



**CHE SERA. SERA**

*THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN ITALIAN WAR BRIDE*

# Que Sera, Sera

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First Printed in November 2021

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Nemo James  
[www.nemojames.com](http://www.nemojames.com)

ISBN 978-0-9567986-1-9

Edition 2

Published by  
Derek Newark Publishing  
Tupina 16  
20207 Mlini  
Dubrovnik, Croatia  
[www.nemojames.com](http://www.nemojames.com)

Born in Italy in 1929, Teresa Eginardo grew up under the shadow of the Second World War. Aged only sixteen, she married a British soldier and boarded a train taking her to a new life in war-torn London.

A short story to those generations who despite great hardship, “just got on with it.”

*The war is full of heroes but few of them are known*

*There's some that stand on battlefields and some that stand at home*

Nemo James – The World is Full of heroes

# Que Sera, Sera

The Autobiography of an  
Italian War Bride

By

Teresa Eginardo

[www.nemojames.com/che-sera](http://www.nemojames.com/che-sera)

## Chapter 1



I was born on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1929 in what was then a small village in the municipality of San Nicolo near Piove Di Sacco in Italy. My earliest memory was when I was about two years old, standing on a chair while my grandmother helped me to put on a sky-blue velvet dress which would have been my Sunday best.

I was still very young when we moved to another small village called San Francesco in the same area. We lived in a big but very run-down detached house. The only thing I remember about that time was hearing a new-born baby cry, which turned out to be my sister Raffaella. I always called her Lella, and the name seemed to stick. She was named after my mother's brother Rafael who died aged twenty-five of tuberculosis as many people did in those days. We often saw rats and mice about the place, although I was not afraid of them like I am now. Living next to us was a *Campanara*, which was a woman who rang the church bells, but I don't remember there being a church nearby. I got a bit of a shock once when I saw her forcing bread down a goose's throat, which I was told was to fatten it up.



Luigi Eginardo

My father's name was Luigi Eginardo. He was a trumpet player and also conducted the local orchestra. He was very fond of us all and used to call me "Negra" because my skin was darker than the rest of us. He never showed us any affection, but unlike my mother, he seemed warmer, which is why we all preferred him to my mother. He also used to enjoy painting and drawing, and I remember one day sitting next to him at the table while I watched him copy a black and white picture of Saint Francis from a book. My elder sister, Iris, must have taken the drawing into school to show the headmistress, as a couple of years later, on my first day of school, I was excited to see the painting hanging on the wall. I felt very proud.



Maria Eginardo

My mother, Maria was an accomplished embroider and made a little money from it, although it was not a regular thing. She mostly worked on white or cream curtains and had some kind of stand in the hallway where she sat and worked. It was many years later that she told me she adored my father so much there was not much love left for her children.



Emelia Mantoan

My Grandmother Emelia (from my mother's side) went to live with my parents when her husband Eugenio died in 1909 of Tuberculosis, aged only thirty-three. She never went to school as her mother needed her to help in raising the children, and that is all I know about her early years. She was a very religious woman, which is strange because she had two children out of wedlock with the husband of her best friend, Alba. Alba, (who must have known about the affair) died of tuberculosis when she was only twenty-eight, and on her deathbed she made my grandmother promise to marry her husband (Eugenio) and help him bring up their two children as well as my grandmother's own two illegitimate children. I knew about the promise, but it was many years later that I found out that my grandfather had two families at the same time, which would have been a big scandal in a small village in catholic Italy. Emelia looked after her stepchildren and loved and cared for them as if they were her own. She was a very kind and caring person, and we all loved her very much.

Emelia was not made welcome by my grandfather's family as they saw her as an uneducated peasant who had wormed her way into their son's life. Sadly, in the space of six months, she lost her husband and her son to tuberculosis. She also lost her brother-in-law, who she was very fond of. I don't know what he died of, but I expect it was also tuberculosis.

I never saw Emelia dressed in anything but black with a bun tied tightly at the back of her head. I have a very fond memory of her sitting in a chair with a newspaper across her knees and her glasses

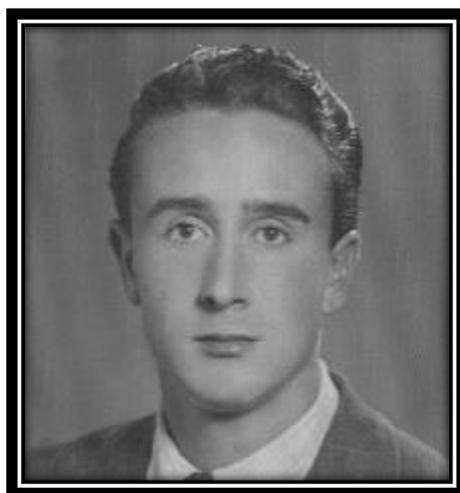
down her nose, struggling to make out the words, but she never stopped trying. She had a sister called Pasqua, who was a dear. Pasqua had a stall in Piazza del Duomo selling sticks of toffee. To get them into the right shape, she had to pull them this way and that until they got hard and they were ready to cut into portions. She was also a widow and had two sons.



Iris

My elder sister Iris was an unfriendly and bossy kind of person. We used to play a game called *schools* where she always played the part of the teacher and gave me a slossh if I got something wrong. She did have a better side to her, but we hardly ever saw it. She got on very badly with our mother, which is why she was much closer to our grandmother, Emelia.

I had a good relationship with my brothers and sisters, and I don't ever remember fighting with them. I think it was down to my grandmother being such a good influence on us.



Nico

My brother Nico was thirteen when he left school, which was not unusual in those days. My mother found him a job as an *operario's* apprentice, working some kind of machinery. Some people criticised her for sending him out to work when he was only thirteen, but to be fair to my mother, it was not about the money which would have been very little. She felt it was important to keep him occupied through the long hot summer months instead of getting bored and restless. He only worked there during the summer as when winter came he felt the cold very badly, so my mother stopped him from going. I assume his workplace had no heating. He soon found another job with a company called Riva Calzoni that made big hydroelectric pumps and turbines. He was lucky because the owner's wife took great care of the young boys and established a school at the factory. He attended classes regularly and later went to

a night school for five years before graduating. He was promoted to manager and ended up working there happily for forty-five years.

Iris always accused our mother of preferring her only son Nico, but she always denied it and said, "if you cut off one of the fingers of my hand, it would hurt just the same as any of the others."

Nico was a very kind and gentle boy, but I don't remember ever playing with him as I suppose with three girls in the family, he didn't get much of a look in. He did have some friends but no one he was very close to. You would think that being the only boy, he would have been my father's favourite, but he was treated the same as the rest of us. He did his national service when he was eighteen and joined the *Alpini*, which was stationed in the mountains, so he learnt to ski very well. I remember him telling us that during one exercise, a friend of his fell to his death. Nico was married in 1956 to Franca, and they went on to have three girls.



Lella

Lella was the youngest, and it is her that I have been the closest to all my life.

## Chapter 2



I used to get a lot of earaches, and one day I was diagnosed with an ear infection called Otitis. It must have got much worse as my father hired a driver to take me to the hospital at Padua where they thought I might have meningitis. I laid naked on a couch as the doctor tapped my knee with a small wooden hammer. My father was not an emotional man, but my mother told me many years later that he cried with relief when the doctor told him it was not meningitis. Mussolini had introduced some kind of national health service, but I don't think it included much as my parents still had to pay for the treatment.

The field opposite our house had small concrete posts to prevent carts from going onto it. Women used to lay sheets on the grass to dry them in the sun. I suppose these days, it wouldn't be long before a cat or dog would come along and lay on them, but very few people had pets, and I don't remember ever seeing any strays.

Although we lived quite near Venice and the sea, we never went there to visit. This might seem surprising to people these days, but the world was different then and most families never went far from their village. Recently I was asked whether we pestered our parents to take us to see Venice, but the words *pester* or *I want* were just not in our vocabulary. We instinctively knew that there was no money to spare, so asking for any kind of treat would never have occurred to us. Neither could we point to other children and say, "we want what they have" because no one had anything. Once a year, my father used to go to an exhibition in Padua and come back with all sorts of leaflets, but that was the closest any of us got to go on a trip. We probably didn't even know that Venice existed.

We moved to a house on the main road leading to the cathedral. It was a two-storey building, more compact and intimate than the previous one with a garden at the back with a pear tree. Iris and I used to go into the garden to collect small thistles that used to stick together, and we made crude kinds of chairs with them. None of the places we lived in Piove had bathrooms, so I assume we must have washed ourselves with a bowl of water and a flannel. I do remember we were always clean.

It was normal in those days for children to catch whatever diseases were going around, like measles, German measles, whooping cough etc. Iris had the most serious illness, which was diphtheria. My mother, in a panic burned most of our possessions to prevent the rest of us from getting infected, and I don't know whether it was that or luck, but no one else caught it. When Lella was only one year old, she caught double pneumonia. Around the same time, I came down with scarlet fever. The only thing I remember about it was lying in bed, unable to get up I felt so ill. I also had whooping cough and don't know whether that contributed to my many chest infections in later life. No one was taken to hospital as parents were expected to look after their children at home. It was a very difficult time for my mother, but fortunately, my grandmother was a great help. We were happy that she was able to give us all the love and affection that sadly, our own mother seemed unable to give. My mother did make an effort when we were ill, but it didn't seem to come naturally to her.



Luisa, Teresa, Liana and Rosa Eginardo

I was about five years old when I first took part in a procession, and although it wasn't that far, it seemed such a long walk at the time. It took us from a small side road to a large monument with a marble placard commemorating those who had died in the great plague. My grandmother told me that people who contracted the disease were sent to the island of Lazaretto, where they were quarantined.

It was around that time that I was first taken to the cinema, which was the only one in Piove di Sacco. There was great excitement in the village when we heard that Rudolf Valentino was showing in a silent film as all the women loved him. It was the era of silent movies with stars like Charlie Chaplin, Gloria Swanson, and Greta Garbo. When the talkies came along, most of the actors and actresses were dropped when people realised how unattractive their voices were.

We all got very excited around Christmas time although I don't know why, as it was nothing like the lavish occasion it later became. There was no Father Christmas, and the only presents we got were in our stockings, and that would be a couple of sweets and an orange. Christmas dinner would have been boiled chicken, and the only extra treat was a *Panettone* which is still traditional even now. There were no Christmas carols and no radios, and although I expect they had special Christmas songs, they would have only been sung in church or at school. There were no Christmas decorations, but my sisters and I used to make a crib and little figures out of cardboard.

Children started school at six years old, but there was a nursery available for younger children. At junior school, I remember someone pointing out a gipsy girl to me, and although we never bullied or looked down on her, we always felt like she was an outsider. I don't know where that came from because we never talked about gipsies at home, and there was certainly no prejudice towards them.

In 1935 Mussolini was annoyed that so many countries had empires and Italy didn't, so he decided to invade Abyssinia. It all seemed quite normal at the time, but it must have cost a lot of money because he made an appeal to Italian women to be patriotic and give up their wedding rings to help pay for his war. My mother donated voluntarily, and I waited in a long queue with her. When it was our turn, she handed over her wedding ring and was given a cheap metal one in return. The men were not asked to give up

their rings, so I assume Mussolini saw women as a soft touch. I don't know how my mother felt about it at the time but years later, she told me she regretted it and was amazed at how gullible she was. No one had a clue where Abyssinia was and even less why we were fighting a war there.

There was very little work in Piove Di Sacco, and with seven people to feed, it was a struggle for my father to provide for us, so when there was a recruitment drive for men to work in Abyssinia, he signed up. I don't know how long he was away, but like a lot of the men that went, he came home early due to bad health. My mother was overjoyed to see him return, and it was the only time I ever saw them embrace. The only thing I remember my father saying about the experience was that he found it strange that the African women used to rub butter in their hair.

I don't know how my mother cooked in those days, but there was a big fireplace, so I assume it must have been done there. I don't remember what we ate, but there was a common saying, "poca carne, tanto pane" (a little meat and lots of bread.) I went too near a saucepan one day, and it fell and scalded me. I still have the scars under my left arm. My grandmother told me how lucky I was that the pan jumped to my left side and that if it had fallen onto my stomach, it would have been much more serious. I was treated at home as the nearest hospital was sixteen miles away, and there were no ambulances.

I was thrilled one day when I saw a man walking on stilts in the road outside our house, and I was told he was advertising the circus which had just arrived in town. I don't remember a thing about the circus, so I assume I didn't go, although I don't expect it was very good and probably didn't even have any animals.

One day, a neighbour calling around excitedly to tell us to come and look at her new acquisition. It was a two-ring stove that ran on Calor gas. She was very proud, so we felt obliged to admire it, but it was more suspicion than admiration that we felt. She was a very kind and friendly woman who lived with her husband and two children, sadly we learned years later that her daughter died of typhoid.

## Chapter 3



With no work in Piove Di Sacco, my father went to Milan and rented a room while he looked for work. It wasn't long before he found a job as a welder at the aeroplane factory *Caproni* and so he called for us to join him. He hired a lorry to move our furniture while we made the journey by train from Padua to Milan. It took two or three hours, and we had to stand most of the way. My father met us at the train station, and we took a tram to our new home. It was the first time any of us had been on a tram, and although we would normally be excited, we were so tired after standing on the train for so long that we just wanted it to be over. My grandmother must have felt travel sick on the tram because she suddenly had to get off. My father didn't realise until it was too late, so he had to get off at the next stop and find her. I don't know how we ever found each other as my mother had no idea where my father lived, but somehow we eventually met up and spent the night in his small room before going to our new home the next day.



Via Tolstoi, Milan

My father rented us a ground floor flat in Via Tolstoi about four miles west of the centre of Milan. It was two privately owned blocks of flats separated by a courtyard. Our flat was in the block at the rear, farthest from the road and was cheaper than the front block, which had lifts and some extra fittings, but it was still much more expensive than we were used to. I remember running around the empty rooms until the lorry came with our furniture. There were two bedrooms for seven of us. In the larger bedroom was a big bed where my grandmother, me, Iris and Lella slept. My parents slept in the other bedroom, and there was a small bed in the corner where Nico slept. Later on, Nico slept in the hallway with a little bedside table and a curtain to give him some privacy. Unfortunately, the bed that was bought for him turned out to be riddled with bed bugs.

It was quite a new building, and for us it was the height of luxury as it had central heating, tiled floors and a bathroom. The warmth from the radiators was a great pleasure, and I suppose it was the main reason for the high rent. We could ill afford it, but we seemed to just about manage. The biggest luxury was the bathroom. It even had a bidet, which was unheard of except in upper-class homes. There was no water heater for the bath, and as my mother had to heat water in pans in the kitchen, we only ever had an inch of water to wash in. Later on, we moved to the second floor of the same building, but in all the years my parents lived there (long after I left home,) they never had a water heater or a telephone. We were very poor, and even after my mother got a job at the Agfa factory, there was still no money for luxuries like running hot water.

Cars were very rare in those days, but there was a row of garages at the back that we could see from our balcony, and a couple of the families did have cars. There was great excitement one day when we

looked down and saw a woman driving as no one had ever seen such a thing before. I don't remember any horses, but there was a local tradesman making deliveries on a three-wheeled bike with a basket in front.

The kitchen was a good size, and apart from eating there it was also our living room where we did most of our activities, including homework. It was a tradition that we all sat together in the kitchen every Sunday night to play *tombola* (bingo.) The prizes were very modest, like a sweet or a slice of bread and jam, but it was still the highlight of our week.

My father worked every day, including Sunday mornings when Lella and I used to wait for him at the tram stop. He always arrived with a package of pastries which was such a thrill for us.

My grandmother would have been happy to stay in Piove di Sacco all her life, but she had no choice but to move with us to Milan, where she was like a fish out of water. Her two stepsons went to settle with their family in Turin but sometimes came to visit for the day on their motorbike, bringing with them a bag of old clothes they had discarded. I was very pleased with them as there was very little money for clothes. I often heard my grandmother say "Milano per la grandezza, Torino per la bellezza," (Milan for the grand, Turin for the beauty.) We had no strong feelings about leaving Piove Di Sacco or about our new home in Milan. We just all went along with it, and as long as we were all together, everyone was happy.

In 1943 Nico caught typhoid. He was taken to a hospital on the other side of Milan, and it was touch and go for a while. One day my mother arrived home after visiting him and burst out crying as his condition had deteriorated. Thankfully, he did recover but not long after that, Lella also caught it and was taken to hospital. I remember the ambulance man carrying her out of the flat. Lella didn't get it as badly as Nico, and when she recovered, she was sent by the hospital to a convalescence home in Ossona. After that, she stayed for a week at my aunt Maria's house in Castelfranco, Veneto. She really loved it there, especially being in the company of her four cousins. She returned to Milan fit and well. I missed her a lot while she was away, so I made her a little basket and put some sweets in it and gave it to her on her return. Lella was so happy when she saw it and even now remembers how touched she was by that little gesture.



Aged eleven

I was about eleven years old when I first started using a needle, scissors and cotton. It started when I was asked to keep company with a two-year-old boy (which I didn't mind at all,) and one day, they rewarded me with a doll. It was not a pretty doll with big blue eyes and golden hair but a kind of boy doll with no hair and features painted on. That was the only doll or stuffed toy I ever possessed, and at the time, I had never even heard of a teddy bear.

I decided it had to be a girl doll and started to make little dresses with one for each day of the week. I spent many hours dressing and undressing her, and so began a lifetime of dressmaking. Nobody showed me how to sew; I just seemed to do it by instinct. I started looking around for some material and found what to me was a Pandora's box of bits and pieces brought from Piove di Sacco. I always managed to

find what I wanted, which included some lengths of chiffon, and I had a field day using up every inch of it. For the rest of my life, I was never able to throw away a piece of material.

Cinema was an important part of our lives, and in Milan, there was a lovely little intimate cinema which, being quite new, was very comfortable. It had a prominent sign inside saying "Vietato fumare" (*No Smoking.*) This was because of a tragedy that occurred in another cinema when a cigarette caused a fire. Everyone ran to the exit, but they found the door locked, and so they all perished.

One day we were taken to see a full-length cartoon film "Snow White and the seven dwarfs" and oh how we loved it. The films were American but we didn't have to worry about reading subtitles as they were always dubbed into Italian. It was amazing to hear how well the actors imitated the famous actors' voices. I used to spend all my pocket money every Sunday on a trip to the "Ducale Cinema" nearby. A multitude of children would wait outside, and when the time finally came to let us in, we all rushed in excitedly to the cashier to get our tickets as we had to get there early to get the best seats. We waited eagerly for the film to start but when it did, it often used to break, so while we waited for it to be mended we had to sit in the dark. Pandemonium would break out with the boys whistling and stamping their feet in protest, so it was really quite deafening. Even during the film, the children were very noisy and especially so when it was a cowboy film. Most of us stayed to see the film a second time to get our money's worth. When it was all over and time to go home, I used to feel so deflated knowing it was another week before I could go again. To make it worse, the next day was Monday when we had to go back to school. I didn't mind school, but I couldn't wait for the week to be over so I could go to the cinema again. Another of my favourite things was on Sundays, dressing up in our *Sunday Best* and walking in the local park *Piazza Napoli*.

Around the corner from our flat was a Drogheria (grocer's shop.) Just below the long counter, there were boxes full of assorted biscuits, and on the lid, you could see what kind of biscuits were inside. One day when the grocer wasn't looking, I found the temptation so great that I lifted the lid and helped myself to a few biscuits and quickly put them in my pocket. I can't remember how often I got away with it, but I don't think I did it for very long. Strangely enough, it was the same grocer that ended up recommending me to a man for my first job. With four other girls, we used to wrap peppermints that the man sold to the grocer and other shops.

At the bakery, they had some slices of very tasty looking pizza, and on one occasion, when the woman's back was turned, I quickly put a slice of pizza under my shirt and then paid just for the bread. When I got outside, I took a bite of the pizza and found it had anchovies on which were horrible, so I threw it against the wall. I didn't feel guilty at all. We had no money for frivolities, so these forbidden items on display were just too tempting.

One day I saw a tramp sitting against the wall of the grocery shop. He was starving and cold, so a woman bought him a large cafe latte, and another woman handed him a bun which he soon devoured. I have never forgotten that act of kindness.

In those days, Via Tolstoi was regarded as being on the outskirts of Milan, and we often used to see flocks of sheep brought by a shepherd to graze in the grassy area in front of us. There was a field nearby where my grandmother used to take us to find some kind of edible weeds. We used to play in that field a lot, and the grass was very long, so we used to pick large clumps of it and throw them at each other in a kind of grass war. There were also some tall stones I used to climb up on and look around. My grandmother used to take us to church every evening in May when they had special services for the Madonna. There was some singing involved and my grandmother was such a terrible singer that it was embarrassing, so I used to pray for her to keep her mouth closed.

Not far from us was the German factory *Osram* and on the grounds was a large house where the owners used to live. My best friend was a girl called Maria Segoni, and her mother was a dressmaker who used to work for those owners. Every now and then, a big black car drove up to Maria's house, and two young girls aged around ten and thirteen called Giovanna and Eva used to step out and go into the house for a fitting. We never mixed with them as they lived in a different world to us. Every day a loud siren called the workers to start or stop work but around 1940, that ended, so I assume the company went back to Germany.

My school was a lovely new building and part of Mussolini's flagship. It even had a swimming pool but unfortunately there was no money to pay for a swimming instructor, so the pool was never used and none of us learnt to swim. The only sport I remember doing at school was the hula hoop.

Once a week, we were taken to a large room where there was what looked like an upside-down bell. It contained liquid and had vapour coming from it, and we had to breathe in the fumes. I assume this was to prevent us from getting Tuberculosis which was still a big killer at the time. Every week, a nurse came around to check our hair for lice. One day I was told I had lice, so my mother spent ages combing me and doing what was necessary to get rid of them. The school had two entrances, one for boys and one for girls, and once inside, there was a lovely big staircase that led to the classrooms. The teachers were not bad, and it was quite normal that if we made a mistake, they would give us a quick slap around the head. Our school holidays went on for four months, from June until October, which dragged on for so long that we were very happy when it was time to go back to school.

Iris and I used to go with our grandmother every Saturday to Porta Genova, where there was a big market. A broiler chicken was always on the list, but I can't remember what else we bought. When we got home, my grandmother would put the chicken in boiling water to make it easier to pluck and then cook it for our Sunday lunch.

At the time, there were two opera houses in Milan, *La Scala* and the not so famous *Lirica*. My father was passionate about opera and used to get free tickets for the *Lirica* as an *animator* in return for cheering and clapping.

The friendly woman who lived in Piove Di Sacco and lost her daughter also came to live in Milan, so we often went to see them, although it involved two changes on the tram. One day the son made the journey by himself just to tell us the good news that his mother had given birth to a girl. It made us very happy considering she had lost her first daughter.

In a flat downstairs lived Signora Castellini with her husband and daughter. Iris told me Mrs Castellini used to sleep with men for money. Strangely enough, it didn't seem scandalous at the time as she only used to do it for a bit of pin money. Iris used to go out with a soldier, and like most soldiers, he expected to have sex with his girlfriend. She would have none of it, so she introduced him to Mrs Castellini. There was a rumour going around that she had even had sex with the husband of her next-door neighbour. I suppose she was a prostitute, but we never thought of her as one and have no idea whether or not her husband knew about her goings-on.



One day the school took us by tram to the Piazza del Duomo where Mussolini was giving one of his show business speeches. The workers were given the day off to go to the speech, and when he appeared we all had to wave our flags and shout "Duce, Duce." The fascists encouraged us to wear special uniforms for out of school activities, but they were not compulsory as we had to pay for them ourselves. Although most people couldn't afford them, they managed to find the money from somewhere, and I know Lella and I had one. At that time, the workers only had Sunday off, but Mussolini introduced a new law that also gave them Saturday afternoons off. Of course, it was very popular and was referred to as *Sabato fascista* (Fascist Saturday.)

For us, the war started in June 1940. At school, our class had to keep a war diary, and the best-behaved children got to write events in the diary, like how many enemy planes had been shot down. No one was particularly interested in the war, but when there was a rally at Piazza Del Duomo, the workers were happy to go, as it gave them the afternoon off work. There was conscription but my father didn't have to join the army because of working at the Caproni factory where they made fighter planes.

I was booked to go to a *Colonia*, a kind of summer camp for children. They were really well-organised camps started by Mussolini so that children of workers had the chance of a holiday by the sea, something that no working-class family could otherwise afford. Iris had gone to a *Colonia* the year before and had really enjoyed it, although she mainly talked about how a girl had nearly drowned in the sea. Iris never did like to talk much. I was really looking forward to go to the *Colonia* but when the war started, it had to be cancelled. My father saw how disappointed I was, so he bought me what turned out to be the love of my life, a pair of roller skates which very few children had in those days. I used to skate for hours in the middle of the road outside our house, and the only traffic I saw was the occasional bicycle. The skates were made of cheap steel, and I used them so much that they often broke but my father being a welder, was able to take them to work to repair, which he did many times.

My mother, like most women, started panic buying, and I came home from school one day to see lots of packets of spaghetti and tagliatelle on the table. Unfortunately, when the time came to eat them, they had to be thrown away because they were full of worms and insects. Food was very scarce and I often got up from the table still hungry so I took an apple from a bag we used to keep in the bathroom. Bread had been our staple diet, but now we were rationed to one loaf a week. My brother Nico and my father used to go to Vimercate in the country to try and find someone selling potatoes, and sometimes they got lucky. There was a place called *Mensa* in *Piazza Napoli Park* where for just a few lire you could buy some risotto and a few meat dishes, but we only used it a few times because their food was terrible. The food at school wasn't too bad and for poor families like us, it was free.

Apart from hunger, people were cold, and one day we heard a rumour that some men were cutting down the trees that lined the tramways and chopping them up for firewood. It must have been people who still lived in the older houses where they had solid fuel stoves and heaters. We went to have a look, but by the time we got there, most of the trees were already cut down and all we saw was men dragging them along the road. There wasn't a policeman in sight, so I assume the authorities had decided to look the other way. After the war, all the trees were replanted. I often heard my mother cursing the war, and neither of my parents had any interest in politics. After a long period of poverty in Pieve Di Sacco, they had finally managed to save some money, but that didn't last long when the war started.

The biggest air raid was in the summer of 1943. I was walking home when I heard a terrific noise and when I looked up, I saw what I was later told was *Flying Fortress* warplanes. Five minutes later, there were some huge explosions as the bombs fell on a group of old houses and flattened them. It was not surprising that no one survived. We heard that on the other side of town, they suffered a lot worse. There was one area that was a slum, but it had a very good community spirit which was lost forever after it was flattened by the bombing. One day my mother came home and told me she and a lot of workers from Agfa were in a shelter when a bomb fell nearby, which covered them all in earth. Fortunately, they all got out safely, but they were very dirty.

Of course, the war never stopped children playing in the street all day as we always had done. One game I remember was called *Madam Cavalieri*, which consisted of a line of girls on one side and boys on the other. We took it in turns to go up to someone of the opposite sex, and on the third time of going to the same person, you were accepted, and so you would marry them. How innocent we were.

It was around that time that I went on my first ever holiday. I went with our neighbour Signora Di Luca to stay for the whole of May with her uncle in Bellagio near Lake Como. I was surprised that the ferry journey took two and a half hours due to the many stops along the way. It was a very old and modest first floor flat with a shared bathroom halfway up the stairs. I don't remember the uncle at all or ever speaking to him, although I suppose I must have done.

I was surprised to find myself ending up with two holidays that year as there was a mass exodus from Milan following a heavy air raid. People walked to the central station to get a train to wherever they could. My father took Lella to Castelfranco to stay with some relatives, and Lella told me when he left, he kissed her and cried. It was the only time she ever saw him cry. I was sent to a farm that was owned by my mother's friend Rosa. My parents, Nico and Iris, went to Piove di Sacco.

In 1943 Mussolini was removed from government and kept captive in various locations. The king declared an amnesty, and everyone was so happy, we were dancing in the streets, but then some German paratroopers rescued Mussolini from Gran Sasso and installed him as a puppet leader so they could maintain a grip on Italy. Everyone knew that he was finished, and he looked like a very poor figure when he was presented to people in public. We didn't notice a lot of German presence in Milan, but on a tram once, I saw a very handsome blond German soldier standing behind the tram driver looking very bored and showing no interest in the people around him. When the war ended, one mother and daughter who were known to entertain Germans had all their hair cut off by partisans.

By that time, we had a radio, and it was on that we heard that the partisans were very active and had captured Mussolini somewhere in the Como district. They shot him and his mistress Clara Petacci and then took the bodies to the Piazza Loreto in Milan, where they hung them upside down for everybody to see. We wanted to go and look for ourselves and so jumped on a tram but the closer we got, the more crowded it became so as it was obvious we wouldn't get anywhere near the bodies, we went home.

The only people who grieved for Mussolini were from the South of Italy as they loved him for the many improvements he made. When the war ended in 1945, everyone was so happy, but there was a shortage of nearly everything. Surprisingly, the Lire didn't collapse like the German mark.

There was not enough fuel to run the central heating, so we had to get a solid fuel burner to cook and keep us warm. The factory where our father worked used to let the workers take home broken parts of aeroplanes. One day he was given a whole wing that was made mainly of wood. He broke it up with a hatchet and put it on a cart, then pushed it eleven kilometres back to our apartment.

During the five years of war, the dance halls were closed, and it was even forbidden to dance in our own homes. When the war ended, lots of apartments held dances in their courtyards as all that was needed was a gramophone. I used to go and dance with Iris, and needless to say, she would take the lead as a man. It didn't last long, as after a few months, the novelty wore off.

## Chapter 5



I left school in the summer of 1944 when I was fourteen. I had no qualifications as the war with all its air raids made our lessons go to pot, but I was never very academic and don't think I would have passed my exams anyway. Iris was far more studious and always did well in exams, but she was completely lacking in common sense.

For my friends and me, it was the end of school life forever, so we went to a local park to celebrate the prospect of never having to face the daily drudge of school ever again. One of the girls pointed to a young Italian soldier who was exposing himself to us. I suppose he was hoping to give us a pleasant surprise, but we all ran away laughing and giggling and thought it was very funny. Later we chatted up a boy who was not much older than us. I was rather a show-off, so he gravitated towards me and asked to see me again. I must have given him my address because one day he turned up at my home. We walked a few metres to where there was a metal door and a step at the bottom. We chatted for a while when he picked up a long blade of grass and suggested we put each end in our mouth and chew it until we got to the centre. We were halfway when I realised what the outcome would be, so I laughed and pulled away. How innocent it all sounds now.

In the warm summer evenings, we used to meet up outside our flats and play at choosing a partner and pretending to walk off into the sunset together. I was rather streetwise where boys were concerned and didn't fall for all the romantic slosh they dished out. The only boy I ever remember being interested in was a boy called Gabi (short for Gabriele.) I was only ten at the time, but unfortunately, he seemed to be more interested in my friend Maria. I wasn't terribly upset about it as it was all very innocent and childish.

I had no burning ambition to become a dressmaker, but when I was fourteen, I got a job for a local dressmaker doing simple things. There was an older woman there who was very passionate about *Il Duce* (Mussolini) and raved on and on about his wonderful speeches. It was a boring job, and feeling the need to move on, I left and got a job in a fashion house in Via Montenapoleone, which was the centre of the fashion industry in Milan. I enjoyed working there and being part of the commuting crowd and so at last, I felt I had my place in the world. I loved getting on the tram every day and walking along the *Portici* by the Il Duomo Cathedral, which was near my place of work. It was an old, high building and an old-fashioned lift took us to the floor where our workroom was. I got on well with the other staff and must have given them the impression at first that I was a shy girl who wouldn't say boo to a goose, but it wasn't long before they remarked on how I never stopped talking.

My main job was making shoulder pads which were fashionable long before the TV program Dallas came along. I was handed a large piece of wadding from which I had to cut pads and stitch them up into curves. I also did the occasional hem. The supervisor was very kind and showed me how to cut clothes using paper patterns and gave me many other helpful tips. In the corner of the workroom, there was a small stove where we warmed up our lunch which was usually risotto brought from home. We usually had our lunch on the balcony to get a bit of fresh air.



More figures can be found at [www.nemojames.com/luigi-eginardo](http://www.nemojames.com/luigi-eginardo)

There was not much work at my father's factory, so he used to spend most of the time making beautiful little metal figures, including one piece of an entire orchestra complete with an audience and street vendors. The owner of the factory used to like them, so my father gave him a lot of the figures.

It was on Boxing Day afternoon in 1945, three weeks after my sixteenth birthday, when Iris and I went to *Giardini Pubblici* (the public park). There was no special reason for going, and we just walked aimlessly around until we saw two British soldiers coming the other way. We gave a little smile, and I can't remember who started it, but we began talking. Both of them spoke Italian very badly, and of course, we didn't speak English, but we managed to get by. Iris wasn't keen on the "piccolo soldato" (little soldier,) but the other soldier was very persistent with me and talked me into meeting him again. His name was Jack. I wasn't particularly excited when I got home. It had just been a bit of a laugh as we had never spoken to English soldiers before. Being a pretty girl, I had many encounters with Italian boys, but it was always very innocent. I was not the type to go weak at the knees at the sight of a boy. It was on our second date that Jack started talking about marriage, but I never took him seriously. He was always keener on the idea than I was, but after a while, I got carried along and agreed to marry him.

Soon after we met, Jack was stationed in Bologna, where he had to stay until our wedding day, but he used to come and visit me once a week on the fast train. He never had permission to go on weekend leave, so he used to hide his bed so they didn't notice his absence. The train was always very crowded, and on one occasion, it was so full that he ended up sleeping on the floor with children all around him. He was pretty sure that was when he caught scarlet fever. He never mixed with children when he was young, so he never had any of the usual childhood illnesses. He was taken to hospital, and the worst part of the experience for him was having to deal with the ward sister, who he said was a real battle-axe.



Sometimes I went to visit Jack in Bologna, and it was on one of those occasions that he took me in an army lorry to Riccione near Rimini. I was sixteen, and it was the first time I had ever seen the sea. On another occasion, we met up in Milan and planned to go out for the day, but I forget I had to discuss something with my mother. When we got to the building, Jack preferred to wait downstairs as he was always very shy. I don't know what came over me, but I started chatting with my mother and completely forgot about Jack waiting for me. He didn't know in which apartment we lived, so he had to wait for over an hour for me and wasn't very happy about it.

It soon became obvious that Jack loved his food and I must admit I used to get a bit embarrassed when he devoured chicken bones, including mine. We all laughed one day when we were having lunch together, and my mother served artichokes which Jack had never seen before. It wasn't until he was halfway through eating one that we realised he was devouring the whole thing, leaves and all, and still seemed to be enjoying it.

The time came when we decided to talk to my father about getting married, so we met in a Café in Piazza Napoli. With Jack's terrible Italian, and my father speaking no English, the conversation did not flow too easily. Jack wanted to impress my father, so he showed him photographs of a house in Westcliffe which had a lovely garden. I knew it belonged to his wealthy uncle George, but I didn't care. My father seemed to like Jack well enough and was very relieved when Jack insisted on paying for the wedding.

The commanding officer at the camp in Bologna was making it very difficult for his men to marry Italian women. Jack was summoned to a meeting with the officer, and one of the arguments against him marrying was, "If you marry an Italian woman, she won't be able to cook roast beef like your mum does." Jack burst out laughing because his mother was a terrible cook. He was not going to be talked out of it, so with the help of Iris, who worked at the Palace of Justice and her friend who was a lawyer, she arranged the marriage.

The owners of the fashion house I worked at were two middle-aged spinsters who were very cold and unfriendly women. One day one of them was particularly unpleasant to me, so I snapped and told her that they treated us like dogs. I can't remember if they sacked me, but I know I never went back there again. My mother didn't mind and said there was no point in looking for another job as my wedding was only a couple of months away. As the wedding day got nearer, I went with our neighbour, Signora Di Luca, to look for some material for a wedding dress and found a parachute made of silk, which of

course was perfect. We also made a headdress and a soft bag, so the only thing I had to buy was the veil. I can't say it was a big love affair, but I knew Jack was a good man and I was very happy.



We were married on the morning of 17<sup>th</sup> July 1946 at Sant'Alessandro Church, close to Piazza Missori near the centre of Milan. Two cars took us to the church. I had no bridesmaids, which was normal for working-class people at the time, and I didn't have my hair done especially, like they do these days. I was not nervous as it all seemed so unreal. Jack was very nervous, not just about the wedding, but because he was getting married without permission, so he was half expecting the military police to arrive and take him to prison at any time. After the ceremony, we all went back to our apartment in Via Tolstoi and shared some sponge cake that our neighbour baked for us, although I don't know how, because none of the apartments had ovens. We had a drink of Vermouth, and for Lella, at thirteen years old, it was the first time she'd ever drunk alcohol so she got a bit tipsy and had to go and lie down to sleep it off.

That afternoon we took a train to Lake Como for our honeymoon. We walked around with our luggage, trying to find a place to stay and eventually found a kind of café with rooms above. At first, the woman was reluctant to let us stay because I was with an English soldier, so she thought I was a prostitute. I was prepared for that, so I showed her my church booklet as proof we were married. It was on a main road, and noisy trams went along the road outside, making such a din.

I don't know if it was a shortage of money or that we were just not used to eating out, but it never occurred to us to look for a restaurant to eat in. We ate all our meals in the café, but even in those days my appetite was quite poor so I didn't eat much, although I do remember enjoying a fried egg one day. There was nothing much to do but stroll around most of the time and one evening while sitting in the park by the lake, a policeman approached us, thinking I was a prostitute. I told him where we were staying and that we were married, and he seemed to believe me.

When we arrived back in Milan, we went to visit my parents and found some military policemen waiting for Jack. They took him to prison, but we were half expecting it, so it didn't come as much of a shock. We were supposed to stay with some friends of my parents, but as Jack wouldn't be there, I stayed with my parents while he was away.

A few days later, a senior officer asked why Jack was put in prison and got very angry when he heard that a junior officer was stopping people from marrying. Jack was released immediately and all the men were free to get married, so he became a hero and the junior officer was demoted. Jack said his stay in prison didn't bother him and that it was quite interesting chatting to the men in cells on either side of him. They both said they had murdered someone, although Jack was never sure if that was true or just bravado.

As soon as we were married, my father was given food by the British army, so things became much easier for my family. It wasn't long before Jack was sent back to England, so I stayed with my parents for a couple of weeks to prepare for my trip to join him. Before leaving, my father took me by coach to Piove di Sacco to see all our relatives as I had not seen them since 1936 when we moved to Milan. We

took a night bus from Piazza Castello and stopped in Verona for a short time. In Piove, I met my uncle Antonio who was a small quiet man. He could not forget his time in North Africa when he was a prisoner of war under the British, and he was very bitter about the way he was treated, although he didn't go into details. I also met uncle Isidoro who started a driving school that became very successful and is still going to this day, although now it is run by his daughter. After Piove we went to Venice for a few hours, so it turned out to be a lovely trip.

## Chapter 6



On 8<sup>th</sup> October 1946, I left Italy to start my new life in England. I said goodbye to my grandmother at our apartment in Via Tolstoi. She was weeping and saying gently, "I will never see you again." I reassured her that of course we would see each other again, but she was right; she died in hospital just over a year later, aged seventy.

All the family came to see me off at the station. I was leaning out of the window waving goodbye, and as the train slowly moved off, I could see for the first time in my life, my mother was crying. There was a lot of people in the corridor standing or sitting on their cases, me included. I think people must have felt sorry for this young girl travelling all alone, so someone offered me a seat. My father had given me a small bottle of cherry brandy and a collapsible aluminium cup to drink from. I had some condensed milk but can't remember what else I had to get me through that long journey. I don't think I would have had any kind of sandwiches as the only bread available was rolls, and they only stayed fresh for one day. I must have had some fruit, maybe some walnuts (my father's favourite,) but they would have been in their shells so I don't know how I would have opened them.

I remember another passenger sitting in front of me, a young girl from Naples who was holding a lovely baby girl of about eight months. She was joining her English husband in Devon. He was the son of a vicar, so I presume she was going to live with his family. She felt sure she would be very homesick for Naples but in my case, I felt nothing. Milan was not a romantic city, and I left it with no regrets.

It was a long journey, and as only first-class carriages had soft seats, I had to sit on a hard wooden seat for over twenty-four hours. At Calais, I got on the cross-channel ferry. The only boat I had ever been on before was the one on Lake Como, which was on nice, calm water. This ferry was moving from side to side, making me want to throw up at every movement. When I arrived at Dover, I was asked by a customs man if I had anything to declare. I didn't really understand why he asked that, but I had been having English lessons and wanted to show off my English, so I told him, "Yes, I have this watch that my mother gave me before I left Italy." He looked at it and told me I had to pay two pounds and ten shillings (£2.50) in duty. I was really shocked as it was a huge amount of money in those days and I didn't have enough to pay. Fortunately, Jack was at the port to meet me, and he had money with him, but he wasn't very happy about the unexpected expense. We went to the train station at Dover, and I was pleasantly surprised to see that all the trains had soft seats. When we finally arrived in Victoria, Jack saw how tired I was, and so he called a taxi. It felt like I was in a dream.



My new home

Jack took me to a small, terraced house in Camberwell, South London. His mother, Jessie, was standing outside waiting for us and welcomed me with a peck on the cheek. I was shown around the house, and I thought it was very odd that the tiny kitchen was downstairs, as houses in Italy always had the kitchen upstairs in case of fire. Next to the kitchen was a small dining room where the table was already laid. I suppose Jessie wanted to make me feel at home, so she had bought a tin of Heinz spaghetti for lunch. It was awful, but being polite, I ate it all. The fish and chips we had in the evening was much more to my liking.

The house was owned by Jack's brother Cyril who lived there with his wife, Grace, and Jessie. We were put in the back room, which was very dark and depressing although I wasn't too bothered at the time. I adapted well and had no preconceived idea of what the house would be like. I was not a romantic, dreamy kind of person, so I soon fitted in. Jessie did her best to make us feel welcome which was not easy for her being quite repressed as most women were of her generation. Every morning she brought us a cup of tea and toast in bed. I remember sleeping with my head on Jack's arm.



Me and Jessie

Unfortunately, it wasn't long before I found my mother-in-law very difficult to live with, and it can't have been easy for her. Jack had always been the apple of her eye, and despite having very little herself, she still managed to send him money and comics while he was in the army. She must have looked forward to his homecoming and having him all to herself, but instead, he arrived with a bride who was no more than a child herself. Jessie was very sulky, and although there was never any arguments, she often went silent. Years later, I realised it was good that she ran the household in the beginning as I didn't have a clue. The only time I did any cooking was when Jessie went to Westcliffe to visit her cousin, so having found some precious onions (they were very scarce then,) I made myself a nice plate of pasta. Bliss!

There wasn't a lot of work available for men returning from the war, so Jack was lucky to find a job at the central post office in Mount Pleasant near the centre of London. It was a secure job which was the most important thing for him, but the salary was very low. To save on bus fares, he bought a second-hand bicycle and cycled the five miles to work and back every day, sometimes twice a day. There was an Italian shop next to where he worked, so he was able to buy pasta and other Italian food that was not available in the local shops, so I was very happy about that.

In October of my first year in England, Jack and I went to Southend for a few days with Jessie and stayed at a bed and breakfast. One day, Jack and I went for a long walk and stopped at a little café. We had bread butter and a plate of shrimps (still with their shells on) and a cup of tea. It was very exciting for me as it was the first time in my life I had ever eaten out. We also went to Westcliffe to visit Jack's uncle, who owned a successful herbal shop in Walworth Road which is still going strong to this day. I was impressed with the house and especially the garden. One day, sensing that Jack and I wanted some privacy, Jessie went off by herself but it was a bit embarrassing when we went to the cinema and saw Jessie sitting just a few seats away.

There were several fireplaces in our house where we burnt coal. In the living room, which was at the front of the house, the fireplace was only lit on the very rare occasions when visitors came. Next to our kitchen was a small room which became our dining and living area. I lit a fire every morning and kept it burning all day until bedtime. There was a lot of work involved in cleaning it and starting the fire with balls of newspaper and wood. I was told the best way to get the fire started was to hold a newspaper across the front of the fireplace to help draw the air through. That did work, but often the newspaper caught fire in my hands which was a bit scary. When it was finally lit, I would sit there with one side of me nice and hot and the other side freezing cold. It was unheard of for anyone to have central heating. One day we had a gas cooker installed, and while they were doing it, they also put in a gas tap by the

side of the fireplace, so I no longer had to mess about getting the fire started. Later on, we bought a paraffin heater which saved a lot of work, but it meant we had to keep going to the corner shops to buy paraffin. How lovely it was when Jack came home one day with a gas fire.

There were still gas lights sticking out of the walls, but as electric lights had been installed, the gas ones were never used. We had an electric iron and to use it I had to remove the light bulb and plug the iron into the light bulb socket. The fuses often blew and the power often went out, so we had to put more money in the meter.

There was only one bath in the house which was in Jessie's small kitchen overlooking the back yard, but that was strictly for Cyril and Jessie's use. On top of the bath was a board used as a working top when the bath was not being used. Jack and I went to the public baths at Camberwell Green once a week, taking soap and a change of underwear rolled up in a towel. It was an old Victorian building at the end of a cul-de-sac, and they also had a swimming pool. Once inside, an assistant showed me to a large private cubicle and filled the bath with hot water. If I needed any more, I just had to call her. I used to really enjoy those baths.

Not only was there still food rationing, but there was also furniture rationing, so we didn't have our own wardrobe. One day, Jack won some money in a raffle at work and managed to find a wardrobe someone was selling. It turned out to have woodworm in it, so he had to throw it away and spend days treating all the wooden floors to prevent the woodworm from spreading.

## Chapter 7



Denis

It was in November 1946, when I was still seventeen, that I walked down the hill to St Giles Hospital, where they confirmed that I was pregnant. It wasn't planned, and although at the time I took in my stride, that night while lying in bed, I had a good cry when the enormity of the news hit me. The next day I got used to the idea, but I can't say I was jumping for joy. Jack was never one for hiding his emotions and made it clear he wasn't happy about it. He had only ever had one girlfriend before me which ended in disaster, so now that he finally had a wife, he hated the idea of sharing her.

Denis was born on 8<sup>th</sup> July 1947 and pregnant mothers were treated so well in those days. At 10 a.m. on the day I was expected to give birth, I walked down Vestry Road to St Giles's hospital. They sat me down on a bed in a large ward to prepare me for the birth. They gave me some disgusting castor oil which I suppose was for my constipation. When labour started, I was moved to a large room with two beds. The dear old soul of a midwife was all the time encouraging me and saying what a good girl I was. I don't remember being in great pain. There was no gas in those days, so I don't remember if I was given anything which might explain why it was not that painful. At 6 p.m. Denis was born, all 7lb 3 oz. of him. He was put in a cot beside me with a thin pipe going up his nose, but I can't remember why. That was how Jack first saw him when he came to visit me after work. Even though the experience wasn't too painful, I still remember saying to visitors, "never again." The worst thing was the lady doctor stitching me up without giving me an anaesthetic. I was surprised to find how much I enjoyed being a mother and how quickly I got attached to my new baby.



Eighteen months later, finding Jessie so difficult to live with and craving our independence, Jack looked at adverts in our local newspaper and found an upstairs flat to rent in Credon Road, Bermondsey, so we moved there. We had no sink or water so on our arrival, the elderly landlord handed me two enamel jugs. For every drop of water we needed, I had to carry the jugs downstairs to fill them up in the landlord's kitchen. In our room, dirty water was poured into a bucket which I had to carry back down and throw down the landlord's sink. We all shared a toilet which was in the garden. As for our weekly bath, we found a small, public baths nearby but nothing as grand as the one in Camberwell.

The landlord was a strange old man who grunted continuously, and Jack got quite concerned when Denis started to imitate the grunt. I suppose being so young, he thought that was the thing to do. The old man told us he had been in prison for some minor offence. I had no idea what he had done, but he was incarcerated again for a few months which was a great relief to us as it meant we had the place to ourselves for a while.

Jessie used to come to visit us every day and spent most of her time playing with Denis as she was very fond of him. The landlord returned from prison and one day was particularly unpleasant to me, so when Jessie saw how upset I was, she suggested we went back to live with her in Gairloch Road. By that time, Cyril had left his wife Grace for a Scottish woman called Sadie and moved to Scotland with her. Grace had taken on a lodger and they became a couple, so they moved out to a very nice council flat in Dulwich and ended up getting married. As there was now plenty of room in Jessie's house, we moved back after having lived at Credon Road for eighteen months. Jessie moved to the upper part of the house, and we lived downstairs. Once a week, we were allowed to use her bath. Cyril sold the house to Jack for £400, which was a bit lower than the market price but on condition that Jessie lived there until she died. The house was in a bad state of repair, so Jack got a mortgage for £800, which gave us enough money to make the most urgent repairs. I was flabbergasted when I heard recently that the house sold for £800,000.

In 1947 Iris came to live in England, although I never understood why as she had a very good job at the Milan Court. It was soon after our grandmother died, and as she was the only person Iris was close to, I suppose she wanted to get away from her family. She found a job in a spinning mill and stayed with a woman that she worked with. While she was there, she studied nursing and found a job in a psychiatric hospital which I assume didn't work out because soon after that, she learnt shorthand and went to work for a lawyer. To obtain British citizenship, in 1951, she married a man called Ebenezer Allen. He was a lot older than her and married her as a favour. A few months later, she met someone and became pregnant. Michael was born the following year and I don't know how she managed to get divorced so quickly as it wasn't so easy in those days, but a year later she married Michael's father. The strange thing was that none of our family in Italy knew that Iris had had a baby until I went to visit them a year later. Her second marriage didn't last long, so she rented a room that Lella saw when she came to visit and described it as "immensely depressing." After that, she rented a room at Jack's sister's house in Peckham, which was much better although very small.

In 1951 I became pregnant with my second child, and this time it was planned. I was very upset when I started bleeding halfway through the pregnancy as I was sure I was having a miscarriage, but the doctor told me to rest for a while, and the problem seemed to go away. To prevent varicose veins, women in those days used to wear very tight, thick stockings, which were very uncomfortable. As they are not worn anymore, I can only assume that was a waste of time.

Around the corner from our house, there was a good selection of shops which was convenient as the main shopping area was nearly a mile away. One of the shops was *Turnball's*, a shop that sold milk, eggs, and similar groceries. For many years Mr Turnball pushed a pile of heavy crates of milk around the hilly streets in the early hours delivering door to door. Rain, snow or ice, he never failed to deliver. My favourite shop that seemed to sell most types of food I used to call *The Cut Shop*, although I have no idea why. The cashier used to add up the bill in the complicated pounds, shillings and pence system at

such a fantastic speed. She must have been a great asset to the shop owner, although I often wonder how she must have felt when a machine took her place.

For my main shopping, once a week I went to Peckham High Street and on the way, stopped at Sainsbury's where I had to queue up to be served at each different counter. The woman who sold the butter did it with great pride, picking up a large pat in each hand and bashing them into pieces until they ended up looking like a work of art. From there, I went to many different shops, including what I called *the button shop*, where I bought all my dressmaking supplies. Right next to that was a toy shop where Denis bought a lot of matchbox cars that he loved to play with.

My shopping took me in a big circle, and I ended pushing my full trolley up the steep hill to Gairloch Road. I did that every Friday morning, even when I was heavily pregnant. I can't say I enjoyed those trips, but the exercise must have done me good, and I did enjoy getting out of the house for a while.



Derek

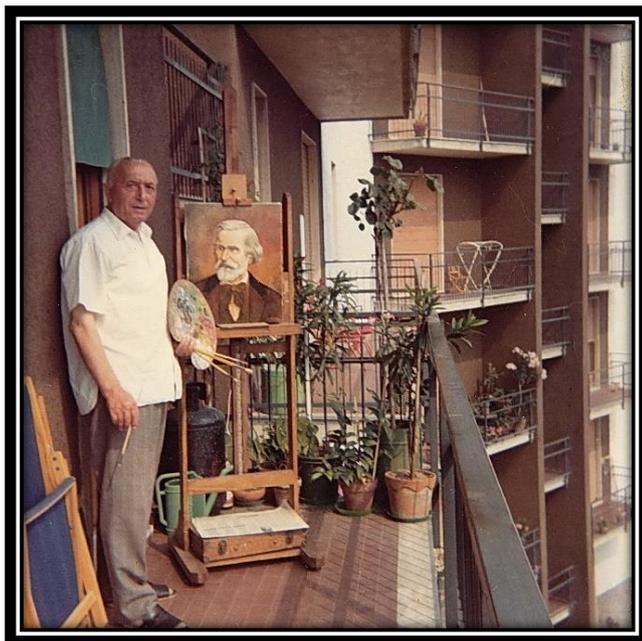
It was at the end of one of my weekly shopping trips when I was heavily pregnant that I felt contractions. I walked calmly down the hill to St Giles hospital and this time it was very painful. After giving me an injection, I fell asleep. When I woke up, I vomited and shortly after that, they took me to the labour ward. Derek was born at 9 p.m. and what a relief it was when the baby finally came out. They put him across my chest, which I suppose was to help me bond with him. His plump little body slithered across my chest, and all I noticed was that his ears at the tips were stuck down; what a strange thing to notice? At the end of the ward was a nursery where the babies were kept at night. At 5 a.m., the lights came on, and the nurses gave us a bowl of water to wash our breasts before feeding our babies. What I thought was really great was being able to sleep right through the night with the baby safely in the nursery. They always kept you in hospital for ten days after giving birth in those days, so by the time I left, I was well-rested and had adjusted to my new baby. I hear that these days, mothers are sometimes sent home the next day.

We bought a lovely *Silver Cross* pram from Jack's niece Joan, and it wasn't long before I was taking Derek out in it. Around that time, Jack bought our first washing machine, a *Goblin*. It had a mangle attached which squeezed all the water out. I was so happy with it and thought it was the height of luxury. Until then, I used to have to clean dirty nappies by boiling them in a big saucepan.

With a new baby in the house, Jessie offered to look after Denis, which I found a great help, but gradually he started to spend more and more time upstairs with her. She made a big fuss of him, and I suppose he enjoyed it. There came a point when I knew I should keep him downstairs with me, but I found it difficult to cope. I didn't have the strength to put my foot down, and Jack didn't want to get involved. Denis was happy enough with the situation, so it was hard to force him downstairs with us.

I can't say I was ever homesick. For the first few years in England, my mother used to send me bundles of magazines to read, and every Christmas, we looked forward to a parcel full of luxuries like *Torrone*, *Panettone* and *Salami* that we couldn't get in England even if we had the money. I wrote to my parents

regularly, but it was mainly my father who answered them. He had given up playing the trumpet many years earlier, but he wrote one day and said he had formed some kind of band with friends and they were playing here and there. It didn't last long, and the next thing I heard was he had sold his trumpet. He kept up with his painting, though.



My father on his balcony in Trescore

Having learnt to drive in the army, Jack's greatest wish was to own a car. With money so tight, it was not until 1956 that he was able to buy one, which of course, was second hand. He answered an advert in the paper, and a professional-looking man drove from the other side of London to deliver an *Austin 8* car to us. I expect he couldn't believe his luck when Jack handed him £240 which we later discovered was far more than it was worth. Jack was only earning around £8 a week, so it was quite an achievement for him to have saved so much. Instead of flashing indicator lights like they have now, it had little plastic indicators about six inches long that used to pop out from the side. They hardly ever worked, so most of the time, Jack had to make hand signals, or we had to put our hands out the window and pull the indicator out manually.

For our first long trip, we went on our summer holiday to Pentewan in Cornwall. While Jack was in the army, he found he loved sleeping in tents, so he bought an old army bell tent, and we stopped at a campsite. The start of the journey didn't go too well as Jack loaded the roof rack too high. We were driving down Fleet Street where the surface of the road was still made of wooden blocks, so it was very slippery. We stopped suddenly at traffic lights, and the car went into a skid. It was a very strange experience as everything seemed to go into slow motion, and it was ages before the car turned on its side. The back of the car was full of blankets which all fell on top of Derek. People came rushing over to help us, and a policeman held Derek while a group of men helped to push the car upright. We continued on our journey, and it turned out to be a lovely holiday and a great boon to me that we were able to buy ready-cooked chicken and Cornish pasties.

In September of that year, we went to stay at Cyril's hotel, *The Whim*, in Scotland. Jessie had already travelled there a few days earlier by coach. We had joined the AA, and they used to provide detailed routes free of charge, so we had no trouble finding our way. Jack was determined to make the journey in one day, so we left home at 5 am. We only got to Marble Arch before Derek started asking, "are we nearly there yet?" and continued asking for the next four hundred miles. I kept him amused by reading his favourite *Noddy* books, but he was very restless. Denis was always well behaved and sat quietly in the back. Unlike Derek, he never demanded attention. By the time we got to Scotland, it was dark, and we were driving on minor roads that had no lighting with headlamps that were not much brighter than candles. It was a tree-lined road, and in the darkness, it gave a ghostly appearance. Cyril was not very happy with us arriving so late and keeping him from his bed. Our bedroom was at the top of a lovely old

staircase in an area where I expect the servants used to sleep when it was a stately home. Cyril's wife Sadie had been involved in catering, so when Cyril heard the hotel was being sold very cheap, he bought it for her, although he kept well out of the way of the day to day running of it. Neither of them had a clue about how to run a hotel so it turned out a disaster.

Driving home, we had Jessie with us, and after having learnt our lesson, we decided to make two overnight stops. On the first night, Jack and I got out of the car to enquire about somewhere to stay, leaving Jessie to look after Denis and Derek in the car. Derek was never able to sit still for long and when climbing into the back he stood on the handbrake, which in those days had no safety catch. The car started rolling backwards down the hill with Jessie and Denis screaming, and heaven knows what would have happened if a brave man hadn't jumped into the car and brought it to a halt.

The next day we stopped for lunch in a town called Newark, intending to have a nice meal, but all we were offered was baked beans on toast which we had no choice but to accept. Later, we were annoyed to see a man eating a lovely steak meal. I suppose he was one of the favourite customers and could order whatever he wanted. That night we stayed in a café which had rooms above, and we managed to get a good meal which was a big relief.

The next year we planned our first driving holiday to Italy and once again got a route map from the AA, which directed us all the way to Milan. We weren't in France very long when we arrived in a town called Arras, which wasn't on our map. We realised we had taken a wrong turn and had to turn around, but it was very difficult with a trailer full of camping gear. Jack couldn't do a U-turn, so I had to get out and move the trailer manually. The first night we stopped at a very primitive campsite in a town called *La Fare*. How strange that I should remember that name after all these years. We quite often got lost, so it was up to me to ask people for directions. Jack never seemed to appreciate that Italian and French were different languages and used to get quite irritated when I said I didn't understand what people were saying to me.

After that, we used to go on holiday to Italy every two years, which was all we could afford. It was unusual for working-class families to go abroad in those days and it caused some resentment at Jack's work. They wondered where he was getting the money from and ignored the fact that he didn't drink or smoke and cycled to work every day. I used to look forward to our holidays to Italy, but they were quite stressful as my parents' apartment was very small and overcrowded when we were staying with them. One year, Lella and I went to the cinema, and it was the first time Jack stayed to look after Denis and Derek. He didn't take to it very well, and when we got home, he was in our bedroom walking restlessly up and down, really stressed out. My mother used to like Jack, but in later years when she saw how stressed he used to get, she gave me a look as if to say she commiserated with me.

We went on a long summer holiday every year, and Jack loved to drive, but I was not so keen on the long trips. Children and cars are not a good mixture, especially when they are babies and you are on the road for days on end. We also used to go camping most weekends in the summer. I quite enjoyed the camping, although I found the packing and putting the tent up and down a real drudge. Years later, we started camping at Walton Camp Site in Surrey, where we put a heavy-duty tent up in the spring, and it stayed there until the autumn. I enjoyed that much more. Jack also enjoyed it but missed the adventure of going to new places all the time.



In all the years we lived at Gairloch Road, I don't remember Jack ever getting anyone to work on the house as he did it all himself. He learned a lot from a friend at work called Bert Sherman, who, despite working for the post office, was a jack of all trades and gave Jack the confidence to tackle anything. At first, he learnt how to work with lead water pipes but later replaced them with copper. He rewired the whole house and even got on the roof to fix leaks with nothing but a small piece of string to save him if he slipped. I remember him fiddling with some wires one day and he must have done something wrong as he got a big shock which threw him across the room.

All the window frames in the house were rotten, so he spent a whole winter working in our cramped cellar making new frames and then fitting them. He would walk all the way to Peckham to buy the glass and carry it back, and I had to hold them in place from inside the house. I know they lasted at least fifty years, so he must have done a good job. One day I got a bit heavy-handed when swatting a fly and managed to break one of the windows. I knew Jack would get very angry about it, so rather than upsetting him, I walked to Peckham pushing a pram and bought a pane of glass. I fitted it myself, so Jack never found out. There were a few other jobs I had to do, like laying lino as Jack hated working on his hands and knees, but I can't say I was that keen on it either. He seemed to think that cutting lino couldn't be much different to cutting dress material.

One day we had a small bonfire in the garden, and I threw a large piece of old lino on it. A few seconds later, thick black smoke rose up with a big flame in the middle. Apparently, in those days, lino was backed with highly inflammable material. Jack wasn't around at the time, so in a panic, I grabbed the washing up bowl that was full of water and threw it on the fire to put it out. It wasn't until the next morning I found half my cutlery in the ashes.

One big problem I had was Jack's insecurity. He didn't like me going out of the house and was always very suspicious, though I never gave him cause to be. He never understood women, and while he was growing up, he was badly affected by seeing how promiscuous his two sisters Doris and Maisie were. Jack being ten years older than me couldn't have helped much. It was also difficult dealing with his many bouts of depression which I found hard to understand. Sometimes he came home from work completely stressed out, and although there was never any question of him being violent or even shouting at me, there were times when he got so worked up within himself that it looked like he was going to explode. The next morning he would go off to work in a terrible state, leaving me to spend the whole day in turmoil, worrying that he would finally go over the top and do something terrible, but then he arrived home at night as if nothing had happened. He probably returned to normal during the morning, whereas I had spent the whole day worrying. But I knew he was a good man and a good provider, which went a long way to make up for his difficult nature. I buried myself in my needlework, which apart from my weekly shopping trips, was my only contact with the outside world.

My professional dressmaking started when I made outfits for Jessie and Jack's sisters. Jack's brother Cyril was quite wealthy and made most of his money as a bookmaker at racecourses, but he also dabbled in many different businesses. One of those businesses was a shop selling second-hand sewing machines at the indoor market in Peckham High Street. One day Cyril brought home a sewing machine for me, which worked by turning a handle. A couple of months later, he fitted a motor which made my dressmaking a lot easier. I don't know what came over him as he was not known for his generosity. I don't think he really liked women, and I never said more than a dozen words to him in all the time I knew him.

At that time, it never even occurred to most women to go out to work, so I put an advert in a florist shop in Peckham hoping to get some work as a dressmaker. It wasn't long before I got my first customer, a buxom Swiss woman with a very strong accent that I could hardly understand. Word got around, and other customers soon followed, quite a few of them being Polish women and some who even travelled from north London for a fitting. There was one woman called *Mrs Jossé* who owned a

hotel in South Kensington called *The French Hotel*. I assume her husband was French and that she must have been a diva in her younger days as even in middle-age, she looked quite stunning. She must have been connected with show business as she told me she had put a big trunk of stage clothes up for auction and got a very good price for it. Many a time, I thought she must have been mad to come by underground and a bus and finally the long walk up Vestry Road, just to have some dresses made. I heard many years later that she sold the hotel and went back to live in Paris.

The money I received for my dressmaking was not great, but through the years, I managed to buy carpets for the whole house and a living room suite. For myself, I spent very little. It was many years later that one day when Jack and I were visiting the West End, he talked me into paying £50 for a Jaeger pleated skirt made of fine wool. It seemed like a phenomenal amount of money, but it turned out to be the best item of clothing I ever owned. It never creased or got dirty and served me well for many years.

As Derek and Iris's son Michael were nearly the same age, they became very close, so when Iris said she wanted to go back to work, I was happy to look after Michael. Derek didn't get on so well with Denis (who still spent most of his time upstairs with Jessie,) so it was good for him to have someone to play with. When Iris wasn't working, she sometimes looked after Derek, which gave me a welcome break. Iris was very strict with Michael, and despite only being five years old, she insisted he spent some time every day doing lessons with her. One day when Iris was looking after both of them, she gave them some sums to do. Derek was always good at maths, so he answered all the questions correctly, but Michael made some mistakes. I was shocked when Derek told me that Iris had got very angry and smacked him several times on the legs. It was normal to smack children in those days but only for being naughty. I never heard of anyone smacking a child for making a mistake. Shortly after that, Iris told me things weren't really working out for her in England, so she was going to return to Italy.

## Chapter 8



David and Isabella

In 1960 I gave birth to my third child David, and that led to a period of real fatigue. After the birth, I saw the midwife carrying a bowl full of blood. There was not enough blood loss for me to have a transfusion, but it left me very weak. Jack took Denis and Derek to Clapton Sands for a holiday but returned after a few days as he found it very difficult to cope with them. Fortunately, my mother came from Italy to help, as feeling so weak, it took me much longer to recuperate than my other births.

Two years later, I gave birth to my fourth and last child Isabella, and once again, my mother came to help. Jack was at work one night when I called an ambulance as there were signs of an early birth, although there was no pain yet. I was taken to St. Giles hospital, where I walked up the stairs to the ward, and two hours later, Isabella was born, my quickest birth yet. By the time they took me back to the main ward, I had lost a night's sleep, and I found it impossible to doze off. Despite being born a week early, Isabella weighed the same as Derek did, 6 lb 1 oz. I was not like other women who after having boys, longed for a girl, which I suppose is natural. We were all expecting it to be another boy and were going to keep up the tradition of having all our boys' names starting with the letter "D" and call him "Donald." When the baby came out, I asked the midwife if "he" was alright and was quite shocked when she said it was a girl. Denis and Derek wanted us to call her Diana, but we decided to call her Isabella, who I think was a character in one of Jack's favourite books. It was silly really, having our children's names starting with "D" because Jack spent the rest of his life mixing up the names Derek, Denis, and David. I know Denis and Derek were named after two famous cricketing brothers, so I suppose it went from there.

Strangely enough, I didn't feel as weak as I had done after my other births. A few days after returning home I saw Jack one night pushing Isabella in her pram, trying to get her to go to sleep so he did try, but it didn't come naturally to him. I consider myself lucky that I was able to give birth so easily and see my children grow into decent human beings.

Jack's friend Bert came around to help him put in a large boiler which fed a shower built into a small cubicle in the hall downstairs. Washing ourselves became so much easier, but being in the hall, it was very cold in the winter, so getting out of the shower was not very pleasant. I still had a tiny baby bath on a stand to wash David and Isabella until they became too big for it, and then I washed them in the kitchen sink.

Now that we were a family of six, cooking big meals in my tiny kitchen became very difficult. There was a sink and a cooker which took up one wall, and on the other wall was a washing machine which also served as my only worktop. There was no room for our fridge, so it was put in the hallway, meaning I had to walk through our living room every time I needed something from it. Our living room

was next to the kitchen. It had a table where we ate and where I did everything from making my own pasta to dressmaking.

Shopping also became much harder for me. My wicker shopping trolley became too small for the weekly shopping, so I put a bag on top and had to hold it whilst keeping an eye on David and Isabella. The trolley was very difficult to push up the hill back to our house, but I managed and never thought much about it.

We still went to Italy every two years and much as I looked forward to the trip, I always worked right up until the day of departure, by which time I felt a terrible sense of panic that everything would be done on time. When the day finally came to leave, I would be so tired that I felt more like staying at home.

When Derek was ten, the headmistress asked if I would go and talk to her. She said Derek was very bright and could easily pass his eleven plus, but he didn't seem to be interested. He preferred to talk to his friends and mess around. I suppose I should have pushed him harder, but I was already finding it difficult to cope without that extra pressure. He failed his eleven plus but got into the "A" stream of the school he wanted to go to, so it didn't turn out so bad after all. He never did show any interest in studying, and the only thing he seemed to care about was sport, which he was crazy about.

Things changed a lot for us in 1966 when Jessie died as we had the whole house to ourselves. Our bedroom became a lovely large living room, and what a luxury that was after all being squeezed into one small room for so many years. I made yellow satin curtains, and we bought our first ever three-piece suite. Denis and Derek had their own rooms, and Isabella and David, who were still very young, shared a nice bright room at the top of the house.

Walton campsite became a big part of our lives, and we loved going there every weekend where our tent was left up all summer. It was very well organised, and there was even a social committee. We all liked playing table tennis, and I wasn't a bad player. Derek was a good player, so we entered the mixed doubles competition and came second. Tennikoits was another favourite of ours, and Jack got so obsessed with it that he wanted to play even if it was raining. There was always something happening, and we took part in most of it. At the start of one summer school holiday when Derek was only thirteen, he asked if he could stay at the campsite during the week by himself. We always gave him a lot of freedom, but I was concerned about him staying there alone and tried to talk him out of it but we reluctantly agreed. Jack gave him the train fare to get home if he got lonely and was expecting him back in the middle of the week, but he ended up staying the full six weeks and every year until he left school. He spent most of his time fishing and seemed to love every minute of it. I don't suppose he ever washed when we weren't there, and I don't remember him even having a toothbrush, let alone using it. It seemed like a risk at the time, and I am sure it wouldn't be allowed these days, but I know it was good for him.



One weekend at the campsite, one of our neighbours told us he was breeding his Labrador and would have some puppies available. Though I wasn't keen on the idea, Derek talked us into letting him take one of the puppies, which he called Jasper. A few years later Derek left home, and we ended up looking after him, which I knew from the beginning would happen. Of course, Jasper became a big part of our lives, and it was very good for Jack as he loved walking, and it got him out of the house. When we were camping, he sometimes took sandwiches, and they spend the whole day walking. I used to buy Jasper big bags of giblets from a poultry stall in Peckham market, and then I had to boil them, which made a horrible smell. Jasper loved them so much he used to turn his nose up at even the best quality tinned food, so I knew I had spoilt him. Any normal woman would have told him to eat the pedigree chum, and if he didn't like it, he could lump it. Unfortunately, he was a very nervous dog and became very aggressive. He was always fighting and hurting other dogs, and the only person in the family he didn't bite was Jack. Then one day, Jack came home from a night shift and was having a snack before going to bed when he dropped a cracker on the floor. As far as Jasper was concerned, anything that dropped on the floor belonged to him, so as Jack bent down to pick it up, Jasper bit him badly on the arm. The wound became infected, so Jack went to the hospital, where they cleaned it and sent him home. What they hadn't realised was that there was a second puncture mark that went much deeper. From that wound, he developed septicaemia and ended up in hospital in a critical condition. He was delirious for nearly a week, and he later insisted that he saw the infamous *white light*. We had to accept that Jasper had gone too far this time, so poor David had to take him to the vet to have him put down. Jack was very upset when he found out and said he never would have allowed it, but he knew we had no choice as he might have ended up killing a child. It is strange because you often hear people say that if you want a dog that is good with children, then you can't go wrong with a Labrador. Above all, Jasper hated children.

## Chapter 10



In the mid-sixties, my father retired, and my parents moved from their apartment in Milan and bought a house in a small mountain village called Carenno. My mother didn't want to move as she had her friends in Milan and a job cleaning chandeliers which she enjoyed, but it was always my father who made the decisions. He loved Carenno and used to go on long walks to pick wild strawberries. Being a very social and popular man, he soon settled into their new life and was very good at billiards which he used to play in the local bar. My mother felt very isolated and hated it. Eventually, she got her own way, and they moved to a bigger town called Trescore Balneario in the province of Bergamo. They bought a second-floor apartment, and my father finally agreed to have a water heater and even a telephone installed.

My father found a job as cashier in a local clothes shop which he really enjoyed. My mother would have loved to have a job, but he wouldn't allow it. I suppose in his eyes, it was shameful to have his wife working as a cleaner. I don't know why he allowed it in Milan and not Trescore, but I assume that living in a small community made a difference. She spent her days just sitting on the balcony doing nothing and ended up having a breakdown. She had no friends in Trescore and always regretted leaving Milan.



Me and Lella

Lella was only thirteen when I left Italy, but through the years, we have written regularly to each other and sent photos. I loved receiving letters from her and hearing all the news from home, but it always surprised me how long the post took. Usually it took a week or two but could take as long as a month. Sometimes it was delivered the next day, and on one occasion, Lella posted a letter in the morning, and I received it the same afternoon. Those were in the days when we had three posts a day.

Lella became a secretary in a solicitor's office and stayed there until she retired when she was given a very good leaving package. She never seemed that interested in boys and was thirty when she settled for a man called Italo. It was no great love story, and she regretted it as he became very possessive, but she stayed with him.

Before the war, Italo's father had an exclusive hairdressing salon next to the Il Duomo, so he must have been doing very well, but it was destroyed by an English bomb which changed Italo's life forever. He became a travelling salesman and considering he spent most of his life driving, it was surprising what a terrible driver he was. Jack used to say he was more scared as a passenger with Italo than in any battle during the war. Most of my family refused to be in a car if he was driving.

Iris was never an easy person to get along with, but she got worse as she got older. She was very possessive with Michael and kept him at home with her most of the time, expecting him to devote his

whole life to her. When he was twenty-two, he told her he wanted to marry his girlfriend Lidia, but she forbade it. He told her he would marry anyway, so Iris went to our parents and asked them to step in. They refused to get involved, so Iris never spoke to Michael or our parents ever again. When Nico called her to say that Michael and Lidia had lost their first child at birth, she didn't call them to give her condolences. They went on to have three children, but the only time Iris saw them was when Michael became very ill. Lidia called to say she ought to visit him because it looked like he might die, and she reluctantly agreed. Nico drove her to their apartment, and all she said to Lidia and her grandchildren was "Buon giorno." She took a quick look at Michael and then left the apartment, saying to Nico, "There, I have seen him now. Please don't call me again."

I suppose she had some kind of mental illness so I shouldn't judge her, but it seems so strange how any mother can be so hard.

After a couple of years working at various jobs that he hated, Derek became a professional guitar player and started to travel a lot. He joined an Italian band and worked in Gstaad in Switzerland, so when he had a few days off, he used to drive to Italy and visit my parents. I used to talk to Derek in Italian when he was very small, and I was very surprised one day when he pointed to our biscuit jar and asked, "Cosa c'è dentro lì?" (what is that inside there). I had never taught him those words; it just seemed to come out, but unfortunately that was the last Italian he ever spoke and none of my children are bilingual. While he was working with the Italian band, Derek did try and learn Italian, but it was difficult for him. It was a shame because he was never able to communicate with his grandparents. I always felt a bit guilty about that, but my life wasn't easy when the children were young, and I didn't have the time or energy to push them to learn Italian. It would have been different if Jack had been able to speak Italian fluently and we only spoke Italian at home. Fortunately, Nico's daughter Cristina spoke very good English, and they became very close, so the next time Derek went to Milan, he stayed with Nico and his family.

Both David and Isabella went to grammar school and could have gone to university, but neither of them wanted to. David was in a band that was doing very well for a while, but that petered out. After a few different temporary jobs, he ended up working for British Airways in the computer department and did very well. Isabella also tried several different jobs and eventually became a nurse. I expect a lot of people will say I should have pushed them all harder, but it seems to me that if children are capable, they will find their own way in life.

I never realised how unhealthy my life as a dressmaker was. Many hours standing at the table, cutting or sitting bent over patterns and the only time I went out was for shopping once a week to Peckham and occasionally around the corner. It helped that we went camping every weekend in the summer, but even then I used to take needlework with me. I never liked to turn customers away, so I often found myself doing too much. It couldn't have been very good for my lungs, and in 1974 I had my first chest infection. It was a bad one, and I spend several days in bed. There is no doubt that my dressmaking was the one thing that helped me get through some very difficult years, but it did take its toll on my health.

By now, Denis had married Linda and after living in London for a couple of years, they were lucky to find a house in Worthing near Linda's parents. Derek always seemed to be off travelling somewhere, and then he married Frances. After living two years in South Africa, to our great relief, he returned to live in North London, where they also managed to buy a house. In 1978 Denis and Linda gave me my first grandchild Emma, and six years later, Natalie was born.

Jack retired in 1980 aged sixty. He had intended to work until he was sixty-five so he would get a bigger pension, but the decision was made for him when after yet another bout of depression, his work insisted he took early retirement. They had been very good to him over the years, as he had spent a lot of time on sick leave, so we couldn't blame them. They gave him a good leaving package and there is no doubt that retiring early was one of the best things that ever happened to him. Some people with depression lose interest in everything, but Jack was the opposite and set about doing lots of DIY jobs.



The first things he did with the help of David and Derek was to extend the kitchen and rewire the house. Jack had always hated living in that house and longed to move. I didn't feel so strongly about it, and now that I had a lovely big kitchen with proper worktops, I wanted to enjoy it for a few years. Another great improvement was that after so many years of having to shower in the hallway, Jack built a proper little shower room in the corner of a room that was only used for storage (we always called it *The Junk Room*.)

One day Jack came home with some darkish red lino for the kitchen and the steps that lead down to it, and as always, I was expected to lay it. I don't remember panicking about it, and although the result was far from perfect, it looked very nice when it was done. Years later, when I saw a professional laying lino, he did it so quickly and perfectly it seemed like a work of art.



Throughout the years, we continued to go camping most weekends in the summer, but when we heard that Derek was selling his camper van we decided to buy it. That was the time I enjoyed camping the most as there was very little packing involved and no tent to put up and down. No pumping up airbeds or setting up the cooking equipment.

Derek and France were selling their house to go off travelling and so they needed to find a new home for their dog, an Alsatian called Lena. We had looked after her a few times in the past so David and Isabella wanted Lena to come and live with us. Once again, I wasn't so keen on the idea, but again it turned out very well as Jack used to take her on long walks, which did him a lot of good.

## Chapter 10



In 1984 David bought a house with his girlfriend Laura, and Isabella moved in with her boyfriend Steve, who she married shortly after. It was finally time for us to move somewhere else. We never had a particular desire to live near the sea, and Jack always said he wanted to retire to the country, but as Denis was living in Worthing we started by looking around that area. The first house the estate agent took us to I wasn't keen on as it was a bit isolated. Jack got a bit huffy with me and was so desperate to move I am sure he would have taken the first house on offer. Next was a bungalow that was also a bit out of the way, and I didn't like it at all. The third house we saw was in Lancing, and Jack fell instantly in love with it. It was a three bedroomed semi-detached with a garage and a lovely big garden that we could develop and make something of.

We made an offer on the house, which was accepted, but we had a lot of trouble with the buyer of our house. We agreed on a price, but he kept coming back, trying to knock more money off. Twice we had to lower the price as we were afraid of losing the house in Lancing, and then at the last minute, he tried to reduce the price yet again. Derek told us to give him an ultimatum and say if he didn't exchange contracts within twenty-four hours, we would put the house back on the market. That seemed to do the trick, and within a couple of days, all the papers were signed, and we started to organise the move.

The night before moving, we sat on the living room carpet watching television, and the house felt empty and soulless. Jack left early the next morning with our camper van and half of our belongings, and Derek and his friend came later to fill his large transit van with what remained. Derek gave me strict instructions to throw away as much as possible and only take essentials with us to Lancing, but after so many years of economising, I couldn't resist taking a large bag of cheap oranges. The van was so full that there was barely enough room for them, and as Derek was trying to close the van door, the oranges fell out and started rolling down the street. Derek wasn't too pleased, but fortunately, he saw the funny side of it.

I felt nothing when we left Gairloch Road. I didn't even turn around to look at the house I had lived in for thirty-two years and raised four children in. At our new home, Derek and his friend helped us unpack and stayed until late evening to help us settle in. A few weeks earlier we had gone to Worthing to order some new furniture and gradually during the day, it was delivered. When the dining room suite arrived, we realised we hadn't measured the space for the wall unit very well, so it was a real struggle to fit it in, but with all of us pushing, it just about fit without a millimetre to spare. And so it was to be the final and by far the best chapter in our life.

It took me a while to get used to our new house, but I soon began to appreciate everything about it. There were some local shops and a post office only two minutes walk from us. The beach was five minutes walk, and there was a very good bus service at the end of our street. For years we took a daily walk to Widewater, which is a kind of river near the beach. There was always a large selection of different ducks and birds, and we found it particularly amusing to watch swans flying down and pit-a-pattering on the surface of the water before they came to a landing. They used to build nests every spring, and I used to love watching the cygnets following their mother in Indian file.



I can't remember what state the garden was in when we first arrived, but it did have several rose bushes, most of which flowered all summer. I knew practically nothing about gardening, but I took to it straight away and loved every minute of it. For years I carried on with my needlework, and several of my customers came by car or train to have dresses made. I set up the spare bedroom as a workroom and spent many hours doing my needlework while looking out at the garden listening to Derek's music on my Walkman.

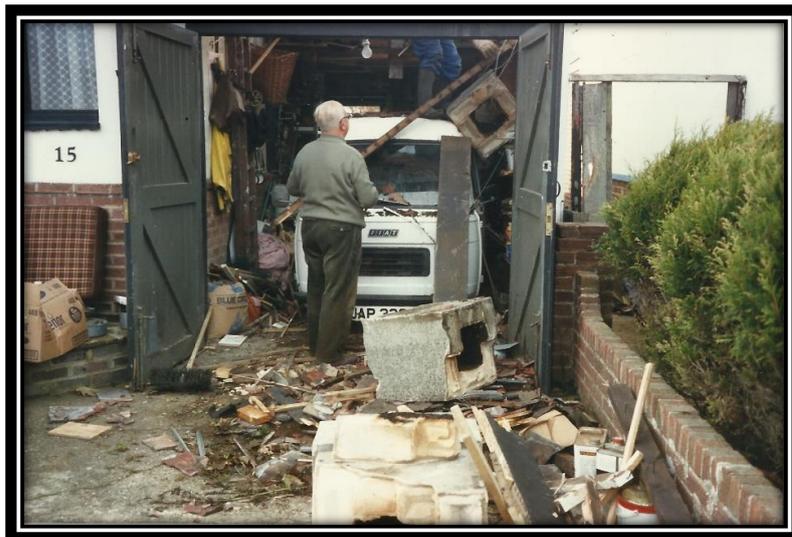
Jack joined Hove cricket club the year we arrived. I stayed at home as I was always busy, but he persuaded me to go along one day, and I soon became a big fan, although I still took some needlework with me and worked during the quieter moments. We had to get there an hour before play began and join the queue to make sure we could park our van on the ground just behind where we sat.



We still made a couple of trips with our camper van, but it was too big for us now, so we sold it and Jack went with David to buy a smaller Fiat "Amigo" camper van. It had a little table and seats, and at a pinch, we could sleep there using a sponge mattress. We both loved it. Jack did a lot of work on the house, and what I remember the most was helping him put new panes of glass on the sun lounge roof as I was lucky not to get myself decapitated. He needed me to hold the glass in place while he fixed it, and I did that by resting them under my chin. The sun lounge was very important to us, and we used to love having lunch there in the summer months, although it did get a bit hot at times.



There was a little pond in the garden which had some fish but it started leaking, so the lining needed to be replaced. It was quite a big job, so Derek came from Derby to help. He was never able to do anything by half, so Jack was horrified when before he knew it, the garden looked like a building site. Derek made it much bigger and created a little waterfall that had a birdbath at the top. We got so much enjoyment from that pond and it sounds silly, but we became very fond of the fish. When we got close, they use to come to the surface with their little mouths out of the water, waiting to be fed. For years, both of us used to sit there for hours just looking at the fish swimming around. In the winter months, the birdbath would be full of sparrows playing and washing. There was so much splashing that sometimes Jack had to top it up with water. There is very little in the life that I miss, but I do miss that.



The hurricane of 1987

In October 1987, the South of England was hit by a hurricane, and we woke the next morning to find next door's chimney in our garage. It destroyed the garage roof and landed on our camper van. Ironically, we did very well out of it. Jack was given £3000 to repair the garage, but he did it himself for a few hundred. The van was written off, and we were given £800 to replace it, but as the damage was only cosmetic, Jack managed to repair that as well. We had replaced our fence the previous year, so it withstood the wind, but the other fence was our neighbour's responsibility, and that blew down completely.

Unfortunately, I was constantly plagued with chest infections. I was entitled to a private consultant through Jack's work, but I couldn't get an appointment unless I was referred by my doctor, and the doctor refused to refer me. When I told Derek about it, he got very angry with the Doctor and pushed

me to insist on a referral. He finally agreed, and it was only after a CT scan that I was diagnosed in 1988 with bronchiectasis. I was given a heavy dose of antibiotics, and my health improved a lot, but I was still prone to the occasional chest infections, which were very debilitating.



My parents at the retirement home near Bergamo

The retirement home where my parents stayed was very good and all paid for by the government. The home had three stages. At first, residents were put in a small apartment where they were able to look after themselves, but help was always on hand when they needed it. When they could no longer manage by themselves, they were moved to a double room and finally a ward where they were put when they were near the end of their lives. In 1990 my father died aged eighty-six, so I went to the funeral. We were all amazed to discover that he had around £60,000 in his bank account. It was sad to think that my mother had to go without hot water and a telephone for so long when they could afford to buy them, but having been so poor for so long, I can understand why my father was so careful about money.

According to Italian law, the money could have been shared out straight away, but we agreed to wait until my mother died when it would be shared equally amongst the four of us. Also, by law, all children are entitled to an equal share regardless of circumstances, so Iris also got her share despite the fact that she had disowned us all. In the last few years of her life, she was unable to cope by herself, so she had a young woman from South America helping her. She gave the woman power of attorney over her bank account and the story that we were told was that the woman stole all her money and went back to South America. Iris was not the type to let herself be cheated, so I sometimes wondered if she was so bitter about Michael getting married that she would rather that a stranger had her money than be forced to leave it to Michael.

My mother died in 1995, aged eighty-five. Also in 1995, my brother Nico died, aged sixty-seven, with skin cancer. He had always been paranoid about his health, so maybe he had some kind of premonition that he would die young. We were all upset about it but Derek in particular as they were quite close. He always said that Nico was the kindest man he had ever met.



In 1996 we celebrated our 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Jack planned it well in advance but unfortunately became very ill a couple of months beforehand and ended up in hospital. They never knew for sure exactly what he had, except that it was some kind of hepatitis. The anniversary lunch was at Arundel cricket ground, and we thought we would have to cancel it, but Jack recovered enough and managed to get through the day in a wheelchair. He didn't look great, but we could see he really enjoyed it. Some of the Sussex cricket team came over to congratulate us, which meant a lot to him.

During that illness, Jack suffered a mini-stroke which affected his memory, and he was no longer able to do things like paying the bills and setting the video player. I had to learn how to do it, which I found difficult, but Derek was always there to help when I had problems. The surprising thing was that we had been going to a whist drive twice a week, and Jack was still able to play very well. I wasn't very good but used to go along anyway and enjoyed getting out of the house for a while. I also started going to a club for the elderly every Friday where we used to chat and play games, or they had the occasional speaker or entertainer.

We went on several holidays abroad, and although I enjoyed them I was never that bothered about going. It was always Jack who had the wanderlust and never seemed to tire of travelling. The two holidays I enjoyed the most was Madeira, where we went for two weeks to watch Derek play in a hotel and to visit David and Laura in Johannesburg. They had a lovely house with a swimming pool, and we were very fond of their two huge dogs Abby and Boris.



It was spoilt a bit when I had an anxiety attack which prevented us from going on Safari. It was particularly frustrating when I realised later that all I needed to do was take a diazepam tablet, and I would have been OK. Anxiety was not a big problem for me, but it did come on every now and again and usually for no particular reason.

We both loved the theatre and went to the National Theatre in London regularly. We travelled by train and then on the Underground to the Embankment. We would eat lunch at the Mezzanine Restaurant, where we had a very nice meal at a reasonable price. The time came when we found it too much to go to London, so we became *Friends of the Theatre Royal* in Brighton and went regularly, always having a meal beforehand in one of the many restaurants in the area. Eventually, even that became too much for us, but by then, Jack had finally got over his hatred of Rupert Murdoch and subscribed to Sky TV, and so he was able to indulge in the luxury of cricket all year-round. With that, I learned a lot more about the game and could see it a lot better than watching it live at the cricket ground.

## Chapter 12



Jack was eighty-five when he finally accepted his driving days were over after he nearly caused an accident coming out of a garage without looking properly. Life without a car was inconvenient, but we got used to going by bus, and when that became difficult for us, we started using Tony, a friendly taxi driver who always helped Jack in and out of the car and made sure we were OK. Jack particularly liked him because he was ex-army. Gradually we found ourselves doing less and less but accepted it was just a part of getting old. We stopped going to the theatre and to the cricket excursions that Jack used to love so much. Instead of being at the Hove Cricket ground every second of every match, Jack started coming home early and then stopped going altogether. A couple of times, he fell in our driveway, and although they were minor falls, it shook his confidence, so he was less keen to go out. We still managed the occasional outing and restaurant meal which we always enjoyed. I had always been happy staying at home, so it didn't bother me too much, but it was harder on Jack. What he used to love more than anything was going with Derek on day trips to France and shopping at the enormous supermarket. They would buy lots of wine, cheese and pâté which was much cheaper and better than in England. Eventually, that became too much for Jack, although every now and then he still asked Derek, "just one more trip." We pointed it out to him that if a quick shopping trip to Worthing was too much for him, how was he going to manage an exhausting day trip to France and back? He accepted it was not possible but always said there was no harm in dreaming.

For years I had to go to the toilet during the night, and I walked across the landing to the bathroom in the dark. One night I became disorientated, and the next thing I knew, I was falling down the stairs. I somersaulted at least twice and landed so hard on the electric heater that it was destroyed. By sheer luck, Derek had arrived for a visit a few hours earlier, so when he heard what had happened, he came rushing down. It was truly a miracle that the only injury I had was a broken little finger, and even more surprising was that it didn't hurt at all. I was taken to the hospital and let out after a few days when they said I was OK. The funny thing was that despite the fall, the ambulance arriving, and three paramedics dealing with me, Jack slept through it all and only surfaced when I was being taken to the ambulance. After that, Derek arranged for us to have alarms on our wrists, so if we ever needed help, we just had to press a button. He also arranged for a key to be put in a box on the outside wall so carers and emergency services could let themselves in.

During my recovery, someone came from the council and saw that I was having trouble coping. She said I was entitled to some money every week to pay for a carer to come. I suppose I was naïve when I told her I didn't need any help and turned the money down, but thankfully she talked me into it. It was enough to pay for someone to come to a couple of times a week to tidy up and do the things that I was struggling with.



In 2006 we celebrated our 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary and received the customary telegram from the queen. This time Derek had to organise it, and so he hired a function room in a hotel in Arundel. Most of us spent the night there, and we all met for breakfast the next day, which was very nice.

Probably the most important thing in my life is my fax machine, and I get into a terrible panic when it is not working. David has lived in South Africa for many years, and I always get great enjoyment out of the weekly diaries he faxes to me. Derek also sends faxes regularly and is always there if I have any questions or need anything. I send him my shopping list every week, and he gets it delivered from Tesco. I have spent most of my life writing letters and have enjoyed receiving them, but now I don't have to worry about letters getting lost or delayed. I speak to Lella on the phone every Sunday and still feel very close to her, although I know we will never see each other again.

In 2012 Derek could see we were getting old and feeble, and Jack especially was finding it difficult to get up the stairs. He applied for a grant from the council and put the wheels in motion for the construction of an extension with a new sun lounge and bathroom. The planning and amount of work involved was phenomenal, and Derek had to fight all the way to get us a good deal and stop us from being cheated. Fortunately, he had a lot of building experience and didn't allow himself to be bullied by the builders or council. They started in December 2012, and Derek had to keep going backwards and forwards from his home in Croatia. It was just as well he did because, at one point, he saw that they had built a wall in the wrong place. He insisted they took it down and put it where it should be, but they weren't very happy about it. Even after the work was finished at the end of April, Derek continued to argue with the builders, surveyors and council, who all tried to overcharge us in various ways. He even took the builder to court and could prove he had not finished the job, but the builder employed a barrister from London who got the case thrown out because of an obscure court decision in 1894.

What was extra hard to cope with was having central heating installed at the same time as the building work. We always said we didn't want central heating because of all the upheaval, and we managed for years with just one electric heater in the hallway running for twenty-four hours a day and a gas fire in the living room. Looking back, I realise how silly we were because Jack suffered badly from the cold, and I am sure it must have cost a lot more to run one electric heater than to heat up the whole house with central heating. With a new extension to heat up as well, we had no choice but to get it installed. It was a nightmare for three days, and at the time, we cursed Derek for talking us into it, but what a relief it was when it was done and we were constantly warm wherever we went in the house.

It was a very difficult time for us having to put up with all the mess and noise, but it turned out to be a great success as the only time we had to use the stairs was once a day to go to bed, and we no longer dreaded the coming of winter as we knew we would be warm and comfortable at all times. It was also lovely to be able to eat in the sun lounge all year round.

The new extension was finished on 5<sup>th</sup> April, Jack's birthday, and it couldn't have come a minute too soon. Jack had always had to go to the toilet many times a day, so getting up the stairs was becoming a big problem. He had always loved his showers, but for a couple of years, it had been too difficult for him to get in and out of the bath, so he had to wash at the sink. We now had a shower with a seat (I think it is called a *wet room*,) but it wasn't long before even that became too much for Jack. Fortunately, by now he was also getting some money from the council to pay for a carer, so I managed to persuade him to let the carer give him a shower, and once he got used to the idea, I think he quite enjoyed it.

The extension had a ramp leading to the garden, so every day during the summer, Jack walked with a stroller to the pond where he sat for hours. I joined him a few times, but it was usually too hot for me to sit there for long.

On Friday, 18<sup>th</sup> October 2013, I noticed that Jack was very late getting up one morning. It wasn't unusual as he was taking longer and longer to do everything, and it took him half an hour to dress most days, but it seemed a lot longer on that day. I found him lying on the bed and was unable to wake him. I could see he was only able to move his arm a little bit and knew something was wrong. I called for an ambulance, and when they arrived, they said he'd had a stroke. They took him to Worthing hospital, and after giving him an MRI scan, they told me he had had a "massive stroke" and that he would not recover. A few days later, they asked me to go in as they thought he wouldn't last the night, but he hung on for another week before he died peacefully on 28<sup>th</sup> October.

Derek arrived from Croatia and took care of the many things that needed to be done, including finding out what benefits and pensions I was entitled to. Fortunately, there were a few small life insurance policies that Jack had taken out many years earlier, so although I wouldn't get Jack's full work pension, at least I wouldn't have to worry about money for a while. There was a lot of work involved in putting everything in my name. Despite having a joint account with the same bank for thirty years and me owning the house, they still refused to give me a credit card until Derek pushed the bank manager, and she finally agreed to give me one with a £250 credit limit. I knew how to sign cheques but had never had anything to do with the accounts. Fortunately, Derek had already started handling our affairs a few years earlier, so at least I didn't have to worry about that.

Like most things in my life, I just seemed to take Jack's death in my stride and can't say it affected me very badly, although I did get quite lonely at times, especially during the winter months. Derek came to stay for a few weeks during the winter and spring, but he was very busy renting their apartments in the summer, so it was six months before I got to see him again. Isabella found it difficult to visit as she had so many commitments, and it was a long drive from her home in Kent. Denis came every other week for lunch, and I went to his children's houses for lunch sometimes. I enjoyed those occasions, but it got harder for me every year. My neighbour Adrienne and her sister Rosie were a Godsend and never failed to come straight around when I needed help.

I still did some dress alterations for people from my Friday club, mostly women who were in their eighties and nineties and were no longer able to hold a needle as their sight was so bad. It was touching to see how frail they were and it never occurred to me that I was probably no stronger.

Of course, it has been a long time since I was able to do any work in the garden, and it is difficult to see it so overgrown, but a gardener comes once a fortnight to mow the lawn and tidy up a bit, so it is not too bad. The only thing I feel sad about is the pond. A few years ago, it started to leak, and all the fish died. I knew I wasn't able to go into the garden to look at the fish like I used to, but I still asked Derek to repair the pond and put some fish in it. I know it was silly, but I just liked the idea that there was still fish in the pond. He did try, but it wasn't very successful as with no water lilies or pondweed, the water was very clear and the fish were easy to see from above. It wasn't long before seagulls came and ate them all.



In 2015 Isabella got married again. My breathing was getting worse, and I was finding it increasingly difficult to spend time out of the house, so I didn't think I would be able to go. It was the middle of summer, so Derek wasn't able to take me but my neighbour Adrienne very kindly offered to drive me there and back soon after the ceremony. I was anxious about going but glad I made the effort as it was such a lovely day. It turned out to be my last outing.

A few years ago, during a bad spell of health, I started going to St Barnabas Hospice once a week, where they were preparing me for *End of life*. It didn't worry me, and I quite enjoyed going as everyone was so nice and friendly. It was supposed to be only for six months as I think they were expecting me to die soon but I ended up going for over a year before they told me I didn't need to go anymore until I was very ill again. I didn't mind as I was finding the visit harder each week and shortly after that, I became housebound.

It is 2018 now, and I have five grandchildren and seven great-children. They come to visit sometimes, and although I love to see them, I find it so tiring that I have to ask them to leave after half an hour. Even then I am exhausted for the rest of the day. I have been sleeping downstairs for the last few years but just going to the bathroom and back takes me fifteen minutes to get my breath back. For years I have been using an oxygen machine and many different types of inhalers, and even though I find it laborious, I keep it up. I still get great enjoyment from the television and corresponding with Derek and David through the fax machine, and of course, visits from Derek and Isabella. I get lonely sometimes, but I have carers coming three times a day, which helps.

Being so old and helpless now, when I look back at the jobs Jack and I used to do, it seems incredible. It feels like they were done by someone else. I find every year I can do less and less, and my breathing gets worse. A very kind and interesting woman called Ruth used to come around for a chat every Thursday, which started off as one hour, but I had to ask her to cut it down to half an hour as I found it so tiring. Much as I enjoyed her company, when she said she was unable to come anymore it was quite a relief. Little Mary from our church comes around once a week to give me holy communion. We always went to church every Sunday and had our own seats at the end of a row that people always left for us.

Jack became a catholic so we could marry in church in Milan and although he was much more religious than me, I do find the communion very comforting.

I have spent quite a long time writing these memories, which I never would have done if Derek hadn't pushed me to do it. It surprised me how much I enjoyed writing them, but I think this will be the last. I can't imagine anyone being interested in them. It's a strange thing, but while I have been writing and thinking about the distant past, it's as if I am seeing a different person, and I feel quite detached. Certainly not nostalgic.



July 2021

A few words from Derek

The last time I stayed with Mum was in February 2020, just as the coronavirus pandemic was taking hold. While we said our goodbyes she told me she didn't think I would be able to come for my usual May visit. I told her off for being so pessimistic and said the pandemic would never get that bad. That was the last time I saw her. She died on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2021 at Saint Barnabas Hospice in Worthing.

When my father died, I wrote and played a song at his funeral. It was written for both mum and dad, but I would like to conclude with the verse that relates to mum.

The World is Full of Heroes

The world is full of heroes  
Though few of them are known  
There's some that stand on battlefields  
And some that stand at home  
There's a million debts of bravery  
That will never be repaid  
The world is full of heroes  
And here lies one today

A young girl shelters in a storm  
Hungry and afraid  
While buildings rocked by angry bombs

Demand a price be paid  
From dusty ruins, she builds a life  
Fighting every day  
To keep her children safe and warm  
And help them find their way

Laying down her life each day  
For those she holds so dear  
Asking nothing in return  
Hiding every tear  
Look around at what you have  
And all you hope to be  
We owe it all to the sacrifice  
Of those who kept us free



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