IT GOES WITH THE TERRITORY

Memoirs of a Poet

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IT GOES WITH THE TERRITORY
Prelude

Last week, I went to St Martin-in-the-Fields on Trafalgar Square and listened to a performance of Bach’s Christmas Oratorio, directed by my son Martin. I came out buzzing with the tenderness and exhilaration of the music. It seemed to me, at that moment, that for all my eccentric dedication to a writing life, I have not too seriously harmed any of my three sons. Good fortune is unpredictable, but none of them will ever have to brood over what they failed to attempt.

I am not so sure about the damage done to my marriage. My desire to make poems and stories was as intense as any adultery, and the demand to put that ambition first is not readily forgiven in a woman. Still, poetry strengthened me in the face of more traditional infidelities and harsh words. And all our attempts to separate over fifty years came to nothing.

My childhood hardly equipped me for the life I wanted to find, but it was a happy one, and gave me an optimism I have never entirely lost. Jean Rhys once said that if she could live her life over again she would rather be happy than write. It is not a choice any of us are ever offered.

– Elaine Feinstein, January 2013
CHAPTER 1

Foreign Roots

All four grandparents came from Odessa, a port on the Black Sea coast of Ukraine, and settled in the north of England some time in the last decade of the nineteenth century. They were all Jews, though the two families were remarkably disparate.

Dad’s family loved the old rituals. I remember candles on Friday nights and crackly matzot on Passover. When my father told me the story of the Hebrews escaping from slavery in Egypt, it was as if he remembered the events himself. I must have been about four, and it was the most thrilling story I had ever heard. The following year I could read most of the English words in the Haggadah myself and found it something of a disappointment.

My mother’s family, on the other hand, assimilated into English middle-class life in one generation. Two of her brothers went to Cambridge and learnt to speak a perfectly inflected standard English. None of them believed in God or his protection, and found my father’s beliefs tiresome, though they were far too polite to say so.

As a child I gave the matter little thought, until one day in 1937 I was given a brusque awakening. I remember the smell of wet coats hanging up on the low hooks of the Cloakroom, so it was probably just after lunch. I had won one of the silver medals the Form Teacher awarded every week for good work. As I was pulling off my coat, with the medal proudly pinned to my tunic, a red-faced girl, whose name I can still remember but won’t use, came up to me and sneered: “My father says you are nothing but a dirty Jew.” I was in floods of tears as I told my father after school, and I heard my parents talking about what action to take long after I had gone to bed.
Those were the years when Mosley’s Fascists fomented riots among the unemployed in London and Manchester, though I don’t remember my parents fearing violence in Leicester. What I did overhear, once I had begun to listen for it, was their alarm about what was happening in Germany. I remember my father refusing to buy me a balsa-wood aeroplane, powered marvellously by an elastic band, because it was made in a wicked country. He read the News Chronicle every morning and believed England had a quite different sense of fair play. The man I married many years later, however, saw another side of England. He grew up in Stepney, in Blackshirt territory, where he was taunted “Go back to Palestine!” and had his head banged against the paving stones of the schoolyard.

My own earliest memories are of a small house on Groby Road, Leicester – a road which led to the outskirts of town, past the cemetery, towards a quarry where children were not allowed to play, although there were fascinating pebbles, some of which held fossils. Dad’s father often came to stay with us in Groby Road after his wife died – his children shared the care of him – and I was told to call him Zaida. He was large and affectionate, with a ginger beard and deep laughter lines round his blue eyes. His yellow handkerchiefs smelled of snuff and the strong peppermints he carried in the pockets of a cardigan, which always sagged at the back. I liked to sit on his knee while he told me stories about the sunny streets of Odessa. He had been sent there to study after he lost the top joint of his first finger while minding a circular saw.

Zaida was always a dreamer. And he loved to study, particularly relishing heated argument over the meaning of rabbinic texts on a Saturday afternoon. He did not say much about his childhood in Belarus, or the hostility of their Ukrainian neighbours, though I remember he had wistful stories about young girls and boys playing hide-and-seek in the great forests.

He could read Russian, but he spoke Yiddish as a mother tongue. It was, I know now, a language used not only in the shtetls of the Pale but across the whole Jewish world from Russia through
Germany to Paris, London and New York. It was a language rich in poems and stories. The poet Peretz Markish found it a genuine lingua franca, which brought him audiences wherever he travelled after the Russian Revolution. What took him back to Russia, fatally, was learning about the Soviet encouragement of Yiddish culture, especially Solomon Mikhoels’s Yiddish theatre. Markish never wrote poetry in Russian, but Akhmatova herself translated him, and mentioned with delight his image of a dry leaf blown in the wind as “scuttling like a brown mouse”. Stalin had him shot on the Night of the Murdered Poets in 1952. These days, of course, as Isaac Bashevis Singer said when collecting his Nobel Prize, “Yiddish is the language of ghosts”.

The language was never spoken between my parents, but my father often used Yiddish phrases. For the most part they went along with a shrug. Not all of them find their place in Leo Rosten’s remarkable book, The Joys of Yiddish, and friends in London who are more knowledgeable than I am in this area are puzzled by them. Perhaps they were local to Zaida’s early days in Belarus, perhaps my father simply mispronounced the words.

If he was overtaken by a speedier car, he would say: “Layf und freizach”. This, he told me, translated as “let him laugh and enjoy himself”. Or he would say, when he wished me to regard someone who troubled me as insignificant, “Khob im in bod”. This he translated as “We have him in a bath”. I was bewildered by the nature of this encouragement. “Look,” he tried to explain, “when you have someone in a bath they are helpless.” Since he frequently used the words about some figure in authority, I was unconvinced. My headmistress was clearly not in the least helpless.

Yiddish is written in a cursive Hebrew script, running from right to left – not the heavy square alphabet of the prayer book, but a sinuous, almost Arabic flow of letters. I still know them, because Zaida asked me to use them when writing to him in Manchester, even though I could only transliterate English words. Since then, I have occasionally used the script to disguise my thoughts in diaries.
I never heard my mother use Yiddish. She was happy to observe religious customs which she came to believe in devoutly, but all her words were English. She had a number of superstitions learned from my grandmother, whom I hardly knew. She was afraid of white blossom brought into the house, for instance, and threw salt over her shoulder when it was spilt. Challenged about that last habit, she confessed uneasily that it was to blind the eyes of the Devil. I cannot imagine her discussing these matters with her brothers, or indeed my father, who would have dismissed them as narishkeiten (nonsense).

We were not, by present-day standards, particularly observant. Even my rabbinical Zaida never expected his wife to wear a sheitel (wig). My mother, in her hat and tweed coat at a bus stop, looked like any other Midlands housewife. My father, built like a sportsman, was accepted without demur at Glen Gorse Golf Club. Still, D.H. Lawrence, who wrote in his letters about disliking rich Jews at the seaside, would probably have detected him as foreign quickly enough. There were not many immigrants to provincial Britain in those days. And Jews looked “different” even to writers like Jean Rhys, a Creole from the West Indies, who always felt like an outsider herself.

* * *

My mother was particularly proud of two brothers, Joseph and Maurice, who took First Class degrees and went on to make a place for themselves in the English establishment. Both were thin men, with narrow faces, though Jo became redder and more corpulent as he grew older. Even Grandfather Solomon listened to Jo, I was told. He had served in the First World War and, soon after he came down from university, persuaded Solomon that the family name should be changed from Goldstein to Compton. The change was a sensible move towards acceptance into gentile society.
As it happens, my father already had a surname – Cooklin – which did not sound particularly foreign. The name has always puzzled me. I was told the origin was the Russian word for doll, *kukla*, and I liked the idea: perhaps some earlier generations had been involved in making dolls, or perhaps even puppets. In Turkey, puppet masters were storytellers, and very often Jews.

A wish to find the tale had some basis in fact led me to investigate the *donmeh* (Muslim converts) of Istanbul in the late Seventies, and what I discovered fed *The Shadow Master*, a novel I was writing then. A less romantic origin is likely, however. Alan Sillitoe, a friend of later years who loved maps, discovered the village of Kooklin in Belarus, not too far from the village where my great-grandfather Hatskel is said to have worked as a factor for a local landowner. Somewhere along the line, the traditional way of naming a child – as in the synagogue, by calling him the son of his father – had been lost in favour of using the village where the family had settled. In Odessa, which I visited in 2005, I found several families in the telephone book with the same surname, though none of them, it seems, were related to me. All denied any Jewish roots.

My father’s Manchester sisters had a tough independence which went back to the old shtetl world, where women often earned a living for the family while their husbands studied holy books. One ran a wood shop and could even handle a circular saw. They welcomed my mother warmly; indeed, his sisters liked to tease my father she was far too good for him. She was uncomfortable with their praise, and quietly miffed by their comments about my olive complexion, skinny body and habit of retreating into a book. For my part, I found their huge bulk and the noise in their big house, alarming. They piled too much food on my plate: *latkas*, stuffed meats, roast potatoes. I could never eat much of it.
My mother taught me to read at four, and like many only children I read avidly. Discovering as much, she wrote to her brother Jo, then Director of Education at Ealing, describing this unexpected passion and asking him to suggest a list of suitable books. He replied loftily that it really didn’t matter what I read, as long as I was reading. So no one objected to my choices. I enjoyed Lewis Carroll – not just Alice, but Sylvie and Bruno too, intrigued rather than put off by the moral puzzles – and Rudyard Kipling, especially the story of the gallant mongoose Rikki-Tikki-Tavi. I read Jane Eyre, which my mother had once enjoyed, but also and with equal eagerness my father’s Hopalong Cassidy cowboy books. Other novels on those shelves were more puzzling. One, I remember, was highly charged in ways I did not understand. A cloth was thrown over a child’s cot so that something unspecified could go on without the child seeing. Nobody stopped me reading whatever I wanted.

Fortunately for me, my mother did not always take Uncle Jo’s advice. When she wrote to ask about the best schools in Leicester, Jo wrote back that she should save her money since, if I had any intelligence, it would come out whatever school I went to. My mother rejected this opinion and chose an excellent junior school at the other side of town, for which I needed to wear a dark velour hat with a smart crest on it and a navy-blue coat.

Most of the girls there came from middle-class backgrounds, but it was a world in which my mother could pass easily: her whole upbringing had fitted her to do so. And it was always she who came to the end-of-term parents’ days – in tweeds, court shoes and wearing gloves. She was, my form teacher told me after I had earned a reprimand for some disgraceful behaviour, a “perfect lady”, who did not deserve such a daughter.

Dad was not enthusiastic about open days, but he collected me from school every day in his Armstrong Siddeley; the big, heavy car smelt attractively of real leather and had a walnut dashboard. It was somehow redolent of the man who drove it. I watched for
him driving up the hill towards me from a curved metal seat in the school railings.

He was often a little late, but always reliably turned up, until one day, when I was six or seven, he failed to appear. I stared down the hill, looking for the V-shaped nose of his car with complete confidence, long after all the teachers had left and the school gates closed. It was then I began to panic, as I wondered how to pay for two trams to the other side of town if he failed to appear. The conductors, surprised to see such a young child on her own, let me travel free, but I was snivelling by the time I walked up Groby Road to the family door.

An ambulance was standing outside. When my father saw me, he looked at his watch in astonishment, then got into the ambulance to join my mother. Seeing this, I burst into wild tears, and the cousin who had been called in, perhaps to look after me, thought I was distressed to see my mother taken away. I was too ashamed to explain, if indeed I allowed myself to know, that I was weeping because my father had put my mother first. In fact, a fetus had lodged in one of her fallopian tubes and she had haemorrhaged badly. She was lucky to be alive, but there were to be no more children.

I have never written much about my mother, though images of my father run through all my novels. She was a good, kind woman who dabbed my spots with calamine lotion when I had chicken pox and tried to turn me into a respectable young lady. But I had no wish to turn into someone who wore tweed suits and gloves. I wanted to climb trees and scuffle through brambles on patches of wasteland. I absolutely didn’t want to turn into her – and until now I have never tried to imagine what it was like to be her.

She looks shyly pretty in her childhood photographs – everything about her slight and feminine: slender wrists, delicate lips and small nose. Her court shoes were size three. Unlike my father, who left school at twelve, she had a grammar-school education. Did she think wistfully of finding some use for her intelligence beyond typing Dad’s business letters? I don’t know. I never thought to ask.
At sixteen, when the Great War was at its height, she took a job in an office and enjoyed it. Her nickname in those days was “Goldie” – and I have letters from girl friends who seem to have made a pet of her. An autograph album suggests a young soldier felt some affection for her, too, though I have no idea what happened to him. She married my father in her late twenties, and must have felt keen to do so, since she pretended to be a year younger than her age: she was thirty-one when I was born.

For my quiet mother, my father’s working-class ease and lack of embarrassment about bodily functions was part of his attraction. She once confided that he was the only man with whom she felt no anxiety about admitting her need for a lavatory. She did not often talk to me so intimately.

She had small pearly teeth, and my father once told me that it was her smile he had fallen in love with, though he spoilt the praise by adding “of course, she wasn’t bonny” – meaning that she wasn’t plump and sturdy in the manner of his sisters. On his side of the family women were laughing, bossy creatures who had all married rather less powerful men.

I only began to look at my mother as a separate being when she was in her early middle age. By then, she wore rimless glasses, and her body was held in by pink cross-laced corsets. I understand now how she came to be wearing those corsets and grimace at my unthinking, barely repressed mockery of them. My mother had rhesus-negative blood. As her first child, I survived a difficult birth, but the pregnancy set up antibodies which destroyed every other fetus she carried. And there were several. It was her defining tragedy, though she never spoke of it. She felt a failure in relation to the wives among my father’s relations who had large families. She remained brisk, bustling and cheerful nonetheless.

Even now I think of her fridge with awe: the savoury fish, fresh-cooked and balled in jelly inside glass containers, the meat washed and salted, ready for roasting. She devoted the same meticulous attention to her domestic world as her sister Annie gave to running
a hospital. The most insignificant articles were given their appointed places.

Quite early on, a steely determination grew inside me not to resemble her. Underneath that round black velour hat and behind the shyly smiling face of my first photograph was a fierce spirit of which my mother would certainly have disapproved, had she guessed how I daydreamed of a more adventurous life.

Meanwhile, Dad stole my affections. As soon as I started school, he made my breakfast — poached eggs on toast — while she rested. And on holidays he enjoyed fairgrounds and seaside piers, rollercoaster rides and booths where you could win fluffy toys. He watched patiently while I tried to lower a penny mechanical crane over trinkets lying in piles of coloured pebbles, never scooping up so much as a boiled sweet. In a treasure hunt one afternoon on Skegness sands we were luckier: we won a miniature boat with white sails. He was triumphant.

Unquestionably, in a worldly sense, my mother married beneath her. My father was enjoying a brief period of prosperity at the time of their engagement, but her Compton family would not have been impressed. I don’t know if her parents took any pleasure in finding that she had married inside the Jewish community. Of their seven children, most did not marry at all. Of the sons who did, none married Jewish girls. None of them showed much desire to be fruitful and multiply. There were only three cousins I know of, in comparison to the plethora of cousins on my father’s side of the family.

My mother was closest to her younger brother, Frank, who wore a dark-blue blazer, was captain of his golf-club team and had something of the appearance of Bing Crosby, with a charming smile barely repressed at the centre of his lips. My father used to tease Frank about the length of time he spent in the bathroom flossing his teeth, or the meticulous care he took defrosting the windows of his car before setting off on the drive north. Secretly, I liked Frank’s superb white teeth, the way he always smelt of lavender and his blue two-seater sports car.
Maurice, a permanent under-secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, visited more rarely, and Uncle Jo only stayed in touch by letter. None were family men. Maurice had a happy marriage, but I remember him saying the world was too brutal to bring a child into it. He had a son nevertheless. Frank never married. Uncle Leslie’s first marriage ended in divorce, and he let my mother’s sister Annie bring up his daughter.

My father was unimpressed by their academic success, and for a long time I accepted his poor opinion of them. My father liked to dismiss Annie – a handsome, sophisticated woman, then matron of a hospital near Durham – because she had never married. To be a spinster in those days was to be counted a failure. I observed her lilac underclothes, therefore, with some perplexity. In turn, Annie remembered my mother’s delicate prettiness as a girl, and was disappointed in my stronger, more masculine features, once sadly remarking that my looks resembled those of my father’s family.

Grandfather Solomon was a small, clean-shaven patriarch, with starched triangles to his white collars and a single rose-cut stone in his tiepin – a cold scary man, albeit a shrewd one. I cannot remember anything he said, or even the sound of his voice. My mother liked to tell me that when he first arrived in Liverpool he had to carry sheets of glass around the city on a bicycle, but by the time of her marriage he was a wealthy glass merchant and owned property across Liverpool.

The year after I was born, my father had to sell his three wood shops in Liverpool and begin again. My mother’s family quietly noted this business failure. However, Dad was a resilient man. The manager of Barclays Bank gambled on him and financed a lease on three floors of a rundown piece of Leicester, where he set up a small factory. Solomon’s initial reservations about his business acumen, however, began to harden into active disapproval. Some time in the early years of the marriage, he decided to disinherit my mother, though we didn’t discover that until he died in 1941. He divided his
estate between his other children, though for some reason he left a little money to me.

All through my childhood, I thought of my father as rich because he drove a big car, took us to grand hotels and expensive restaurants and enjoyed giving presents. “Izzy,” my mother would reproach him, because she did the firm’s books and knew their financial situation to a penny. He laughed while I gazed up at him with complete trust.

Once, though, in the Maypole grocery shop close by our Groby Road house, I was shaken by a brief glimpse into what it meant to run out of money. I can still smell the sweet tea and smoky odours of bacon sides and hear my mother say nervously to the shopkeeper: “We’re going off on holiday this evening. Will next Tuesday be all right?” And I remember tugging at her sleeve and reminding her it was next week we were leaving for Devon. Her face went pink with embarrassment. Then I realized with horror that she’d been lying because she couldn’t pay. She didn’t take my hand as we walked silently home together along Groby Road.

* * *

My father once told me about an ill-fated venture of Zaida’s, which took the whole Cooklin family off to Canada to set up a farm. Perhaps Zaida was thinking of southern Russia, where fruit and vegetables grow easily. Perhaps it was a wish to live directly from the earth. Unfortunately, the land he was allocated by the Canadian government was close to Montreal, where snow and ice cover the ground for more than six months of the year. The family found themselves surrounded by distrustful Ukrainian Catholics, by no means delighted to discover a Jewish family in their midst. They were amused at Zaida’s efforts rather than helpful. The whole enterprise was a financial disaster.

Dad, who was four when the family arrived in Canada, described some moments of sheer magic nevertheless: he liked to tell me how his mother threw boiling sugar out onto the snow, so that the
sizzling liquid made a delicious brittle toffee. And he remembered looking up at the huge trees, which had to be cut and sent downriver as timber, and the awe their height inspired in him, even though he was felled by an errant branch of one of them.

His handwriting was clumsy, and usually sprawled all over the page – yet, after my mother died, he wrote me several letters from a two-week holiday in Israel, which were filled with childlike wonder. He had a genuine sense of the numinous. When I confronted him in my last years at school with evolution and astronomy, he was not so much assertive of his own beliefs as humbled. “What can we little human beings know of all that?” he said.

A poet friend, to whom I showed an early draft of this chapter, asked me: “What did your father actually do?” Not so easy to explain. He was trained as a cabinet maker and worked in the family business until he started his own. He was always boss of his own shop. The idea of a career as the Comptsions understood the word was quite alien to him.

Dad liked what he did. He once made me a doll’s house in which the small furniture was crafted with the same carefully made joints as real chairs and tables. His workshop in Clinton Street, however, rarely made use of such skills. There, he and his workmen made household objects such as kitchen chairs, breadboards or rolling pins.

His office was barely separated from the main area of the factory. I sometimes sat in it, impatiently, listening to the whine of circular saws and hating the smell of boiling glue – restlessly pushing about the wood shavings that covered the floor while he finished dealing with a problem. He liked to work at the bench alongside his workmen, though since he had to find the wages for them every week, in cash, what was made had to be sold. Selling was not what he enjoyed. He employed Mr C. for that. My mother thought he should look more closely into the expenses Mr C. claimed. Dad ridiculed the idea, saying they were a perk of the job.
The war marked my way of seeing the world and my place in it for ever. When it began I was an eight-year-old tomboy stupidly excited by the drama of underground shelters, blackout curtains and the absence of streetlights. When it ended, I was a teenager with an after-school life of Saturday nights at the Palais de Danse, illicit cigarettes and delicious sexual games in parked cars. I also had a precocious, damaging knowledge of human cruelty, taken from newsreel footage of British tanks entering the camps: bones, bulldozers and emaciated children in striped pyjamas. So that’s what it meant to be Jewish. Or, more exactly: that’s what might have happened to me.

We were still in Groby Road in 1938. My father dug an Anderson shelter in the garden: a dank, unhealthy place, he decided. He was glad to leave it behind when, in early 1939, he struck a deal with a builder for a patch of land in Stoneygate, the smarter south side of the city, and there designed his own detached house on a corner of Elmsleigh Avenue. I remember the delight he took in walking round the foundations, looking at plans, then arranging for his workmen to put in wooden floors and solid-oak doors, the way he chose the colours of the walls to match the huge tiled fireplaces: russet-gold in the dining room, pale-lilac in the front sitting room.

It was a source of some irritation to him that, once we were there, I preferred to play in the patch of wild ground beyond our fence, where there were pear trees to climb and grass came up to my armpits. My younger cousins sometimes joined me in the games I invented. We made bows and arrows which we shot into the redcurrant bushes, or crawled on the ground like Indian trackers with dry powdery earth hurting our eyes.
I was still only eight on 3rd September 1939, but I picked up the urgency of my parents’ attention as we listened to the radio together. I struggled to understand the words, though they sound readily enough in my ears now in the often repeated cadences of Chamberlain’s voice. “I have to tell you no such assurance... This country is now at war with Germany.” I remember my father’s great sigh, which had a puzzling measure of relief in it, as though something hidden were at last out in the open.

The next day he arranged for heavy sandbags to be put around the wash house, which he fitted with bunks and electric light. This was sensible enough, unless there was a direct hit, but by now I understand him well enough to guess his other motives for building our refuge there. He did not want an ugly tin shelter to wreck the look of the garden, which had been landscaped to his plan: Victoria plum trees, a sunken lawn surrounded by a rockery; alpine shrubs with tiny flowers, pots of lavender on the terrace. He wouldn’t want an Anderson shelter spoiling that.

Even before the outbreak of war there was air-raid practice in school, and when the alarm sounded we formed orderly lines and walked over the hockey pitch into concrete bunkers, all of us carrying satchels of goodies in case we were forced to stay in the shelters for a long time. I particularly relished the packets of Sun-Pat raisins my mother tucked into mine. Even now the taste of those fruity blobs evokes a memory of under-the-earth smells and a heart-pounding excitement which never became terror, because there were in fact no daylight raids on Leicester.

That first winter of the war nothing much seemed to be happening, but our domestic landscape changed radically. My parents took in two children: Ilse, from Breslau, a plump girl with round spectacles, a couple of years older than I was, and Stanley, much younger, evacuated from the East End of London. He was a pretty child and very polite. He did not talk much about his family, and I don’t remember him getting letters from them, but he must have
missed them. He went back to London, Blitz or no, a year or so after he arrived.

Ilse’s father once owned the largest department store in Breslau, and had arranged for his two children to be sent abroad when he was taken into a concentration camp in late 1938. He was strangely fortunate in being held there for only a few months before he and his wife were able to take a boat to Chile. I had no idea then how unusual their escape was. Ilse’s brother, Hans, went to Scotland to work on a left-wing commune as a farm labourer. When he came to visit Ilse, a couple of years into the War, I found him alarmingly well-read; he had plainly enjoyed a privileged education. He was eager to argue about politics, especially the evils of capitalists, among whom he included his own father. I resented him including mine among his villains, pointing out that Dad lived from the work of his hands as much as any worker. He sighed at my lack of comprehension.

Wartime changed Leicester into a cosmopolitan city. The provincial Jewish families of Leicester found European strangers living among them: German doctors and dentists who had retaken their exams after coming to England, entrepreneurs who arrived with valuable patents and set up factories, Viennese ladies living in shabby rooms who loved Mozart and Beethoven. In general, German refugees were far more cultured than the people they found themselves among, and were still very proud of being German, which local Jewish families found annoying.

Soon there were Canadian and Australian servicemen in the street alongside patriotic Poles and de Gaulle’s Free French. In the last year of the war, there were wealthy Hungarian refugees, too, who had thought themselves altogether part of Budapest high society before the Arrow Cross began to investigate their Jewish ancestry. At the other extreme were market traders who had evacuated themselves from the East End to the safer Midlands – Leicester always had a huge and celebrated market in the centre of the town – their children were lively, fearless and not altogether respectable; they wore suits with padded shoulders and combed their hair into DA haircuts.
There had been some discussion in the first weeks of the war about sending me by ship to Canada in case the Germans invaded. My father was opposed to the idea, because there were submarines in the Atlantic, and when we heard that a ship had been sunk, with children aboard, that was decisive. I was pleased, because the thought of going so far away made me feel lonely, and I could not imagine a situation in which he could not protect me. We knew so little then.

Parents did not like to leave children behind when they went out for the evening, so on a Saturday all five of us went to Variety shows at the Palace Theatre in the centre of town: Murray and Mooney, Max Miller, naked women standing on plinths in beams of coloured light – art, my father explained – who were not allowed to move, but were legal as long as they stood perfectly still. Innocent days. At nine, I didn’t really understand the jokes, but I can still remember the moonlight and the stars and the laughter on the long walk home up London Road.

Did my mother enjoy the entertainment? Certainly she expressed no disapproval. Still, most of the songs she sang to me had melancholy stories in them, like ‘The Isle of Capri’. She was also very fond of Gilbert and Sullivan, and regaled me gleefully with songs from *The Mikado*.

I’ve got a little list…
And they’d none of them be missed.

We had a wind-up gramophone in an oak case, which held favourite records of current popular music. However, my father’s eldest sister Eva, who lived in London, was gifted musically and had made sure all her four daughters played a musical instrument. One of them, Ruth Pearl, went on to become a classical violinist. During the first years of the war, she came to Leicester to play with the Reginald Jacques Quartet for ENSA. We went to listen to a concert: Mozart, Haydn and Schubert. I can’t remember what I thought of it, except that it went on a long time.
A friend of Ruth, Miss Railton, happened to be teaching music at my grammar school, and my father set about arranging violin lessons for me. These were not a success. Any stringed instrument requires hours of dedicated practice, which I hated, and my parents hated even more. They wanted me to learn, but the sounds my playing produced were excruciating to them, so I was isolated farther and farther away, until it was possible for me to mutiny, put the violin down and quietly read a book. Miss Railton could hardly believe that any relation of Ruth could make such slow progress. I took Grade 3, played the Messiah in one school orchestra performance, then begged to be released.

The following year, when the wailing sound of the sirens began at night, I was suddenly very frightened. The bombs on Leicester were mainly dumped by German crews who had failed to find the munitions factories of Coventry, but they were still deadly, and someone we knew was killed in a raid nearby. My mother prepared thermos flasks of tea, and at first we went into the wash house and shivered there, obediently, half asleep, until the all-clear. A small electric fire was connected to a plug in the kitchen. After a time, we all began to sleep through, sirens or no, though I sometimes lay awake until I heard the all-clear.

Dad was too old to be conscripted as a soldier – though a cousin and an uncle were sent to Egypt, and another cousin by marriage fought as a pilot – and business boomed as Dad’s machinery was converted to making wooden clothes pegs, for which there seemed suddenly to be an insatiable demand. This was because the industrial manufacture of plastic was useful to the war effort.

We read about the progress of the war and listened to the news with anxiety, though Dad was never in any doubt England would win. When France fell, he declared that country had always been a kurova, a rude Yiddish word for prostitute. Even when the war seemed to be turning ineluctably against the Allies in North Africa, he still persisted proudly: “The English always win the last battle.”
One day in June 1940, Zaida – who had come to stay on a sofa-bed in our front room for a few weeks – walked up the stairs with the *News Chronicle* in his hands to tell me that Hitler had invaded Russia. His face radiated delight. “God has fertummelt der kopfs (muddled up their heads). The two monsters will destroy one another,” he announced. I objected strongly to him comparing Hitler to Stalin, whose noble Communist ideals had been explained to me by Miss Adams, my new English teacher.

He sighed. “It’s all the same, Elainela.”

“But it isn’t,” I argued crossly.

“It was all part of Stalin’s plan,” Miss Adams explained a day later. “The pact with Hitler was a trick to give Stalin time to build tanks and planes.”

But the German army pushed deep into Russia nevertheless, and it looked as if they were both wrong.

Once America entered the war, my father began to bring back loose-limbed, casual young soldiers who turned out to be Jewish to eat with us on a Friday night. The young men enjoyed my mother’s cooking and sometimes brought presents from their stores for her. It became apparent that American soldiers had very different rations from English servicemen or the rest of us. I was not surprised. In those years, everything about America was glamorous. I kept my radio tuned to AFN even while doing my homework, enjoying the relaxed voices of the presenters as much as the music. I read Raymond Chandler and used to daydream of becoming an elegant woman in his dark world.

When was it I began to spend all my Saturday nights at the Palais de Danse? I cannot have been more than fourteen, but I have no memory of my father voicing any objections, though he must have known it was a place of shivery sexual excitement. I went with a crowd of friends on a tram on dark winter evenings. Not with friends from school, but children of my parents’ friends, the ones who came round to play poker on a Saturday evening and brought their family with them. Looking back now, I am surprised my mother did not protest.
I remember standing with a row of girls combing my hair in front of a mirror. I can still smell the powder and the pancake, and see the breasts that stuck out like pencil points underneath close-fitting jumpers. Everyone wore heavy red lipstick and thickened their delicate skins to look older for the Yanks, meeting one another’s eyes in the lacklustre glass with a haughty blankness learnt from photographs in fashion magazines.

How I envied them, those girls whose hair hung down each side of their faces so fashionably. I could never assume their expression of arrogance, however hard I tried. My boneless face changed expression with every thought I had. My eyes were too large. My mouth was twenty different shapes. And in repose? It was never in repose. My own hair was a dark-brown bush. There was a lot of it, but it was too fine and flopped in curls all over my face. For all that, I was never a wallflower. I was an athletic dancer, and I knew how to match my feet neatly to the rhythm as an American arm threw me out and pulled me back.

In this after-school life the people I most wanted to like me cared only about clothes, gambling and sex. The girls I knew best were children of my parents’ friends. One was the daughter of a famous publican who promoted boxing matches. Another went to the Wyggeston with me: a pretty girl with an enviably tiny waist. We shared intimate sexual secrets, humour and hypochondria. The boys we liked most were the confident children of market traders who did not go to good schools.

Sexual games in those far-off days of the Forties were frustrating for boys, but oddly pleasurable for girls, though we naturally feared to become pregnant. Our boyfriends’ own needs taught them all manner of subtle fingering more conducive to women’s pleasure than the direct encounters of later generations, who could take reliable contraception for granted.

The first boy I saw regularly was a Londoner from the East End, with broad Slav cheekbones and a lovely smile. He was quick-witted, though he had little education. When he went into
the Air Force, I took up with a fair-haired, very slender young man much older than I was, who worked in his father’s firm but aspired to the Variety stage and indeed found a place on it after we parted.

When I look back at photos of my adolescent face, I no longer dislike it as I once did. At the time, I longed to erase the laughter lines, which ran from nose to mouth. Now what I see is the absence of anything sly or malicious or hidden – though, in fact, there was something important I was hiding: a secret ambition I never attempted to bring into my after-school life and which none of my friends shared.

My first poems were made up as I bounced a tennis ball in Groby Road, and then against our garage doors in Elmsleigh Avenue. I showed one to my form teacher in the junior school and she puzzled over my handwriting until I took the book back and said, “It’s a poem. It sounds like this.”

The excitement of seeing that poem in the school magazine hooked me for life in an addiction as dangerous as any other. I was soon sitting up and reading poetry aloud by the one-bar heater in my bedroom wall. While other girls dreamt of princes or Hollywood stars, I dreamt of dead poets.

My first novel was written when I was about twelve on plain paper. I remember securing the pages together with my mother’s stapler. I can’t remember the story, but when my mother was curious, I let her read it. She expressed some dismay at the title – The Gatecrashers – and wanted me to understand that a gatecrasher was a very bad thing to be: the word meant pushing into a party when no one had invited you. I was impatient with her criticism. To break into some other and more exciting world was exactly what I wanted.

I was not a very dutiful school pupil, and was often in trouble, sometimes sent to the headmistress for not having gym shoes or forgetting my homework. I daydreamt in class and sometimes scribbled my own thoughts when I should have been taking notes. Examinations suited me much more than course work.