

## Growing up in Surrey Hills – Spring



Gill Bell

In the magical sphere of my memory, I step into the spring garden of my childhood. The pittosporum hedge at the front puts out clusters of creamy yellow blossoms which give off an intoxicating scent as I brush past them. The quince tree by the gate reaches out branches decked with blossoms of palest pink. Beside the driveway the silver birch bears tender new shoots, while the majestic oak tree unfurls soft leaves of freshest green. The air is filled with the scent of spring and the promise of warmth to come.

In the back garden the fruit trees burst into flower. There are apricot, peach and apple trees, but the queen of them all is the gnarled old blood plum tree, which bears branches of sumptuous white blossoms.

It is Saturday morning and Dad is working in the vegetable garden while we children play nearby. I look for eggs in the chickens' nesting boxes and Dad digs chicken manure into the already rich soil. I join him as with a fork he turns over the soil looking for the roundness of potatoes. I love this treasure hunt. The silvery globes of the cabbages are wrapped in darker green leaves veined with white. Dad dusts them against caterpillars with Derris dust, a plant-based powder. He cuts a bunch of silver beet from the large patch near the chook pens. From the old service lane behind the back garden wafts the scent of mint, and the orange and yellow nasturtiums shine against their smooth green leaves.

Dad will soon be picking the early peas. We children will shell them into basins with a satisfying plinking sound. Occasionally our fingers encounter a squishy green ball: a caterpillar which has escaped the Derris dust and has been sleeping snugly in the pod. This is organic vegetable growing sixties style!

The bees in the hives busy themselves collecting nectar for their golden store. The hives hum with their energy. Gus, our ageing cocker spaniel, has an extra spring in his step as he trots to the gap in the front hedge to lie in wait for the postie on his bicycle. In those far-off days there are still twice-daily weekday mail deliveries, and one delivery on Saturdays. The whistle sounds and Gus springs into action, racing along the hedge barking loudly. Gus loves this game; the postie not so much.

I open the letter box to an exciting collection of mail: a slim blue airletter from New Zealand and a fat envelope from Queensland. There is also a colourful envelope bearing stamps from the UK. Mum holds the widespread family together with her constant letter-writing.

In the afternoon we climb into the green Zephyr and Dad drives us to an old farmhouse in Ringwood. In a shed at the back of the property he selects a new batch of tiny yellow chicks. Their little feet scrabble in their box on the back seat as we drive home. We carry them carefully through the garden and settle them in their pen which is lined with fresh straw. There is a water dispenser, a simple tin cylinder standing in a shallow dish. A kerosene heater warms the pen. It is a cosy place to be.

Released from their box, the little chicks chirp brightly. They peck at their special soft bran and sip their water. It is as if they have always lived here. In the pen next door their older sisters croon softly. Perhaps the new arrivals have awakened their motherly instincts. My older self is moved by the chicks' resilience and their confidence that all will be well. The scent of kerosene wafts me back to that time of new life and hope.

As dusk falls the chicks cluster more closely together. Their little eyelids close and they drift into chicken dreaming. It has been a big day for them.

It is still cool enough to light the briquette heater, and it is snug in the kitchen. The family is sitting down to dinner at the kitchen table, covered with an embroidered cloth. Dad opens his damask serviette with a flourish.

Mum serves out the dinner: corned beef and white sauce, accompanied by mashed potatoes, peas and dark green silver beet. It is simple but tasty fare. There will be apple crumble for dessert.

On the back door mat Gus sleeps peacefully, his paws twitching as he pursues in his dreams his enemy, the postman. The family sits surrounded by warmth and light as I silently take my leave from this sphere of dreams. Outside in the darkening garden the cool evening breeze stirs the plum tree, and blossom falls like snow.