

Growing up in Surrey Hills - A Winter's Day

Gill Bell



I floated up from a dream to the sound of the milkman's horse clopping its way along the street. There was the familiar clink of our six daily pints of milk. I drifted back to sleep and woke again to the sound of my older sister practising scales on the piano. It was 7 am on a freezing July morning in the nineteen fifties.

I made a shivering dash to the outdoors toilet. The backyard was carpeted in white frost and the chooks crooned softly in their cages as they scratched in the dirt. The water bowl of Gus, our black and white cocker spaniel, was covered with a thick sheet of ice.

Mum was standing at the kitchen stove, smoothing back her soft dark hair as she stirred a steaming pot of porridge. She had already stoked the Warmray and the hot water heater with briquettes and had hung our clothes on a rack in front of the heater so they would be warm to put on. The kitchen was cosy and there was the delicious scent of frying bacon.

Mum had finished packing our lunches: five sets of sandwiches and homemade biscuits all wrapped in greaseproof paper. There was also an apple each.

Mum served our breakfasts. I poured milk carefully around the edge of the semolina and added a generous spoonful of honey. I loved this porridge. Next came fried eggs and bacon. On special occasions there might be a fluffy souffle-like omelette. Sometimes there was lambs fry, which Dad loved, perhaps with bread fried in dripping. Finally came thick slices of white toast with butter and homemade marmalade. It was well before the days of pre-sliced bread and pop-up toasters. I have no idea how Mum managed to juggle toasting, frying and serving.

We girls left together for school, a tram-ride away. I was in Grade 4 and my two sisters were in Grades 2 and 6. I envied our little brother who could stay home in the warmth with Mum.

The tram was icy. The central section, reserved for smokers, was shielded from the freezing air by a single layer of canvas loosely pegged at the base and flapping in the breeze.

At school we lined up for assembly. 'I love God and my country' we chanted. On Mondays a flag was raised and we sang 'God save the Queen'. We marched inside and sat at wooden desks with white china inkwells full of blue ink.

The boys had the important task of mixing the ink powder with water. The boys had all the exciting jobs. Not only were they the drummers for school assembly but they were also allowed to fetch firewood for the open fireplaces. These were picturesque but barely warm, especially if a teacher stood in front of it, enjoying the warmth. I suffered chilblains on my toes from the cold. They burned and throbbed through winter.

At lunchtime I wistfully eyed the steaming meat pies of some of my classmates. They were so lucky to be allowed to buy their lunch! but pies cost an impossible shilling each. After eating my cut lunch I went to the tuckshop. 'Threepence worth of mixed lollies, please. Chocolate bullets at eight for a penny were especially good value.

When we arrived home from school Mum was standing at the kitchen table ironing. No ironing boards in those days, just several layers of old woollen blankets and a sheet on the kitchen table. The old polished wooden wireless was tuned to 3AR. The wireless had a little lighted window, and a square of oatmeal-coloured fabric hid what was inside. I used to imagine that tiny people were in there behind this curtain, speaking and playing music.

By five o'clock dinner was underway. The meat was mutton left over from the Sunday roast. The pressure cooker valve hissed and whirred away to ensure the vegetables were well cooked. We had a hot pudding every night. Tonight it was chocolate delicious with tinned cream. Despite our solid meals we were all slim.

After dinner Mum filled the kettle and set it on top of the heater. It hummed to itself as the water simmered for Mum and Dad's bedtime cup of tea. We did our homework at the kitchen table. There was no television to distract us.

By nine we were in bed, tucked up under layers of heavy woollen blankets. As I write today tears come to my eyes at the thought of the carefully ironed clothes, the lovingly made lunches and the little garments so thoughtfully warmed for us.

The bare oak tree branches outside bobbed in the winter wind, but inside we slept peacefully, cocooned in the warmth of family.



Photos by Gill Bell: Canterbury Sports Ground in winter fog.