agnes as Rosie placed the cup of tea in front of her. “In the letter I gave my permission for Rosie to work as her dresser.” Anything else Agnes was going to say was lost as Rosie squealed in delight and flung her arms around her mother’s neck.

“Oh, thank you, Ma” she eventually said when her delight lessened enough for her to speak.

Charlie went to the door, “Now I know what the letter said, I’m off to work,” he said. “Don’t leave me any supper, Ma. Peter and I will get something from the chop house during the interval.”

Agnes and Rosie chorused their goodbyes and added ‘break a leg’ the traditional theatre good luck wish.

“Now Rosie, you can help get supper ready then go and get George in.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Hendon 1937

“How’s Violet, Charlie,” asked Elaine. “And little Vi-Vi. Been ages since I have seen them. I know William sees her at the Leicester Square shop but he never brings home important news.” She grinned across the table at her husband. “He is more interested in giving me the business news than telling me how my sister-in-law and niece are getting on.”

“Now, now, Elaine, folks will be thinking that I am only interested in business if they listen to you,” remarked William.

Junie snorted in a very unladylike fashion and even Agnes look sceptical.

“What?”

“Well, brother and boss of mine, you do tend to concentrate on business to the exclusion of most other things. Even your membership of the Freemasons is related to business. Honestly, there are times when I am sorry for Elaine having to listen to you jabber away about the business when you are home of an evening.”

“Now, Junie,” demurred Elaine softly.

Junie, ignoring her sister-in-law, grinned at her brother, taking the sting out of her words. “William, if you weren’t so focused, you wouldn’t be the success you are and we wouldn’t have been the successes we are. We have all benefitted in some way from your business, Ma, me, George and Violet obviously but even Charlie here was able to live in the flat above the shop when he needed. I count you and Elaine as a team but I daresay she never saw herself bookkeeper to a burgeoning tobacco shop empire thirty years ago. It is your drive that made all this possible, I don’t mean this flat but I mean US,” she declared passionately.

William looked startled. “I hadn’t thought,” he began then paused, a thoughtful expression on his face. “No, no,” he said slowly. “It doesn’t come from me, you know. It’s you, Ma.” He leaned across the table and clasped her hand in both of his. “Always has been. You are the one who kept this family together by sheer hard work, especially when Dad died. It’s your example that spurred me on and made me determined to succeed. Then I met Elaine and I was damned if any child of mine would experience the same poverty. But whatever I have achieved, I wouldn’t have been able to do it without you.” He stopped, his voice clogged with emotion. Elaine quietly rose and put a hand on his shoulder. William released one hand from his mother’s grasp to cover his wife’s hand on his shoulder.

There was a pause then a clearing of throats and shuffling of feet as the siblings dealt with the unaccustomed emotional outburst.

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Agnes patted her eldest son's hand. "Thanks, son," she said quietly. "A life of poverty wasn't what I wanted for you either."

"William! How can you," Iris began indignantly.

"Hush, Iris. I know what he meant and haven't taken offence so there is no need for you to do so. Shall we have the radio on in the background while we wait for supper?"

Charlie got up and moved to the cabinet that dominated the room. The doors receded into the cabinet as he opened them revealing a large radio that hummed as he turned it on.

"Takes a while to warm up," Agnes advised him. "It will work as well without you hovering over it."

"Ma, is that the one I gave you? And it's still working! Do you remember the radio, Elaine. Gave it to Ma several years ago."

"That radio is one of my prized possessions, m'boy. I can still remember when you boys bought it over. When you decided to enrol Harry at that posh school near where Iris lives. You thought of me because you thought I needed company in the evening what with Rosie and Iris leaving to set up home with their new husbands and Junie hardly ever home. It's kept me company in the evening for years."

"I remember carrying it up the stairs. You were going to keep it if you wanted it or not because I wasn't going to carry it back down."

"Yes Charlie, I remember as well. How come you didn't help carry it out when we moved Ma here? Had to get Harry to help me," muttered George.

"Just the luck of the draw," Charlie assured him, "just the luck of the draw, old man."

George snorted.

“Now, now boys. That’s all water under the bridge. It was a lovely thing you did for me, helping William when he gave me the radio. Seen me through many a night, that has. Talking of which, it feels like it is getting late. Anyone like a bit o’ supper? Dare say I can rustle up something; anyone?”

“It’s all ...”

“Rosie & I ...”

Rosie and Iris spoke together then stopped. Rosie sprang to her feet and bustled out to the kitchen leaving Iris to remind Agnes that they had been with her all afternoon during which time they had prepared a meal, enough to feed everyone.

“Rosie has just gone to put the dumplings in the stew and put some lovely runner beans that Elaine bought from her garden on to cook. Won’t be longer than 20 minutes until we are all sitting down together, just like old times.” She reassured her mother with false cheerfulness then hurried out to the kitchen. Rosie was carefully placing the last of the dumplings in the stew so Iris started pulling the beans through the bean slicer turning them from wide, flat lengths of green bean to long, thin, strips of green vegetable.

“I’ve got the water on and put in a pinch of bi-carb to keep the beans green,” Rosie advised her sister. “Should be coming to the boil any second now.”

Charlie stuck his head around the kitchen door, “Time for me to get some beer?”

“If you are quick,” replied Iris. “We won’t wait for you,” she shouted at his retreating back.

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Elaine came in bearing the tea things on the tray which she replace with cutlery and condiments.

“Shall I make up some mustard? I didn’t think to bring any horseradish, although we have plenty. Honestly, I can’t get rid of it.”

Elaine quickly added water to the mustard powder that she had spooned into the blue glass lined bowl of the cruet set.

“Elaine? What do you think about Ma? She isn’t herself, is she. You see her as much as we do, Iris and me are worried.”

“It’s not like her to nap during the day and to forget what is being cooked for supper? Not like her at all. I agree with you both, she is not her usual self but I am not sure that’s enough to go to a doctor. I am also sure you have done the right thing in inviting everyone here. It’s just a feeling, isn’t it,” Elaine added.

Just then Junie came in, making the small kitchen even more crowded.

“I came in to see if there was anything I could do to help so William can’t start talking business. Ma is starting to drift into the past again. I can’t remember her talking so much about the past before. I am so pleased you have gathered us all together. I have to admit that I am getting more and more concerned about her.”

“Just what we were saying,” agreed Rosie. “I’m glad you agree with us, Junie. I think Iris and I called you all here on an instinct.”

“Well, as far as I am concerned, you did right. Now, what can I do?”

“Help me set the table, will you Junie. I expect we will be ready to eat very soon, is that right, Rosie?”

As Rosie turned to the stove and began lifting saucepan lids, Elaine and Junie left the kitchen.

Junie had just returned with the tray which Iris loaded with bread, butter and plates.

Rosie and Iris carrying a serving bowl each followed Junie into the other room.

There was a scramble of chairs being dragged into place so they could all sit down.

Each sat with a plate before them which they filled as the serving bowls were handed round. William cut generous slabs of bread, remarking as he did that dumplings were all well and good but bread was the thing when it came to soaking up gravy.

“If we are going to reminisce, then let’s remember something I can remember,” declared Junie. “Seeing us all gathered around the table like this, it reminds me of the Sunday lunch gatherings Ma introduced.”

“Yes,” said Elaine with a smile. “A trial by ordeal so prospective husbands or wives could meet the family.”

“If they survived that, you knew you were on to a good thing,” added William with a fond look at his wife.

“That and the interrogation by William and Charlie,” muttered Rosie.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Drury Lane 1919

Rosie bounced up to her and anxiously asked her if she could invite a friend to lunch on Sunday. Distracted and wanting to have a word with Junie before she went out Agnes replied in the affirmative before she had even thought about it or asked Rosie who it was.

Junie knew very little about the mysterious man that had been closeted with William for about fifteen minutes towards the end of the business day. "Why, what is wrong with him," asked Junie as she pulled on her coat.

"Nothing, nothing at all," replied Agnes. "Be good!"

Both girls gave their mother a quick peck on the cheek as they left in an excited whirl.

"You girls make me dizzy," she complained. "Where's Iris," Agnes called after them.

"Out with Hubert, we are on our way to meet them," Rosie shouted over her shoulder as she hurried after Junie who had already made it to the stairs.

Agnes was left in an empty flat, George had told her of his plans for the evening when he had delivered her order at the Kiosk some hours before.

She made herself a pot of tea and settled down in her chair with the intention of reading some more of her library book but her mind would not settle and questions nagged at her. Who was this friend Rosie wanted to invite for lunch? Was William's business really doing well? What did the enforcer want? Could William afford to pay and what would happen if he couldn't? With a sigh Agnes realised that she had read the same paragraph several times, her tea was getting stewed and cold and there was nothing she could do by worrying anyway. Ruthlessly, she ignored the questions her mind was throwing at her and set about concentrating on the written word in her chosen book in a determined fashion.

By the time the girls returned home from their evening out, Agnes was half asleep. Unable to corner Rosie there and then and she had to leave before Rosie was up so it was not until the evening that Agnes was able to question Rosie about who she was inviting to lunch on Sunday.

Rosie was a little defensive, "I told you about him a few weeks ago. He sells new cars at a place in Mayfair. I met him when he came with his mother to buy a frock. For his mother, not himself," Rosie added. "His name is Jim and I have seen him a few times when we have been out. The boys have met him, well Charlie and George," she amended. "He's ever so nice and I want you to meet him."

"Alright, alright. I suppose I had better invite William and Elaine so he can meet everyone at once."

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Rosie looked a bit daunted at this plan but didn't demur.

"I can drop into see Elaine on my way to work tomorrow," she offered. "Save you the trip."

Agnes solemnly thanked her daughter, managing not to smile at Rosie's eagerness to help her even though Agnes had only intended to send a note to Elaine with George the next morning.

"Is he serious about you? Are you serious about him?" That was the question that would affect Rosie the most.

"I think he is awfully handsome and I do enjoy his company," she replied. "He may be the one! Oh, Ma! I hope you like him. I hope William, Charlie and George approve of him," she muttered.

"Let's meet the poor man before begin to worry about the future," advised her mother.

"It will be another big family lunch as I expect Iris will invite Hubert. As he lives by himself and doesn't have much family I suspect that the lunches he has with us are the only home cooking he gets all week. I do like to feed young men, they are so appreciative and such hearty eaters."

Rosie knew her mother would be thinking about food for Sunday and that the interrogation was over for the time being, there was just the twin hurdles of the family lunch and her brothers to go.

Sunday came around and everyone arrived early to meet Rosie's young man. As soon as he arrived and the introductions were made, the menfolk cornered him and took Jim off to the pub to 'get out of the way of the

women'. Rosie knew it was to ask in his intentions and discover his background.

"He seems a well mannered young man," commented Agnes as she put the flowers Jim had given her when they were introduced.

"His manners are very good, Ma," said Junie from her seat at the table where she was peeling potatoes. "Can't see what he sees in Rosie thought. Ow! Ma, Rosie kicked me." Junie gathered up the potato peelings on to a double sheet of newspaper and grinned at Rosie. "Just a joke, sister."

Iris and Hubert entered the flat.

"Hubert, Iris' brothers have taken Jim to the pub. They asked me to tell you to join them."

Rosie said that they had things to discuss with Iris about her wedding dress and Junie added that it would be bad luck if Hubert found out or saw the dress before the wedding. Hubert didn't need much more encouragement to make himself scarce and join the rest of the men at the pub.

Iris took her place at the table and helped her sisters prepare the vegetables. Agnes had made the Yorkshire pudding batter and was letting it stand.

"Have you finished peeling those potatoes, Junie. I need to cook them for five minutes or so before I put them in the oven."

Before they were called up Charlie and William had bought their mother a coal-fired range. It had two ovens which meant that she could be much more versatile with her cooking. Her own family and the additional invited guests meant it was becoming more economical to cook a large roast for lunch on Sunday. Agnes removed the

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sirloin of beef from the hot oven and drained the fat from the roasting tin. She moved the beef onto a metal tray and placed it in the slow oven as the hot oven was needed to roast the potatoes and cook the Yorkshire pudding.

The potatoes, parboiled to Agnes' satisfaction, were drained and put back into the saucepan to be dried in the residual heat and shaken to rough them up a bit so that the rough edges would crisp up when roasted. Agnes always reckoned the King Edward potatoes made the the best roasters and mashers. Roasted crisp on the outside and meltingly soft inside; there was seldom any left over.

The potatoes in the oven, the Yorkshire pudding batter resting, soon to be used, only the cabbage to be boiled and the gravy made.

"Now what is this about a wedding dress," said Agnes as she joined her daughters at the table.

Rosie was about to answer when William, Elaine and Harry entered the flat. William, discovering that the men had escaped to the pub hurried after them. Elaine settled Harry with some building blocks to amuse him and joined her husband's female relatives around the table.

"I have found a lovely dress that I think would really suit you, Iris. It had been reduced because there is a small tear, in an inconspicuous place," Rosie added hastily. "I could easily repair it so no one would notice. It is silk crepe de chine. I could sew some beads on it if you like. At least, come and have a look tomorrow," she pleaded. Iris wasn't sure, silk crepe de chine sounded too expensive but the others persuaded her to just have a look. As Elaine sensibly pointed out, there was no harm in just looking.

Elaine offered to make the wedding cake if no one else was. “Nothing fancy, just a nice two tier fruit cake with white icing so you can keep the smaller tier for the christening of your first child.”

“Have you decided how many and who you will invite, Iris”

“Yes, Hubert and I have worked out a list, Junie. Because the wedding will take place on a Friday some of our friends won’t be able to attend as they will be working but we are inviting sixty. Ma, will you be able to make pies and sausage rolls as well as sandwiches.”

Agnes assured her that she could as William had allowed her to close the Kiosk so she could use the kitchens at The Lamb & Flag on Thursday.

Junie and Elaine offered to make the sandwiches on the morning of the wedding, much to Agnes’ relief as she thought they would dry out if made the day before even if they were wrapped in greaseproof paper.

Rosie volunteered to help Iris dress on the day so by the time Agnes called for the table to be laid for lunch, most of the wedding had been planned to Iris’ satisfaction. She was only unsure about the dress. Rosie had a good eye but her taste was more expensive than her sisters and Iris didn’t trust her to find something that would suit her deliberately modest means.

The men came back just as lunch was being readied for the table.

Rosie surreptitiously looked at Jim. Charlie intercepted that look and winked at her.

“Ma, we found out that Jim’s unit and maybe Jim himself was responsible for the observations of the enemy

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called for by our platoon during the war. He helped save our lives!”

“Well, that might be taking things too far,” murmured Jim modestly. “We were only doing our bit.”

Agnes said nothing but gave Jim’s plate an extra potato and slice of meat.

Rosie reasoned from this exchange that her brothers approved of Jim and she could continue to meet him but more openly. She only hoped that Jim felt the same way about her.

Agnes echoed her thoughts later as she made a pot of tea while Rosie and Junie were washing and drying up, Iris having been excused that particular chore because of the presence of her fiancée.

“Jim seems a nice fellow but he isn’t from our class. He appears to be a great deal posher than us. Rosie, you should be careful and not get carried away. I don’t want to see you hurt, child.”

“Oh, Ma. Don’t worry. He’s not like that. It’s not like I haven’t noticed myself, you know. He doesn’t talk about his family. I have tried to question him about it but he just clams up or changes the subject.”

“Well, just be careful. Your brothers seem to think that he is alright and I have always been able to trust them in the past. That war, that cursed war, has been responsible for too many changes, if you ask me,” she added with feeling. Then deliberately changing the subject, “do you really think that dress you mentioned will be right for Iris?”

“I think it will be perfect. White crepe-de-chine, long sleeves, round neck and the skirt should come to just above the ankle. You know, your Nottingham lace shawl

would look very well with it. If Iris approves, we will bring it home tomorrow so you can see it. Well, I will have to take it back to work the next day so that I can mend it. Some pearl beadwork would set it off a treat, make it really special. I hope she likes it.”

“I’d like to see it, too! Don’t forget me,” said Junie. “But if Iris wears your shawl, that would be the something borrowed.”

“And something old in one. The dress would be something new. All we would need is some thing blue,” giggled Rosie.

“Well, lets see what Iris thinks before you go making plans, young ladies.”

Rosie and Junie looked at each other and giggled some more.

Several months later Agnes had forgotten wondering who was to marry next before falling asleep on Iris’ wedding night. She was abruptly reminded when Rosie spoke to her about her wish to marry Jim in a few months time.

It was late September but a warm evening. The flat felt stifling from a combination of heat built up over several days and a lack of air; due in part because there was no breeze and Agnes was very conscientious about closing the windows before she left for work in the morning. She had spent what seemed a longer than usual day at work and her customers were more cranky than usual. Even her usual regular customers seemed out of sorts. Must be the heat, she had thought. No one expects late September to be warmer than July. We are having an Indian summer to beat all Indian summers one customer had remarked to

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her as she handed over his change. Agnes could not help but agree. She had lived in London all her life and could not remember as hot a late September as this.

“Mark my words,” another customer had dolefully remarked, “we will have a cold winter. I feel it in my bones.”

Agnes wasn't sure what exactly his bones were feeling but hers were unable to register anything other than that they were exhausted from the heat.

Agnes was sitting in her favourite chair after supper, soaking her feet in cool water in an attempt to seek relief from the heat.

Rosie came in earlier than Agnes expected. Agnes sat up in alarm when she caught the expression on her daughter's face.

“What's the matter, Rosie? Have you had a quarrel with Jim? Why are you home so early?”

“No! Nothing like that.”

Rosie came to sit on the floor by her mother, resting her head on her arms which in turn rested on her mother's knees. Rosie looked up at her.

“Ma, Jim has asked me to marry him,” she said in a small, awed voice. “He wants us to buy a house and everything.”

Agnes' heart skipped a beat. She liked Jim, he had come over several times since the Sunday Rosie had invited him to lunch to meet the family. He had taken to calling her ‘Mrs T’ which she liked although she tried not to let him know it. He was charming, even Iris gave him grudging admiration though she made it perfectly clear that Jim was not as perfect as her Hubert. However, Agnes was not sure that he was the right man for her

daughter. There was the class difference for a start that Agnes saw as a major stumbling block. She had raised the matter with Rosie a few weeks before. Rosie had taken offence at the inference and had come close to having an argument with her mother.

Rosie continued before Agnes had time to reply, “he has gone to see William. To formally ask for my hand in marriage. Say something, Ma.”

Agnes let out the breath she hadn’t realised she was holding.

“It’s bit bit sudden, isn’t it duck? Are you sure he is the one? I mean, you haven’t known him very long, have you?”

“I am sure he is the one, Ma.” Suddenly, Rosie drew back, “you don’t like him, do you. You don’t want to see me happy. I know Jim and I will be happy together.” Rose was almost wailing now. Hurriedly, Agnes tried to calm her down, “Rosie, I didn’t mean that you two shouldn’t get married, but you know I am doubtful because of his class. No, I don’t want to go over that ground again,” Agnes said firmly as she saw Rosie getting ready to argue. “I want you to be happy. Aren’t I allowed to express my doubts. It’s one thing to think you love him,” Agnes raised her hand. “No, hear me out, please. It is one thing to think you love him but it is quite another to still love him ten years later. You have seen it all around you as you have grown up.”

“Ma, he is the one for me. There is nothing you can say that will make me change my mind.”

Agnes sighed, “Very well, child. If your mind is made up, but remember you have made your bed, now you have to lie on it.”

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Rosie recognised this as a favourite saying of her mothers by which she meant that she, Rosie, would have to deal with the consequences of her decision to marry Jim alone. Rosie interpreted this as her mother acceding to her desire to marry Jim. One stream crossed, the next to come, she thought.

“We would like to have the wedding as soon as possible. It isn’t going to be very big, as big or smaller than Iris’. Jim doesn’t have many relatives to invite and I don’t want to invite all of ours.”

Rosie’s request rang all sorts of alarm bells in Agnes’ head. Why do they want to get married so quickly; is Rosie pregnant? She nearly blurted the question out so great and sudden was her anxiety. Instead, Agnes breathed in deeply, held the breath and then breathed out before reply.

“I cannot afford another wedding for the next twelve months, duck. I just don’t have the savings for another so soon. And it is no good you saying that you only want a small one, it will still cost money I haven’t got.”

Rosie pleaded, argued, even suggested that she approach William, offered to use her own savings but her mother would have none of it, she was adamant that Rosie was not going to have a quick wedding. She even asked Rosie if she was pregnant. Her indignant reply and sudden blush revealed to Agnes that she probably wasn’t but would like to try!

“I’m 26, Ma. I don’t want to be an old maid! You had three children by the time you were my age. It’s not fair!”

“Show me the piece of paper you got when you were born saying that life is fair. No, Rosie. You are not getting

married this year and that is final. Now, let me move my feet from this basin, they have been soaking long enough.”

Rosie knew from her mother’s tone of voice that there was nothing that would change her mind. She would have to tell Jim that their plans would have to wait and she did so want to go to France with him as he had promised. But her mother had made her decision and that was final. Rosie had spent her life under her mother’s roof and living to her mother’s rules which were not unreasonable, she had to admit. She knew well enough that her mother would have given them her blessing if Iris hadn’t got in first and Rosie could not begrudge her sister any happiness. Besides, the atmosphere in the flat was more agreeable now that Iris had moved to a new flat with Hubert; and there was more room in the bed! Especially welcome on a hot night like this one.

“I’ll make us a cup of tea, Ma. Is Junie back yet?”

Agnes knew the subject was now closed and she knew her daughter had accepted her decision. The offer of tea was a declaration that the argument was over.

“Thanks, duck. No, Junie isn’t” At that moment Junie walked in and flopped down on a chair.

“Oh, Rosie, if you are making tea, I would love some. You have no idea how hot I feel. Some the customers were so bad tempers today! You would think they were the only ones who were suffering. Poor Violet got a tongue lashing from one man today, and I won’t call him a gentleman because he isn’t, for a simple mistake in the change she gave him. That is one of the reasons I am late. William and I have been going over the books. Do you realise that the shop has been open for over six months! Trade is really much better than we expected;

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well, William would not have had to buy the van if they weren't good, I suppose." Junie paused to blow on her tea before taking a sip and resuming before Agnes and Rosie were able to utter a word.

"Anyway, as the figures were looking so good, I asked William if he would give Violet a payrise and he suggested I have a share of the profits! Oh and he is going to let the flat above the shop to Charlie."

Agnes did not know what to think. She didn't mind that Charlie was moving out of the family home. Truth was it was high time he had a place of his own. No, the part about Junie sharing in the profits of the Leicester Square shop had caught her attention.

"Junie, love, what do you mean when you say that William suggested that you take a share of the profits. You can't be earning more than your brothers, that isn't right."

"Ah! I am not sure William thought of that when he made the offer. Besides which, I don't even know what my brother's earn." Junie regarded her mother over the top of her teacup.

"Ma, are you saying that I shouldn't earn more than George even though I manage a shop and he does the deliveries?"

"No, that is not what I am saying. Oh drat! I'm hot and tired and I can't be putting up with these modern ideas from my daughters. I'm going to bed."

"What was all that about," enquired Junie as Agnes stumped off to bed.

"I had told her that Jim and I wanted to get married this year and we had just finished arguing about it when

you got home with your news. Well done, by the way. You have worked really hard.”

“Well done, yourself,” exclaimed Junie getting up and embracing her sister. “When is the happy day?” She looked suspiciously at her sister. “You’re not pregnant are you?”

“Why does everyone assume I am pregnant just because I want to get married. I am twenty six! It is time I got married. And no, I am not pregnant. Between you and the boys, Jim and I hardly have a moment together, let alone an opportunity to even try anything. And Ma doesn’t have the money for another wedding for twelve months at least,” she added bitterly. “Hey, Junie,” said Rosie as she fished around for a nearby magazine. “What do you think of that hairstyle. Bang up to the minute or what? Do you think it would suit me, would you like to come and have your hair cut with me?” The two sisters bent their heads together over the magazine. The picture was of a slim, elegant figure with her hair cut into a short bob that followed the contours of her head. The picture was in an advertisement for a Marcel Wave and presumably the wave in the models hair was an illustration of what the treatment could achieve.

“I have seen some of the clients after their hair was cut and styled like this,” said Rosie. “It seems very popular. I rather fancy the new look and short hair does seem much cooler and easier to look after.”

“Let’s do it, Rosie. When’s your next day off. Make the appointment for us both and I will take some time off. Violet knows enough by now to deal with all but the trickiest of orders.”

“You don’t think that Ma ...”

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“After what she had heard tonight? I think a haircut would be the least of her troubles. Besides which, hair will grow back. Don’t back out now, Rosie Thomas.”

Junie was right, new haircuts were the least of her mother’s problems. When they both arrived home a few evenings later Agnes took one look at them, commented that short hair could lead to head colds which could lead to other complications but if you girls want to suffer for fashion go ahead only don’t come running to me when you get a nasty cold.

Agnes went on “I can’t understand your brother sometimes. I went over to have a talk to him about you, Junie, and the offer he made to you. I explained that as a girl you cannot be earning more than your brothers. This war has changed the heads of you girls, thinking that you can do as well as a man! It isn’t right to take the job from a man, I don’t care what you say.”

Junie let Agnes have her say without arguing with her. In her view, there was no point. True, the war had shown women that they were more than capable of doing most of the jobs that men did. It was also true that most women relinquished any job that could be done by men when the war ended. Except, there were some things a woman could do as well if not better than a man, there were not enough men to take all the jobs because so many had been killed and the Spanish Flue had also taken it’s toll on the available workforce. And she had worked damned hard to make the Leicester Square shop work and deserved the reward that William had offered her, whether her mother agreed or not. The world her mother knew had changed and there was no going back. Thanks to her

eldest brother, Junie had found a job in which she excelled, she enjoyed the challenges of managing a shop and wasn't going to stop, her mother's view's notwithstanding. Junie also knew that should she resign or encourage William to employ a man to manage the shop, someone who was not family; she couldn't see one of her brother's taking on the task; her mother would be one of the first to deplore William's lack of family feeling.

Agnes didn't expect her children to argue with her, her word was law for as long as they lived under her roof. Having told Junie that she was not to earn more than her brothers that, as far as Agnes was concerned, was that. Junie did not like going behind her mother's back but she couldn't agree with her mother and refuse William's offer of a share of the profits of the shop. She had whispered her decision to speak to William about it to Rosie that night as they lay in bed with their mother snoring next to them.

"You know," whispered Rosie, "Ma doesn't want you to earn more than your brothers but you won't be. You can't earn more than William and he is your brother."

Junie looked at her sister in amazement. Rosie was the one who liked a good time, was interested in fashion, who Junie always thought, was fascinated by the less serious.

"I am not quite sure Ma meant that."

"It's what she said, remember. It also means that you can keep doing what you are doing and accept William's offer. She isn't to know unless you or William tell her and William doesn't have to find someone else to run the shop. You know, I don't think our mother likes or understands the way the world is changing. That is why she said those things this evening. I am sure that if she thought through

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the implications of what she said, she wouldn't have said them.

It reminds me of that time I overheard Grandma and her arguing. Grandma did not approve of something Ma was doing and told her so. Looking back, I don't think they knew I could hear, otherwise they would have changed the conversation”.

“I can hardly remember Grandma. Did Ma change like Grandma wanted?”

“No, no. She heard her out and continued to carry on as before. Like you are about to do.”

“Thanks, Rosie. Goodnight.”

Junie rolled over and was soon asleep but Rosie stayed awake going over in her mind their conversation and what she had just said.

Eventually, the Indian Summer broke and winter arrived with a vengeance. George, who had been inviting Sadie to Sunday lunch with a regularity that made Agnes think that a proposal was in the offing, announced one Sunday that he and Sadie were to marry. Sadie simpered, showed off her engagement ring and made pointed remarks to Junie and Rosie about shelves and old maids.

“I am beginning to really dislike Sadie,” said Junie to Rosie as they cleared away after that particular lunch.

“Do you think she really loves George? Or is she marrying him because he lets her get away with murder?”

“Or was he the only one to ask her,” replied Junie. “Sorry, that was a very catty remark but she really got under my skin today. As if marriage is the be all and end all.”

“Maybe she is jealous of you? You have brains, beauty, a good job and the respect of your family. I don’t know that much about her circumstances but ...”

Junie gave her sister a hug, “You are right. I have much to be thankful for.” Then lowering her voice, she asked, “How are things with Jim?”

“It’s tricky but we are happy. I went to see a doctor in my lunch hour yesterday. No, a lady doctor who talked about how not to have a baby. Oops here comes Ma, I will tell you more later. Just about ready to make the tea, Ma. Nearly finished, aren’t we Junie?”

“George and Sadie have gone for a walk,” said Agnes. “I’m not sure about that girl but if she looks after George, I’ll be happy for him. I didn’t like the way she was talking to you two girls over lunch. Rosie, are you still keen to marry Jim?”

Puzzled, not sure what her mother meant, Rosie replied that they were still keen to marry.

“Tell Jim that I suggest May or June. Old maids indeed. Hurry up with that tea, girls. I’m parched, always am when my dander is up. No, no, Rosie, you and Jim can thank me later - oh and you can thank Sadie as well. Hope I don’t regret it,” Agnes muttered as she moved over to her favourite chair by the fire and picked up her book.

“What, going out before you have had your tea, Rosie? I hope your lunch has had enough time to settle, don’t want to get indigestion before you have told your young man the news,” said Agnes as Rosie slammed the front door in her eagerness to be gone.

“Now, got anyone you want to marry, Junie love?”

Junie laughed, “There are enough weddings on the offing without me adding to them. And no, I don’t. Don’t

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worry, Ma, I won't let Sadie get to me again. I'm glad George has found someone to marry but I don't have to be best friends with her."

"Only you and Charlie left now. Goodness knows what he gets up to in his flat."

Junie sensed that her mother was angling for information so she answered truthfully. "He seems to live very quietly. Not that he is often home during the day but he sometimes has Mondays off. I hardly see him let alone hear anything from above when I am working. I do get very busy, Ma."

"I know, love. Don't worry, it's just that I miss having him live here. Mind you, come to think of it he wasn't here that often when he did live here, was he." Agnes sipped her tea.

"You are all grownup now, seems like only yesterday when you all were little. Even little Harry doesn't seem so little now he has started school. Iris looked well this afternoon, don't you think. Not so peaky. I didn't agree with that Doctor, telling Hubert to get her pregnant again as soon as he could. It's alright for men, having babies doesn't take much out of them." Junie could hear the bitterness in her mother's voice and didn't know what to say.

Agnes looked at her, "I love you all and don't regret having each and every one of you, remember that. But, it doesn't mean that I want the same for my girls. The world is changing and if women don't have to have so many babies, that is a change for the better."

Junie looked at her mother who had picked up her book and started reading. She was used to seeing smart women of all ages come into the shop and there was no denying

that her difficult life had left its mark on Agnes Thomas. However, thought Junie, Ma hasn't been cowed by her life. She is still a vigorous woman, not necessarily in her prime, rather on the downward descent. It was true that she looked more careworn than some of the wives of her customers but she looked happier, or more content. Yes, that was it, more content. Junie smiled and gave her mother a hug. Agnes looked up, startled.

"Might just go and see if I can find myself a husband," she laughed.

"Well, don't be too long, dear. Remember it is the start of the week tomorrow."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Hendon 1937

For a while the family were fully occupied with filling their plates, passing salt, pepper, bread and butter.

Agnes asked “How is the Kiosk going, William? I haven’t been there for a while. Who is working there? Are you filling in for me, Junie?”

William and Junie exchanged glances and William spoke.

“The kiosk’s been closed for a couple of years, Ma. I have opened a new shop in Selfridges, the department store.” He looked desperately at Junie who seeing the confusion on her mother’s face rose to the occasion.

“Ma, you, William and I had a chat a couple of years ago. You felt you were getting too old to work the long hours at the Kiosk. At the same time, William was thinking about selling cigarettes and tobacco in a department store and the Kiosk’s lease was coming up for renewal so the timing was perfect. Do you remember now?” Junie looked rather desperately at Iris and Rosie.

Agnes' face cleared. "Yes, I remember now. I really enjoyed running the Kiosk for you William and I was wondering what had happened to it. Junie," she snapped, "there is nothing wrong with my memory, I just forgot momentarily. No need for you to look to your older sisters, I'm fine."

Junie bent her head over her plate, studiously avoiding looking at her siblings who were also doing their best to avoid catching each other's eye.

Elaine cleared her throat and asked Charlie how was work at the museum. He told a long story about a how he was able to reunite a lost child with it's parent that morning so the awkward moment was glossed over.

"It was all the fault of that blasted war!" Their mother's outburst startled them. With all eyes upon her, Agnes went on, "The last war caused so many changes. William, you expanded your business, Iris met Hubert."

"and look where that ended up," muttered Charlie with a grin.

Agnes continued, pointedly ignoring the remark, "I don't suppose Charlie would have his job in the museum if the war hadn't happened. You girls," she looked around at her daughters, "getting ideas that you can do a man's work. Although, Iris and Rosie, you have seemed to have got over that idea. Junie, though ..."

Rosie hurriedly interrupted her, "when the children come along, that's what makes the difference. Can't expect a man to give up his job to feed the baby, can you." She giggled. "I don't think they have the patience. Anyway, Junie just hasn't met the right man to settle down with yet," she added while desperately imploring Junie with her eyes not to make a comment. Junie, catching her

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eye and divining Rosie's meaning gave a small shake of her head.

"I think the war bought opportunities in it's wake," ventured Elaine cautiously.

"Change is always difficult," said William. "And speaking personally, I would rather the war hadn't happened."

"Hear, hear," agreed Charlie.

"But it did. I suppose an opportunity like the Leicester Square building would have come along anyway but would I have been able to take advantage of it, that's the question," he said thoughtfully. Then gave a rueful smile and addressed his mother, "The past is past; no time to have regrets or think about what-might-have-beens. You bought us up to do our best and that is what we have done. No point in speculating what we may or not have done if the circumstances were different. You just get to play the hand you are dealt and make the best of it. You taught us that. When Pa died, you just got on with it, didn't you and that hasn't turned out too badly." He grinned affectionately at her.

Agnes didn't return his smile and seemed to those gathered around the table to be looking inwards.

"Ma," said Rosie gently. "Ma," she said more urgently.

Agnes came back with a start. "Sorry, duck. Just thinking about your dad. The past seems more real today, somehow. Lost track a bit there. What were we talking about?"

"It's not important," Rosie said quickly. "Sorry, there isn't any pudding but I'll put the kettle on."

The women cleared the table and went into the kitchen to begin the washing up.

“That’s the second time today she has mentioned Dad,” commented Rosie.

“I really don’t remember him,” said Junie.

“I’m not surprised, you were only 2 when he died.”

“So how did he die, Iris. No one in this family seems to want to talk about it. See! That’s what I am talking about,” exclaimed Junie as she caught her sisters exchanging glances.

“Maybe we’ll talk about it after Ma goes to bed,” soothed Rosie with one eye on Iris.

CHAPTER TWENTY

1914

The New Year followed, seen in with the due ceremony and their lives resumed the usual routine; except for the imminent arrival of Agnes' first grandchild and the looming prospect of war.

The grandchild came first. A healthy, bouncing boy that Elaine and William named Henry but he was to be called Harry after Elaine's father. He was a placid baby and Agnes took to dropping in to William's shop on the way home from work to spend an hour or so with the baby so Elaine could catch up on chores or rest. Agnes knew from what Junie had said that Elaine's mother visited her daughter for several hours most days. Agnes, who had had very little help from her mother when William was born, was slightly nonplussed by the amount of help Elaine was receiving and felt a little removed from the baby and his mother. That was partly the reason she changed her routine so she could spend time with the baby. Also her own young ones were nearly adults and didn't need her to be home when they came home. Rosie

was working in the theatre and Junie and George were working in the shop. Very frequently Iris came home later in the evening

She realised that different families did things differently and that daughters invoked a different response in their mothers at the birth of a baby than their sons did. When one of her daughters had a child she was sure she would feel otherwise but Elaine needed her own mother more than her at this time. So Agnes took to making a stew or other easy to reheat meal when she was at work and dropping it off with any left over pudding like Jam Roly Poly to the shop when she called on her way home, maybe taking home some washing to put in with her own households; unobtrusive things that wouldn't be noticed until they no longer happened. Agnes gradually reduced the amount of help as the number of weeks since Harry's birth increased and Elaine was able to better organise herself and the baby.

But all the while Agnes was preoccupied with the new life she was aware that the talk was all about war. She caught snatches of conversations about it at The Lamb & Flag. Mr Dickson talked with her about the effect on the business. He agreed with the prevailing opinion that it would be over by Christmas. Business at the pub seemed to be increasing, Agnes knew she was doing more meals than ever and there didn't seem to be a reduction of drinkers in the bar rooms. So overall Mr Dickson was pleased with his business and didn't see it changing too much when war was declared. Agnes privately thought that it was alright for Mr Dickson to think that war would be good for business but he didn't have sons of soldering

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age. So far Charlie and George had not got caught up in the general war fever and she was sure that William would not be interested in signing up because of his new baby and successful business. However, she couldn't help but worry, although she was careful to keep her concerns from her children.

War was declared in August and to Agnes' relief none of her boys appeared keen to enlist. Shortly after the declaration, one warm August evening she and Iris were sitting with a cup of tea after clearing away the supper things. Agnes was feeling too hot to attempt any mending and was idly sipping tea. There was a knock on the door and Iris went to open it. Agnes could hear Peter's voice but no responding answer from Iris. She arose from the chair to see what was happening. By that time Iris had found her voice, "You have enlisted. Why... when do you leave?"

"I thought you would be pleased," Peter replied.

"Pleased, pleased!" Iris exclaimed. "Why would I be pleased that you were going off to war. You, you" Iris turned and fled to her bedroom leaving a clearly perplexed Peter with Agnes.

"You had better come in and have a cup of tea," Agnes said, thinking that she had better ask the questions that Iris couldn't as she was obviously too upset.

"When did you enlist," she asked as she seated him at the table and handed him the promised cup.

"This afternoon. We had been talking at work about forming a 'Pals battalion', you know when large groups of men enlist together, and most the factory have signed up. We will be given uniforms and training starts next week. I

thought Iris would be pleased,” he added plaintively. “Chaps at work say their girlfriends have encouraged them to sign up. I don’t know why Iris is so upset.”

You don’t know why she is upset that you have enlisted to go to war without telling her, Agnes thought privately. Haven’t you realised that she likes to take control and manage the lives of those she cares for. Outwardly Agnes sighed.

“I’m sure she will come round soon.” Especially when I tell her that you are beginning your training next week, thought Agnes.

His tea finished, Peter allowed Agnes to usher him out, despite casting glances at the shut bedroom door.

As Agnes shut the front door on Peter, she heard the bedroom door open behind her. Iris came out, her eyes red rimmed.

“Oh, Ma,” she said as Agnes went to give her a hug. “Oh, Ma, why do boys have to be so stupid?”

Agnes thought it best not to answer that question. Instead she said, “why don’t you go and see him tomorrow after work. He will be going away soon and you won’t want him to go with bad feeling between you both, do you.”

Iris took her mother’s advice and went to see Peter after work the next day and every other day that week. Her employer, proud that one of his waitresses had an enlisted boyfriend, granted her the time off work. After all, thought Agnes when Iris told her, it will only be for the rest of the week then Peter goes away to training camp then to The Front and who knows when Iris and Peter will see each other after that.

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Iris took the next Monday off work so she could farewell Peter at the train station.

Iris was home when her Mother returned from work and discovered that Iris had been home long enough to do most of the ironing from the previous days washing. Agnes, knowing her eldest daughter and watching her thump the iron down on the innocent clothing, surmised that Iris was still angry with Peter and was using the domestic chore as a way of venting that anger and distracting herself at the same time.

Agnes, herself unwilling to become the target of Iris' anger by uttering a careless word, silently made tea and slipped a cup to Iris. She didn't hear Rose's footsteps in the corridor outside. So an harmless, everyday remark Rosie uttered when entering the room made her bear the brunt of Iris' anger.

Iris proceeded to verbally savage Rosie who tried to fight back but had been ambushed and didn't understand why. Rosie, not knowing why she had provoked such a savaging from Iris, retreated to their bedroom. Agnes followed her. She found Rosie curled up of the bed having flung her hat and coat into a corner of the room. Agnes picked up the coat and brushed it over with her hand to give herself something to do while she said to Rosie, "Iris doesn't mean what she just said but she is angry with Peter and unhappy that he has enlisted. She saw him off today," Agnes reminded her.

Rosie sniffed, "she didn't have to take it out on me!"

Agnes sat beside her and agreed but added in a reasonable tone of voice "She is probably feeling very sorry for herself at the moment."

“Bet she won’t admit it, though,” came the muffled reply. Agnes smiled to herself, no Iris won’t admit it even to herself and would probably try to blame Rosie for provoking the attack.

Outwardly, she said “You can’t let Iris get to you like this. You know she only does it because of the way you react to her. If you don’t let on that she has got to you, she will stop. Come on, dry your eyes, come out and have a nice cup of tea. I made it just before you came in so it will still be hot.” Agnes felt like adding that Iris was sure to apologise to her sister but couldn’t bring herself to say it as she wasn’t sure it was true.

Agnes left Rosie in the bedroom and went to pour the promised tea. While she was performing that small, common domestic chore she said to Iris, “You know that what you said to Rosie was unfair and undeserved, don’t you. It is unfair to make her pay for your unhappiness when the way you feel is not her fault.”

Iris’ expression turned mulish. “she has no right to be so cheerful.”

“That is not a reason,” Agnes started to say but just then Rosie re-entered the room and the opportunity for private conversation with Iris was over for the time being.

When Rose had left for work, her job as a dresser meant she only started work in the evening on Monday as there was no matinee performance in the afternoon, Agnes took the opportunity to settle George and Junie with some chores while she took Iris to one side and began to draw out from her eldest daughter the events earlier in the day. Soon words were tumbling out of Iris’ mouth, such was her eagerness to share her misery with another.

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“Peter was leaving from Victoria Station. I thought I had allowed plenty of time but when I got there the Station was crowded. I had to push and shove my way through the crowd to find the Information Board but when I got there, there was no train information. So as not to let the enemy know vital information about troop movements, Peter told me later. But it was very trying,” Iris voice was almost a wail. Junie and George looked over but any question they may have asked was quelled by a look from their mother.

Agnes took Iris’ hand in hers and gave it a reassuring pat.

“ You found him then, love. You managed to say goodbye.”

“Oh, Ma,” exclaimed Iris. “You should have seen them all lined up, standing tall, looking so proud. As I was standing by the Information Board, or Lack-Of-Information-Board,” she added darkly, “wondering what to do next there was a commotion in the crowd and I caught a glimpse of Peter’s hat, the one I bought him last Christmas, so I made my way over to where I last saw him and there they were. Peter was with his mates from work and they were part of a group of new recruits. We just had time for a quick goodbye before some soldiers formed them into lines and marched them off along the platform. Everyone watching was waving and cheering madly,” Iris choked back tears and blurted out “Why am I the only one so angry with him?”

Agnes put her arms around Iris and hugged her close. “Most people get caught up in the emotion of the moment, with no thought to the future. You care for Peter and part of that caring means that you don’t want him to

put himself in danger, that's why you are angry with him. But what's done is done, no point crying over spilt milk. Now dry your eyes and lets have a nice cup of tea. You never know, the Army might not want him."

Despite her hopes to the contrary the Army did want him. Peter sent Iris a letter telling her that he had passed the medical and was doing basic training, 'square bashing' he called it. Learning how to march in time, fire a rifle and being inducted into the battalion. He had been told that the war would be over by Christmas and was hoping that he would be posted to France before then so he could see some action. Iris balled the letter up in her fist and threw it at the wall when she read that. Later she retrieved the letter and ironed it flat. The family trod warily around her for a few days

Peter came back for one weeks leave after he had finished training and before being sent to France. Iris refused to take any holiday even though Peter begged her so he met her at the Lyons Corner House where she worked and walked her home every night. He had spent every evening with Iris since coming home. After a few days Agnes remonstrated with him, suggesting that he might like to spend some evenings with his own mother. Peter doggedly continued by Iris' side.

On the last evening Peter met Iris as she finished work as usual then instead of going home he took her to a chop house. When Iris protested at the expense, Peter replied that it wasn't every day he went to France and as he wasn't sure of the food over there he was going to have a slap up meal before he left. Iris, bristling slightly at the implied

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criticism of her mother's cooking, allowed herself to be included in his 'slap up meal'.

Agnes, forewarned by Charlie that 'something was up and that Peter was taking Iris to dinner', wasn't concerned when Iris didn't come home at the expected time. However, she was getting a little concerned some three hours after her usual return time, Iris still had not appeared. She was wondering if she should get George to have a look around the nearby streets to see if he could spot Iris when Agnes recognised the sound of footsteps in the corridor outside the front door. Iris burst in, dragging Peter after her. Agnes, taking one look at her eldest daughter's face, stifled her immediate angry "what time do you call this then" and waited for Iris to tell her why she was late. After all, Iris was 26 and by that age Agnes had had, well several, of her children.

"Ma," Iris exclaimed. "Peter has asked me to marry him" and promptly burst into tears. Peter looked nonplussed by this unexpected emotion and ineffectually patted Iris' shoulder. Agnes fished into her pocket and pulled out a clean handkerchief which she handed to her daughter. "Congratulations," she smiled. "I should have guessed when Charlie told me that something was up."

"What!" Iris, tears forgotten, glared at Peter.

"I had to ask Charlie or William for permission to ask you to marry me. Especially as I still remember the grilling they gave me when I told William that I was going to ask you out." Iris did not look particularly mollified by this statement and to change the subject Agnes arose from her chair saying "We need a toast. I have some brandy that is usually saved for medicinal purposes"

Junie and George came over to add their congratulations.

Helped by Junie, Agnes bustled about finding the bottle and glasses . Pouring some of the amber liquid into each she raised her glass “To Iris and Peter” she toasted. Junie and George dutifully took a glass each, raised it to the happy couple and sipped and grimaced slightly as the fiery liquid burned their throats. “It tastes like medicine, Ma,” smiled Junie.

Iris held out her left hand, “Peter gave me a ring and did everything proper when he proposed. We talked about it and plan to marry when he comes home on leave,”

“or if the war ends by Christmas”, interjected Peter. Iris smiled up at him, her previous tears and anger forgotten “or if the war is ended by Christmas.”

“Well that is what they are saying in the newspapers and at the training camp,” said Peter, a little defensively. Agnes, not wanting to spoil the mood of celebration, kept her own opinions to herself.

So it was some little time later that Rosie and Charlie came in to find their mother, sister, brother and prospective brother-in-law sitting round the table each trying to finish their glass of brandy.

“Ma, did you use the medicinal brandy for a toast,” laughed Charlie as he removed a bottle from his coat pocket. “I think this will taste better.” With a flourish he put the bottle of champagne in the middle of the table.

“Charlie,” Agnes gasped. “Where did you find the money for expensive wine?”

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“Oh Ma, don’t carry on. I know a man who knows a man. It’s not vintage and doesn’t Peter and my eldest sister deserve a decent drop to toast their future. Not that your brandy isn’t good, Ma,” he added hastily. “But it is,” her children chorused in unison, “medicinal!”

They laughed together and with Charlie supervising, Rosie emptied the glasses back into the brandy bottle, filling the now empty glasses with the fizzing wine. “Congratulations, Iris and Peter,” said Rosie, raising her glass to the couple.

“Yes, congratulations,” added Charlie.

“How did you know, Rosie,” asked Iris, suspiciously.

“Charlie told me on the way home,” Rosie replied.

Iris opened her mouth but before she could say anything Charlie cut in. “It was my idea. Peter came to me asking my advice on how he should propose to you. He has been wanting to ask you for ages but hadn’t got the nerve.” He looked at Peter, “sorry old man but you treat Iris like a piece of glass and she is not that delicate.” Iris glared at him.

“Well you are not,” he retorted. “So I suggested a good meal and Bobs your uncle it has done the trick. So when is the happy day?”

“We were discussing that when you came in and interrupted us.” Iris was not that happy with her brother. “We plan to marry when Peter is next home on leave.”

Agnes, with the wine going to her head, felt ready for her bed.

“Well, Peter. I am sure you have an early start tomorrow morning and will want to go home soon. Iris can see you out, Rosie clear the glasses and you and Junie can wash them and put them away. I am getting ready

for bed. Come along, George, it is time you got ready for bed as well.” Thus like a general ordering the placement of his troops she arose from the table with dignity and retreated for the night.

Iris and Peter said their goodbyes that night. Iris didn't want a repeat of the chaos she experienced at the train station last time.

Charlie reported back the next night that he saw Peter and the rest of his factory group marching off to the station through streets lined with cheering, mostly female, crowds.

“Women were darting from the pavement, kissing a soldier seemingly at random then retreating back to their giggling and cheering friends. I saw Peter,” he said with a sly glance at Iris, “be singled out by one woman but he shrugged her off.”

Iris snorted but looked relieved.

Agnes too was relieved to hear this as Iris would have made life very difficult if she thought that Peter was being unfaithful to her in any way so soon after becoming engaged.

After the excitement of the past few days, their life resumed it's normal routine; except for the fact that Iris was mostly at home in the evening and enquired if there was any mail for her every evening on her return from work. When she did receive a letter from Peter she read it in the privacy of her bedroom and slept with it under her pillow. Agnes had read the letter before handing over to Iris, of course. It was her right as matriarch and as long as her children lived under her roof, they would live by her rules. None of her children questioned her right to read

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any letters addressed to them, it was how things were done.

Several weeks past and Iris had fallen into a routine; she sent a letter to Peter every week. Usually written over two or three days in the evening after supper, and Agnes was persuaded to post it on Thursday as her walk to work took her passed a Post Office. If Iris was lucky she received a letter from Peter once a week on a Tuesday or Wednesday. She knew that Peter had to be careful about the subjects he wrote about and that the letters were read by the Army censor but there were times when his letters contained more thick black lines than unobscured words, rendering the letter incomprehensible. The family always knew when one of 'those' letters had arrived as Iris, already mindful of the respect due to her as the eldest of those still at home and verbally enforcing respectful behaviour in a sibling if she felt it lacking, became even more prickly for the next few days. Charlie, sensing Iris's changing mood during those days, was rarely home for long leaving Rosie, George and Junie to bear the brunt of Iris' ill humour. Iris wouldn't dare be uncivil to her mother but it was a close run thing at times. More than once Agnes had to fix Iris with 'the look' to remind her that her mother, Agnes, set the rules and Iris had better toe the line. Rosie was usually the one Iris snapped at most. Sometimes Rosie felt that it was the mere fact of her existence that set Iris off. She knew her mother had always said that if she didn't react Iris would stop but somehow Iris always managed to stir a reaction from her. It seemed to Rosie that Iris always managed to time her baiting so Rosie reacted when Agnes was absent from the room. When Agnes returned,

Rosie was angrily expostulating with Iris who then looked innocent and hard done by. Agnes would blame Rosie for the domestic disturbance. Iris, having caused the ruckus emerged blameless which seemed to allay her bad feeling caused by the over-censored letter she had received that week from Peter. Rosie sighed inwardly and promised herself that she wouldn't react the next time. Uncannily, Charlie would return almost as if he was able to sense that the squall had passed and all was sunny at home again.

Much to everyones silent relief Iris announced one morning that Peter would be home on leave in time for Christmas. The bad humour disappeared replaced by plans for their future. There was no question that Iris would move out of the family home, the only question is where would she and Peter live. Iris was busy discussing that very subject as she helped her mother prepare supper that evening.

"I know Peter would like us to live with his mother, at least until the first child comes along," Iris said. "She has a spare room now his youngest brother has left home and joined up." Iris continued speaking but Agnes wasn't hearing her, thinking instead how glad she was that her boys hadn't joined up and how Harry was growing. Why he was already crawling and pulling himself up on his two legs. Won't be long before he is walking, I expect, she mused.

The cosy domestic scene was interrupted by a knock on the door. Agnes looked at Iris to see if she was expecting anyone but Iris looked as startled as her mother felt.

None of the other children were home yet and besides they would all open the door and come in without knocking. Agnes walked to the door, drying her hands on

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her apron as she went. Whoever was on the other side was persistently knocking so Agnes hurried to open the door. To her astonishment, Peter's mother almost fell into the room. Agnes took her by the arm and half supporting her guided her to a chair at the table. Agnes was going to instruct Iris to pour her prospective mother-in-law a nice cup of tea but taking one look at Mrs Collins she turned instead to the cupboard where the medicinal brandy was kept. Swiftly, Agnes poured some into a glass and put it front of Mrs Collins saying 'drink it down now, you look like you need it.' As Mrs Collins dutifully swallowed the contents of the glass, Agnes instructed Iris to bring the cup of tea. Not that she really needed to, Iris was already replacing the now empty brandy glass with a steaming cup of tea. Mrs Collins grasped Iris' hand. "I have just received a telegram! Oh, my dear ..."

As she spoke her eyes welled with tears to join the ones spilling down her cheeks. Almost before she was aware, Agnes was around the table and with her hands on Iris' shoulders, pressing her into the chair next to Mrs Collins who still held had a firm grip on her daughter's hand.

As Agnes turned to get the brandy bottle she heard Mrs Collins continue, "the telegram said Peter," she nearly choked on her son's name, "Peter was missing, presumed dead," she gasped out through her tears.

For a minute Iris looked at her uncomprehending. Then Mrs Collins' words penetrated. "No," whispered Iris. "No, no. There must be some mistake. We are going to be married in 4 weeks time. The telegram must have been sent to you by mistake. It must be some other Peter Collins. Not my Peter."

Mrs Collins didn't let go of Iris' hand as she fumbled with her other hand in the pocket of her skirt and brought forth the crumpled telegram. "There's no mistake, Iris, duck. No mistake at all. He thought the world of you, oh, my poor Peter." Tears ran down her cheeks seemingly unstoppable. Iris sat mute, her hand still clasped by Mrs Collins.

Agnes refilled Mrs Collins' glass and poured brandy in one for Iris and one for herself. She pushed the glass in front of her daughter, "Drink it down, Iris, there's a good girl" In truth she was a little alarmed by the girl's unnatural pallor. It was as if all the blood had drained from her face. Agnes hoped the brandy would put some colour back into her cheeks and break the mask-like effect of the pallor.

Dutifully, Iris swallowed the fiery liquid which added to the alarm Agnes was already experiencing. Under normal circumstances Iris usually refused to drink the brandy; swallowing it without argument certainly was unprecedented. Agnes hoped that the alcohol would produce some animation in her daughter but Iris just sat there. Mrs Collins, realising where she was, released her grip on Iris' hand but the girl didn't move her hand or otherwise indicate that she was aware that her hand had been released. Agnes feeling an obligation to Mrs Collins urged her to stay the night. At first Mrs Collins demurred, began ineffectually picking at her shawl, making as to leave but Agnes would have none of it. Aware that her sons had enlisted and knowing that her two daughters had young families of their own and could not get away she went next door to commandeer one of the children next door to take a message to Junie and George at William's

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shop telling them what had happened and asking George to let one of Mrs Collins daughters know that she was staying the night with them. Then George was to return to spend the night in the shop so Mrs Collins could have his bed. Agnes had no doubt that Elaine would feed her son as she heard the news. Agnes also had no doubt that Charlie would find somewhere to spend the night as well.

Still Iris sat unmoving as Agnes bustled about making more tea and finishing preparing the supper that no one would eat. She used these preparations to mask her concern about Iris. Mrs Collins feebly attempted to offer to help Agnes but was waved back into her chair. Tears still chased down her weathered cheeks and Agnes, not needing any assistance with her preparations for their simple supper, felt that she would benefit from just sitting.

The sound of quick, light footsteps in the corridor outside heralded the arrival of Junie who rushed into the room, red faced as though she had been running.

“Oh Iris,” said Junie as she hugged her sister to her. “I am so sorry, I came as soon as I heard.” With that simple hug the reserve that shielded Iris from the truth of Peter’s death shattered and Iris compulsively sobbed in Junie’s arms. At a nod from Agnes, Junie rose and half carrying her, led Iris to their bedroom.

“Poor girl, Mrs Thomas, poor girl,” said Mrs Collins as she watch Iris leave the room.

Agnes sighed and reached out to clasp the hand of Mrs Collins. “She will survive but it will take time. Junie will look after her. Now, how about you, do you want another glass of brandy, cup of tea, something to eat?”

Mrs Collins declined any food saying that she wasn’t hungry but a nice cup of tea would be welcome. Her

tears gradually dried up as Agnes listened to her talk about Peter. Occasionally Agnes would make encouraging noises, nod or otherwise indicate that she was listening but it wasn't really necessary. Mrs Collins didn't really seem aware of her surroundings but needed to talk about her son.

Agnes was smothering a yawn as Rosie came home.

"Mrs Collins, this is my daughter Rose." In a few words Agnes made Rosie aware of all that had happened that evening and that Mrs Collins was staying the night in the boy's room.

Rosie made a fresh pot of tea and made a sandwich for herself. "get off to bed, Ma," she said. "I will sit with Mrs Collins a while." Agnes gave her daughter a grateful look and needed no further encouragement to go to bed. While Mrs Collins and Iris may not go to work the next day, she had no excuse and as she got older late nights made it more difficult to get up in the morning.

Junie came out of their room. "Iris has cried herself to sleep. Is that pot fresh?" On hearing that it was, she poured herself a cup as Rosie made a sandwich for her. In unspoken agreement, the girls sat either side of Mrs Collins and listened as their mother had done before she went to bed.

Iris didn't go to work the next day. When Agnes returned from work, she found Iris in bed where she had been that morning as Agnes left for work. Agnes was concerned for her daughter but the family could not afford the luxury of such behaviour.

Agnes sat on the bed besides Iris.

"Iris, love," she started to say.

Iris turned her face away.

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The gesture irritated Agnes so the next words she said were spoken in a harsher tone that she originally intended.

“Iris, you will have to listen to what I say. I know that news of Peter’s death has come as a great shock to you and don’t think that I am not sympathetic to your unhappiness nor the that emotions you are experiencing are unknown to me.” Agnes was pulled back to her memories of that terrible week over fourteen years ago. With a shake she pulled herself free of the remembered emotions and went on, “but, you cannot afford to lie here for another day. You must go to work tomorrow. We need you to be bringing in a wage and if you don’t go to work tomorrow, you will be dismissed.”

“It isn’t fair,” wailed Iris. “Why did he have to join up to fight this stupid war. Why is everything I want taken away from me!”

“Life isn’t fair,” responded Agnes, as she stroked Iris hair, glad to be getting any reaction. “None of us is born with the promise that our life is to be fair.” Agnes sighed. “There are times when life seems manifestly unfair but that is the way things are.”

“How can I go back to work tomorrow? How can I endure the pitty of the other girls?”

Agnes smiled a world-weary smile, “you don’t honestly think that you are the only one who has lost her man, do you? You don’t honestly think that Peter has been the only one to die on the battlefield in France. Come on, Iris, get up. It’s time you had a wash and some food. Lying in bed with nothing but your own thoughts never did anyone any good. That’s enough, Iris,” Agnes said sharply. “Get up. Our kind aren’t able to indulge ourselves in this way.

We have livings to be made. As to how you go back to work - you just do it. One day at a time, one day at a time. I'm going to put the kettle on so I suggest you get a move on and out of bed with you."

Iris is right though, Agnes mused as she filled the kettle and put it on the range to boil, life is unfair and Iris feels it more than most. I suppose that looking at it her way, it was unfair that Charley died before she had a chance to go to the secondary modern school she had her heart set on. No, Agnes gave herself a mental shake, no Iris couldn't have continued her education if Charley was still alive. If he was still alive, we would probably be in worse position than we are now. We haven't done too badly, reflected Agnes. William's business is thriving and he has a good mate in Elaine. She smiled to herself as she thought about her grandchild, Harry. What a charmer that boy is, quite takes after his father and grandfather, thought Agnes as she remembered Charley in the early years of their courtship and marriage.

Her reverie was interrupted by Iris who emerged dressed but still brushing her hair.

Agnes put a plate with a sandwich on it down on the table and placed a cup of tea next to it.

"Sit and eat," she commanded. "You haven't had a thing to eat all day, it will make you feel better," she added in a softer tone.

Iris started to nibble at the sandwich and must have discovered how hungry she was because the remainder of the sandwich was devoured in a few bites.

"Now you can sit and help me prepare supper."

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Iris' eyes welled with tears. "That was what we were doing yesterday when Mrs Collins came to tell us ..." The rest of the sentence was lost in a sob.

Agnes replaced the empty plate with a couple of onions and a sheet of newspaper.

"You may as well peel the onions while you have a little weep. Worked for me when your father died," she added, hoping to make Iris realise that she wasn't the only one to lose her man. "I have the potatoes and cabbage we cooked but didn't eat yesterday, so I thought I would make Bubble-n-Squeak to have with a bit o' left over roast I bought home from work. What do you think?"

Iris, slowly peeling onions did not reply. She knew her mother didn't need an answer to the question she had just posed. She liked her mother's Bubble-n-Squeak cooked in beef fat and if the truth be told she was feeling hungry - not that she would admit it to anyone.

Charlie, George and Junie came home together just as Iris was laying the table for supper. "Wash your hands everyone, before you sit at the table," admonished Agnes who had from the corner of her eye caught sight of Charlie about to sit at the head of the table. Iris seated herself there while he was washing his hands and glared at him as if daring him to question her right to sit there. Charlie was no man's fool and knew better than to challenge his older sister when she was in one of those moods. As she seated herself at her customary position at the foot of the table Agnes wished, not for the first time, that Iris was a bit more like Rosie and Junie and not as prickly and jealous.

Agnes made sure that Iris was up and ready to go to work the next day and the rest of the days that week.

During the morning church service when the vicar said a Commendation for all who had died in the war that week, he mentioned Peter by name. Agnes silently passed Iris a clean handkerchief.

Iris complained no more about having to go to work and the unfairness of her life in general but Agnes was aware that Junie and Rosie were spending a bit longer at work and were less lively around home than they used to be. Agnes suspected that the two younger girls had fallen foul of Iris' temper in some way but as she was not present when the incident occurred and as neither of the girls complained to her about Iris there was little she could do. She could just hope that family life would get back to normal soon.

Apart from the threat of Zeppelins over London, food shortages, a growing lack of men and the worry that conscription may be enacted the family enjoyed Christmas and saw in the New Year of 1915 together. Charlie complained that he was expected, like all the Music Hall acts, to include a call to men to enlist as part of his nightly stage act but beyond that since the terrible news of Peter's death the family were untouched by the war.

Agnes was getting increasingly concerned over the gossip she overheard at The Lamb & Flag. The government needed more soldiers as the armies became increasingly bogged down in trench warfare. So far her sons had resisted the urge to join up despite the blandishments of the posters and Music Hall songs specifically designed to encourage the males in the

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audience. However, the talk at the pub was of conscription; a word that sent a chill up Agnes' spine every time she heard it. She didn't want any of her boys to end up shell-shocked or even dead like Peter, Iris's fiancée. William, being married was safe but Charlie and George were of an age that would be called up. She began to scour the newspapers for news of conscription. Her worst fears were realised in January 1916 when Charlie and George received their call up papers.

When the time came for them to leave for basic training, Iris refused to say good bye to them. In fact, she refused to acknowledge they were leaving at all. George was upset by this but Charlie and Agnes explained to him that she didn't really want him to go. She was afraid that what had happened to Peter may happen to either one of them. Charlie promised to keep an eye out for George. However, George was sent home, the Army did not want him. Agnes was angry at this. The thought that George was not up to killing or being killed but Charlie was really annoyed her. The girls kept out of her way for a day or so. George went back to his old job as a messenger boy for William's business.

As well as swallowing up two of her boys the war was making a difference in other areas of Agnes' life. Fewer men were using the pub and she found the demand for lunches and suppers was declining. Mr Dickson was keeping a brave face about the declining business but Agnes was beginning to read the writing on the wall. When Anne started to intimate that she was going to look for another position, Agnes knowing that at 50 she was getting too old to work in the kitchen on her own, wondered what she was going to do for a job.

It was not Agnes' way to spill her worries to another so she kept her employment concerns to herself. 'I will stay at the Lamb & Flag just a little bit longer,' she told herself, 'something might come along.' By March, Mr Dickson was suggesting that Agnes help out in the bar on the days when there was not enough trade to warrant her working in the kitchen. Agnes was becoming increasingly worried about her future employment prospects at the pub. Although she said nothing to Elaine, her daughter-in-law must have sensed something was awry because out of the blue one day William told his mother that if things ever got so she was out of work, she could rely on him. Agnes retorted more sharply than on reflection she perhaps should have done "that I have always payed my own way in this world and I don't intend to stop now, thank you." William just looked at her then changed the subject.

Charlie had already sent several censored yet cheerful letters home from the Front when rumours began to circulate that married men were the next to be conscripted.

Agnes had taken to calling in to the tobacconists to see Elaine and Harry and have a cup of tea on her way home. One day soon after the rumours had started circulating Agnes happened to mention them to Elaine. Elaine said that she had heard similar herself and was hoping that it wasn't true when William entered the shop.

"Ah Ma! Glad to find you here," he said. "I want to show you something, get your hat and coat on and come with me." Agnes began to protest that she hadn't finished her tea when William held her coat out for her to put on while Elaine thrust her hat at her. "It won't be wasted, I

will finish the tea,” Elaine said above Agnes’ protests. “Then I will put the kettle on for when you get back.”

Agnes was hurrying after William when the implication of Elaine’s words sank in, Elaine knew where William was taking her. By this time William had slowed enough for Agnes to catch up with him. She linked her arm through his to slow him to a more comfortable pace. ‘Really’, she thought in passing ‘ I must be getting old.’ “What is it you want to show me,” she said out loud. “What do you want to show me? Why the big hurry?”

“All in good time, Ma,” replied her eldest son. “Do you recognise where we are.”

Agnes snorted, “Really, my boy. Of course I know where we are. These streets were familiar to me before you were born.” She looked around to orientate herself amid the customary bustle and noise of a London street. “Why, we are very near to where we used to live when your father was still alive. The Strand is ahead of us. Is that where we are going? What are you going to show me there?” Agnes couldn’t keep the puzzlement out of her voice. William just grinned. “Just wait until we get there,” was all he would say.

They turned into The Stand. William led her a little way along the busy street, as though they were heading to Charing Cross. They were on the opposite side of the street to The Savoy Hotel; well, Agnes knew it was The Savoy but the building was set back from the street, in Savoy Place. William had stopped and Agnes, who still had her arm linked through his, stopped also. She followed the direction of his gaze. They were outside a small kiosk tucked in between two larger buildings. William took a key from his waistcoat pocket and slid it

into a lock located below a thin counter that extended beyond the shutter. With a click the lower door swung outward and bending over, William ushered his mother into the narrow environs of the kiosk. It was very cramped with two people inside but Agnes could see shelves at the rear. There was a gas ring set atop a small table and a stool tucked under the table.

“What do you think?” William was unable to keep the grin off his face. “I bought the lease last week. I reckon with the right person behind the counter, this could be a thriving little tobacconist. There are a lot of toffs around here, living here, dining at The Savoy. They need somewhere to send their servants, valets or chauffeurs for Egyptian tobacco, their cigarettes, the special blends that I sell. During the day the best person behind the counter is you.” He looked his mother square in the eye. “I have thought it through, Ma.” William looked serious. “I don’t joke about business. I need someone steady, reliable, someone who will remember a customer’s likes and dislikes, someone who will learn about the wares. Someone trustworthy and someone the customers will trust. What do you say? Will you help me out by working here?”

Agnes held her son’s gaze while she thought about what he had just said. It was true that Mr Dickson was unlikely to keep her on for much longer. There just wasn’t the same amount of work for her at The Lamb & Flag. The war was having such an effect on the pub’s clientele. She trusted William’s business acumen and that made her mind up.

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“Yes, I will work for you, son,” she agreed. He gave her a quick, delighted hug and suggested that they go back to the shop on Kingsway and tell Elaine the good news.

On the way back, William said that he wanted to open the kiosk on Monday week. “That will allow you to work out your notice and then spend the remaining few days stocking the shelves and getting yourself familiar with the different blends.” Agnes began to demur, events were going rather too fast for her.

“Half an hour ago I was wondering what I would do for a job if Mr Dickson let me go,” she retorted. “Give me time to catch up. How long have you been planning this anyway?” Agnes was suddenly suspicious that William might have bought the kiosk just to give her something to do for which he could then give her enough money to live on. William snorted in derision when she told him of her suspicions.

“Ma, I am not that devious, nor am I so well off that I would waste money on a business that didn’t make money. Elaine would have my guts for garters if I ever dreamt of such a thing. No, I have asked you to work for me because I think you will make that kiosk a success and no other reason. Mind you, I won’t deny that the timing is right but that is half the trick of being a success in business, making the right decision at the right time.” William couldn’t, or wouldn’t thought Agnes, hide the self satisfied smirk in his face as they walked back to his waiting wife and son.

“There’s a lot to do, son. The kiosk needs a good clean before anything else happens.”

“I’ll lend you George, if you like. To help with the cleaning, the higher shelves and the like,” he added quickly.

“There’s hardly room to swing a cat let alone me and a full grown lad like George. No, I can do it myself, give me a chance to get to know the place and the neighbours.” William knew that his mother had caught up with herself and he could relax and let her take charge of her new little kingdom.

He said as much to Elaine when they were together later that night.

“That was an inspired idea of yours to get my mother involved. I had my eye on that kiosk for sometime but it wasn’t until you mentioned that Ma was needing to find new employment that I finally saw how I could make it work. She was already thinking about what needed to be done on the walk back.” He gave her a quick hug and kiss on the cheek. “I’m really glad I married you.”

Elaine smiled quietly. “I like to think I am of help to you. But I had no idea what you were thinking when I mentioned last week that she needed to find another job.”

“Ah, but your timing was right, love. And as I said to Ma as we walked back to the shop this afternoon, timing is the trick to a successful business.”

Good as her word Agnes saw Mr Dickson the next day and told him that she had received another offer of employment so she was giving him one week’s notice. She didn’t give him any details about the job she was going to and he didn’t ask. Instead, Mr Dickson told Agnes how sorry he was to see her go, what an asset she had been to the pub, how this war was draining the country. To his

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credit he kept the relief he must have been feeling to himself, reflected Agnes later. She had worked for him for 15 years and if not a friendship at least a good deal of trust between employer and employee had developed over those years. Indeed, mused Agnes, if it wasn't for Mr Dickson's generosity in those early years there would have been times when her children wouldn't have had enough food in their bellies. In exchange she supposed that she had given him her loyalty, support and did her best to make what came out of the kitchen a credit to the pub. She would be sorry to go but change was inevitable and, she admitted privately, she wasn't getting any younger and kitchen work needed a fair amount of energy and strength. So Agnes and Mr Dickson parted on good terms, with no regrets on either side.

The evening she finished working at The Lamb & Flag, William suggested that all the family eat at the local chop house, but Agnes wouldn't hear of it. Instead she insisted that she would cook for them all. Her children objected to this idea with one voice. As a compromise, George said he would buy some beer and William should buy enough fish and chips for all "that way we can feast at home but Ma doesn't have to cook." When Agnes protested that she liked to cook George replied that having a free evening once in her life was not going to harm her. Rosie offered to make a trifle" so we have a proper dinner" to which her brothers readily agreed. As the extended family sat around the table, Rosie asked her mother what she was planning to wear when she was in the kiosk. Agnes replied that she hadn't thought about it and anyway, she wasn't getting dressed up to clean the shop, thank you.

Rosie persisted, asking what her mother planned to wear when she was working in the kiosk. “You can’t wear the shabby clothes you wore when you were working in the kitchen. Besides which, they are a bit smelly. Only of food,” Rosie corrected herself hastily. “But all the same, Ma, you have wear something a bit classier now you will be working in The Strand.” Agnes was not used to taking suggestions from her children and opened her mouth to protest that her clothes were perfectly decent but before she could utter a word William said, “Rosie is right, Ma. You need some new clothes. When was the last time you spent any money on yourself, anyway.” He reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a roll of bank notes. He peeled off two five pound notes and gave them to Rosie. “Take her with you to Selfridges on Saturday and use this to buy her something suitable.” Seeing Rosie’s eyes open wide, he said “is it enough? Will you need more?” Elaine laughed, “No, she doesn’t need more, William. Ten pounds will be enough, right Rosie, but I don’t think Selfridges is the right place to go. Would Debenham’s or Dickens & Jones be better, what do you think Iris?” Before Iris could reply, William said “I don’t care where Ma gets a new outfit from but I do care that she gets something. Now you girls sort it out, George and I are off to the pub.”

The men left the younger women gathered around the table with their heads together each declaiming the relative merits of the store of their choice. Agnes, taking nor wanting any part in the debate left the table to put the kettle on. She was content to let the discussion run its course then go where she wanted. The decision was made after the tea. The sisters knew their mother, knew that she would not spend, or in her words, waste time looking for

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suitable cloths in different shops. Rosie suggested that she use her half hour lunch breaks for a quick look in several shops over the next two days. Should she find anything suitable she should buy it, show it to her mother and if unsuitable, take the garments back at the beginning of next week. This was agreed by all as the best plan and Iris suggested that they all gather on Saturday evening and see what had been purchased with William's ten pounds. The only one who did not agree with this plan was Agnes who argued that ten pounds was a disgraceful amount to be spending on clothing for herself, she could buy something suitable much cheaper at one of the nearby markets and that all this fuss was not necessary. Rosie kept tight hold of the notes, even going so far as thinking about slipping them in her pillowcase while she slept but that was going a bit far. Her mother didn't approve of what she called a waste of money but she was too honest to remove the money from Rosie.

Agnes spent the next two days scrubbing, cleaning and then stocking the shelves with the empty canisters William sent with George. On Saturday, William arrived to oversee the final arrangement of the shelf space. He asked Agnes to raise the shutter while he stood outside on the pavement to see how the kiosk looked.

"Why send empty canisters with George," asked Agnes as she moved the said canisters according to William's directions.

"They are easier to move when empty," came the soft reply. Agnes looked over her shoulder at him. William's expression was bland innocence but indicated with his eyes that she look to his right. She spotted a man leaning

against the next building. He was dressed so he wouldn't stand out of the crowd, neither shabby nor expensive, his clothing blended in with his surrounds.

"How long has he been watching," asked Agnes quietly.

"Probably off and on since I took the lease on the place. I noticed him this morning and he has been watching the place continuously this afternoon. No, don't look at him or go over to talk to him. I'll find out who he is working for soon enough." he raised his voice, "Come out and have a look and tell me what you think."

Agnes joined him on the pavement and as pedestrians eddied and flowed around them, looked over her handiwork. She felt proud of the way the kiosk looked, much more inviting than when she had first seen it. What shelving that wasn't covered in canisters and packets, gleamed. The wooden counter had been polished so that it shone. However, Agnes knew she would have to dust the shelves several times a day to keep them looking like they did now. The Strand was a busy street and that caused endless dust which entered the kiosk. She had already been asked several times for tobacco or cigarettes as she was arranging the shelves and was approached again.

"We open on Monday, come back and see us then," said William. "Can't sell you anything until then." With that he indicated that Agnes should go inside and pull down the shutter.

"Ma, I don't want you to worry but should anyone come and see you Monday tell them to see me at the shop on Kingsway." William spoke softly even though they were both inside and close together. Agnes nodded her understanding. She helped William collect the empty

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canisters and packets and put them in boxes. When George arrived, they loaded the boxes onto his delivery bike and all three of them walked back to the shop on Kingsway.

Elaine and Harry accompanied Agnes home as Elaine wanted to see what Rosie had bought with her husband's money. Harry was bought along so his aunts could make a fuss of him.

By 8 am Monday morning Agnes had opened the shutter and was waiting for her first pot of tea for the day to brew. She had arrived at the kiosk by 7 am and was waiting for George to bring the stock. He had arrived shortly after having ridden his laden bicycle from the shop in Kingsway. Swiftly Agnes replaced the canisters on the shelves in the same order as they were when they had been removed the previous Saturday. Between Saturday evening and that Monday morning someone, either William or Elaine, had filled the canisters. Having emptied his bicycle of canisters, George returned to Kingsway to fetch the remaining stock that Agnes would need before the kiosk opened. As Agnes had finished placing the filled canisters to her satisfaction George signalled his return with a sharp rap on the shutter.

He passed packets of cheap cigars and cigarettes under the partly opened shutter to Agnes who arranged them as William had shown her the previous day. Finally, when Agnes thought that nothing else would fit in the kiosk, George said he had one last thing for her. Keeping one hand on his precious bike, he turned full on to face her and using his body to block anyone standing on the

pavement from seeing what he was doing, he handed over a money bag.

“William said that the float is ten pounds and that you shouldn’t keep more than fifteen pounds in the till.” George then passed her a leather belt with a pouch attached.

“He also said that you should wear this under your apron to keep the takings in. How did he know you were going to wear an apron, Ma?”

“I think I am ready to open up now. You can run along, George and tell William that we have set up and opened. I daresay he will be along later to see for himself how the kiosk looks.”

After putting the float money neatly in the till she lifted the shutter the rest of the way to indicate the kiosk was open for business. She had opened a little early that day but she was excited to be starting a new job and there was no point in watching the hands of the clock slowly crawl around the dial until it was 8 o’clock. She just had time to fill her cup from the teapot when her first customer approached, followed the next until it was after 9 o’clock and she hadn’t managed to have a sip of her now cold tea.

With a sigh, Agnes emptied the contents the cup and teapot into the slops bucket she had thought to bring late last week. She refilled the kettle and set it to boil on the gas ring. As she lit the gas a throat clearing cough sounded from the street startled her causing her to drop the lit match. Quickly stamping it out, Agnes turned and recognised the cough came from the same man who had been watching the kiosk the previous week.

“You need to be careful with matches, Missus. Fire can cause a deal of damage.”

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Agnes knew a stand-over man when she saw one. Mr Dickson had had dealings with several during the time she had worked for him. It seemed to her that it was another penalty of doing business; there was always someone who wanted to make money the easy way and usually wasn't too scrupulous how to do so. So it was with a steady voice that she replied as William had advised her.

"I don't own the kiosk, you had better advise your boss that he should talk to William Thomson. He will be found at the tobacconist on Kingsway. Good day."

With that she turned her back on the man to attend to her interrupted tea making. Nonplussed by her casual attitude she watched the man in the mirror that had been carefully positioned so she could see the counter while her back was turned. He opened and closed his mouth a few times as if he wanted to say something and then thought better of it. Agnes made a mental note to tell William about the incident then thought no more of it as brooding wouldn't help her son's business.

From then on business was steady but she wasn't so busy as to be unable to drink her tea; that happened at lunchtime. However, Agnes was accustomed to having her lunch after 2 pm so when the lunchtime rush eased she found to was well after 2 pm. She was just about to take the first bite of a sandwich she had bought with her from home for elevenses when William appeared at the counter.

"Hello, Ma," he greeted her. "I see you have found time to have something to eat. Elaine gave me some stew to bring to you in case you had been too busy for lunch. Shall I take it back with me."

“Not on your life, son. So kind of Elaine to think of me. Thank her for me, will you.” Agnes carefully rewrapped her sandwich in its greaseproof paper and opened the pot containing the stew.

“Here, let me watch the shop while you take a break and eat. No, I insist. Let me in and then make yourself comfortable on the stool. It won’t do me any harm to stand for a while. How had business been so far?”

In between mouthfuls of the thick and hearty stew, Agnes told him of her day. While she was eating and talking a part of her mind registered that Elaine had made a very good stew, using plenty of pearl barley and vegetables to make the meat go further.

“Very glad you married Elaine, my boy. She looks after you very well. Oh! I’ve just remembered. I got a visit from the man watching us. I told him to tell his boss to speak to you as you said.” Agnes didn’t ask William if he had had a visit judging that he would tell her if he wanted her to know.

“I’m very glad I married her, as well,” replied William. “Don’t worry about anything the man may have said. So long as he was polite, I won’t have my family menaced or threatened by any jumped up hireling.”

Agnes assured him that he had been perfectly polite, “even though I don’t think I let him finish his spiel. I think he was rather taken aback because I didn’t look worried or frightened. As if some young whippersnapper is going to frighten me,” she snorted. “I should have put him over my knee and tanned his hide for him if he had been disrespectful. Not that I have the room,” she said looking around the tight confines of the kiosk now both she and William were inside. William smiled, glad that his

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mother had taken what could have been a nasty incident in her stride.

“I daresay I will get a visit in a day or so. I wonder if Alan Jarvis has this patch, I already pay money to him,” mused William. “oh well, it’s part of being in business, I suppose.”

William left after assuring himself that Agnes had eaten all she wanted, taken a refreshment break and was ready for the afternoon and early evening rush they both anticipated. “I fully expect it to get busier in the next week or so when people realise that the kiosk is open for business and they can get a range of goods normally carried in a larger shop,” William had said before he left. “Don’t forget to make a note of anything you don’t stock as I can always send George with it the next day. That is another advantage we have over a sole trader, a better, quicker supply chain.” William hurried away through the rain that had started as Agnes was finishing her lunch.

The cheerful awning that sheltered the kiosk from the weather also encouraged some passersby to shelter from the rain. Agnes asked them what they wanted which seemed to discourage those who were just standing to get out from the rain. As the rain grew more persistent Agnes found that those who wanted to shelter declined. She made a mental note to herself that showers could pose more of a problem than persistent rain. She watched as the awnings began to sag under the weight of water that was collecting on top of them. When there was no one near she quickly seized the broom and going the other side of the counter used the broom handle to push the accumulated water out of the awning. It made a great splash and if Agnes hadn’t moved quickly she would have

got wet feet. Another mental note to get the canvas tightened as soon as possible. Mind, it would be a useful fire extinguisher if need be, she thought with a smile.

The rain didn't seem to prevent people buying tobacco, cigarettes and cigars. As daylight faded and people started homeward Agnes as kept busy by the requests for items most of which she had but taking noting the few requests she couldn't fulfil. Despite her assurances that the requested items would be available the next day, most didn't want to wait. Agnes thought she would get the stock anyway, they would always sell next week. Accordingly, she added those items to the list even though the customers had said they would get them elsewhere. She wished them a cheery "good evening" adding that the item would be available tomorrow so it would be here next time they called.

George arrived, explaining the William had sent him off with his deliveries with a reminder to look in on Ma and see if she needed anything. By this time Agnes had switched on the electric light and stepped out from behind the counter to admire that cheerful yellow light. She thought that it made the kiosk look like an Aladdin's cave, full of mysterious jars and objects. Surprised by her train of thought, she gave herself a mental shake and returning behind the counter handed her list of stock requests to George to take to William.

In the weeks that followed, Agnes acquired many regular customers. With some she exchanged a few observations about the weather and suchlike but others were in such a rush to get to their place of work or home she just enquired, "the usual?" and handed whatever was

their particular ‘usual’ to them. Whatever the customers requirements, Agnes always remembered to smile. and wish them good morning, afternoon or evening as appropriate; even if the customer was too busy to remember their manners. Every evening George would appear on his bicycle for her restocking order or just to say ‘hello’ if she didn’t have anything for him. She had learnt that a pleasant but firm “excuse me, you are blocking my customers” would move all but the most intransigent of loiterers from the shelter of the awnings during periods of rain. If there was no response to her request, Agnes had no qualms about expressing in a forthright manner that they should be moving on.

Agnes ensured that she never ran out of stock of the particular brand of cigarettes favoured by the owner of the shop on one side. The female employees of the Twinings Tearoom were beginning to use her as a Mother confessor, several stopping to have a chat about the shortcomings of their young man or the exploits of their men at ‘The Front’. Agnes, having some experience of the censor’s black pen in the letters Charlie sent, thought that most of the girls imagined the exploits they talked to her about. However, she never said what she thought only replying “You don’t say” or more rarely “Never!” Several of the staff at The Savoy Hotel and Simpson’s restaurant favoured her kiosk with their custom and as they began and finished work outside of her busiest times there was usually time for a chat. Most of her customers were either men declared unfit by the Army or those exempt from conscription, for example those that were married. However, that changed in May when married men were called up.

As usual, Agnes was given advance notification of the headlines by the Evening Standard vendor when he called at the kiosk for his usual. It was his habit to recite the headlines from the latest edition to her. This time, after his recitation, Agnes demanded a copy of the paper from him knowing that if the headlines were true it meant William was going to be called up. She had to read the article for herself before she could believe it. The vendor was a little taken aback by her vehement request for a paper but was mollified when Agnes explained that she had one son at 'The Front' and this news meant another would probably have to go. They both agreed that it was a sorry business, the vendor saying he was glad his son died at childbirth as it made his loss easier somehow because he didn't get to know his child. Agnes, thinking briefly of her own stillborn daughter, agreed with him. However painful it was at the time, now it seemed easier to lose a child one didn't know.

That evening, instead of going straight home as was her usual habit, Agnes went directly to the shop in Kingsway, ducking behind the counter and up the stairs to the flat above the shop where William and Elaine lived. As she entered Agnes called out to Elaine. Elaine answered that she was in the kitchen and to come on through. As Agnes entered, Elaine was pouring water from the kettle into the teapot.

"William isn't here but I hope you will stay of a cup of tea."

"It's you I wanted to see and I never turn down an offer of a cuppa," replied Agnes. "Have you heard the news,

they are conscripting married men from today. I thought I would come around to see if you had heard. I don't suppose that William will be called up right away but when he is called, I want you to know that I will help you in any way I can."

Elaine resumed helping Harry feed himself. "Thank you, Ma. I hadn't heard but we knew it was coming. William and I have talked about what will happen to the business when he is called up but he hasn't made any definite plans, yet. I suppose that the system will be the same as for the unmarried men so there will be time to make all the arrangements. Oh, it's a worry, though. I'm glad you come over to tell me," she added and on impulse touched Agnes' arm.

"William is clever enough not to get himself into trouble and Charlie will look after him. Anyway, he is not called up yet. The war might be over before they get around to him."

Agnes looked at her. Elaine gave a rueful smile, "Yes, I know. It's unlikely to end soon but there is no harm in dreaming. There, all finished!" The last remark was directed at Harry who had been making steady progress through his tea while they talked. Elaine, after wiping Harry's face and hands, lifted him out of the highchair and plonked him on his grandmother's lap. He grinned at her and Agnes, delighting in her chubby, healthy grandson, grinned back feeling herself relaxing as she did so. If William was already deciding what will happen to the business when he was called up then she will leave it to him. Her private worry about having two of her three sons at 'The Front' were nobody's concern but hers.

Agnes stayed for a while longer, as much as for the pleasure of entertaining Harry as to chat with Elaine.

One Sunday, soon after Agnes' visit, William, Elaine and Harry invited themselves to supper. It was a joyful affair, William teased his sisters, Harry charmed his aunts as only a two year old can, even Iris forgot herself enough to laugh out loud on more than one occasion. After Elaine had tucked her son into his grandmother's bed and rejoined the others at the table, William started by saying "I hate to introduce a serious note, but I want to tell you what I have decided about running my business when I am called up and have to go to France.

I have been made an offer for the shop in The Aldwych, which I have accepted. Ma, I would like you to keep running the kiosk, and you George, making the deliveries as usual. Junie, I would like you to be in charge of the Kingsway shop and Elaine overseeing both shop and kiosk, the ordering and so forth. Now, Iris," he said, "I haven't asked you but do you want to work with Junie in the shop or are you happy to keep working in the Lyons tea shop? I don't want you to feel ignored," he added while studiously avoiding meeting Junie's eye.

"Thank you for asking, brother, but I am quite happy to keep on at Lyons. One meets such a nice class of lady there. Quite different to the sort of person who buys tobacco at Kingsway or The Strand."

Agnes noticed that Junie relaxed at Iris' words while maintaining her expression of mild interest and smiled to herself. It was useless to deny that her children remained close knit but there was a difference between spending few hours before and after work in each other's company and

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working together. Agnes thought that if Junie had difficulty imagining working with Iris, then the remainder of her children would not even contemplate such an arrangement. Only Iris could slight the business that employed her siblings while exalting her own workplace without a voice raised against her.

William's call up papers finally arrived at the end of August when everyone's nerves were frayed by summer heat and the seemingly endless waiting. Elaine confided to Agnes that it was a relief to know when he would be going and together they planned a family party to see him off. Agnes wrote to let Charlie know he was to expect his brother to join him in a few more weeks. She was not unduly concerned not to receive a reply to her last two letters. She had idly wondered if the letters had been so censored there was no more sense in them. She knew that if Charlie was seriously injured or even killed she would be told via a telegram and no such communication had been received. Agnes had said to Charlie when he was last home on leave that she wished he would write more often. Charlie had replied that there was very little to write about and anyway "it was difficult to keep my feet dry let alone find paper when we are at The Front." With that she had to be content but that didn't stop her wanting to hear from her son more often.

The party was attended not only by Agnes, George and the girls but also by Agnes' extended family; her sisters Betty and Susan and their respective husbands. Betty explained that two of her girls were working at the munitions factory. "Well paid but dangerous" was her

verdict “And I don’t like the way their skin is taking on a yellow tinge. You know they are starting to call them ‘Canary Girls’. But they wanted to make a contribution to the war effort.” Betty sighed, “With their men away at war I don’t see why they should but I suppose they have to have some money coming in. It’s not like your children have to go far away to find a job,” said Susan with a sideways glance at William. Agnes decided to let that remark pass without comment, Susan always had had a waspish tongue. She was glad that her daughters weren’t lured by the thought of fuller pay packets and content to work nearer to home. Betty opened her mouth as if to say something but William and Elaine chose that moment to introduce Betty and Susan to Harry. The Aunts made an appropriate fuss and complimented William and Elaine on Harry’s behaviour. Noting that her grandchildren were older Betty had said how much she had enjoyed her grandchildren when they were Harry’s age. “But I see more of them than I used to as they come to me from school until their mother collects them when her shift ends. They are all doing well at school but they are missing their Pa and my girl’s are so tired when they finish work, it can’t be good for the kids.” Susan agreed saying to Elaine “you don’t know how lucky you are only having one young one to worry about.”

Agnes didn’t think that luck had much to do with it but kept her thoughts to herself.

Loud, raucous male laughter distracted Agnes. She glanced quickly to the side of the room where her brothers-in-law were gathered around the table on which were placed some jugs of beer. George was with them. Encouraged by his uncles George had drunk more than he

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was used to. William moved over to join his uncles before Agnes was able to do anything herself. George came over say that William had sent him over to ask if they would like more tea and can he get them some sandwiches or cake.

“Here, George, take Harry for a while, will you,” said Elaine. “I will get a tray for us.”

“How very thoughtful of her, Agnes,” commented Betty. “You have a very considerate daughter-in-law. I must be getting old,” she added with a laugh, “I am very comfortable to be seated and waited upon these days. Mind you, when my grandchildren arrive, I don’t get a moments peace.”

She didn’t look too unhappy about that thought Agnes, Betty had always been a bit of a willing martyr where her children were concerned. Bless me, if she wasn’t complaining that the boys eat her out of house and home. Agnes was just about to open her mouth and suggest that Betty ask her daughters for more money for their children’s expenses when Susan’s husband came over and announced that they were leaving. Susan protested that she wasn’t ready to leave but her husband insisted. As he grabbed her arm and practically pulled her away, Susan had no choice but to make perfunctory goodbyes to her sisters.

Susan’s departure signalled the departure of the extended family. Agnes managed to catch William’s eye and discretely indicated that he should meet her outside the room. When William joined her Agnes asked him what had precipitated Susan’s sudden departure. His reply that she shouldn’t worry about it earned him a direct look and a repeat of the question.

He sighed and said “they were encouraging George to drink too much then making fun of him. I told them that that kind of behaviour wasn’t welcome here and if they were to continue, I would ask them to leave. I think Aunty Susan’s husband was the one who started it. Uncle Jim just went along with him. Anyway Uncle Fred didn’t take too kindly to my interference so I told him to leave. I think he was a bit worse for the drink himself.”

Agnes pursed her lips. “I don’t like anyone making fun of George, family or not. I never really cared for Susan’s husband myself. Oh, William,” she almost wailed, “I shall miss you.”

“Hey, Ma! I am relying on you to bear up and support Elaine and Harry while I am gone. Don’t worry, I won’t be gone long. With me and Charlie at The Front, the Bosch won’t stand a chance.”

Agnes smiled, a little watery to be sure but his words had steadied her. She patted his arm. “Don’t worry, son. I’ll look out for them.” With that they returned to the room before anyone should miss them.

Elaine handed around Harry for goodnight kisses from his aunt, grandmother and father whispering to William as he said goodnight to his yawning son “I don’t think I will be away long.” He smiled at her and said that he would be waiting. Elaine laughed and whisked Harry out of the room.

“That awful Uncle Fred,” Junie started. “Sorry Ma, I know his is married to Aunty Susan but he is an awful man, he asked me if he could have a Family Discount,” her brother could hear the capital letters in the way she pronounced the words. “and he has roving hands,” she added almost as an afterthought.

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“Clammy, roving hands,” added Rosie with a shudder.

William got white around the lips. “He gets no discount,” he said firmly. Adding, “if he ever comes into the shop.”

“He won’t get anything from me except the sharp edge of my tongue. And don’t you go delivering anything to him, George. Even if he asks you nicely,” added Agnes. “In fact if he ever asks you, you can tell him from me that ... No, if he ever asks you for anything, you are to tell me and I will tell him what I think of him to his face.”

“Clammy hands indeed,” muttered Agnes. “Just let him ask,” William heard her say and thought that Uncle Fred had made a mistake to get the wrong side of his sister-in-law.

Elaine rejoined them and William told her not to offer a discount to Uncle Fred. “I should think not, nasty man. You didn’t do anything wrong, George. Just stay away from him. He doesn’t have your best interests at heart, like we do. Here, have another cup of tea.”

William was due to leave for his medical the next day. He stated that he didn’t think his departure warranted closing the shop or kiosk. “It’s not as if I am leaving tomorrow. It’s only a medical and I might be considered unfit like George.” Agnes and Elaine had looked at each other, reading disbelief in each others eyes. Nor were they wrong. Agnes had just popped in to deliver her next days order for the kiosk when William returned that night. He didn’t even raise his eyebrow at her feeble excuse for being there with Elaine. He was, he declared, fit for active

service and would be leaving next week. Elaine turned a gulp of dismay into a cough. Agnes had been expecting that he would pass the medical, sighed and said she had expected that. "Oh well, son. Just make sure you catch up with Charlie, won't you. I'll be on my way. Got to get home and make sure your sisters have got supper on the go." She waved them back as both of them made to get up and show her out. "I can find my own way," and left in a hurry before the tears spilled over and ran down her cheeks. "I am just a silly, old woman," she berated herself as she slowly made herself home. "I can't let the children see me like this. William is right, I have to be strong." Being strong, she ruefully reflected, was what she had been doing for most of her life. With a mental sigh, she pushed dark imaginings to a corner of her mind and left them there. By the time she reached home she had regained her usual state of mind and was able to tell Rosie, Junie and George that William was going to war. Iris who came in as she was telling them, went a little pale when she was told the news and was quiet for the rest of the evening.

William insisted that the shop and kiosk remain open when the day came for him to go to war. Junie had colluded with Elaine to look after the shop alone as she accompanied her husband to Victoria Station. Agnes had said her goodbyes the previous evening. She tried to keep the anxiety out of her voice as she wished him godspeed. William had promised that he would find Charlie and let her know how he was before she had a chance to say anymore on the matter herself. "The children still look out for each other," she thought, adding "even now when they are grown up. I hope William finds Charlie in time."

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Agnes was beset by sudden doubts. There had been so many articles on the newspapers about the dreadful loss of life and the growing problem of soldiers suffering from 'shell shock'. Some seemed to think that it was being used as an excuse to leave the battlefields. Agnes wasn't sure. If the little Charlie had told her when he was last home on leave was true, then Agnes could understand how the almost constant fear could wear a man down. Even Charlie had seemed subdued, not his normal, loud and cheery self. She gave herself a mental shake. "Can't be worrying over things I have no control over," she said to herself and poured water into the teapot to make herself a nice, comforting cup of tea.

A few weeks later Agnes was behind the counter at the kiosk as usual when she caught sight of Elaine walking quickly towards her. Agnes' heart skipped a beat, a telegram, she thought but no Elaine would not be smiling if it was. Agnes served the next customer while she waited for Elaine to reach the kiosk.

It was a letter from William. Elaine had wasted no time before bringing it to her mother-in-law. She could have sent it with George but came herself so to take over serving customers while Agnes read. Before starting to read the letter, Agnes made Elaine and herself a nice cup of tea. Then she put on the reading glasses that William had insisted on buying for her and began to read.

"Ah, he found Charlie!" As she read a bit further on she exclaimed again, "good for him!"

"Well, Elaine," she said as she folded the letter back into its envelope and tucked her glasses back into her pocket. "Thank you for bringing the letter to me. I have been

worried about my boys. It looks like William has landed on his feet. I am surprised that the Army had the foresight to use his business experience by assigning him to the Quarter Master. I hope that means that he won't have to stay at The Front like Charlie. I hope that keeps him safe." Elaine agreed with her saying, "I knew you were worried about the boys so I that is why I bought the letter as soon as I could. I should be getting back. I left Junie on her own. She is very capable but it nearly time for the elevenses rush. Thanks for the tea. Bye!" With that she ducked under the counter, gave a cheery wave and was hurrying back to the shop on Kingsway.

William didn't prove a more reliable correspondent than Charlie. His letters were few and far between and what Elaine did receive was usually one side of the sheet of paper filled with irrelevancies and his requests to be remembered to this or that business acquaintance. He never failed to send his regards to his mother, sisters and brothers. Elaine seemed to take his guarded written words with stoicism. She once remarked to Agnes that he had never given voice to any words of love so why should he be expected to write them. "I know he loves me, always have done, but William has never actually said that he loves me." Agnes was filled with admiration for the sensible woman William had married. No doubt about it, Elaine and William suited each other and were happy together. I hope this war doesn't spoil their partnership, Agnes thought.

However, Agnes did not have much time for introspection. She, Elaine and Junie were running

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William's business for him. Agnes had found it very tiring at first; a long working day followed by the bookwork. She had tried to do the daily balance in the kiosk so she could drop the day's takings into the shop at Kingsway but she was forever being disturbed by people wanting cigarettes, cigars or tobacco. They could see light escaping from the sides of the metal shutter and bang away until she answered them. By which time Agnes had lost her place and had to start again. After two days when it had taken her until midnight to finish, she had asked Elaine if George could be sent at her closing time to escort her back to Kingsway.

Elaine considered this for a minute and suggested that George escort Agnes home where she could do the bookwork in her own time during the evening then George could bring the days takings with him the next morning.

This arrangement suited Agnes and the rest of her family quickly learnt not to disturb their mother when she had her reading glasses on and money and her ledger spread over the table. Rose soon got into the habit of counting the day's takings, arranging the coins according to value in piles amounting to one pound arrayed in a line along one side of the table to make counting easier. Agnes quickly came to rely on her speed and accuracy never having to recount the coins. Her columns of figures ... now that was another matter. William and Charlie had not inherited their mental arithmetic abilities from her. Agnes scratched her head and wondered where that elusive threepence had disappeared. She knew it existed

because Rosie had counted it there in the table but why didn't it appear in the ledger? It was getting late and she had an early start in the morning but couldn't go to bed until the books balanced. Her thoughts moved sluggishly in her tired brain. As she added the column of figures again she realised that she had written an entry badly in the column and if she just added everything correctly ... there, it balanced at last. Agnes drew two heavy lines under the day's entries and wearily closed the ledger. Rosie had scooped the takings into a cloth bag ready for George to take to Elaine the next morning and left her float in another bag which she put in her mother's bag.

"Ma," she began, "Me and Iris have been thinking."

Agnes was not too tired to correct Rose before she had a chance to go on, "Iris and I".

"Iris and I have been thinking," she dutifully repeated. Then continued, "how about we make the supper and prepare the sandwiches for our lunch while you do the books? You would probably be less tired and be able to finish them quicker. Iris and I can take it in turns to count the money as well."

Agnes was too tired to think about her proposal for long and certainly too tired to argue with her. "Let's try it for a week and see how it goes," she said. "I am off to bed."

The arrangement worked well once Agnes had got into the habit of giving the girls freedom to decide for themselves what they were cooking. Agnes had bought up all her girls to know how to cook. They just had to learn how to get the timing right so all the meal was ready at the same time. George had made one or two disparaging remarks about lumpy mashed potato or cold vegetables

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but quickly stopped when Agnes half seriously suggested that he try cooking supper the next day and see if he could do better. Junie was excused from cooking duty on the grounds that she was helping Elaine at the Kingsway shop and rarely arrived home before supper was about to be served. Both Iris and Rose made sure she pulled her weight when it came to clearing up. George washed, he had made a fuss and only agreed to help if he could wash up. Junie dried and put away, doing the chore with good grace while either Rose or Iris made sandwiches for all for their lunch next day.

Agnes found that she was usually able to finish the bookwork by the time supper was ready. She was grateful that the girls had suggested taking on the cooking. It was a job she usually enjoyed doing but deciding what they should eat, where and when to get the produce did take a great deal of mental effort. Mental effort that was now bent towards bookwork. Agnes fell to wondering how Elaine was coping? After all she not only had Harry to tend but the ultimate responsibility of the business fell on her shoulders. Soon after Agnes had a quiet word with Junie one evening after all the chores were done and there was time for a last cup of tea and biscuit before bed.

“She is looking a bit tired and careworn,” replied Junie in answer to Agnes’ enquiries about Elaine. “Harry is getting a bit of a handful. She must be finding it hard to run the business and look after him. I think the nights are the most difficult for her. No adult company, no one with whom she can discuss decisions. I know William used to talk over his ideas with her. Not that he would always agree with what she thought, mind, but I suppose it would help to be able to talk things through.”

Agnes pondered this.

“What would you say if I suggested that you move in with Elaine and Harry. Only until William comes home,” she added quickly in response to Junie’s startled look.

“I hadn’t thought of it to be honest, Ma. It does make sense as I already work in the shop and have been for a few years now. I certainly know the ins and outs of the business. Do you think Elaine would welcome the suggestion?”

“I don’t know. You will have to ask her to find out.”

Junie reported at supper the next day that she was moving to live with Elaine and Harry until William came home.

“I would like to move this Sunday, will you be able to help me, George. Can you carry my few bags on your bike?”

George said that he would be able to help her on Sunday as the football season hadn’t started so he would be free in the morning if she wanted. Junie did want. That evening she began to sort her belongings and begged the use of a hatbox belonging to Iris. Iris rather grudgingly gave her permission to borrow it, adding that she didn’t see why it was necessary for Junie to move in with Elaine - and so suddenly as well. Agnes overheard Junie explain to Iris that Elaine was family and she needed help. Iris demanded to know why Elaine’s family couldn’t help her, why it had to be us?

Agnes left the girls to their argument and went to ask a neighbour whose son, before he was called up, used to be a commercial traveller if she could borrow a suitcase for the weekend. Not wanting any misunderstandings and the subsequent gossip she explained that the suitcase was

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required because one of her daughters was planning to stay with her sister-in-law and she needed something in which to carry her bits and pieces.

Even giving this much information to a neighbour went against Agnes' grain somewhat. However, some people would speculate which led to gossip using almost no information at all. She knew that the sight of Junie and George carrying a hat box and suitcase would be sure to start tongues wagging. The explanation wouldn't stop the gossip but it might prevent lurid speculations. Agnes knew that some women in the flats thought she classed herself above them. Men in her experience gossiped but without the keeping the tale alive for weeks at a time nor with the maliciousness some women brought to their tattling. Agnes liked to keep her and her family's doings private not because she thought of herself 'above' those she lived with but because she expected a certain standard of behaviour and moral code from herself and her family; and by extension that came to include Elaine because she was William's wife. A moral code not shared with many in the block of flats where they lived. It was true, she mused, that they were not likely to be burgled because no self-respecting petty criminal thieved on his own patch or stole from those he lived with, a form of self-preservation maybe, a tacit agreement; if I don't steal from you, you won't shop me to the police. Nor did they have the criminal gangs that seemed to be rife in the East End, that is if you believe everything that is written in the papers which, on the whole, Agnes didn't. No, she had brought her children up to respect others regardless of their race, colour or creed. She kept herself and hers slightly apart because she did not want her children to be exposed to the

narrow world view of some she knew. She hadn't wanted her children to grow up fettered by a low expectation of what they could achieve. Would William have dared to buy Mr Goldschmidt's business as those years ago if she had bought him up differently? Would he have started working for Mr Goldschmidt in the first place? Given the way she had heard some of her near neighbours talk about Jews, she thought not. "I have no regrets," she thought. "No regrets about anything. Don't usually sit around thinking either. Must be past time for bed."

Agnes had also resolved to ask Elaine and Harry for a meal once a week. It would be a twofold boon for Elaine she thought. Get her out of the flat and her girls could share the burden, delightful though he was, of keeping an eye on Harry. She said as much when she called into the shop on her way home one evening. Elaine was upstairs trying to make up an order while keeping Harry from climbing on the chairs to get onto the table.

"Harry, get down! Thanks, Ma," said Elaine as Agnes rushed to pluck Harry from his exploratory assault on the furniture. "It is getting more and more difficult to get tobacco," complained Elaine, turning her attention back to the papers on the table. "Of course, it has been almost impossible to get Turkish tobacco since the beginning of the war but those horrible U-boats are starting to make American tobacco very difficult to find." Agnes couldn't do much to help her beyond suggesting that she make them some tea.

"Its been such a help having Junie here these past few days," said Elaine pushing aside some papers to make way for the cup of tea Agnes held in her hand. "I can't begin to say how thankful I felt when she made the suggestion. I

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was beginning to find the evenings especially difficult, when everyone had left and there was just me and Harry. That's when I started imagining things, noises, you know. Having Junie here means I am not so alone and I am sleeping better. She says that it wasn't her idea to come but she is glad she did." Elaine looked at Agnes over the top of her teacup. "Did you suggest to her that she come here?" Elaine must have read something in Agnes' face, "Why?"

"I believe that families should stick together. It seemed to me that raising young Harry," Agnes swiftly diverted Harry's attention from another assault on the furniture with a piece of bread and butter. "And," she went on, "running the business was asking a lot of you. William supported us, you married William, we support you."

"Sounds very simple when you put it like that. But you raised all your children on your own after their father died. William never said that anyone helped you."

"Ah, but that was different. I didn't have a business to run. I only had to turn up to work. Doing the books these past weeks has made me appreciate how much more work there is in the day to day operations than just being an employee. If Junie's staying here helps you then I'm glad. Don't want our William to come home and find you worn to the bone. Now, before I forget, I want you, Junie and Harry to come over to us once a week for a meal. It might as well be Sunday lunch, if that suits. That's settled then. May as well start this Sunday. Must be on my way. Oh! Can you tell Junie. I'll see myself out and leave you to your orders."

Life settled into a weekly pattern, Agnes worked in the kiosk from Monday to Saturday afternoon when she

closed for the rest of the weekend. At noon on Sunday Elaine, Junie and Harry arrived for lunch which they ate together at 1.30pm. Junie, Elaine and Harry generally left after 4.30pm leaving Agnes with Iris, Rosie and George. Sometimes, Elaine bought a cake which they had for tea. George amused Harry, by getting down on all fours and giving him horsey rides if it was raining. If it was dry he would take Harry to the yard behind the flats and kick a ball with him or they would join in playing 'kick the can' with the neighbourhood children.

The regular pattern of their lives was disrupted every so often when either William or Charlie returned for brief periods of leave.

Charlie was much quieter then when he went to war, happy to sit with the rest of the family during the evenings. Like William, he didn't say much about his experiences of war and seemed content to listen to conversations about everyday topics. Agnes was concerned for her son, although she took care not to let Charlie know. She noticed that sudden noises or bangs caused him to flinch.

She especially grew more concerned after George, bringing the daily order one day had lingered. Agnes, gave him a sharp look as this was not his usual custom and asked him what he wanted.

To her surprise he wrapped his arms round himself and started to rock back and forth.

"Ma, I don't want to sleep in my bedroom any more. I want to live with Elaine."

Agnes was mystified. "Here, George, come and sit down. I'll make you a nice cup of tea and you can tell me why you don't want to sleep in your bedroom anymore."

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She bustled around making tea and as she passed him a cup said "Now, why don't you tell me what this is about."

George appeared to be calmer, the normal routine of drinking tea seemed to have a soothing effect on him.

"Come on, Georgie. Tell me what's the matter."

"It's Charlie," burst out George. "He is frightening me. He cries out in his sleep and moves about and talks. I don't like it. I want him to stop."

"Oh you poor boy", said Agnes giving him a quick hug as she wondered what to do. "You love Charlie, don't you?" Her son nodded.

"You aren't frightened of him, just the noises he makes when he dreams, is that right?" Again George nodded.

"I want you to be very brave for Charlie. When he has a bad dream and makes noises, I want you to hold him until he quietsens. Can you do that for him?"

George mumbled that he would try. Agnes smiled at him. "I think Charlie needs you to try very hard and I think he will be very proud to have such a brave brother."

Now that George had made her aware of Charlie's nightmares Agnes was acutely conscious of the dark circles under Charlie's eyes, how he flinched at loud noises. Agnes wished William was home so she could discuss with him how she should treat Charlie. She sighed and served another customer. William wasn't here and wouldn't be while Charlie was on leave so she just had to do her best and hope it was enough. Even though her children were adult, or nearly adult, she still thought of them as children, they were still her responsibility and always would be. Age didn't seem to matter, she was their mother and it was up to her to find a solution to Charlie's

nightmares ... if she could. As usual with her family they all had a part to play. I hope George can help Charlie, she thought. I am not sure what else I can do.

I hate this war she thought with sudden savagery, I really hate what it has done to us. Sensible woman that she was, she realised that there was nothing she could do about the war, that she just had to live through it one day at a time.

Catching sight of Charlie a couple of days later, Agnes fancied that the circles under his eyes were lighter than she remembered; but she wasn't sure. On the other hand, it appeared that George no longer wanted to live with his sister-in-law so their little chat must have reassured him. Agnes resolved to have a quiet talk with Charlie when the opportunity arose. As luck would have it, the opportunity presented itself that very evening.

With Charlie's period of leave running out his sisters had planned to take Charlie and George out for the evening. There was plenty of bustle as Rosie and Iris got themselves ready, there was hair to do, dresses to press and noses to be powdered. George was already sitting and waiting in his best suit, face newly scrubbed when Agnes heard Charlie swearing in his bedroom. Alarmed at such out of character behaviour, Agnes motioned to George to stay where he was and went in to see what the matter was. She found Charlie sitting on the edge of the bed, shaking like a leaf with tears running down his cheeks.

"I can't go out like this, Ma," he cried. Agnes moved towards him, he wrapped his arms around her waist and sobbed into her apron.

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“There, there, son,” she gently stroked his hair. “there, there.”

Slowly, his sobs eased and his arms relaxed their grip around her waist.

“I will go and tell the others to go out without you tonight. Then I will make a pot of tea and we will have a chat; just the two of us. Now wipe your face and come out when you are ready.”

Agnes went out and told his assembled brothers and sisters that Charlie wasn’t feeling very well and won’t be coming with them tonight.

There were exclamations of disappointment.

“Why don’t you go anyway. Junie will be expecting you, so someone will have to tell her that Charlie won’t be coming. Go and have some fun. Most likely, Charlie will be feeling better tomorrow so you can all go out tomorrow night.”

Iris started to demure, saying that she couldn’t afford to go out two nights in a row. Agnes fixed her with a steely glare, “Charlie is a very generous soul and I am sure that if he goes out with you tomorrow night, he will make sure you won’t have to pay for a thing.”

Iris subsided, she knew better than to argue with her mother when she was in that mood! They clattered out, shouting their goodbyes through the closed bedroom door to Charlie.

After they left a sheepish looking Charlie emerged from the bedroom her shared with George.

“Sorry, Ma. Didn’t mean to breakdown like that. Just the thought of having to go back soon ...”

“Charlie, we all know that you are not the same person you were before you went away. We are all worried about

you. Your brother and sisters would do anything you wanted if it would bring the old Charlie back. That is why they they planned this night out, the old Charlie would have leapt at the chance but the old Charlie was left behind at The Front, wasn't he. Have a cup of tea and you can tell me all, some or nothing; I really don't mind. If you want to speak about the war, I will listen but if you'd rather talk about something else, I will still listen. Oh, and before you say anything, I'm your mother. If you can't have a cry in front of me then I don't know who you can. So you needn't say anymore about that. And all I will say about it is that I knew there is something wrong and I don't think any differently about you. After all," said Agnes with a grin, "it's not the first time you have cried in my arms."

"Been a while, though," said Charlie as a rueful smile flitted across his face. Then he grew serious.

"It's difficult to explain to someone who hasn't been there. It's all so unreal here; Iris and Rosie talking about dresses and what to buy for supper." He got up and started pacing around the room.

"It always seems to be wet. Thick mud, all churned up, wet feet. Rats, oh I hate rats, Ma. Some of the chaps make pets of them, they are always running around. God knows they don't stay with us for the food. And the noise! Explosions near and far. The noise from the mortars Jerry shoots at us or we shoot at them; the cries of men caught wounded in no mans land and they won't shut up," his voice rose.

Agnes, sensing the underlying hysteria, sought to distract him. "Here, Charlie, don't let your tea get cold. Drink it up while it is hot."

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Obediently, he came back to sit at the table and drunk his tea.

He looked up and saw Agnes looking at him in concern “Don’t worry about me, Ma. I’ll be ok. It’s just the thought of going back. I’ll be fine when I get there.”

Agnes smiled, “Course you will, son.” Silently, she resolved to write to William tonight, if possible, and ask if there is anything he can do, any strings he can pull to get his brother away from The Front. After all, she thought, there must be lots of jobs that to be done that don’t involve being so close to the enemy.

“Sorry, Ma. Nerves are a bit shot. George has been a real pal. I think my nightmares frightened him at first but he’s been a brick. He has made the nights much easier to bear.”

“Have you told him,” enquired Agnes. Seeing Charlie shake his head, she said “Then tell him. He wants to help you, he looks up to you and William. It would mean a great deal to him if you told him how much easier he has made you sleep. Your nightmares did frighten him but now he knows he didn’t cause them so you need to thank him,” she added firmly.

They passed the rest of the evening quietly. Iris, Rose and George came home before 11pm. By that time Charlie was more like his old self and promised his siblings that he would take them for a night on the town the next evening.

It was getting close to closing time the next day when Charlie came up to the kiosk.

“Hello, Ma! Come with us for dinner before us younger ones go dancing.”

Agnes laughed and said that she would have the takings with her and had to do the books but Charlie wouldn't hear of it.

"Lets go and have oysters at Sheekey's. Drop the takings off home on the way, Come on, Ma. You know you love oysters and maybe a nice drop o' Guinness to go with 'em."

Oysters were her weakness, as well Charlie knew, so she let herself be persuaded. Charlie helped her close up and took charge of the money. Agnes tucked her arm in his as they walked homewards.

Not wanting to cause him embarrassment by referring to the previous evening, Agnes waited for Charlie to make the first mention of their conversation. They had walked in companionable silence and were almost home when Charlie said "I had a word with George at lunchtime. I went to meet him at the shop and took him to the pub for a quick drink. Did he say anything when he bought the afternoon delivery?"

"No, but he looked as pleased as punch with himself," smiled Agnes. She gave his arm a little squeeze, "Thanks."

"No, it was the right thing to do. And thanks for listening last night," he muttered as they reached the entrance to the flats.

"Say no more about it, son. Least said, soonest mended."

Iris and Rose were nearly ready when Agnes let Charlie and herself into the flat. Rose dashed past them and said something that Agnes couldn't make out. Rose had spoken through a mouthful of hair clips. Charlie interpreted for her, "something about Iris complaining

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that her dress had a dirty mark on it so Rose was doing her hair while waiting for the dress to dry. Girls!”

Agnes was reminded that Charlie had always known what Rosie was saying, even her baby babbling; seems he hadn't lost the knack.

George and Junie arrived soon after. Elaine had persuaded them that she was perfectly capable of closing without their help.

Rosie called Agnes in to their bedroom to change and offered to redo her hair. Agnes didn't think it needed repining but Rosie pressed her to sit in front of the mirror and began to brush out her hair regardless. Agnes had to admit this her hair looked much neater when Rosie finished. Rosie also insisted that her mother put on her Sunday best, “after all we are all dressed in our finery so you don't want to disgrace us, do you?”

Twenty minutes after coming home, Agnes was locking the door of the flat behind them before accompanying her children on the short walk to the oyster bar. As they entered, Agnes nodded to several people she recognised, either from her time at the Lamb & Flag or more recently customers of hers at the kiosk.

As they were a party of five, they decided to take a table together instead of separately sitting along the bar watching the oysters being schucked. Agnes caught sight of Mr Dickson at one of the corner tables. He rose and came over to them. Agnes made the introductions. All of her children had met him at some time when they were younger but he exclaimed to see them all grown up, “even young Junie is a young woman now. Where does the time go to Mrs Thomas? And you are looking very well yourself, looks like life is treating you well.”

“Charlie here is going back to the Front in a few days so we are making the most of remaining time with him. William is over there at the moment but fortunately he is at the rear with the Quarter Master,” replied Agnes. “Won’t you join us? Oh, but I see that you are one of a party.”

“Yes, I am with some people but if I may, I would sit and have a chat with you; if your children don’t mind.”

No one objected and Agnes and Mr Dickson spent a pleasant ten minutes catching up until the order in the form of oysters, brown bread and butter and stout arrived. Mr Dickson returned to his table with a parting assurance to Agnes that she was welcome at The Lamb & Flag anytime. The two younger girls exchanged smirks in hearing this gallantry. When Mr Dickson had passed beyond earshot, Rosie asked Agnes if Mr Dickson “was sweet on her.”

“Really! The idea! Mr Dickson was very good to us when you were young. It was very kind of him to say I was welcome at the pub anytime but I won’t be going. I don’t have time and besides I don’t go back,” she added before any of them could say anything.

“What do you mean, you don’t go back?” asked Charlie through a mouthful of oyster and brown bread.

“Don’t speak with your mouthful, Charlie. When I have gone back to places I haven’t been to for quite some time I never fail to be disappointed. Things and people change, nothing is quite the same as I remember it. I would rather have my memories than know how things are at present. If I go back to The Lamb & Flag, the patrons won’t be the same, some of the old characters will have died or gone elsewhere. The menu will have

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changed - well, if anyone replaced me I hope they have changed the menus. It would be difficult to buy some of the food now. Mr Dickson was planning to stop serving food all together when I left, if so that is another change. The pub wouldn't even smell the same! I have some good memories of the place and I don't want to change them. So I won't be going back," said Agnes with finality. "Now, lets change the subject. Where are you going tonight?"

The discussion this question prompted lasted quite sometime. Charlie was dead set against going to a music hall. He muttered something about how he didn't want to go back either. They finally decided to go dancing. To Agnes' secret amusement she realised that was what the girls had wanted and, by their dress, had planned to do all along . It just took the brothers sometime to recognise that that is what they wanted to do as well.

Her children insisted on walking Agnes home despite her protests that she was quite able to find her own way home, thank you.

Charlie was back at war by the end of the week. The flat felt emptier without his presence. Agnes hoped that George was sleeping better now that his night nursing had ceased. She didn't ask and George had said nothing. She was still worried about her second eldest son and hoped that William had received her letter and was able to find a way to do what she had asked of him. Not for the first time she wished the sons were more communicative like her daughters. There were times when Iris was too ready to let all know her thoughts, so much so that she knew or could guess Iris' opinion on nearly everything, Agnes reflected ruefully. This thought was getting dangerously

near to expressing favouritism, something she was scrupulous in avoiding. Iris had many good qualities and it was unfortunate that circumstances had dictated that she had to miss some of the opportunities that she had wanted so desperately. Agnes sighed, "I can't be given to regrets over past decisions. I did the best I could." Such reflections, she thought, don't get the job done. The job in question was adding the value of the daily sales. The figures were getting increasingly more difficult to see.

Iris and Rosie came into the flat almost simultaneously. "Ma! Why are you squinting like that," demanded Rosie. "I was reading that squinting can lead to headaches. Have you a headache?"

Agnes confessed that she was having difficulty seeing the numbers on the page and newspapers seem to have reduced their print size as well," she complained. Iris and Rose exchanged glances. Agnes intercepted the exchange and demanded to know what they meant by it.

"Are you sure you don't have a headache," enquired Rose. "You are very testy this evening."

"Rosie and I have noticed that you are not reading as much and that you seem to be having trouble seeing the figures in the ledger," said Iris. "We have been thinking," she continued, "and think you may need new spectacles. There is an opticians near work and I would be happy to make an appointment for you."

"Junie can mind the kiosk for you," added Rosie. "I have already asked her and she doesn't mind which day or time."

Agnes looked from one to the other. She massaged between her eyebrows. "I don't seem to have much choice. Make me the appointment on your way to work

tomorrow if you can, Iris. Now, I need to add these numbers and whose turn is it to cook tonight? It's getting late." The girls laughed, knowing that there was no malice in their mother's words just her natural irritation at being out thought by her children and turning their attention from their mother began to prepare supper.

Two weeks later Agnes was adding up the sales figures as usual but it was made much easier by the new spectacles she had perched on her nose. Her new glasses, she reflected, were making a great difference. The evening book work did not take as long; mainly due to fewer errors.

Agnes had suddenly become aware of having more free time in the evening. She had seized the opportunity and rediscovered the pleasure of reading. Not just newspapers but the joy of reading books. While not anticipating the expense of reading glasses, Agnes had to admit that it was money well spent. She had a bit of money 'put by'; thrift was a lifetime habit and 'saving for a rainy day' was easier now that the children had employment of their own and no longer relied on her to provide for all their needs. She had insisted that she could pay the opticians account herself even though it was more than she expected. On the way back to the kiosk from the opticians, she had passed the Charing Cross Library on Leicester Square. On impulse, she had entered and upon enquiring of the friendly young woman at the front desk she had completed the necessary form, provided proof of her address and was told she could borrow up to four books for a period of two weeks. Agnes was directed into the lending room and made her way to the fiction section. Being conscious that Junie was filling in at the kiosk and Elaine would probably

be missing her, Agnes did not have time to linger over her choice of books. She was at the beginning of the alphabet so chose 'Silas Marner' by George Elliot and 'The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes' by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; she had enjoyed reading a good murder story in her youth.

She had quickly developed a habit of sitting after supper and reading a few chapters of a library book in the evening. She quickly became engrossed in her chosen volume and it didn't take her children long to realise that it took a great deal to intrude on her concentration when she had a book in her hand. Agnes read voraciously, it was as though she was trying to make up for all the years when she was too tired or busy to pick up a book for any length of time. Her taste was eclectic, ranging from the Victorian classics of Charles Dickens to the African adventure tales of Rider Haggard. When she was young she read to escape the day to day squalor to be found in a large family of very limited means. Now, she read to escape the anxieties bought about by having two sons taking part in the waging of the war in France.

However, she had received one piece of news that had somewhat relieved her worries. A letter from William had arrived that contained a message for her. Elaine had forwarded the letter to her with George's usual daily delivery.

William had written that Charlie had obtained a position of batman to an intelligence officer, based behind the Front. The information was brief because William obviously didn't want to fall foul of the censor. However, he did include that Charlie had found the position himself before William could do anything to help him. Agnes

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knew better than to expect to hear from Charlie and resigned herself to waiting until either of the brothers returned home on leave before finding out more details. Sighing to herself and thinking that no news is good news, Agnes went about her daily business of keeping her Kiosk customers happy and spending time in the evenings with her library books.

November and peace had been declared. Agnes and the rest of her family were looking forward to having William and Charlie back with them again. 'Home by Christmas' now had real meaning and Agnes began to look forward to Christmas this year, anticipating it being less dreary than those of recent years.

At the beginning of December, four weeks after the armistice was signed, William and Charlie returned home. Charlie, who looked healthier than the last time he was at home, remarked that "William had managed to wangle their demob earlier than scheduled." He spoke very little regarding his experiences but waxed eloquent about the Captain he looked after. "I can't speak highly enough of him, a real gentlemen he is. Very particular in his habits and dress. He looked after his men, which is more than you could say about some of them and the men respected him 'cos they couldn't get nothing past him." George resumed his nocturnal caring role as it appeared that the improvement in his physical health and his job with the Captain hadn't affected his nightmares.

However, Agnes was pleased that he was healthier as she was sure it would make him better able to withstand the Spanish flu that was doing the rounds; often with fatal consequences. She had made sure that her family had

always eaten well, even during the impoverished years of their early childhood she had ensured that there was always bread in the house. Boys of course had such large appetites but at least there was always something to fill them, not like those poor, scrawny children of the East End with their distended bellies; or even some the children in their neighbourhood, thinking of the neglected children of several families who lived nearby.

She was at the kiosk and stamped her feet to induce some life back into as the cold numbed her toes. The shops in The Strand were decorated for Christmas and between customers Agnes peered around the walls of the Kiosk to admire them. During the war she had missed the decorations and seeing them again and having her two boys return safe made her feel all Christmassy. She began thinking of food for Christmas and was wondering whether to buy a goose and chicken or two chickens and no goose when Elaine came up to the counter. Agnes swiftly invited her in and put the kettle on.

Agnes was about to ask Elaine her opinion on what and how many fowls she would prefer when Elaine spoke first. Agnes was so taken up in thoughts of Christmas that it took her sometime to understand what Elaine was talking about. Then her mind caught up and she realised that Elaine was worried about William.

“He doesn’t want to talk about the war and I don’t mind that but he is keeping me awake half the night by shouting in his sleep. I worry that he is going to wake Harry. And that is another thing, the other night William went missing. I looked in to see that Harry was ok and saw William on his knees by the boy’s bed, sobbing his heart out. Tears rolling down his face. He didn’t wake the boy

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though, Harry slept through. I haven't said anything but I am worried about him. What do you think, Ma?"

"Charlie is still having bad nightmares, George looks after him. They are not as bad as when he was on leave last but bad enough. I suppose they don't want to worry us by telling us of what they saw and did over there. If I was you, I would tell William that you saw him by Harry's bed the other night," said Agnes slowly, thinking as she spoke. "I would tell him that while he doesn't have to talk to me or you if he doesn't want to, we will always be here to listen to him if he has a change of heart. How has he been otherwise?"

"It is as if he has never been away," said Elaine with a rueful smile. "I don't miss the worrying I used to do when he was away but I do miss being in the shop as much. He seems to think that I can just go back to the way things were. Don't get me wrong, I love Harry but it seems like my world has closed in on me now that William is back."

"Won't Harry go to school next year? You will be able to help William in the shop while he is at school. Where is the little fellow now?"

"Junie offered to keep an eye on him. In fact she suggested I go out for an hour or so. She said I was looking peaky and needed a brisk walk to bring the colour back into my cheeks."

"She always was a good girl, very observant and caring for another's welfare. Now, why don't you mind the shop while I make us another pot," suggested Agnes as she picked up the teapot.

After Elaine had gone, Agnes debated with herself as to whether she should tell William of their conversation. It didn't take her long to decide not to. After all, how they

lived their lives was their affair. She hadn't interfered before and she wasn't going to start now. She hadn't even asked Elaine if they were going to have another baby. In some ways another baby would give Elaine more to do but Agnes was determined not to interfere in the lives of her children and enquiring about the possibility of a brother or sister for Harry was the thin end of the wedge. She hoped that Elaine and William would talk to each other but in the end it was none of her business.

Agnes needn't have worried about Elaine. A few days before Christmas, William and Elaine invited all the family to supper. After they had eaten and Harry had been put to bed William announced that he had decided to open another shop.

"Isn't it a bit soon to be thinking of another shop" blurted out Agnes. "The war is only just over and not everyone is back home."

"Just so, Ma," William replied. "However, business will pick up in the coming new year or next and now is the time to be expanding. Then we will be ready for the new customers and not playing catch up like some. I have my eye on a vacant shop in Leicester Square. If I can negotiate favourable terms, I would like to be open in February. Would you like to manage it, Junie? George, reckon your legs will be able to manage the extra couple of delivery miles you would have to do a day? Elaine has offered to help me in this shop during the busy times, so what do you say to a bit of extra responsibility, Junie?"

"Well, I don't know. If you think I can, William."

"You and Elaine did really well while I was away. I wouldn't be asking if I didn't think you could do it."

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“Yes, yes I will then,” said Junie all in a rush, either before William could change his mind, or she changed her mind, Agnes wasn’t sure which way it was. Either way, it looked like Elaine’s world was opening up again.

George spoke up “Err, William. I could make the deliveries much faster if I had a motor.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, brother. Lets just stick to seeing how the new shop goes before I start to think of other investments,” laughed William.

Agnes was a little alarmed at the thought of George getting behind the wheel but calmed herself with the thought that it was not likely to be anytime soon.

“Charlie, Iris, I can find jobs for you if you need one.”

Both Iris and Charlie declined his offer. Iris with her customary brusqueness, Charlie said he didn’t know what he wanted to do.

“I know I don’t want to go back to the music halls. It just doesn’t seem right after what we have been through, too frivolous somehow. Thanks for the offer, old man but I still have a bit put by and until that runs out I don’t want to make any definite plans.”

Agnes thought that Charlie wasn’t fit enough to get a job at the moment and was glad that William didn’t push him. Iris opened her mouth as if to say something to Charlie but a glance at William made her shut it again without uttering a word.

“I am enjoying my job, as well, thank you William,” said Rosie. “In fact, who do you think came into the department today; a pilot! Well, he said he was a pilot during the war. He was with his mother who had come to look at the new frocks we have just had delivered. He was ever so handsome and we had a nice chat while she tried

some on. He works at the swanky car place in Mayfair. No, George, he isn't a mechanic, leastways he couldn't be as he had clean hands. He said he sells the expensive new motorcars, you know, Daimlers and the like."

Iris stiffened and sniffed in derision, "I wouldn't let anyone pull the wool over my eyes. A pilot indeed. Honestly, Rosie, you will believe anything anyone tells you."

Rosie exclaimed that all she had said was that he seemed nice, Charlie and William were demanding to know his name, where he lived and George was talking about the relevant merits of a Daimler compared to a Bugatti. Agnes, Junie and Elaine took refuge in the kitchen and began the washing up.

"To think I missed Charlie and William when they were away," said Agnes.

"So long as they don't wake Harry," said Elaine. "It takes me long enough to get him to sleep when his favourite aunts and uncles come to visit. I really don't want to spend another hour getting him back to sleep."

Junie laughed, "Harry seems to sleep through practically anything. Don't you remember he slept through the sirens during the Zeppelin raids a couple of years ago. I don't think a lively debate will wake him."

"Well, it sounds like Rosie is giving as good as she gets," observed Elaine.

"Oh Rosie will only take so much before she fights back. William and Charlie are still doing the older brother act; laying down the law, 'you won't be seeing any man until we get to know him'," Junie deepened her voice as she mimicked her brothers. With a glance to her mother

she added "I don't think Rosie will let them get away with too much."

"The boys are only looking out for their sister," Agnes commented mildly. "This family looks after it's own. I'm sure William and Charlie only have Rosie's best interests at heart. It's too easy to take advantage of a girl, as well you should know, Junie. Rosie should be proud that her brothers look out for her the way they do. No, I don't mean that you have been taken advantage of," she added as Junie began to splutter. "My goodness, what has gotten into you all this evening?"

"It sounds like the 'lively debate' has ended," Elaine commented wryly. "Now, whose for a nice cup of tea? Will you give me a hand, Ma. Thanks for your help, Junie. Why don't you go and join the others." Elaine adroitly encouraged Junie to leave the kitchen.

"William hadn't told me of his plans when I saw you," she quietly said to Agnes. "When we had our little chat I had no idea he was thinking of expanding the business."

"I didn't say anything to him," Agnes assured her.

"Oh no! I am certain you didn't. I appreciate the way you don't interfere in your children's life; unlike some," she added bitterly.

Agnes cocked an enquiring eyebrow.

"No, it's ok," said Elaine with a little laugh. "My father drives William and me wild sometimes with his ideas for the business. Just 'cos he lent us money to get started, which William paid back with handsome interest as soon as he could, may I add. He thinks it gives him the right to tell William what to do. William has the patience of a saint and always hears him out. Which is more than I do." Elaine sighed, "He is getting worse as he gets older. I wish

my mother was still alive, she always knew how to handle him. Still, to get back to William's plans for the business. Oh thanks, Junie, just take the cups and saucers out, we will bring the milk and sugar with the tea, nearly ready.

No, what I was saying was that William took me by surprise a day or so after I had seen you. I had no idea he was planning to expand so soon. I thought he would work himself back in but it seems he had been planning this for some time only the war intervened.

There now, the tea has had time to brew properly, shall we join the others?"

William didn't waste anymore time. Junie, who moved back home when William returned from the war, gave regular progress reports during supper. He had decided to buy the building as the owner wanted to sell it quickly and accepted William's offer. Junie had visited the premises and declared its situation as perfect. William was very pleased as it was near the underground station so would pick up lots of passing trade. He also thought that it might be profitable to open until later on the evening to catch the cinema and theatre trade. Agnes was about to comment that she wasn't happy with the thought of Junie in the shop of an evening when George, smiling from ear to ear, said that William had asked him to work in the evenings. Junie explained the arrangement by saying that she would open the shop and at 6pm George would arrive and stay for three hours until she closed the shop at 9pm. George boasted that William had told him he could start work at midday but added seriously that he might have to pedal faster to get all his deliveries made. They all laughed at this and Rosie suggested that it could mean

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that George got his delivery motor sooner rather than later!

Charlie had volunteered to help get the shop ready for opening. William had him cleaning, painting and doing general maintenance. William found some glass fronted mahogany bookshelves at a reasonable price so he had them delivered to the new shop where they looked very handsome and he was confident that they were perfect for displays of cigarettes, tobacco and cigars; especially cigars. He was a great champion of mahogany as the preferred wood for humidors. Agnes had several customers who only bought their cigars from the Kiosk or the shop in Kingsway. They said that the cigars were not kept so well at other shops and allowed to dry out. Like herself and the rest of her children, William liked to do a job properly. Agnes understood that keeping cigars, especially the more expensive cigars and cigarettes, in the mahogany box that William had supplied for the purpose was good for business. So in the box they were kept and she had received, and passed on to William, several favourable comments about the quality of the tobacco products she had for sale. In fact she was certain that several of her regular customers patronised the Kiosk because of the care William ensured they all took with the stock. He had even gone so far as to fit a special mahogany box to the rear of George's delivery bicycle so that the cigars could be transported without fluctuations in temperature and environment.

So she was not surprised to see the cabinets positioned against the walls either side of the counter which ran the width of the shop. The walls were whitewashed and the floor carpeted so when William switched the light on

Agnes was astonished to see that the shop was lit not just with a central light but that there were electric lights on the walls that brilliantly and extravagantly cast light around the shop. The light reflected off the wood and glass and she was aware of the thick carpet beneath her feet. The atmosphere was very different to her familiar kiosk and the more workman like environs of the Kingsway establishment. It looked bright and modern, more uncluttered than she was used to in a shop.

“Well,” said William, “what do you think?”

He had insisted that all the family come to view the completed shop before it opened the next day. He and Charlie had done most of the work themselves and the two brothers were showing off their endeavours to the rest of them. It had meant long hours, especially for William and Agnes doubted that Elaine had seen much of her husband beyond a hurried breakfast. About a couple of weeks ago, worried that Charlie was not eating properly because he was working such long hours in the middle of winter she had taken a stew and some bread to the shop so she could be certain that he would be having a proper meal and found William working there as well. Agnes had taken it upon herself to take them something hot each night from then on.

Seeing the shop all set up was very different to the untidy surroundings she had been used to seeing every evening.

Agnes and the rest of the family looked around.

“I thought you said it was ready to open tomorrow,” Agnes said. “It doesn’t look as if you have much stock. George is going to be flat out bringing the supplies.”

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“That’s what I said, Ma,” relied Junie from behind the counter.

“I had Charlie line the room out back with shelves so most of the stock is back there. I wanted this area to be modern and uncluttered. What is for sale is displayed in the cabinets so customers go up to the counter, ask for what they want and Junie goes and gets it. Actually, I am hoping that they will give an order so Junie will have time to get a package assembled for them and George can make the deliveries at a certain time each day. I am expecting some passing trade, from the cinema and theatre crowd but given where this shop is located I am hoping to get mostly account customers during the day. In fact, I have had a telephone installed in just that expectation,” he ended with a dramatic flourish of his arm and Junie turned to one side and indicated the telephone.

“Coo!” exclaimed Rosie, obviously impressed, more with the fact that there was a telephone than her brother’s vision, Agnes thought. Iris tried hard to remain unimpressed by the surroundings but was losing the battle. George was impressed by whatever his older brothers did, Junie was proud of the shop and Elaine was proud of her husband. Judging by the reaction of the family, William, Agnes thought, had much to be pleased about. As usual on these occasions, Agnes was so proud of her family that her eyes watered.

“Well, after all this excitement, I could do with a nice cup of tea,” she said. “Why don’t we all go home and put our feet up. It’s a big day tomorrow.”

As was his custom, William had decided that the new shop would be opened with as little flourish as possible and rely on word of mouth to increase trade. It soon happened with the cinema crowd who were lining up for entry to the big Leicester Square cinema. They had the buskers to entertain them but still there was plenty of time to look around and spot a new shop. Soon, Junie was busy supplying the needs of men who had just nipped into the shop leaving their wives or girlfriends to keep their place in the queue.

Junie had mentioned that she was kept busy by the matinee and George by the evening cinema crowd but the remainder of the day was very quiet. Agnes was concerned and mentioned that business at the new shop might not be going as well as William had first expected. William did not appear to be concerned and his confidence was soon rewarded. When word began to spread that there was a new branch of William Thomas tobacconists in Leicester Square trade at other times of the day picked up. It picked up further when butlers and ladies maids discovered that they could telephone their orders to a delightfully helpful and knowledgeable girl and receive reliable same day delivery.

William had counted on Junie's manner appealing both to the masters and their servants. Time showed his business acumen as the new shop gradually amassed a reputation for 'quality among the quality' as Charlie joked one day when Junie had called him in to help during a particularly busy day. There were always plenty of deliveries for George to make and William began to think that George would get his van sooner rather than later.

Proud Hearts

Junie and William were talking one evening after closing time on an especially busy day.

“It was so busy today some customers had left before I could serve them. Taking time with each one is all very well; don’t get me wrong,” she said quickly. “I do enjoy talking and getting to know them. It is just that the process takes time and some of the gentlemen get impatient and walk out before I can get to them. I have thought about it and I think I need an assistant that I can direct the easier sales to which would free me up to take the time I need with the more, er,” she paused while thinking of the word.

“Long winded?”

“Yes, long winded customers. The ones that I need to take more time with. It isn’t necessary to have someone all day; but it would help.”

“I’m glad you raised the matter of help, it is something I have been thinking about as well. Yes, I think you are right, assistance is certainly needed and I think that somebody has to be female and attractive. We have a reputation to maintain,” William said with a grin.

“Now, how about your sisters. Iris? We are talking about this from a purely business point of view. No, I don’t think so,” he added before Junie could speak. “Rosie?”

“No, I think she is set at Selfridges, more interested in clothing than what we sell.”

“I think it would be difficult to have one of your sisters work here, you being the youngest but in charge. Not sure it will go down well with Ma either. No, I will have to find a younger girl from outside the family,” he said decisively. “Leave it with me. Now, how is George doing with the deliveries?”

They discussed deliveries for a while. Junie was of the opinion that George was coping well and he could comfortably cope with his daily run on his bicycle. William thought that it would probably be quicker by bike to deliver in certain areas but for shuttling between all three shops George would get his van sooner rather than later.

Next day William called into the Kiosk and spoke with his mother.

“Junie is going to have some help in her shop. I don’t think the job will be suitable for either Iris or Rosie. I was wondering if you knew of a girl who might be suitable?”

“There is Violet, my sister Betty’s eldest girl’s youngest daughter. The one she has bought up since her mother was killed in the munitions factory explosion. You could see if she is suitable. Can’t think of anyone else at the moment but I can keep my ears open. How is the business going? I don’t get to talk to Junie much these days. She comes home later than the other two then either falls asleep just after supper or goes out on the town with Rosie, Charlie and Iris. My children are turning into gadflies!”

William laughed. “Business is going as well as expected.” Knowing that his mother would need more detail to set her mind at ease, he added, “The shop on Kingsway is doing well as usual, it has a good regular clientele.” He paused, “although Elaine tells that she gets a lot of enquiries from the regulars asking where Junie has gone. You know how this Kiosk is going and I am very happy with how you are managing the business here. The shop at Leicester Square isn’t quite in the black yet but

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Junie is doing a great job. I really didn't expect to be looking for someone this early, nor did I expect to be about to start looking for a suitable van for George quite so soon, either. But, Junie needs someone to help her and the van will be required sooner rather than later. I may as well start looking now, spend the money this year and reap in the profits next year! Junie and I did discuss if either of her sisters would be suitable but I thought it might be too difficult for her to be their boss during the day and their little sister at night. That is why I came and asked you if you knew anyone, I would like to keep it within the family, even the extended family."

"In that case, how about I ask Betty to lunch on Sunday and see if she can bring Violet with her. That way you will be able to find out if she will be suitable and Junie can find out if she can work with her. There will be a few of us as Charlie asked if an old army friend of his can come. With you, Elaine and Harry, Betty and Violet that would make an even dozen. Haven't cooked for so many, lets see now, it must have been before the war!"

Knowing how his mother enjoyed cooking for her family, William did not object to the plan and left her thinking about what she could cook as she served the steady stream of customers.

It had been a good idea of hers to invite Betty and Violet to lunch last Sunday, mused Agnes between customers. Violet had seemed in awe of her slightly younger but more work wise cousin. And that wasn't all that happened at lunch. Charlie's friend, Hubert, seemed to have taken a shine to Iris, so much so he asked her to go

to the pictures with him tonight. Don't know how he had time to notice Iris as he seemed to have spent all his time talking cars, vans and engines with George. George had very excitedly told her later that Hubert was a mechanic. There is going to be no stopping George from nagging William now, thought Agnes ruefully.

Agnes had also enjoyed the chat she and Betty had over several cups of tea after lunch. The young ones had taken their cousin for a walk to show Violet the shop at Leicester Square, the Kiosk in the Strand before walking William, Elaine and Harry home to the shop in Kingsway.

Betty had always been Agnes' favourite sister and she resolved to see her more often now that Betty's husband had died. Agnes had not been especially fond of the man, thinking that he did not treat his wife particularly well. He hadn't hit her, not that Agnes was aware, during their life together but there were other ways to hurt that did not leave bruises on the body and there was no doubt that Betty's mind had been bruised by her life with him. Ah well, time is a great healer, thought Agnes as she hoped that her sister would recover the personality she had before her marriage.

Junie had told her that Sunday evening that Violet was so obviously impressed with the shop at Leicester Square so William had offered her the job that afternoon. Violet would start next Monday. Junie seemed so relieved that she was getting help. Agnes couldn't help thinking that William was right; neither of her sisters would be suitable. Violet was just enough removed from the immediate family to not be affected by the difference in age between her and Junie. Nor by Junie's experience of running the

Proud Hearts

shop. No one except William could match Junie's experience in that shop or the one in Kingsway. There was no doubting that William knew his business and there was none better either, Agnes thought proudly. He was a good boy, they had all turned out well. Now to get the rest of them married off. She could rely on the boys to vet her daughter's suitors. Must have a chat to Charlie and see what he thinks of Hubert. She then got distracted by a customer who had a request that was expressed in a complicated fashion but the right sort of questions elicited a response that in turn became a request that was easy to satisfy. Another happy customer, thought Agnes as she turned to the next gentleman at the counter.

Agnes took the opportunity of Iris' absence that evening to ask Charlie about Hubert . According to Charlie, Hubert was a good sort, good with his hands but a man of few words. "Doesn't mean he is stupid though," Charlie was quick to defend his friend although Agnes had said nothing. "Some of the boys in the platoon thought he was slow to start with. Then they realised that Hubert doesn't speak unless he has something to say. Should suit Iris," he added with a grin. "She can yammer at him all she likes and he won't disagree with her unless he thinks it very, very important."

"Do you think he is serious about her, then," asked Agnes.

"Too early to tell, Ma. But I wouldn't have let him ask her out if I didn't think he was alright." He then told her he was going out to see a chap and would be home later but she shouldn't worry.

Agnes waited up until Iris came home. She offered her daughter a cup of tea as a nightcap. Without being prompted by her mother, Iris immediately began to talk of Hubert. She was late home because they had been walking slowly while Hubert talked of his plans for the future. Charlie who had returned just after Iris and was listening to his sister opened his mouth to say something then after a look from his mother, promptly shut it without making a sound.

“He is happy where he is working but would like to open his own business eventually. It is good to know that he has ambitions and is not content to stay in the same job all his life. He is a very good listener,” she went on.

Agnes deliberately avoided meeting Charlie’s eye. Iris chatted on about Hubert for sometime, unaware of her brother’s amusement. “He has asked me to go dancing with him on Friday night,” Iris eventually said. “I will have to ask Rosie to let me borrow her new blue dress. She can wear my old one if she wants to, after all I am the one who has been asked out. Now, I am off to bed. Goodnight.”

“What did I say, Ma. What did I say.” Charlie managed to whisper when his silent laughter had allowed him to speak. “He will suit her very well, see if I’m right. I’m for my bed as well. Oh, by the way, I will be starting work on Monday. Saw my old captain this evening and he offered me a job at the British Museum. Just as an attendant but it should be interesting. Goodnight.”

Agnes wished him goodnight and rinsing out the tea cups ready for the morning thought that her life was never dull!

Proud Hearts

Charlie's courtship of Violet commenced with the expressed goodwill of Violet's mother. As she confided to Agnes over the tea table that Saturday "You could have knocked me down with a feather when I saw who come knocking at the door that evening. And Violet, the sly miss, hadn't said one word to me, me as bought her up after her mother died, who only has her best interests at heart.

But he was very proper about it, a credit to you Agnes. Spoke very nicely, as gentlemanly as you please. Asked me if I had any objections to his asking my Violet out to see a film on Friday night. Objections? I was almost wordless with surprise but how could I say no to one who asked so nicely. Then Violet came in from the kitchen, turned bright red when she saw your Charlie, he sprang to his feet and turned red. Lawks! They was like peas in a pod, both blushing fit to bust. I sent her back into the kitchen to make a pot o' tea, give her a chance to recover. Then we sat around the table having a cuppa as civilised as you please.

Now, Violet hasn't said to much today about last night but she did say she had agreed to see a film with him next Friday."

"So from that I think we can assume that the evening went to their mutual satisfaction," said Agnes.

"Lawks, you do talk posh sometimes, Agnes Thompson."

"Sorry, I am reading 'Whose Body' by a new author, Dorothy L. Sayers. It's jolly good but I think I am enjoying it so much, I am speaking like the characters in the book."

“Tut. This reading lark of yours; you always was a bit of a bookworm, Aggie. Anyway, back to Violet and Charlie. She is a few years younger than him but I don’t think that is a bad thing. Sometimes a girl needs someone older and wiser.”

“Aren’t you thinking ahead too far? They have only gone out together once. And you haven’t said anything about them being related.” Agnes decided to take the bull by the horns and introduce the family tie that had caused her and her Charley so much grief before and after their marriage.

“Whose getting ahead of herself now? I dunno, Violet is quiet but once she has set her mind to something there is no changing her. And I am thinking that she has set her sights on your Charlie. If that is the case, there is nothing I can say that will change her mind, even if I try till I am blue on the face. So I may as well accept it. I hope you are not going to object, are you?”

Agnes sighed. “Given how difficult both families made our lives while Charlie’s father was alive, do you really think I could make any objection on those grounds.” Agnes snorted in disgust. “No, I’ll not stand in their way, or make things difficult for them. After all, Charlie is old enough to know his own mind, make his own decisions and I hope he has been bought up well enough to treat Violet properly. If not, I think his sisters, especially Junie, might take him to task. I wouldn’t like to be in his shoes if Junie thought she had to give him a piece of her mind,” she said with a rueful smile.

“It’s your Iris I would be worried about. Junie had always struck me as a very reasonable girl but Iris! I wouldn’t like to be in her bad books, that I wouldn’t.”

Proud Hearts

Agnes knew what her sister meant but she disliked any criticism of her children, even when she silently agreed. She must have let her feelings show because Betty took one look at her face and began saying how Iris had a tone of voice when saying certain things that only resulted in Betty entangling herself in words.

Agnes stopped the flow of words by putting her hand on Betty's arm, "Lets forget what you have just said. I don't want to fall out with one of the few relations whose company I enjoy. And with Charlie and Violet, lets just see what happens.

Now, is there any more tea in the pot?"

The conversation moved onto safer topics.

"Junie, put the kettle on will you. I'm fair parched and need tea and a sit down. I also need to get these shoes off. I don't know what possessed your brother to whirl me around the dance floor as many times as he did. My feet aren't used to that sort of thing these days.

Thank's, duck. It was a nice wedding though, wasn't it. I don't know how Betty managed to pay for it. And whose idea was it to have a dance band? Haven't enjoyed myself so much for years."

As Agnes paused to sip her tea, Junie managed to get a word in.

"It went very well. I think the band were friends of Charlie's from the war. One of them told me in the interval that they heard he was getting married and offered to play at his wedding for free. Something they felt they owed him from the war. I dunno. It was fun to see

Charlie whirling you around the dance floor. Rosie and I almost laughed ourselves sick. And it was lovely to see the old Charlie. Reminded me of how much I missed him.” Junie sighed and sat in the chair opposite her mother.

“I hope Violet and Charlie will make each other happy. She thinks the world of him.”

“Charlie needs someone to look up to him. Brings out the best in him. Before the war, when he and Peter were in the music halls together, Charlie was always the leader of the two. He was such a nice boy, that Peter, pity the war took him like it did so many others.” Agnes shook herself. “Don’t know what I am thinking. Today is about the future, not the past. Yes, I think they will suit. And aren’t they lucky William has let them live in the flat.”

Junie laughed. “Oh, I think there was a bit of self interest on his part. William made the offer so Violet doesn’t have to waste time on travel to and from work. He thought it might make it easier for her to decide to stay working in the shop. What he doesn’t know is that Violet doesn’t want to stop work yet.”

Agnes was slightly shocked. “Surely you told him that.”

“Oh no, Ma. I have to look after my staff. Besides, I didn’t want her to leave either. Well, not until she has to. I don’t think it is right that a woman is expected to leave work when she marries.”

“A woman leaves work when she marries so she can better look after her new home. It’s demeaning for a man who has a wife that works. It’s as though she is saying that he isn’t a capable provider. It’s just not right.”

“You worked,” responded Junie.

“Not the same thing at all. I had to go out to work when your father died otherwise we would have all starved

and ended up in the East End.” Agnes shuddered at the thought.

“Charlie says he doesn’t mind Violet working. It’s not as if she has far to go to get to work and she will always be home before him.”

“Junie, I don’t know where you get your ideas, I really don’t. No man will want to marry you if you go around making out that you are just as capable as a man. It’s not right.”

“Oh, it was all very well for us to do the same work as a man during the war but different when the war is over. And I suppose you will be saying next that a woman shouldn’t be paid as much as a man. No, Ma! You surely don’t think that. I’m not talking about ditch digging or hard manual labour but why should a man expect to be paid more than me for doing the same job.”

“Junie, I am not going to discuss it with you anymore. That’s the way the world is and that’s an end to it. I am going to listen to the radio and read until time for bed.”

Junie grinned, “It was a nice wedding though, wasn’t it. Violet looked lovely. It was very kind of Rosie to lend Vi the dress she was married in. And Charlie looked properly nervous. I thought his eyes were going to pop out of his head when he saw her coming down the aisle.” Junie knew that her mother could always be distracted by talk of her children. “And Rosie; not long now before she has the baby by the look of her today. That little Rita is a dear and Iris’ Peter is a bit of a rascal.”

“Reminds me of William when he was a boy,” Agnes smiled in fond reminiscence. “But I am more than happy to hand him back to Iris after a time. I’m too old to cope with toddlers - especially energetic little boys.”

“Rosie will have her hands full when the new baby arrives.”

“I’ve been meaning to talk to William and Jim about that. I thought I would stay with her for a couple of weeks. I must ask Jim if he would like me to be with him and Rita while Rosie recovers. I don’t suppose Elaine has the time to fill in for me now she is William’s bookkeeper.”

“Who knows? It depends when the baby comes, doesn’t it? I know Rosie isn’t due for three or four weeks which will mean the summer school holidays. I expect Elaine won’t be able to fill in if the baby arrives then because Harry will be home.

I’m glad I don’t have to solve all the staff problems and can leave that to William.

Which is not to say that I am not thinking ahead for a possible replacement for Vi.”

“Hmmm. I wonder. Did you see Betty’s youngest’s eldest daughter?”

“The one who was Vi’s bridesmaid? Yes,” Junie looked speculatively at her mother. “Are you thinking what I am thinking? Let me think ... She would be too inexperienced to work in the kiosk, too young as well. I’m not having any young female relative of mine exposed to some of your customers. So I will replace you in the Kiosk for two weeks,” said Junie decisively. “No, think about it, it is the logical choice. I work in the Kiosk, Vi is in temporary charge of the shop and her cousin starts learning the business. Vi has enough experience now and its not like I will be far away. Thanks Ma, I think that is the perfect solution. I will talk to William tomorrow and see what he thinks.”

Proud Hearts

“That is supposing the baby arrives when Elaine can’t be spared. Which will be more than likely. They do tend to follow their own timetable. But she might be early, as you said, she did have that look about her today.”

“At least I have a suggestion to put to William, thanks for talking it through with me. I really do think he should consider Vi’s cousin what ever happens. Do you know her name? I’m sure she told me but I have forgotten.”

“She’s called Mary. Named after the Queen, Betty said.”

“Then I should have remembered it,” said Junie with a grin.

“Don’t tell me you are against the Royal Family, as well,” exclaimed her mother, aghast.

Junie laughed. “I think I have shocked you enough today. No, I am not against the Royal Family as you put it. But, I do have reservations about them which I am definitely not sharing with you this evening.” She giggled, “Ma, if you could see your face!”

Agnes shook open the newspaper, “I think I need to put on the radio for some soothing music to settle my nerves. Junie, have you seen my glasses?”

Junie turned, spotted them on the table and brought them over to her mother. Agnes scanned the programme schedule.

“Ah ha. This sounds promising, I like the BBC Radio Orchestra and it’s just started. Save my feet and put the radio on for me, Junie, there’s a dear. Tune it to the Light Service. Ah, that’s nice,” Agnes said when the radio had warmed up and soothing orchestral sounds of dance music filled the room.

“I’m surprised you want to listen to more dance music after you have been danced off your feet today.”

“Listening is soothing, just the thing before bed. Distracts me from worrying about you,” Agnes gave her daughter a severe look over the top of her glasses. Unabashed, Junie grinned at her, “Just keeping you young, Ma, just keeping you young.”

Agnes gave an unladylike snort and closed her eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Hendon 1937

After drinking her tea, Agnes announced that she was tired and was going to lie down.

“No, you don’t have to go. In fact having you all here reminds me of old times. Hearing you chatter makes the flat come alive. Just make sure the radio is unplugged when you go. Goodnight.” She moved around the room dispensing goodnight kisses to all.

“That’s not like her, not like her at all,” muttered Charlie in a low voice to Rosie as his mother left the room.

“That’s what Iris and I have been telling you. She hasn’t been herself all day. Nothing we can put our finger on; just different.” Exasperation with her brother’s mental slowness lent a sharp edge to her voice.

“Ok, ok. I just haven’t seen her as much as you have.”

“And who’s fault is that, Charlie?” Iris spoke sharply and Charlie was obviously a bit taken aback.

“Well, I ... My job... Vivi ...” he spluttered.

“We all have responsibilities, brother. Just that some of us make the time for others.”

“Iris!” Rosie was shocked and spoke before thinking. As Iris turned to look at her, Rosie went on before Iris could utter a sound.

“Be fair, Iris. You know it is easier for us to see Ma as we live near her. Charlie lives south of the river and it is a much longer journey for him. Besides, he and Violet have to look after Auntie Betty and that can’t be easy for them.” She smiled at her brother. “How is Auntie Betty? I’m surprised Ma hasn’t asked after her, I am sure she will in the morning.”

“She’s as well as can be expected. Doesn’t get out of bed anymore, which puts a bit of a stain on Vi and me,” He sighed, “Vi still feels guilty about giving up her job but Auntie Betty needs her all the time now. She didn’t have any choice.”

Junie heard and leant over, put her hand on his shoulder and spoke softly to her brother.

“We understand, Charlie. After all, Auntie Betty bought her up. Violet wouldn’t be the person we know and love if she didn’t have a sense of duty and obligation to her Grandmother. So reassure her that William and I understand why she had to leave and we admire her for what she is doing. It can’t be easy ... for either of you,” she added quickly, giving his shoulder a squeeze.

“Now that Ma has gone to bed, can you tell me about Dad?” Junie appealed to her sisters. “You promised! When we were in the kitchen. Oh, come on, it’s not fair. I’m old enough to know now! Honestly! This family,” she exclaimed as she saw William and Iris exchanged looks.

Proud Hearts

“Actually, Junie is right,” Rosie spoke in her sister’s defence. “Dad just drank the bottle of Spirit Of Salts by mistake. Didn’t he?”

“That’s what I always thought as well,” said Charlie. “What don’t we know?”

Iris and William stared at each other for what seemed a long time.

“Come on you two. It was just a simple mistake,” said Rosie. Then, as she saw her older brother and sister were still looking at each other, doubt crept into her voice. “Wasn’t it?”

“Iris, we have to tell them,” said William decisively, breaking eye contact with Iris and looking around the table.

“I arrived later,” he started. “I met Iris up the street. Ma had sent her to buy chips for our tea. Iris can tell you what happened before, can’t you.”

Iris was glaring at him, her lips pressed together in a thin line as though to prevent words escaping. When she spoke, her voice was harsh.

“I have done my best to forget that day,” she fair spat the words. “Now you are making me remember, curse you William Thomas!”

“The younger ones need to know the truth.” He spoke softly, gently reaching out to take her hand. “Iris, Iris, instead of keeping this locked inside you, it might help if tell your story.”

She bowed her head, but didn’t let go of his hand. Raising her head she began:

“We were living in Craven Buildings. You and George probably don’t remember, Junie. Our little sister was born that day...”

Pene Thornton

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Craven Buildings 1900

The room was hot and airless, as she lay there trying to master her emotions. She could hear the children in the room next door, especially when Iris, the eldest daughter, tried to keep them quiet. She knew she should move but the weight of her emotions and deep, deep tiredness made her legs disobedient to her will or did she really want to move?

Someone was in the corridor – was it him? No, the footsteps were too sharp and precise. When he came to the door it was slow, deliberate steps. It was a neighbour, probably off to use the shared privy.

“Must remember to get Iris to clean it before any of us use it,” she thought; the thought skittering across the surface of her mind; while below the emotions seethed and boiled waiting his return.

Iris peeped around the door, “Anyfing you need, Mum?”

“Here put the baby on the mantelpiece to warm up. She is so cold, poor thing.” Iris, with a doubtful look at her mother, did as she was told.

“Now keep the little ones out of here!” She said, her voice harsher than she intended. Iris disappeared quickly, not before she had seen her daughter’s bottom lip caught between her teeth in concern. She heard a sudden wail, then a slap and silence. Must have been the youngest, Junie. Not the youngest now but still the youngest; she corrected herself. Iris must really be concerned if she slapped Junie. Junie was just two years old, blue – eyed and dark curled hair, everybody’s favourite. God, she prayed, send Charley home soon, get this over with. I’m so tired.

She must have dozed for a while as she woke with a start at the sound of a door opening, suddenly drenched with sweat. It was Iris with the midwife.

“I just popped in to see how you were, Mrs Thomas. Look, let me take the baby away.”

“No! Get out! Leave me alone! I don’t need you meddling in the affairs of me and mine!” She was shouting now, she was dimly aware of Iris’ eyes filling with tears, the sound of the little ones next door beginning to snivel, a sudden quiet behind the walls on the other side of the room. The midwife turned on her heels and flounced out of the room.

“Iris,” she commanded, “get me a cup of tea.” At least the appearance of the midwife had roused her from her lethargy.

Iris made to go over to the fireplace. Her Mother stopped her. “No, its alright, I will get my own. Is

William home yet?" she questioned as she swung her legs off the temporary bed and stood up.

"No, its early yet," replied her daughter.

She looked for her purse, opened it and scrabbled about for a few coppers. Giving them to her daughter she said, "Here, take these and get some chips for supper and a bit o' fish if there's enough" Iris looked surprised, it was a rare occurrence when her mother got food cooked elsewhere. "Run along, don't take all day", her mother scolded. Iris didn't needed urging a second time and disappeared out of the door as quickly as she could.

Alone again and on her feet she started to pace, her anger and other emotions she didn't want to name threatened to break her grim self-control. The pacing didn't do much for her agitation.

The room was small, no more than four paces wide and five long and sparsely furnished. With six children there wasn't much leftover for furnishings. They could only afford the two rooms in the mean three storey building in central London. It was all she and Charley had known all their lives. They would be like a fish out of water away from the perpetual hum and bustle of London. There were six other families living in the building, all sharing the same outside privy but each family could do their own cooking – if they wanted to. Agnes was a firm believer in home cooking, trying to feed them all at least one meal a day. There was always a fire in the hearth and a large black kettle or pot suspended above it always simmering. Even in summer, it was June, the fire was kept going. Good food and spirits of salts was her recipe for six healthy children and she meant them to stay that way.

A sudden spasm in her stomach made her pause in her furious pacing. Tears threatened; she clenched her jaw and willed them away. This was not a time for weakness.

More steps in the corridor outside. This time it was Iris and William. William was the eldest and the only one with certainty of work. At 14 he was employed as an errand boy at the grocers along The Strand. It was a good thing that he was well muscled for his age, although not tall. His job meant he was carrying groceries of varying weight all day. The grocer often supplied the theatres in the area and William kept them amused at the end of the day with stories about the actors, chorus girls and the impresarios.

As her eldest children entered so did the smell of the food Iris was clutching to her chest. From William's expression, Iris must have told him what had occurred today while he was at work. She set her jaw and hardened her expression, telling Iris to feed William and the other children, she didn't want any herself. "And there's no need to leave any for your father, I doubt he'll be hungry when he comes home. William, wash up then eat. You must be hungry after working all day."

He must have realised from her expression that she was in no mood to listen to any argument from her eldest son. He did as he was told, even going so far as to offering Iris help with the younger ones. They quickly went into the bedroom next door, leaving her with the rare luxury of solitude. She sank into the chair by the fire, gazing at the flames in a reverie.

Roused by a touch on her shoulder, she realised that her husband had come in to their small home without her hearing him. Caught by surprise she was unable to

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subdue the anger and grief that welled up inside her. She sprang out of the chair and seizing his shirt front pulled him with unconscious strength so he was unable to avoid the poignant sight on the mantelpiece. It was the body of a new born infant.

“This is our seventh child,” spitting the words out in her rage. “This is what I gave birth to this afternoon.” Words failed her as she began to sob in anger. Heaving a deep breath she found the strength to continue “She was born black and blue, not breathing poor thing. Why do you think that was?” She hurled the question at him as Charley began to bluster.

“No, you don’t.” She tightened her grip on his shirt as he tried to turn away. “Look on your handiwork, Charles Thomas. You are responsible for this. Coming home drunk then using me as a punchbag. You did this!” The last words were a scream as she sank sobbing to her knees, her strength draining from her as her body began to heave with sobs.

Charley was horrorstruck. He couldn’t properly remember striking her. True, he had come home drunk recently but times were hard and why shouldn’t he spend time with his friends. He only got nagged when he came home, why didn’t she understand that a porter’s job was all he could get at present and it wasn’t fair to say that the only reason he got that was because of her father who already worked at Covent Garden. Maybe he had struck out once or twice when she was carrying on but he got peace and quiet afterwards and wasn’t an Englishman entitled to a bit of quiet in his home. He pushed away from her and muttering something indistinct he left the miserable room.

When he returned from the pub several hours later, the room was empty except for the pitiful shape on the mantelpiece sharing the ledge with a cheap tallow candle. Only now, when he was maudlin drunk, did he remember clearly the times he had hit her swollen belly, the thought of another mouth to feed hemming him in until all he wanted to do was punch his way out of the situation.

Almost against his will he caught sight of the pathetically small body on the ledge above the fire. Now it was his turn to sink in the chair, covering his eyes with his hands. He was racked by remorse, it was all his fault. If he hadn't hit her, the child would be alive now. It was all his fault, the children didn't deserve a father who would hurt a child. As he slowly uncovered his eyes he saw the solution in front of him. In the rudimentary dresser was a bottle of Spirits of Salts. Suddenly, decisively, he arose and crossing over to the dresser he seized the bottle and without allowing himself a second thought, he swallowed the contents.

She was aroused from a fitful sleep in the large communal bed by harsh screams from the adjoining room. Pausing only to throw a shawl over her shoulders she rushed into the room to see her husband writhing in agony on the floor. At first she didn't see the empty bottle, it was William following close on her heels that spotted it.

She gasped in horror as her son held up the bottle. Unstoppered, it was empty, William shook it to confirm the awful truth.

"Spirits of Salts, that was half full and now he has drunk it. Quick, William, see if you can make him swallow some water."

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The sound of his screams echoing in her head, his hands were around his throat as though trying to tear it open.

Since William wasn't able to persuade his father to drink the water she made another suggestion. With the children now roused and clustering around the open door she quickly decided that Charley had to get to hospital. So began the nightmare journey through the streets of central London to nearby Charing Cross Hospital. A journey that would normally take 20 minutes during the day, pushing through the crowded streets, was accomplished in 10 minutes thanks to William and his delivery bike. Propping Charley on the seat they ran either side of him, sharing the steering until they arrived at the Hospital. When they got to the Hospital, the nurse was reluctant to admit him until she proved that it was less inconvenient to have him in the Hospital than her making a fuss in the entrance.

At first the nurse tried to insist that Charley be bathed but a doctor, curious about the noise, overruled her. Swiftly calling a couple of porters and a stretcher, with William's help he manhandled Charley onto the stretcher and followed by William and his mother the strange little party set off to the men's ward. Waving them on, the doctor made a detour and met them as she was helping the nurse get Charley into bed.

"The kindest thing I can do is give him an injection of morphine for the pain," said the Doctor after William had told him what his father had swallowed. The doctor quickly injected the drug into Charley's arm. As the drug took effect, Charley's screams lessened in volume, becoming low moans.

“Now he is quieter, you can give the nurse his name and address,” said the Doctor as he turned to leave. She grabbed his arm, “Is he going to be alright?” she asked in desperation. The Doctor shook her off and giving her a pitying look turned and left the ward. She turned to the nurse, the emotions of the day giving her a wild look. The nurse took a step back. “It’s alright, Ma. Go and sit down, I will tell the nurse what she wants to know and be with you soon.” William suddenly sounded more mature than his 14 years. She nodded in tired acquiescence and left the ward.

She found a chair and sat, ramrod straight as she had been taught as a child. Eyes closed she tried to still the whirling of her mind. She couldn’t get the image of Charley writhing on the floor in such agony. The Spirits of Salts was what she used to clean the privy whenever one of her family wanted to use the toilet. The older children were able to use the powerful cleaning agent unsupervised but she never let the younger ones touch the bottle, waiting until they were old enough to be trusted with the responsibility. Charley knew how powerful the liquid was, he knew what it was for, what possessed him to drink from that bottle? The thought came unbidden to her mind, could he have drunk it because of the new baby. Could her words have driven him to do that awful deed? Ruthlessly, she pushed that particular thought away. She couldn’t think like that, not with the little ones relying on her. Despite the warmth of the summer night she felt chilled to the bone. Wrapping her arms around her stomach in a futile attempt to warm herself she waited until she heard William’s footsteps in the corridor.

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It wasn't a long wait. Soon William was by her side.

"We must get home, son. You have to go to work in a few hours time, the others need to get to school and I will have to work out what to do with the little ones. I will come back here when I can get away." With a sigh she stood up and together they trudged out of the Hospital and off home.

On the way the only conversation they had was when she said, "William, there is no need to mention anything Iris may have told you. It's family business and it stays in the family. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Ma," was all the boy/man said and she knew he wouldn't speak a word of it to anyone. He was a good boy and understood that they all stuck together for survival. Any family that didn't was lost and sunk further down the slippery poverty slope.

Once home, she made him get back into bed, hiding her love and concern behind a severe tone "You will need your sleep, you've got a full day tomorrow. Go to back to sleep, Iris," she ordered. Leaving her children to sleep, she went next door and lay in the makeshift bed. Was it only a few hours ago that she had given birth to her seventh child? The child! She leapt up, the poor wee babe was still on the mantel. She swept it up into her arms and held her against her breast, allowing herself the momentary luxury of imagining the child living, breathing, suckling. It was too much; tears welled up and spilled over and down her cheeks. She sobbed silently, great wracking sobs that shook her body but never making a sound. Exhausted by her emotions and the events of the day she fell into a deep sleep, still cradling her stillborn child.

Awoken by the sound of her neighbours through the paper thin walls, feeling like she had never slept in her life, she wrapped the body of the baby in a small piece of well worn cotton and tucked it out of sight in the still warm bed. Automatically she went to the dresser for the Spirits of Salts. For an instant she had forgotten why the bottle was empty. Her life started to close in on her. She did the only thing she could do, squaring her shoulders she looked life in the face and dared it to defeat her and hers.

William was sent off to work, those children old to go to school had left, she had begged her next door neighbour to have the two youngest ones until Iris came back from school. She was reluctant to do this but had no choice. She was fiercely determined that the family would stay together, whatever happened. It was time to leave for the Hospital. The streets were crowded now, in bustling contrast to the previous night. She pushed and shoved her way, as she was pushed and shoved in turn until she arrived at the hospital. She retraced her steps and too soon was standing besides the bed her husband was in. While she had been away, someone had washed Charley and dressed him in well worn but clean nightwear. In this alien environment, his body looked smaller to her eyes, he looked older that she remembered, more careworn and the pain had etched the careworn lines deeper.

A nurse approached her and offered to get her a chair. At first, she was nervous of accepting that someone would get something for her but the good natured wholesomeness of the woman won her over and she was soon seated on the upright chair. She had asked the nurse

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how her husband was and when he would be better but the nurse just shook her head and said that the doctor would be doing his rounds in an hour and she could ask him then.

Tentatively, she took Charley's hand in hers and sat there unmoving, silent until a large man at the head of several younger men in white coats approached the bed. A nurse swished the curtains around the bed as she shrank as far back against the wall as she could.

“Chart, please,” barked the large, well fed man. The nurse handed him a clipboard from the end of the bed. “Hmmm, doesn’t look good. Well, Mr Moysten, what’s your diagnosis?” He addressed one of the younger, white coated men. The young man cleared his throat, “Swallowing hydrochloric acid slowly burns away the lining of the oesophagus and will result in a slow death, Sir. He is being kept on morphine for the pain.” She heard no more, against her will a sob escaped. The great man turned his gaze on her. Looking down his nose he addressed his acolytes “The lower classes persist in drunkenness and goodness knows what debauchery. This man was drunk when he swallowed the acid, an act of stupidity he will not live to regret.” He turned and left the curtained enclosure, barely giving the nurse time to part the curtains ahead of him. The company scuttled after him to the next bed that the poor inhabitant was next to suffer his scrutiny.

She snorted in disgust at his departing back.

Turning to her husband she took his roughened calloused hand in her reddened, rough one. ‘How did it come to this’, she mused aloud? Speaking softly so none but he could hear, if in his stupor he was capable of

hearing she began to talk of their lives from when they met.

“Do you remember the first day we met, you were playing with my eldest brother, Will. You were both eight and I was seven. Will was told to let me go with him, I forget why. Being a boy he wasn’t going to let me interfere with his games. You took pity on me and persuaded Will to let me join in, do you remember? I looked up to you for years because of that. Later, when we were older, we met again and fell in love. Despite what our parents thought about marriage between first cousins we married on 1st December, 1884. Just sixteen and a half years ago. Do you remember the day? It was so foggy, I could hardly see my hand in front of my face. It was a good wedding, wasn’t it. We had a party at the Lamb & Flag. Thank goodness my mother did the cooking there, so the food was good. Do you remember Uncle Jim got merry and danced on the tables. He tried to make you drunk but you were on your best behaviour and didn’t want to get the wrong side of my Father. I suppose he was protective of me, as I was the youngest. In fact, my brothers were pretty dark on you for a while until you proved that your intentions were honourable. But we were bought up to look out for each other, took you a while to understand that but you didn’t have any sisters so you didn’t understand at first how easily girls can fall into shame if their family don’t watch for them. I worry about Iris, I can see Mr Jeffries who lives in the next building, do you know the one I mean? The one who always pretends he has money put away and uses the lure of money to turn young girls heads. I’m sure he runs a couple of those pathetic young girls who hang around the Cornmarket. I

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see them shivering in rags waiting for men to take them off to the dark alleyways. Well, he's not getting his filthy hands on my girls." She spoke in a low fierce tone. Unconsciously she tightened her grip on his hand but it evoked no reaction from Charley. Consciously relaxing her grip, she continued' " they were happy days, weren't they Charley; in the early years when you made a good living as a printer, working for the pamphleteer, Mr Morrow. With me helping out Mum doing a bit of cooking at the pub, until William came along; then Iris, and young Charlie. But things changed by the time Rosie and George came along, didn't they. You had fallen in with your cousin, Jimmy who took after his father and liked a drink a bit too much. And you always had a weak head for the drink.

Oh, Charley, I don't blame you for liking a drink but things started to go bad when you started drinking more than you bought home. You always were weak where your cousin was concerned, always looking up to him but I told you he was no good for you and you couldn't hold your liquor like he could. Then Mr Morrow refused to let you keep your job because you were late for work a few times and on one occasion still drunk when you turned up for work and you made sure that none would employ you in the trade by brawling and breaking his nose when he told you leave. It was only because of my father that you were able to get a job portering at Covent Garden. No wonder we couldn't pay the rent at the previous place and had to moved to Craven Buildings. If it wasn't for the good ladies of the parish, I am not sure we could have lasted there. At least, they make sure the kids had decent clothes and a pair of shoes each so they can go to school.

And I'm determined that they all learn their letters, being able to read and write is the only way to get a half way decent job and I don't want any of them to live the way we did when we were young."

She became aware of a disturbance in the ward. "My goodness, lunchtime already, Charley. I hope there is a chance of getting a cup of tea, I'm parched; all this talking dries your throat up."

She fished into a pocket and bought out a package covered in well worn greaseproof paper, opening it she removed a piece of bread and cheese which she quickly ate, then carefully folded the paper and replaced it in the pocket of her patched and worn full skirt. The ward orderly asked if she would like a hot drink to which she readily accepted. She sneaked a look at her husband's chart hanging on the white enamelled metal foot of the bed. Quite a few of the words she didn't understand, they looked like they were in a foreign language but she did understand the words 'Nil by Mouth.' She looked around for a nurse, hoping to see the nice one who got a chair for her earlier, to ask if that meant he couldn't drink even tea. Charley was always partial to a drop 'o' tea, especially the day after he got drunk. Ah, there she was, catching her eye, she asked the nurse if Charley could have a cup of tea. The nurse caught her bottom lip between her teeth and looked concerned, "Didn't the doctor tell you, Mrs Thomas, your husband can't eat or drink anything. The best we can do is keep him sedated until he dies. It's the acid, you see, it has burnt away his foodpipe. There is nothing else we can do for him." Seeing her obvious distress at her words, the nurse added, "That is why we don't mind if you sit with him outside of normal visiting

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hours. I have to tell you that he won't last more than a day or so at least. I'm sorry, I've got to go."

The nurse's words had shaken her, she had assumed that Charley would get better and they would resume their life, she hadn't wanted to think of the alternative. She sat looking at him lying in the alien hospital bed. He seemed shrunken somehow as though he was already diminishing, taking shallow breaths. He started moaning, a low keening sound. She watched silently as a young man in a white coat came and rolled Charley's sleeve up and gave him an injection. Charley grew quiet again.

"Charley," she leaned over him to whisper in his ear. "Charley, I have to go for a while but I will be back," she promised. She turned and walked away.

Once out of the hospital she was assailed by the noise and bustle of every day life on the streets of London in the year 1900. The hospital was on a major street that was crowded by horses pulling delivery carts, carriages, even an omnibus. Weaving in and out, delivery boys swooped on their laden bikes between the carts and carriages, trying to get ahead of each other. Street sweepers were poised at the intersection, waiting for a lady or gentleman who wished to take their life in their hand and cross the road. Then the street sweepers would spring into action, going backwards sweeping their path free of horse manure, mud or any other debris that lay in their way. All for a few coppers that may be tossed their way once the crossing was safely made. However, no street sweeper would spring to attention for her, they knew that she had no money for such luxury, one look at her worn, patched, ill fitting clothes told them that. She didn't even have a

farthing for the omnibus so she started to trudge back to the two rented rooms she and her family called home.

As she walked she began to think about the future. What was she to do and how was she to keep the family together? Only William was bringing any money to the household and they couldn't survive on what he earned. She was going to have to get a job, even if it meant leaving the two youngest at home during the day. Then the forbidden thought entered her head, had her actions yesterday driven Charley to do what he had done, driven him to drink the fatal liquid. She hadn't meant him to die; that was for sure, only to stop him drinking and hitting her. She was so angry that the baby was born dead for she was fiercely protective of all her children, born and unborn. How could she have guessed that that was what he would do? She knew that she wasn't responsible for her husband's actions but a nagging voice in her head kept telling her that it was all her fault. After all, hadn't she married him for better and worse, she just didn't realise how worse the worse would be. Ruthlessly, she ignored the voice in her head, hoping it would go away.

Looking around she realised that her feet had borne her to the Church of the parish of St Giles in the Fields. Needing some solitude and reluctant to reach home just this moment, she went inside. Sliding into a pew at the back, she knelt down, clasped her hands in front of her and attempted to pray. The tears that had been threatening for hours spilled onto her cheeks as she struggled in vain to regain her composure. Startled by a hand on her shoulder, she looked up, quickly rubbing her sleeve across her eyes and then her nose.

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“I’m sorry to startle you. Mrs Thomas, isn’t it?” She nodded her agreement to his enquiry, recognising the young curate. He went on “Would you like to tell me what the matter is. Can I help you?”

She was reluctant to tell him, sharing confidences with those outside her family did not come easily to her but she needed to tell someone what had happened to Charley and the curate could help her family and that what was decided her to confide in him – her family’s need.

Haltingly at first, then more fluently she described to the curate the awful events of the previous day; was it only the previous day? It seemed longer ago than that. She told of the birth of her dead child, of her desire for revenge for what she saw as her husband’s weakness and part in that death, her harsh words to him and how he had left but came back later, what he had drunk and how he wasn’t expected to live much longer. “I don’t know what to do, its all too much to bear on my own.” Her voice threatened to break, those ever waiting tears threatened to spill again.

“I think,” said the curate as he stood up and encouraged her to stand by applying gentle pressure under her elbow, “I think we should have a nice cup of tea, things always look better over the cup that cheers; and you are not on your own, Jesus is with you and will be every step of the way.” She allowed herself to be led to the vestry, careful not to let her thoughts show on her face. Jesus might be with you, with your nice clean church and your nice clean life but I don’t think he bothers with the likes of us, she thought as she allowed herself to be led along. However, there was no doubting the fact that she needed help and if the curate could help her she would

accept it, even though some of his ideas may defy known logic.

The curate was young and it must be said idealistic. St Giles was his first posting from the seminary, one he especially requested. He wanted to work with the poor, what others were wont to call the dregs of society but which he, in his idealism, saw as lost souls to be shown the light and helped to live a Christian life. While fussing in the vestry, making the tea, he thought about the story she had told him. Would it be right to advise her to say nothing to anyone about putting the stillborn baby on the mantelpiece as an act of revenge on what she saw as her husbands failing. After all, she hadn't forced her husband to drink the poison, she hadn't put the bottle in his hands and who knows how a women feels after giving birth. He certainly didn't want to judge her, nor was it really his place that was a privilege for a higher court, one not of this earthly plane.

He poured the tea onto the waiting cups and handing one to her said "I don't think you should tell anyone else about putting the body on the mantelpiece. It may give the wrong impression and while you were not in the confessional when you told me, I will not tell another living soul. The babe will have to have a funeral, and I regret to say this, so will your husband. You did say there was no hope and it was just a matter of time, didn't you?" Waiting for her to nod her assent he went on "I take it that you have no money for the funerals." Again he waited for her nod of agreement. "The parish will pay for a funeral for them both, you won't have to worry about that. Your eldest child is working, you say and three are at school

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here and you have two at home. Obviously, the eldest girl, Iris, isn't it, will have to leave school and get a job. I suppose even with two of the children working money will still be tight. A pity, because Iris is a bright girl but it can't be helped. How old are the two youngest ones? Four and two, you say. Well, they are certainly not old enough to be left on their own and need a mother's attention." As she listened to him talk she felt a defiant anger take over, how dare he decide what was best for her children. Again she ruthlessly tamped down the emotion but she swore to herself that she would find a way to enable Iris to continue her schooling.

She finished her tea but allowed the curate to fill her cup because she wanted to postpone the moment when she had to leave. She allowed him to talk on, nodding when she thought appropriate or murmuring agreement, all the while allowing a germ of an idea to grow in her mind.

After the second cup she was able to face the thought of going home. She had unburdened herself from her part in the terrible events of last night. She had obtained absolution of a sort and financial help with the funerals. Now she had to go home for her children, she needed to tell them what had happened and let them know what will happen. Above all, she was determined that they would stay together; no child of hers was being taken away because she was an unfit mother. This she vowed as she walked up the aisle of the church to the double doors that opened out to the rest of the world.

By the time she got home, picked up Junie and George from Mrs Shaw, her next door neighbour, all bar William were home. Iris had obviously been keeping them in line because they were seated around the table and from the books scattered around, Rosie had been practising her reading and Iris and Charlie doing homework. They all rose and ran to her as she entered the door, each clamouring their news of the day, each competing to be heard above their brothers or sisters. Iris won a temporary victory in that particular competition by handing her mother a letter, an official looking letter. Her mother looked at her and saw an emotion she thought was excited anticipation reflected in her face. Her heart sank as she realised what the letter might contain.

“Thank you, Iris. I promise I will read this later but first I must tell you about your father.” They sat gathered around the table and she looked at each one of their young, much loved faces.

“I have been to the hospital to see your father, he is very ill. He is not expected to be coming home. He is not expected to live much longer. I’m sorry this sounds a bit harsh but it means that there are going to be big changes and you will all have to pull your weight if we are to survive as a family. And we will survive, I am determined about that. Now, I don’t expect Junie and George to understand because they are too young, but I am going to have to get a job. Before I married your father, I used to help my mother cook at a pub off Covent Garden called the Lamb & Flag. I am going to see if I can get a job there. But,” she became very intense, “you are to tell no one. Junie and George are going to have to stay here during the day. If anyone finds out that they are left here,

they will be taken away; and that is not going to happen,” she said fiercely. “I spoke to the curate at the Church of St Giles this afternoon. He assumed that Iris would be going out to work while I stayed at home with Junie and George. But I am not going to do that. The pub is far enough away that the curate will not find out that I am working. Yes, Iris, I know that your dad used to work at Covent Garden but no one he knows will let on to any one in authority if they find out what I am doing. Don’t forget, your granddad works there as well. He isn’t going to let anyone take away any of his grandchildren. No, you are not going out to work, your schooling is too important. We are all going to have to make sacrifices. There isn’t going to be much money but there will be enough to get by.

St Giles are also going to arrange the funeral. The curate said that we should bury the baby with your dad. I suppose he thought it would save them money. Tomorrow, I will go to the hospital to sit with your dad and I will also go to the pub to see about a job.

Now, if any of you saw anything out of the ordinary on the mantelpiece yesterday you are to forget it and don’t breathe a word about it.” She looked at each child in turn, it was obvious that Rosie and Charlie didn’t have a clue what she was talking about. Iris knew and was about to open her mouth when her mother said, “I will speak to William when he comes in. You haven’t told anyone else, have you.” Iris solemnly shook her head. “Good, make sure it stays that way. Now carry on with your homework and I will get something ready for supper.” She gave each child a quick hug before replacing the kettle with the cooking pot. She added some hot water from the kettle.

Grasping a bucket a both hands she started towards the door, but was stopped by Charlie who took the buckets out of her hands and went out of the door himself. He was soon back, staggering a little under the weight of the two full buckets of water.

“Thank you, Charlie,” said his mother. “Now, back to your books.”

She poured some of the water into a bowl and scrubbed some potatoes and carrots. She put them into the pot, together with some onions that she had roughly sliced while waiting for Charlie to bring the water. Then she added some mutton that she had bought on the way home. All this was bought to the boil, salted then when boiling, with practised ease she pulled the chain that was attached to the big hook from which the pot was suspended so that the pot was higher above the fire so the rapid boil was soon reduced to a simmer.

When William came home she told him what she had told the younger children. William didn't like the news about his father but he understood the need for the family to rely on itself and not tell anyone else their family business. He agreed that more money coming in was essential and agreed that his mother should go out to work but he wasn't happy about leaving the little ones on their own. However, he couldn't think of another solution to the problem of the family earning more money without anyone leaving school or his mother staying at home to look after his youngest brother and sister.

When they sat down to eat the mutton stew their mother also reminded them that they must all attend Sunday School and the morning church service at the end of the week. “I think we will become regular attendees”,

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said Agnes. “The parish will help us in many ways and that means that it will be easier to stay together. The important thing is that we stay together. Remember, that everything I do is with that in mind. I promised your Dad.” From the way she set her jaw, her children knew that her mind was made up. Not even the two eldest, Iris and William thought to try to persuade her otherwise.

That night for the first time in a couple of days they all slept in the same bed. Agnes had collapsed the temporary bed she was using in the living room and resumed her place with the children in the big bed in the bedroom.

The next morning, before Iris went to school, Agnes told her that if she didn’t come home, there was the rest of the stew to eat and bread to fill the stomachs of the boys if they were still hungry. She also promised that she would read the letter Iris bought home from school later in the day. Either way, Iris would have an answer to take to school on Monday.

Agnes counted out a few farthings and gave them to iris, “Get some bread on the way home, please.” She didn’t need to add that the bread Iris should get was dark brown, solid and filling; it would never occur to Iris to buy white bread, it was far too expensive.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Hendon 1937

Iris and William told their story in profound silence which lasted after they had finished speaking until broken by Rosie. “Iris, why couldn’t you have told us before, carrying that story around with you for thirty seven years! I suppose it does answer the question why Dad drank the Salts, but honestly! I think I will stick to my simpler story. That isn’t to say I don’t appreciate you telling the whole truth about what happened that night, I do. I’m very glad you told us; but honestly” she exclaimed again. “You might have said something earlier, what do you think, Junie.”

“I was so little when it happened,” she began. “You know, I can’t remember him so its like a story read in a newspaper. It has happened to someone else, not me. Anyone like another cup of tea? I think I will go and put the kettle on.”

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Next door, in her bedroom, Agnes became aware of a presence in the room with her. It felt familiar, an echo of memory from years ago. It was too much effort to open her eyes.

“Charley, is that you?”

“Who else would you be inviting into your bedroom, Aggie m’girl”

She felt rather than heard his reply.

“Come and join me by the bed, Aggie.”

“Charley, I’m sorry,” she blurted out. “I didn’t mean for you to drink that stuff. I was so tired and angry and ...” Her voice petered out as she became aware of a sensation akin to being wrapped in a warm blanket but it wasn’t a blanket, it was love and acceptance and feelings she couldn’t begin to describe. The knot of guilt that she had kept close to her heart for over 30 years melted away. She felt lighter than she had felt for years.

“Aggie, I can never blame you. You didn’t make me drink the Spirits of Salt, just as you didn’t make me drink in the pub night after night. Or make me do the other things I did to you. It wasn’t until afterwards that I realised what I had done to you and the kids. So no regrets, girl.

And you were right, this family was better off without me. The kids are a credit to you, Aggie.”

“Oh Charley,” exclaimed Agnes with a sob. “I did miss you.”

“I missed you as well, my love. But we are together now. I have been sent to fetch you. Will you come with me?”

Agnes was aware of a radiance illuminating the room. Outlined in front of her was a half familiar figure of a man. He offered her his hand. As she took his hand in

hers she realised she was standing next to him; together they turned towards the source of the light and moved towards it.

The door of her bedroom opened. Where the light had been, a wail full of pain and loss filled the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Authors Note

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My mother had always been curious about how her grandfather died. Although by that time I was living in Tasmania, Australia, we collaborated on researching her mother's family tree.

A trip to visit her in 2006 gave us the opportunity to question some of her surviving relatives.

Proud Hearts & Strong Wills is loosely based on anecdotes about my mother's grandmother and her family related during a lunch given by my mother's cousin and his wife in North London, UK, 2006.

I could not get the stories out of my head and was driven to write them down the next day. When I showed what I had written to my mother she said that such material could not be circulated. I said that I would have to write them as fiction which pleased her no end as she had been nagging me for years to begin writing fiction. So began the ten year journey that has cumulated in the story you have just read. I hope you enjoyed it.

Pene Thornton

Pene Thornton
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