The Sunny Side of the House

When Life Gives You Strawberries
– Memories of a Fenland Boy (I)

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Author's Note and Acknowledgements

This is my first volume of memories to be published, from earlier incarnations with working titles like *Before the Diaries Kick In* and *Yoof*. It has proved a much more collaborative process than I envisaged when I wrote those drafts, with only myself to please.

I tried to discharge the duty of care to family and friends wherever possible by showing them in advance their mentions. I then omitted the odd memory I know to be true on the principle of sparing upset to others and their own families. I refrained from shedding light on some sensitive matters I learned of only as an adult. I hope it is clear in the text where I am speaking from first-hand experience and where (as often) based on the input of others. In thanking all those who have contributed to inform and enrich the text, including its copyeditor my fellow Wisbech Old Grammarian Ivan Butler, I naturally take responsibility for any errors or lapses of taste that could have been avoided in my presentation.

I have taken no firm line but individual decisions on whether to show people's full names or (rarely) substitute generic ones. The absence of a surname does not mean I have forgotten it any more than its presence means the person is no longer above ground.

These are personal recollections rather than any attempt at social history, but I did find of great interest, and help in returning to the village of my boyhood, publications by local historian William P (Bill) Smith including *Outwell in a Nutshell* and *Outwell Pictorial*. The contemporary annual magazines of Wisbech Grammar School were another valuable source.

My reading list of how-to books on non-fiction of this kind was postponed in favour of examples of the art such as Tolstoy's *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* and Edward Storey's *Fen Boy First*. I have enjoyed handsome presentations by Allan Gambles (*My Back Pages*) and Colin Gough (*A Goodly Heritage*), both friends attentive and encouraging readers of my work, as well as featuring in many volumes of my life. Edited extracts from this one have appeared in The

Cafe Writers of Rugby's (www.rugbycafewriters.com) *A Story for Every Day of Autumn* and *A Story for Every Day of Spring*. I heartily recommend these compilations, along with two more from them whose titles you can probably guess.

While this book deals with uncomfortable realities including physical and mental illness and domestic violence, I take the view that its publication cannot hurt the dear departed. If they live on, I trust it will be with enough understanding to accept whatever I am up to down here, where some readers may find certain language and scenes offensive or upsetting.

All the best, David.

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The Hag and the Head

'So you're a yeller-belly then?'

It would be unseemly for a man already long past his prime to grab and pummel one twenty years older. Since we were in the upstairs bar of a Northampton pub, not a black-and-white Western, gunplay was no more of an option. I'd given John the opening, admitting that although I proudly call myself an East Anglian, I was born in Lincoln. Knowing nothing of his Suffolk, I hoped the all-purpose put-down for country folk would serve for reply: 'Better than being a sheep-shagger.'

Despite spending my early years there from birth in 1955, I had not heard of the term 'yellow-belly' applying to citizens of Lincolnshire. Perhaps in that context it has nothing to do with cowardice. Perhaps it no longer means much in any context to anyone under fifty.

As I plot a walk around my homeland I am thinking of the perimeter of Cambridgeshire (or Isle of Ely in less energetic moods). I would not have to make a big detour to visit Sutton Bridge, where my dad and mum, Allen and Joyce, made their first marital home.

'The Bridge' lies just off the A17 between Sleaford and King's Lynn, much closer to the latter. Some five miles inland from the Wash, it is no higher than other parts of the Fens. Land reclamation and drainage are important. On Dad's wedding certificate under 'Father's Occupation' appears 'excavator driver'. On mine it would read 'dragline driver'.

I am not inclined to trace family beyond those I knew personally, which takes me no further than Dad's parents. They were Nana and Grandad Bailey when Mum mentioned them. Because I never heard her address either by a

Christian name, I didn't know for years that they were Cecil Allen, born on 8 December 1901, and Charlotte Elsie (called Elsie) on 22 November 1904.

Allen Edward Bailey was their first child, born on 9 August 1923, less than nine months after the wedding I understand. Births beginning with Allen's grandad Albert in 1868 were recorded inside the back cover of the family's Holy Bible. After the birth and death of Cecil, a brother to Allen, within three months during 1927, there followed Margaret (1932), Jean (1935) and Brian a war child in 1944.

I don't recall Dad ever telling me anything about his parents. Why would he? I had not the slightest interest in their history, not until it was too late to satisfy it. What I do have is constructed from memories of adult conversations, no doubt as partial and distorted as Mum's direct recollection of her in-laws, which also gave me some material.

Young Allen

Cecil's mum yanked him out of the Great War army recruiting line: 'You've got one of my boys, you're not having this one.' He worked at Leesons garage before getting involved in excavation, apart from casual labour, like many other men in the Bridge, on its docks when the opportunity was there. He was always a grafter, in later life cycling over twenty-five miles each way daily to jobs in Swaffham.

Grandad had an allotment of a couple of acres. I remember sheltering from the sun in a shed on its headland, reading a slim paperback. My copy of Roger Lancelyn Green's *The Tale of Troy*, a three-shilling Puffin book, is inscribed 'To David, From Mum and Dad, July 1964'.

The land kept Grandad Bailey occupied throughout his life, helped feed the family. It fed him less conventionally; Dad said that on occasion his father's heartburn was so severe he would eat earth against it. Dad also remembered him reading the Bible from cover to cover, making no such claim for himself on the equally bulky *Life of Our Blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and Lives of the Apostles*. He had it for his seventh birthday.

The only further evidence of Grandad's reading is *The Last of the Mohicans.* In its flyleaf inscription dated 18 December 1950, after Cecil's full address appears the injunction:

If this book should dare to roam,
Box its ears and send it home

Mum and Dad began married life in his parents' council house, 58 Railway Lane. I get the impression the arrangement was not a roaring success. By the time I came along they had their own home at 42 Princes Street, on a newer council estate almost a mile away across the main road through the village. We had an indoor flushing toilet there, as against the outside wooden board over an open cesspit at Grandad's. I dreaded having to use that, but there was no alternative.

I picture Grandad sitting massively in an armchair in the single downstairs room beyond the kitchen and scullery. Hands on knees, wearing several layers of brown clothing, a jacket and tie, a cloth cap. It was surely a Sunday for him to be so confined. I think of Nana Bailey in dark clothes too, white-haired, pale sharp features under tortoiseshell glasses. Apart from bringing up her own children and looking after us grandkids, Nana worked on the land and at Lockwoods canning factory.

The food I recall from my grandparents' house is jam sandwiches Nana would make for us to eat outside, a bonus if the jam was strawberry or raspberry. The food everyone recalls from Sutton Bridge up to the mid-sixties is 'Cashy' Cawthorn's fish and chips (few are left to recall his given name of Arthur). In his shop at the top of Railway Lane I would greet and be greeted by one of the assistants as Captain Pugwash.

Outside the tiny yard, where the shithouse bulked and stank, was a small patch of grass shared by Grandad and two or three neighbours. On this was a swing, where my cousin Susan – some six months my junior – taught me to blow bubbles with gum and I taught her to whistle. I remember a long walk the two of us had along the nearby railway track. We got as far as a place called Whistle Stop before deciding we had better turn back.

Further beyond various outbuildings was unkempt grassland where we would play games of soldiers, based on war films rather than the first-hand experience our fathers did not share with us. In one I volunteered to be the soldier who is always eating.

Throughout my first years and beyond primary school, the constellation of Grandad Bailey's family was fixed. His elder daughter Margaret, moon-faced with heavy glasses speaking to the poor eyesight shared by several of the family, lived a couple of hundred yards further out from the village in a prefab shared with her husband Jack, from Long Sutton and torpedoed in the war. Childless, both worked on the land. Mum spoke proudly of how Dad helped them talk to the council to secure better housing, which went unvisited by me.

Aunt Jean was much prettier and livelier than her sister. She married a farmer who was still in the army doing National Service on their big day. It was coincidence they already shared a surname, not an example of Fenland inbreeding. Uncle Peter was tall and lean. I once heard Dad speak admiringly of his strength, able to carry a hundredweight sack of potatoes under each arm.

Peter's father owned the land they worked, away from the Bridge but not by more than twenty miles, in one of the Walpoles. Sue came along, maybe not quite nine months after one name became one, always to me a beautiful, brown-eyed girl. I never had the same closeness with her brother Stephen, perhaps because Uncle Peter would set us to wrestle each other when we visited their home. All the adults were watching and there was no physical damage done. I took no credit in pinning my younger and slighter cousin who, even at that tender age, had to take off his glasses to fight.

Uncle Brian lived at home with his parents. I remember him sitting in front of the telly in their living room; otherwise, apart from being christened in the same 17 June 1956 ceremony when I was a baby and he was eleven, we had little contact during my childhood. Although in age closer to us, his nephews and niece, than to some of his siblings, Brian was not boyish or playful. He left school at fifteen to work at Goddard's, a local company involved in building as well as undertaking. I don't blame him for not wanting to play with us kids when he was already doing a man's job.

With no recollection of the upstairs in Railway Lane, I don't know how crowded it was with Mum and Dad living there – not excessively so perhaps, at least physically. In Princes Street I had my own bedroom as an only child (from here on read 'spoilt bastard' whenever I slip in that phrase), with a third apart from the one my parents shared.

Early playmates in other houses on Princes Street were Brian Gilham and David Tingey. Malcolm Easy lived across the road, while my best friend once I was allowed to venture more than a couple of doors away became Steve O'Reilly, in another street. Memories, before starting school or just after, are fragmentary: giving Malc too much of a start in a race, then slowing to a halt in a pretence we were not running against each other at all; playing in Brian's back yard, becoming uneasy or frightened for some reason by the presence of an older boy, saying I would go home to fetch something and not returning; shocked at the lack of formality at Kevin Crane's birthday party, when after tea people would leave only to come back later; fishing sticklebacks out of a creek between our houses with Steve, with whom I also often played indoors, at my home or his.

Are children nowadays encouraged, as we were practically obliged, to address their parents' friends as 'Uncle' or 'Aunt'? The neighbours immediately to our left were Uncle Ken and Aunt Molly. He was a somewhat scary-looking character in jeans and crew cut, the same hairstyle imposed on his three sons – Martyn was closest in age to me, a bit younger. Aunt Molly was buxom and kind, their daughter an impossibly remote creature. So too was Geraldine, only child of Uncle John and Aunt June, who moved away to St Ives near Huntingdon. John's claim to fame was once taking all Mum's washing off the line to preserve it from a downpour, while leaving his own wife's out.

Closer to John and June than Ken and Molly, Mum and Dad's best friends were Aunt Maud and Uncle Norman Chappell. Their oldest son, Brian, was so far above my age that he was also 'Uncle Brian' (which gave me two of

them). Christine, David and Geoffrey descended in order of age to within a year or two of me, then Lesley was a year or so younger. I had no time for her, for that reason and her gender, though outward civilities had to be maintained. She was at our back door one day as I was eating chips at the kitchen table.

'I like chips,' she intoned in a formula that only varied by noun.

'Yeah, so do I,' with no adults around I sniggered to Steve, not sharing.

Within a couple of streets in opposite directions were Aunts Beryl and Beulah. These did have a family connection, as cousins to Dad. Beulah I hardly knew, while Aunt Beryl was no more than the harassed mother of my tough cousins.

Roy and Barry were older than I, Michael a little younger. Age differences matter a lot to kids, down to months, especially if there is a separation of a school year. I would never have dreamed of challenging his brothers but wasn't going to take any shit from Micky. There were a few physical scuffles with him, the only conclusive result when he out-machoed me without striking a blow.

We were with at least one other boy, in a place where we shouldn't have been, perhaps a lumber yard. As a man came hollering at us, we ran along what turned out to be a kind of dry-land pier, the only escape route a drop into thick grass. Micky and the other boy took it, beckoning me down to join them. I couldn't. I dared not jump.

I don't know how big the leap was – several times our own height is all my mind's eye reports. I don't recall anything of the telling-off from the yardman, nor any ribbing from Micky when I next saw him a few minutes or few days later. I do recall a deep sense of shame at my cowardice when I turned to face the man and his music.

Those second cousins were regarded as wild by Mum, who did not have the liveliest sense of adventure for me. We were allowed to roam as far as our legs would take us, the only outright prohibition – for which I was secretly grateful – that I must not go with the other boys to play at a swimming hole by the river. Again, I don't recall any sense of drawing their scorn; it was not a regular haunt, and excuses were easily made. Being unable to swim was not one of them – none of us could do that.

I was generally a biddable child, albeit with an angry and stubborn streak on occasion. Mum was washing me from a bowl on the living-room table one night, telling me how some kids my age had been attacked by older ones.

'I'd have hit the fuckers back,' I bragged.

I suppose she exchanged looks with Dad, who was probably trying his best not to grin.

'David, I want you to promise me you'll never use language like that again.'

I made the promise; kept it too, a surprisingly long time.

Sutton Bridge was small enough that you could rely on any mischief being reported to your parents. Another courtesy uncle from down our road (Johnny, wife Ethel, two daughters older than me, possibly twins) had to swerve on the main street to avoid me running under his car. He went up no end in my estimation when the tale didn't reach home.

Even the most protective parents felt able to leave their children out playing unsupervised, without worrying unduly about harm caused to or by them. Roaming the rough around the golf course looking for balls we had no use for; pelting stones at hundreds of rats milling unperturbed around wasteland behind the playing field; knocking on the front door of the terraced house near Aunt Beulah's where a witch lived: these were adventures for us. Then again, we were only five years old.

From my earliest days I was pleased to be outside the house, or to have friends round, as a way of avoiding the tensions and outright rows between Mum and Dad. In my early teens I had a taste for horror comics, Hammer films and the paperback series edited by Herbert Van Thal, which ran to at least *The 23rd Pan Book of Horror Stories*. In one comic I read of a handsome couple arriving at their honeymoon destination. Alone at last in their suite, he is smartly suited and necktied, clean-cut and clean-shaven; she is lovely in her wedding finery. Rather than withdraw to prepare herself for bed, she offers him the chance to watch her disrobe.

The bride is not shy. The beautiful young woman reveals herself slowly, frame by frame, to be a hideous crone gloating at having tricked her new husband. He is unfazed, the topper to the story (though of less impact on me than the woman's transformation) coming as he removes his own head to stow it, grinning still, under his arm. Years later, when I thought of writing a memoir or fictionalised account of my parents' marriage, the title I toyed with was 'The Hag and the Head'.

Chapter Two

Mum and Dad

Bailey family at seaside
(L to R) Cecil with Jean on lap, Elsie with Margaret, Allen

Grandad Bailey reportedly refused to let his oldest child go to grammar school, although he passed the scholarship. According to Mum, Allen said his dad would rather have money to sit in a pub than spend on his education, which might have helped him get an office job later on.

'I don't remember hearing of Grandad being a drinker. He didn't go out much, did he?'

'I never really saw that either,' she conceded, 'but *his* father owned a pub in the Bridge, I can't remember the name, on the road to Long Sutton. He was a nice old boy, living in a home when we got married. We used to have him round to Sunday tea. That was before you were born,' she added when I said I had no memory of him.

I found the address at which Allen's grandad Albert Bailey was awarded a pension: Salutation Inn, Sutton Bridge. His son Albert Edward, Cecil's older brother, joined the Royal Fusiliers aged seventeen in December 1914 and was sent to France. The first job he scheduled for his eventual return was to kill father Albert if he was still hitting their mother. Sapper Albert Edward Bailey died on the Somme on 13 April 2018. The pension Albert drew was as his dependant.

Mum spoke of Allen taking fierce beatings from his dad, Cecil. Whether these were more outside the norm than Allen leaving school as soon as possible is impossible to know, but his younger siblings confirmed he was hit, as they were not. Cecil's grandchildren had softer memories of him, though he still knew how to make himself respected if not feared. As to the drinking, well he did grow up in a pub, his landlord father reputedly a violent drunk. When in his fifties as a grandad though, Cecil is remembered as always returning from his Sunday pint on time for dinner. Sometimes people can break the cycle, change for the better. Perhaps the great-grandad Bailey I never knew had also changed, become that 'nice old boy'.

On the matter of education, there was usually a cost to put a child in grammar school until the 1944 Education Act, on the other side of which Allen's sister Jean would attend Spalding High School. I never heard Dad comment on either the hidings or schooling he received, yet knew he hoped better for me.

At fifteen, Allen was apprenticed as a grocer's boy, the second part in a two-and-sixpenny deed of indenture where his father (the Guardian) was the first part and the 'INTERNATIONAL TEA COMPANY'S STORES LIMITED', headquartered at Mitre Square in the City of London, the Company of the third part. Over three years from 9 January 1939 he would 'learn the art trade and business of a Grocer and Provision merchant'. Percentage wage increases of 50% after the first year and 33.3% from the second do not look as impressive

in monetary terms: the starting point was ten shillings, rising from fifteen to twenty, which in 1941 would be one pound a week.

I don't know whether such an apprenticeship would have been prized compared to those for other trades (sparkies or chippies, say), or more a catch-as-catch-can employment for a kid with no special talents or qualifications. Not well-built, Allen was weak-eyed, wearing glasses in photos from boyhood, which is perhaps why he did not go 'on the land', the most common option around our way then and for many years since.

When Britain declared war on Germany in 1939, Allen had just turned sixteen. Conscription applied immediately but only to those aged between eighteen and forty-one. Farming was a reserved occupation, leading my future Uncle Charlie to be denied his wish to join up by his father – he had to settle for the Observer Corps rather than the RAF – and the younger Uncle Tom, with more hair to brylcreem, to miss National Service in its last post-war year of existence on the application of *his* father. Allen enlisted in 1941, whether directly from the grocer boy's job (to me the image of forty-something David Jason and his bike in *Open All Hours* is irrepressible) or some other. Perhaps because of his limited vision or what he had learned of the grocery art trade and business, he went into the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC), responsible for provisioning the service with everything except guns and ammo. His main job in the forces was lorry driving. He spoke to his younger brother of coming under shellfire at least once, which was 'not very nice'.

Joyce Elizabeth was the oldest of four children, born on 28 September 1927 to George Edward Hills and his wife Dinah (so everyone called her, though her baptismal name was Elizabeth). Like Allen's, Joyce's family was unimpeachably working-class, equally that of a village, one right on the border between Cambridgeshire and Norfolk. Outwell is less than half an hour by car to the south of Sutton Bridge, with Wisbech, 'Capital of the Fens', roughly halfway between the two. Following the River Nene from the Bridge to Foul Anchor, you will pass on your right in the otherwise featureless landscape an impressive stand of seventeen trees, a landmark known as Nineteen Trees until the gales of 1987.

Grandad George was born and lived all his life in Outwell, as did three of his four siblings (the adventurer, Uncle Will, went working on the railways out of March, a good ten miles away). Born on 5 December 1903, George was too young for active service in the First World War, too old for the Second except as an Outwell Home Guarder. No stranger to land work, he spent forty-five

years driving buses, first for the private business of a Mr Robb, then – or which became – the red double-deckers of Eastern Counties. Intensely shy outside his family, he liked being shut off in the cabin, towards the end of his career declining to move to single-deckers where the driver also issued tickets.

George's button-nosed bride, Dinah Goldsmith, grew up in Norwich, a sickly child who survived, unlike some of a dozen siblings. Her mother Elizabeth had moved to Outwell from her hometown of Norwich in 1918, when she was widowed by the war that four years earlier had claimed one of her sons, named Robert like his father. Dinah's courtship by George included him cycling to Norwich, more than forty miles, for the girl slightly older than him, born on midsummer's day 1902.

Nana and Grandad wed around September 1926, with Joyce arriving a respectable twelve months later. She was followed over the next decade by Doreen (1929), Edward (Ted, 1932) and Shirley (1937). The fact that none of the children went to Wisbech Grammar or High School was no more a reflection on their intelligence than in Allen's case. Joyce's cousin Pam's recollection that the two scholarship successes from Outwell each year – one boy, one girl – were always councillors' children may not have been strictly correct. Mum told me she herself passed two of the three examinations for the eleven-plus as it was known. She was in isolation for the third with measles, along with another cousin, Eileen, with whom in infancy she had also shared a pram and whooping cough.

Leaving school aged fourteen, Joyce entered the labour market around the same time as Allen signed up. Like his, her first job was at a grocer's, 'having to write out little tickets, George Mason's was the shop, beside Woolies'.

Woolworths was on the marketplace in Wisbech, where she also had a brief spell at Smedley's canning factory with her best friend Marjorie Sutton, before returning to Outwell. There she worked on the land of Uncle George Brown, husband of Grandad George's oldest sister Ivy (or Ive sometimes). There was additionally casual work to be had on Grandad's own land, particularly during the strawberry or fruiting season.

I long thought Joyce left home in her teens after some falling-out with her father, but she set me right that he ceased talking to her *because* she left home. Her falling-out was with an Irishman called Jim, to whom I think she was actually engaged, rings and all. He was a great favourite with Shirley because he let her have his sweets ration, and with Uncle George and Aunt Ive because he was a churchgoer, albeit a Catholic one. There was also an American, who

against all odds returned from the States with the promise completed of a house ready to take her there. I believe George disapproved and somehow put the kybosh on it.

Was Jim or Joe (let's call him) the one, or one of many, who sent Joyce Valentine cards? She was always careful to clarify that, while Dad never marked the day in their years together, she had not missed out entirely on these sentimental tokens.

'Where did you meet this Jim, then?'

'Oh, up Wisbech, there was a whole colony of Irish at Lynn in them days. We kept writing for a couple of years after I moved away, nearly up till I met your dad. I just made sure he wasn't there or I didn't see him when I went home.'

'What was he, a navvy or something?'

'No, a bit like your dad really, he had a job something to do with drainage, excavating. We tried to get a job in the NAAFI, Marjie and me, but we were too young.'

The celebrations for Second World War Victory in Europe on 8 May 1945, known as VE Day, saw Joyce aged seventeen cycling over thirty miles to see Jim in Hunstanton on his twenty-seventh birthday. Strictly forbidden to do so by her dad, she swore up and down to George when she saw him back at Wisbech that evening she had not gone. She reckoned without his bus driver and landsman's knowledge of the route. 'What's all them rhododendrons in your front wheel then?'

While Joyce would have had to elope to Gretna Green to get married without her father's permission, his authority did not extend to keeping her at home as a single girl. Marjorie accompanied her to a series of live-in jobs, including a post-war convalescent home for soldiers in Baldock. There was a place near Dunstable, a miners' hostel out Nottingham way. The chronology is uncertain, so I may be wrong to think of these as Bevan Boys, men who without going to the lengths of becoming conscientious objectors preferred digging coal to trenches as their contribution to the war effort. Mum talked of them watching, motionless, tired perhaps but with an altogether modern sense of gentlemanly behaviour, as the young women employed to cook and clean for them strained to lift heavy urns of tea or tubs of washing water.

During Joyce's heady flight to independence her father would at first not speak to her when she came home for weekends or holidays. He would, however, write to her at the various addresses (the hostels and later hotels where she

worked provided accommodation as part of the deal), enclosing say a cooked chicken leg to ensure she did not starve. She was eventually brought back to earth and Outwell by a serious illness.

Young Joyce

Joyce was laid up for a year with a malady she could never name to professionals enquiring of her medical history. This was not from reticence or forgetfulness. As she explained it, 'they didn't tell you nothing in them days.' She would have been about nineteen. If the doctors had wanted to be more specific to her father, I can only imagine George delegating that dealing with strangers to Nan Dinah (as he would to me, as a teenager, going in the ambulance with Nan and her broken arm).

Mum spent a good deal of time in hospital for tests; rheumatic fever are words I throw down without really knowing what they signify. She speculated that she had perhaps strained or ruptured something internally on one of those heavy lifts, scorning any help if grudgingly proffered by the conscripted colliers. Nan Dinah had spent periods of her own childhood laid up. I think we'll have to leave it that Mum was 'poorly' – very poorly even.

I don't believe the illness was life-threatening – while she was presumably medicated, there was no operation. Still, it was a severe blow for someone so active and ready to attack life. Perhaps boredom and a need to test her willpower were partly why she was carried to the strawberry fields at fruiting and picked lying down, dragging herself along the rows. I guess that George would have approved such a willingness to work at the harvesting of his crops, and that his approval would have meant a good deal to her.

Allen did not rise above private in the army. I heard he was involved in the Normandy landings, not on D-Day itself but on D plus a small number. The only confirmed 'sighting' of him after that is in a photo with a pal taken at Wommersom (in Belgium), on 18 August 1945 according to the writing on its back. His mum would send him cigarettes and other treats during his service, but Allen rarely wrote home. He later followed the almost universal convention of not talking about his war, for all that it would affect him deeply. How could it not, when it still cast a long shadow over us, the children of that generation?

Demobbed Allen, like many who had learned in the forces, never had to take a driving test. It would be years before he could aspire to a car, but he drove lorries before graduating to draglines, in the latter like his father before and brother after him. This is not to suggest any degree of nepotism, though Grandad Bailey did make at least one phone call to help Brian get into the job aged about twenty.

Apart from his driving skills Allen had acquired an ability to play the cornet and an abiding affection for brass bands, so much a part of the post-war landscape until they became a victim of rock and roll. It was at a dance or similar social event that he first dated Joyce Hills, recovered from her illness and working as a chambermaid at the Duke's Head Hotel on the market square of King's Lynn. She was on duty when they were introduced, entrusted with the whole set of hotel keys on a great ring at her waist, so that his initial impression – he confided safely later – was of a gaoler. Their date was a double one, the other female Marjie if I had to bet.

All of George and Dinah's children exhibited a strong degree of independence, or perhaps wilfulness. Their second daughter Doreen was eighteen in November 1947 when she walked up the aisle to the aircraft-spotting Charlie Rowell. I long imagined the early part of Mum and Dad's courtship conducted with him in uniform, but Allen was home from the war by 1946 at the latest. His sister Jean remembered his arrival on leave or discharge, seeing him through the window of their house in Railway Lane before he came round the corner to its back door. She ran out to meet her adored 'Algeebub', to be carried back inside by him. Keen to see his little brother, born in September 1944, Allen went upstairs to find Brian at their mother's breast.

Mum and Dad met in March 1949, marrying within the year on 15 October. On their wedding certificate Allen's 'Rank or Profession' appears as 'Lorry Driver'. There is nothing but a dash in the corresponding space for Joyce.

Chapter Three

Striking Out

St Clement's was no doubt for centuries the spiritual as well as the geographic centre of Outwell. Now it shares a vicar and services with Upwell, the two villages a single settlement called Wella back in the doomsdays when John was mislaying his jewels in those parts.

Nowadays far from a social hub, its door usually heavily locked, St Clement's must have been livelier in the forties and fifties when George took his three daughters successively, if not exactly in age order, down its aisle. Only Aunt Ivy from either of my parents' families was a regular churchgoer, but they did things in the time-honoured way. There they are in Joyce's wedding photograph, the principal group, fifteen of them. It is black-and-white, yet looking at it I never feel cheated of a riot of colour. The who's who on the back in Mum's neat handwriting specifies that the bridesmaids' dresses were 'blue with wine ribbons'. The local press report cited below for her own wardrobe adds to the blue dresses matching headdresses and bouquets of blue flowers.

Joyce wore a 'gown of white marocain with a full-length veil held in place by a headdress of heather, and carried a bouquet of red carnations and trailing fern'. Those bridesmaids were the youngest Hills sister Shirley and their cousin Betty, one of Uncle Fred and Aunt Peg's children, along with Allen's two sisters Margaret and Jean. As befitted an already married woman, Aunt Doreen was matron of honour. The two mothers wear hats, dark skirts and jackets.

The men are all buttoned up and buttonholed, white shirts under shades of black jackets and ties. Joyce's brother Ted, an usher for the occasion, stands tall at one edge of the frame behind their mother, beside Uncle Charlie, bald from an early age and in those days with no option but to stay that way. Grandad George is also bald, under the church door, Grandad Bailey square

and solid at the other end of the photo. The best man was Eric Scott, a friend of Allen's from the Bridge, probably pre-army days. I never saw or heard anything of him during my boyhood.

The baby of the group, aged five and in short trousers, is Allen's brother Brian. Still now as I look at the picture, I feel he is somehow there representing me. It would be nearly forty years until his own wedding. Ted had a good twenty to go before a ceremony at Downham Market Registry Office broke the St Clement's thread binding George and Dinah's kids' nuptials.

That thread was almost snapped by Joyce, who said once a serious fall-out with Nan Dinah in the build-up left her prepared to make her wedding a registry office do. Her parents got wind of it only through the banns. George stepped in and insisted not only on giving his daughter away but paying for everything. He did her proud, from the look of the cake. Around a hundred people were reported at the reception in the Swan, just across the river. Uncle Sid got conspicuously drunk on strawberry wine either then or at the wedding a generation earlier of his brother George.

Joyce and Allen were looking for a place of their own, on the council housing lists in both Sutton Bridge and Outwell, as they began married life in Railway Lane. Joyce continued to work at the Duke's Head, travelling daily to King's Lynn by bus. Allen would cycle to work on the lorries then his bright red dragline (one of my earliest toys was a metal replica), not a company vehicle you could swing for personal use.

How long before my birth on 1 November 1955 (All Saints' Day, as I always add) they moved to Princes Street I don't know. It came on offer at the same time as a tied cottage in Outwell, with Allen's job as well as the relative merits of the two properties influencing their decision.

Although in his whole life Allen would never draw a weekly wage of more than twenty pounds, I imagine him and Joyce in the childless years of their marriage and into the first few with me as comfortable enough financially: this in the context of an upbringing for both by no means luxurious, if only – and it was not only – from war and post-war shortages. It was a big plus that neither was subject to the seasonality of land work, though Joyce would always do that to supplement their income.

During their courtship and early marriage, they would go to the pictures with some regularity, later taking me as an infant to sleep and bawl through Westerns, war films and biblical epics alike. Allen kept up his cornet playing for a time, with Joyce going along to watch. There were outings to pubs and dances,

but a meal out would have been an extreme rarity unless you count fish and chips eaten on the way home.

Wedding cake

Socialising was mainly home-based, whether at their own, those of married neighbours or family. An exception was that Allen and Uncle Charlie (born in the same year) used to go to Fenland Park to watch Wisbech Town. I remember the odd football match not just there but to see King's Lynn and Peterborough, the only league team of the three. Charlie and his older son Barrie would keep up the habit longer than Dad, for whom, like his cornet, it did not survive long into my childhood.

'I want you to close your eyes and come outside with me, David. Come on.'

'What for?'

'We've got a big surprise for you. You'll see.'

'How will I see if I've got my eyes closed?'

Outside in Princes Street was a beige Ford, one of the big boxy models, new to us and perhaps factory new. I was encouraged to get into its back seats (I think it had two doors only) and promised a ride in it very soon. I distinctly remember wondering why I was supposed to be pleased, what this big new toy of theirs really had to do with me. I hope I made the right noises. Now I see it as a significant aspirational moment for them, their first car. (Dad had previously owned motorcycles, with and without a sidecar; Mum could not be persuaded to lean with the bike when it appeared to be taking her towards the road surface, so was less of a danger in her own cabin.)

Perhaps the Ford served not only to take us on visits to family in other villages but more adventurous outings. I have the photos, if not the living memories, to prove that with Mum and Dad I went to London and Cambridge: me outside the gates of Buckingham Palace; on a camel at the zoo; Dad trying to stop me scuttling away from him on Parker's Piece. I remember once talking with Mum of a more extended trip to London: 'And one day can we just go round the shops and do nothing but spend?' the greedy boy begged.

The car and the trips allow me to hope Mum and Dad did enjoy a brief spell of affluence, however muted. Lack of money would be a major concern for the greater part of their life together.

Well before I started school in September 1960 (at the beginning of the term in which my fifth birthday fell), I am told I was a fluent reader. It took no conscious effort. Nana Goldsmith was given the credit for reading to me constantly in my infancy. I have a vague recollection of a benevolent white-haired presence, one not too benevolent to greet my biting phase by biting me right back, sportingly taking her teeth out first to make the fight fairer.

Before moving in with George and Dinah, my great-grandmother had perhaps kept house for Uncle Fred, the only other of her children to fetch up in Outwell. His wife, Aunt Peg, was an Upwell girl. Their bridesmaid daughter Betty's older siblings were Eileen and Bobby, with David the youngest of the four.

Nana Goldsmith shared my birthday. She was bedridden for some weeks as we approached eighty-two and four respectively, dying on 16 October 1959. I would go into her bedroom early every morning. Overnight when she died, Grandad rigged a bolt or other mechanism on its door to prevent me entering and finding her still. According to the local press notice 'affectionately known to everyone as "Gran"' (but always Nan or Nana to me), she left only three surviving children – Ollie in Norwich, Fred and Nana Dinah – seventeen grandchildren and twenty-five great-grandchildren.

I am supposed to have astonished my parents by reading out the instructions on the cardboard boxing of the Baby-Glo that warmed my bed of a winter's night. This was a carcass of, I'm guessing now, metal ribbing enclosed in plastic, which would lurk in the bed like some barrel-chested dwarf reading under the covers by the soft pink 'glo' of its central heating bulb. It worked off the electric, which must have been a constant source of trepidation for Mum. My small bedroom had a storage area with enough space between it and the ceiling to stow the heater, which as spring came changed places there with the tortoise waking from hibernation.

My bed may have been warm but it was not a refuge. As I was left to sleep each night, I remember being frightened at the prospect of what dreams would come. I was careful to lie always on my back, on the alert so to speak, which I later read may not have been the best strategy. The play of light and shadow from Princes Street could have stimulated the imagination far more, closed eyes no barrier, than an unrelieved view of pillow would have.

The scary dream I remember specifically was of a witch grabbing at my legs to drag me off the bottom of the bed. I woke with my feet furiously tangled in the sheets to provide an easy rationalisation. Things were not so bad that I was regularly surfacing in terror with cold sweats or soaked pyjamas (I learned the useful trick of waking myself from dreams when they turned too nasty). Although I don't think I ever mentioned it to anyone, the fear of falling asleep is a vivid memory of my early childhood.

My family were not physically demonstrative, either to me or among themselves. This reflects the conventions of the time. I was indulged plenty,

rarely hit, for all that smacking was an accepted part of the adult arsenal of coping strategies back then.

I only recall two smacks from any adult in the days when corporal punishment, even from people outside the family, was an allowable check on children's bad behaviour. The first was on entering the back door of Princes Street one evening. I kicked my shoes or wellingtons off behind me. One of them struck Dad on the shin, and he administered one of the 'clips around the ear' that have passed into legend as the beat bobby's universal, unfailing remedy for juvenile delinquency. (The concept of beat bobbies and the phrase 'juvenile delinquency' have themselves passed not into legend but the dustbin of history.) In the present case it was not any pain from the boot's impact that drew the smack, more my carelessness or conceivably that I laughed and sinned against the respect owed to parents.

If I asked anyone in my family to guess the other smacker, I'm confident none would point the finger at Uncle Tom, married to Joyce's youngest sister Shirley. That gentlest of men had carried me around Yarmouth on his shoulders throughout a hot summer afternoon so as not to wake me, when all the time I was only faking sleep. I tested his limits to destruction on Grandad's strawberries one year. He was trying to pick, I was trying to stop him; after more than enough warnings he grabbed me and slapped my backside. I remember my shock that he would do this, Uncle Tom who was always ready to play. It taught me work is a serious matter.

Although I never felt under any direct personal threat, I was conscious and nervous of growing tensions between Mum and Dad. Wanting not to hear, helpless not to listen, I followed my instinct whenever possible to remove myself from their shouting matches. Striving for pathos, I wrote as an adolescent or young adult some paragraphs on this.

> *They were at it again. The child was neither a part of nor party to their rows, but he was there. He always seemed to be there. They were shouting now. Perhaps later there would be blows. His mother would lose then even if she had won the shouting match. After the blows would come tears, then hugs and reassurances for him. And he, pretending to be reassured, would not be.*
>
> *'I'm just going to get a drink of water,' he mumbled. Neither of them replied so he rose from the settee and walked through the hall into the kitchen. There he took his high-backed, black and white*

plimsolls, his baseball boots, from under the chair and hastily tugged them on, listening in dread of discovery to the noise from the living room. He turned on the tap and left it running as he went out the back door, closing it behind him as quietly as he could.

Cutting across the untended garden so as not to be visible from the living-room window, the boy was soon beyond earshot from the house. It was still raining, though not hard. He did not like rainy days because then he was not allowed to play outside.

He walked to the end of his street, then turned right into the rec' road. The rec' was deserted. He walked across it, keeping to the paths, past the site where the British Legion was building a new club. Coming towards him were two slightly older boys, brothers, his second cousins. He was cheered. Their mother allowed them to play out in the rain.

'Where you going then?'

'Home,' replied the younger.

He knew if there was any trace of an appeal in his voice he was lost. 'Why don't you stay out a bit longer?'

'We've been out all afternoon. Where were you?'

'I expect his old woman's just let him out, now the rain's nearly stopped,' said the older brother in a factual tone.

'Anyway we're off in for tea.'

'All right, see you later.' The boy walked on until they were out of sight before turning back towards home. If Roy and Stevie were going in, there was no one else out.

He let himself in by the back door as quietly as he had left. He pulled off his baseball boots. He filled himself a glass of water and turned off the tap. They were still at it.

The real me close to the surface of this was shocked that my friends would refer to a mother, any mother, as 'the old woman'.

I did not know what lay behind the rows (Mum's invariable word for them), which were explained to me as a normal part of married life. She would always seek me out to provide reassurance when normal service was resumed, except that the rows themselves became part of my normality. From my bed at night, I would hear at least the pattern, if not the actual words, of her recriminations, his voice deeper and less frequent, thuds and bumps

eventually and her crying. It always ended with that, whether he hit her or not. My helplessness to prevent the tears was what distressed me most.

I suspect Mum would have been a volatile partner for any man. If she had felt a need to bottle up her emotions while living with her parents-in-law, perhaps it was a relief to have her own house to shout in whenever she wanted. Problems were always kept behind the closed doors of our semi, hidden from the rest of the family. Without necessarily any open sharing of confidences, some of our neighbouring 'aunts' and 'uncles' saw and knew more.

It would have been a matter of pride to make any marriage work, especially with a child involved. I was possibly oversensitive to some of the normal give-and-take (blow and counterblow) of married life. Be that as it may, somewhere around the time I was learning to read, Dad was taken to Rauceby hospital near Sleaford. The clue to its speciality was in its former name of Kesteven County Asylum. Allen would be there on and off for a couple of years. He would never hold down a full-time job again.