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UK BESTSELLER

CAST NO STONES



a true story

KEVIN MACHELL

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CONTENTS:

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#) - Take No Notice

[Chapter 2](#) - Happy Birthday

[Chapter 3](#) - At First We Were Happy

[Chapter 4](#) - Sergeant Ledrew

[Chapter 5](#) - Heath Street

[Chapter 6](#) - Thompson Street and a New Dad

[Chapter 7](#) - My Dad's in America

END OF SAMPLE

Prologue

Following America's entry into the Second World War in December 1941, there began a massive build-up of American troops and equipment into the United Kingdom. By the time of the D-Day landings in June 1944, approximately two and a half million American service personnel were stationed on these shores. This number represented almost five per cent of the UK's total population at that time. To put it another way, one in every twenty people in the country were American military personnel.

This was to have a major impact on the lives of the British people - a brand new chapter in the country's social history was written. Inevitably, romances blossomed between the American servicemen and British women. The attraction was mutual. To the young British women, the Americans were like a breath of fresh air. They had plenty of money to spend, and they brought vitality at a time when the British girls were more than ready for a little fun and adventure. Equally, the American troops, who were very far from their homes, family and friends, were not slow to appreciate the reception being given to them by the British girls. By the end of the war many had married American servicemen and following the war they sailed off to a new life in America as 'GI Brides.' Many women became pregnant by their American lovers and were left behind - literally holding the baby! An estimated eight thousand illegitimate children were born to American servicemen stationed in this country between 1942 and 1945.

After the war the Americans returned home. For the British, life slowly returned to normal. For some of us, either the perpetrators or the products of those relationships, nothing was ever going to be normal again. It is against this background that this story unfolds. This is the story of one of those illegitimate children.

It is my story - I was one of those children.

Chapter 1 – Take No Notice

My sister had been spending the day with her father and grandmother and she was expected home any minute. ‘Why don’t you go to the end of the street and check if you can see her coming?’ my mother asked. Happy to agree, I went down to the street corner and looked into the distance. Yes, there they were. My sister and her grandmother were walking hand in hand towards me. I ran up to them excitedly and took hold of my sister’s free hand. I was really glad to see her. What happened next was to have a very profound effect on me for many years to come. It was also to become the precursor for an unspoken relationship of hatred on the part of “Grannie” Machell towards me. ‘Get off! Get away!’ the old lady said. She immediately grabbed me by the arm and smacked my wrist until I let go of my sister’s hand. ‘Get off, go away, don’t you dare hold her hand.’ she said. I looked at Ann. She didn’t know what to do or say. She was clearly uncomfortable with her grandmother’s conduct but she avoided my eyes by looking down at the ground. They continued to walk away from me; the old lady held my sister’s hand more tightly and frequently glanced backward to check that I was keeping my distance. I followed a few yards behind them nursing my sore wrist.

I didn’t know what I had done. I didn’t even know this old woman. I knew she must be Ann’s grannie, but I didn’t know why. I wasn’t even sure what a grannie was. Lots of children seemed to have grannies. The only thing I knew was that they were old women who had some kind of authority over you. I didn’t know that they were a mother of your own parent. It had never been explained to me. Even when some children had two grandmothers, the relevance was lost on me. I suppose it wasn’t relevant because both of my mother’s parents were long since dead. I didn’t have a father so therefore I didn’t have any paternal grandparents either. Grannie Machell was very angry with me and I was upset, but I didn’t know why she was angry. When they reached the corner of our street, the old lady kissed my sister goodbye then quickly walked away, but not before giving me a long lasting, and nasty look. I was only about four years of age at the time of this incident but

I remember the feelings of anguish and isolation. I knew that if Ann could have changed the situation she would have done so. Like me, she was also a victim of circumstances neither of us understood or was able to remedy.

As soon as her grandmother was out of sight, Ann held her hand out to me and waited until I caught up with her. 'Don't tell me mam about me "gran" smacking you or I'll get done.' she said. Together we walked up our street and into our house. Mother was waiting for us. She asked Ann about everything that she had been doing and everywhere she had been during the day. She wanted to know about all that had happened. I listened impatiently while Ann recounted her day. I couldn't wait tell my mother what the old woman had done, but I certainly didn't want to get Ann into trouble by telling her about the smacking incident.

Eventually my mother spotted that I was sulking and asked, 'What's the matter Kevin?' I told her that Grannie Machell wouldn't let me hold Ann's hand. Ann glowered at me, afraid that I might mention the smacking. Unsurprisingly, my mother used one of her pet lines, 'Take no notice of her, just take no notice. She's just a silly old woman.' She didn't tell me why she was a silly old woman or why I should take no notice of her. In any case, how did she expect me to take no notice of an adult shouting at me and smacking me? I didn't even know what taking no notice actually meant. I was certainly aware that a grown up – and a very old grown up at that - was angry with me. What was I supposed to do? Should I have kept hold of my sister's hand and try to ignore the pain that was being inflicted? Was she suggesting that I should just accept the pain this old woman had caused me and then forget all about it?

Without a proper explanation as to what taking no notice meant, I had to resort to protecting myself in the only way I knew – by any future avoidance of the cause of my discomfort and pain. As a consequence, I avoided her at all times. She was equally happy to avoid me. In any event, the number of times she called at our house was very few and far between. I grew up never knowing this woman; who she really was or what she was. She had made it abundantly clear to me that she did not like me or anything about me. My

mother simply ignored the situation. Of course, it might have been different had she known of the smacking incident.

Clearly, Grannie Machell must have resented me as a child. At the time I had no idea why. I realize now, that I must have represented the manifestation of everything that had transpired to cause her and her son, Charlie so much distress; namely, the break-up of his marriage to my mother.

During the writing of this book, my sister, Ann, revealed to me, that towards the end of her grandmother's life, when she was clearly dying, she actually spoke of the way she had treated me as a child. She apologized and told Ann that she was sorry. I didn't learn of this until many years after her death, but I was touched by the old woman's contrition. However, it would have been nice if she could have told me herself. I hold no grudge towards this old woman and I would have forgiven her. I forgive her now and hope that she is resting in peace.

The incident was not an isolated one. By that, I don't mean that Grannie Machell frequently smacked me, on the contrary, I hardly ever saw her. I am referring to similar incidents of unexplained cruelty and nastiness. It was not always physical cruelty- although that occurred quite a few times. I was mistreated by many adults and often bullied by their children. I learned to accept that some people just didn't like me - for what reason I didn't know. There was an occasion when I was playing in the street with other small children. One of the children went into his house, so naturally, being children, we all followed him in. That alone did not cause a problem. This was a common enough action by children. The problem arose when the boy's mother recognized me. She told me to go home and not to come in her house again. She didn't tell any of the other kids to go home. While I was making my way out of the house, I could hear her telling her son not to bring me in the house anymore. She never explained why. Once again, I suffered the feelings of rejection and of being ostracised. To my simple mind, apart from physical pain, the feeling of not being wanted was the worst form of hurt a child could possibly suffer.

On another occasion, there were two older boys; one had a younger brother who I used to play with. He threw me to the ground and told me not to play with his brother again. He didn't say why, but he did say that he didn't like 'Yanks.' Of course it is entirely possible that this and other incidents were just coincidental and unrelated to anything that I may have contributed to - or even represented. Bullying is not new. It has always gone on, but I am sure other children in the street were not picked on in this way. Whatever they not liking Yanks had to do with it, I had no idea. I didn't even know what Yanks were!

From the age of about seven or eight, the frequency of incidents reduced quite dramatically. They didn't actually stop until I was well into my teens; however, they did lessen after my mother remarried and we moved to another part of town where we were relatively unknown.

It occurred to me while writing this book, that the majority of these unpleasant incidents took place when I was very young. So I thought it surprising and a little strange that I was able to now recall things that my conscious mind had long forgotten. Perhaps to protect myself I'd so efficiently blocked out these ugly incidents that I'd in effect sealed them up in a kind of mental time capsule. I concluded that the writing process had acted to release all these perfectly preserved and acutely harrowing memories. Sadly, the intensity of the emotional pain has not lessened over the decades.

During my childhood, instead of explaining things to me, my mother would always be telling me to take no notice of people or incidents. My learning to "take no notice" was only ever partly achieved. However, it didn't take me long to learn that no proper explanation would ever be forthcoming! I could almost anticipate what my mother was going to say whenever I asked her questions about certain topics or whenever unusual situations arose. An example of this occurred just before I started school. I guess I must have been about five years old at the time. One of my young friends from a few

doors away had called me ‘A little Yankee bastard.’ It wasn’t said maliciously- he was my friend. It was said in playful conversation.

‘What’s one of them?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know, but me mam said you was one.’

Are you one?’

‘I don’t know.’ was my reply.

I had never heard the phrase before, so it stuck in my mind. I had heard the word Yanks said but I hadn’t connected it. A little later when I was back at home, I said to my mother, ‘I’m a little Yankee bastard.’ I was really pleased with myself for remembering what my friend had said. My mother hit the roof. ‘Who have you heard saying that?’ she demanded to know.

‘Martin said it. Why what is it?’ I answered.

I quickly realized by her tone that I was in trouble again.

‘Nothing, but don’t you ever say that again. It’s very naughty to say that. You just keep away from him in future. Don’t you play with him anymore. Do you hear me?’ She said.

‘I won’t, mam, I’m sorry mam.’ I replied.

This incident left me totally bemused. I didn’t know what I had done, what the term meant or why I should be in trouble.

During my childhood there were so many incidents that my mother had told me to take no notice of, that pretty soon I wasn’t sure what to take notice of, and what not to! My early childhood years were very confusing. I desperately tried to please everyone in order to keep out of trouble. However, at times my willingness to please only resulted in causing even more trouble. It became so much easier to just accept that I must be a naughty child and would always be getting scolded for one thing or another. That way, whenever I was in trouble, the hurt felt a little less because it came as no surprise.

Sometimes I would find myself being treated as though I had done something wrong when in fact, I hadn’t done anything. Clearly, incidents

had taken place between my mother and local residents that resulted in my being either kept indoors or prevented from playing with certain children – at the time I didn't know why.

There were many occasions during my childhood and particularly during my infancy and early school days, when I had experienced being scolded for unexplained reasons. It all served to cause total confusion in my young mind. I began to believe that I was somehow different to other children. I don't mean that I was different in any tangible way; I didn't look different than other kids. I knew that other kids had dads and I didn't. It was much more than that. Outside of my immediate family, I often felt that I was treated differently. I was spoken to differently - often in an uncaring way and sometimes in an aggressive manner. People would look at me differently. I now know those people were looking down their noses at me.

Often, people used to stare at me while they were speaking to my mother. It almost seemed as if they were searching for something within me. They wanted to compare the differences between their own children and me. Their conversations were directed at my mother yet their attention was directed towards me. What was it they were expecting to see in me? I never did find the answer to that question. Maybe it was just curiosity. Maybe pity - although I doubt that, at least not by judging from their conduct towards me on many occasions.

On the whole, other children generally treated me quite well because they were also innocents in this world of adult complexity. Some of the residents of our street didn't want me playing with their children. I didn't know why. As usual, my mother would tell me to take no notice and to play with someone else. I would have happily complied in order to avoid getting into trouble but I didn't know how to. My mother hadn't explained to me how to take no notice! I didn't realize it at the time but the hostility of some people towards me was not actually intended for me. It was misdirected. It was my mother that they held in contempt. I was the manifestation of her 'wrongdoing' in their eyes. It was easier for them to show malice towards me than towards her.

Some were very two-faced regarding my mother. They were friendly when speaking to her, but then gossiped behind her back. I heard this gossip on many occasions, but it was adult talk and nothing to do with me. I knew they were gossiping about my mother, but about what - I didn't know. I grew accustomed to the two-faced gossips and learned to ignore them.

I was often treated unfairly, including by my own mother on some occasions. Her unfairness was in her not telling me the essential things that I needed to know as I was growing up. It was grossly unfair that a good many people – including perfect strangers to me, knew so much more about me than I did. This of course is inevitable during early childhood. But it should not be the case for an older child. It was wrong that extended family members including my younger cousins knew about this massive skeleton in my cupboard long before I did. By ignoring these important issues and always telling me to “take no notice,” my mother only served to compound my feelings of confusion and uncertainty.

During my formative years, I learned that asking certain questions was pointless. So as I grew older I stopped asking them altogether. Any questions that I asked of my mother that related to my father or my sister's father or her grandmother were always met with comments like; ‘mind your own business.’ or ‘you wouldn't understand.’

Questions relating to my real father or grandparents would cause mother to get angry. I remember on one particular occasion when I was six or seven years old, I asked my mother, ‘Is Uncle Bill my real dad?’ She went mad at me. ‘Who have you been talking to? Who has been saying things to you?’

Uncle Bill was in fact my stepfather and at the time of my asking the question, he had been married to my mother for about twelve months. My mother had recently given birth to my youngest brother, Graham. I was totally confused at the time. I obviously knew nothing of sexual matters or where babies came from. There had never been another man in my life that I could relate to in any way, so it seemed reasonable to me that if my Uncle Bill was married to my mother then he must be my dad.

I had two sisters and two brothers. My older sister, Ann, used to visit her father at weekends but I had never seen him. I didn't think he was my dad although nobody ever told me he wasn't. It wouldn't have made any difference even if he was my dad, because he didn't live with us and do the things that dads did with their children, therefore I couldn't relate to him. Uncle Bill was the daddy to our new baby and this baby was being taught to call him daddy. My sister Ann called him Bill. My other brother and sister along with me called him Uncle Bill. I was totally bewildered by it all. Where had this baby come from? Who is this man I called Uncle Bill? Why does Ann have a dad who my mum refers to as, 'Charlie Machell?' These and many other unanswered questions played on my mind almost continuously throughout my childhood. I needed many questions answering in order for me to be fully able to deal with the problems that I was already beginning to experience and would continue to experience for many more years to come.

Chapter 2 – Happy Birthday

The only straightforward and uncomplicated aspect of my story was that of my actual birth. I was born in Hope Hospital, Salford, in May 1944, and was given the name Kevin Albert Machell. I was the second child born to my mother, Laura. My older sister, Ann, had been born five years earlier. I was given the surname of my mother's husband and not the surname of my biological father. I was the illegitimate child of an American soldier who my mother had been having an adulterous affair with.

The name of my father, or indeed, anything to do with my father was to remain a complete mystery to me for the next 45 years. His name does not appear on my birth certificate. The space where my father's name should be was left blank. This was due to the rules governing birth registration in those days. If the child's father was not married to the mother then he was not afforded paternity on the birth certificate - it was always left blank. The surname of the child would be officially registered as that of the mother.

Throughout most of my life my mother deliberately denied me any information about my father. In later years, she claimed that in doing so she had been trying to protect me from emotional harm. She had not only failed in her attempts to protect me, but actually compounded the problems. I believe that her true motive in denying me this information was that she was more interested in protecting herself and her reputation.

I didn't just reach a certain age then discovered that my father was an American. It was more a process of accidentally stumbling across bits of information throughout my life - from infancy to adulthood. As events occurred, they often caused me some upset but without any meaning. It was only when I reached middle age that I was able to piece together the information and incidents and make any constructive sense of it.

Notwithstanding the unfairness of being the innocent victim of my parents' irresponsible actions, the main issue causing me problems was my not knowing anything about my father. Details about him and his relationship

with my mother were fairly common knowledge to others. Many people knew about it: friends, residents of our street, family members and in some cases, their children. I didn't know who my father was, what he was, or where he was. It seemed to me that within our family, if the issue was ignored then it was as though it didn't exist. In not talking about it, my mother rather hoped that it would just go away.

She was not alone in trying to ignore the matter but she did so for very different reasons. Despite the fact that I and many other illegitimate wartime children of American fathers officially existed, many attempts were made by government departments to ignore our presence for the sake of preserving the wartime morale; in particular the morale of serving British troops. A certain resentment towards the presence of Americans on our shores definitely existed among the male population - and not without good reason. These Americans or "Yanks" as they were commonly referred to were having the time of their lives with the British women.

One of these Yanks - who I later found out was called Harry - was now standing on the pavement on Stott Lane outside Hope Hospital in Salford and staring up at the windows of the maternity block. He knew that the birth of his son or daughter was imminent. The hospital did not know the circumstances surrounding this pregnancy, and both he and Laura saw no reason to tell them. It was better to just let the medical staff believe that Laura was having her husband's baby and that he was away on active service. Harry knew he would not be welcome in the hospital because it would quickly become apparent that he and not her husband was the baby's father. The social stigma associated with the adulterous relationship would have caused them both a great deal of discomfort and embarrassment. Added to this was the fact that Laura's husband was a serving soldier during a time of war, the whole of society would have condemned her for her actions.

Harry knew that following the birth of his child, Laura's problems would only just be beginning. He imagined that the pain she was presently

experiencing would be nothing compared to the difficulties she was going to have to deal with in the future. She would not only struggle to provide for and raise her two children, she would also have to deal with all the consequences of a hostile and condemning society. At this very moment he was unable to do anything. Circumstances had conspired against him. He was not in control of the situation and for the first time in his life he was experiencing a feeling of despair.

‘Got any cigarettes Yank?’ a pretty young woman asked him. He was slightly startled by her. He hadn’t noticed her approach him. She was about the same age as Laura. He reached into his pocket and gave her a half packet of cigarettes. ‘Thanks, gorra a light?’ she asked. He handed her his lighter and she lit one of the cigarettes. ‘Do you wanna buy us a drink?’ she asked. He declined her invitation and watched as she walked away. The incident momentarily took his mind off the birth. It caused him to reflect on everything that had happened and what had ultimately led him to be standing on that pavement getting wet from the very fine rain that was soaking into his clothing on this miserable May evening.

Harry cursed the rain. He hated the Manchester weather. Even in the alleged summer months, rain seemed to be a constant companion. It seemed to him that it rained almost every day. He was not used to it. Back home in America, the summers were very long, hot and dry. During the winter it would get very cold, the temperatures often falling below zero for weeks on end. Rain was necessary for the crops and it was most welcome when it came, but unlike here in Britain, it did not last forever and did not preoccupy their lives. It certainly did not rain during the summer time – or at least, very rarely.

He suffered immense pangs of guilt. He desperately struggled with his emotions. He never anticipated that this would have happened. He was just a soldier in a foreign land trying to survive and doing what most soldiers do in their leisure time – trying to have a social life. The conscience he never knew he had was now pricking him quite badly. His hitherto irresponsible and somewhat cavalier approach to life was confronting him in a way that he wasn’t used to, and he didn’t like. He wanted to distance himself from

the situation. He wanted to turn the clock back and walk away, but he was unable to. He stood outside that hospital and gently cried. The rain disguised and diluted his tears as they slid down his cheeks and dripped off his chin. He did what he always did when he was upset or depressed, he sought solace in a couple of beers in a nearby pub. The pub was called appropriately 'The Inn of Good Hope.' He drank a toast to his new son - or daughter. 'Happy Birthday.'

Up in the maternity delivery room the new born baby was handed to Laura. All her pain during the last few hours suddenly disappeared. She held her son and studied his features carefully. There was no mistaking that this was Harry's child. It had his eyes and nose. She thought the mouth and chin were possibly hers. Overall colouring was definitely Harry's; brown eyes, fair hair – her eyes were blue and her hair was brown. She thought the forehead was a little large although the body was generally well proportioned - even for a baby. Within a short space of time she settled down to feed her baby for the first time. As the child suckled at her breast she felt totally protective of it. It was so tiny, so helpless and wholly dependent upon her. She determined to let nothing happen to her precious little bundle. She was going to take very good care of it no matter what she had to do. She was a very determined woman.

The reality of her situation was however very far removed from the relative safety and comfort of that hospital ward. Laura was well aware of her situation and as her baby slept, she was haunted by the spectre of their very uncertain future. Not just hers and the baby's future, but that of her older child, Ann. Where had her life gone wrong? How was she going to manage? What was she going to do? These and many other questions played on her mind as she struggled to find the answers. Eventually, those long arms of exhaustion, both physical and emotional, wrapped around her and gave her a little respite as she fell asleep.

Chapter 3 – At First We Were Happy

Laura was one of six children. She was possibly the cleverest of her siblings. After passing her 11 plus exams she went to the local grammar school for girls. She left school at the age of fourteen and pursued a career in catering. Throughout her teenage years she was a very attractive young woman. She was a very talented singer and dancer and regularly appeared in on stage in concerts. Laura didn't go short of suitors. As was the norm in those days, many of her friends married while still in their late teens. She however, didn't marry until the age of twenty-three. She claimed that the right man hadn't come along until then. When he did come along she was swept off her feet. His name was Charlie Machell. He also lived in Salford, very close to Manchester's famous racecourse, 'Castle Irwell.'

Laura became pregnant during their courtship and in haste they arranged to get married. This was the done thing in those days and surprisingly, these, 'shotgun marriages' usually lasted. Laura and Charlie set up home close to where Charlie and his mother lived in the Littleton Road area. They were ill-prepared for married life and neither of them adapted to their new lifestyle easily.

In recounting her story to me, my mother recalled the old adage; 'Marry in haste – repent at leisure.'

'Well I certainly did!' she said.

This how she recalls her marriage to Charlie:

'At first we were happy. Charlie was a good looking man with a wonderful outgoing personality. He made me feel very special and we were in love – at least I thought we were in love. We were going out for a few months when I discovered that I was pregnant. We probably would have got married some time anyway but we decided to marry straight away. It was normal in those days to get married if you fell pregnant.'

‘I don’t think Charlie’s mother was very happy because I don’t think she really liked me. I think that she thought her son could have done better for himself. My relationship with her was fraught from the beginning. I tried hard to please her but whatever I did, it was never good enough. With her assistance, we managed to rent a little house just around the corner from her. We had absolutely nothing and we had to rely on family and friends helping us to furnish the property. Even though at first we both worked full time, money was always short because setting up a home from scratch takes every penny. We started to have problems early on because Charlie still insisted on going out socialising regularly. Apart from us not really being able to afford it, he couldn’t stand being stuck in the house day after day. He argued that after working all week, he was entitled to go out on occasions. Because of my condition I didn’t always feel like going out after working all week myself. I was often too tired and in some discomfort. Sometimes his mother would encourage him and actually treat him to go out. I used to go mad at him because we needed any extra money for more important things for our home.’

‘Our quarrels became more frequent and lasted longer. Often we didn’t speak for days on end. There was no domestic violence – least not by Charlie. I hit him on many occasions because he used to get me so infuriated. He continued trying to lead the social life of a single man. I suspected almost from the start that he was involved with other women. Women can sense these things. There were too many clues and I became increasingly mistrusting of him. I was lonely and unhappy in my marriage. I tried to get his mother to talk to him but she was completely on his side. He could do no wrong in her eyes. She accused me of being the cause of our problems, and claimed that I wasn’t treating him right. I even think she held me responsible for getting myself pregnant!’

‘One day, a friend of mine came to the house to tell me that my husband was across the road in the Racecourse Hotel and ‘carrying on’ with another woman in full view of everyone. I was eight months pregnant but I gave him what for! I went to the hotel and there he was, sitting with his arm around her - canoodling with her. The pub was packed with people. I swept my arm

across the table knocking the drinks flying. I turned the air blue with my language and frightened everyone to death. I called him a dirty cheating bastard and asked him just what he thought he was doing. He stood up so I shoved him; he fell backwards into another table resulting in even more glasses crashing to the floor. By this time the place was in an uproar. Some customers thought the whole thing was hilarious and others were entirely sympathetic to my heavily pregnant condition. The woman quickly made her exit and Charlie was eventually persuaded by his friends to leave as well. I was in a rage and had to be escorted home. I thought that the baby might have even been born in the bar, amidst all the spilled beer. Charlie slept at his mother's for the next few nights. I had suspected that he was being unfaithful to me from the start of our marriage. I think I knew then that this incident was going to be good indicator for our future life together.'

'Our relationship improved slightly for a while, but things were still not right between us. Shortly after Ann was born things worsened again. Eventually, we both found ourselves trapped in a loveless marriage for the sake of our baby daughter. We were married for less than twelve months when war was declared with Nazi Germany. Our Ann was only six months old.'

'Following the outbreak of war, Charlie was called up for military service. He became a member of the Military Police (Redcaps). I hardly saw anything of him. His times of leave were few and far between. On some leave periods, he never came home at all and spent his rest and recuperation elsewhere. He claimed it wasn't always practical to come home. I was often very lonely. Me and the baby were almost always short of money for essential things. I had hardly anyone to turn to. Both of my parents were dead. Charlie's mother lived around the corner but our relationship was hostile. The old lady loved and cared for her granddaughter but could only find fault with everything I did – or even did not do.'

'I know that Charlie had soured his mother against me. It seemed to me that in trying to have any friends or semblance of a social life, I only made matters worse. It just was not worth it. The old lady seemed to know everything that went on in my life. Whenever Charlie came home on leave

there was always a blazing argument about one thing or another that his mother had reported to him. I will admit that I was not totally innocent in all of this. I had sometimes been out with other men behind Charlie's back, but it was only after the marriage had irretrievably broken down - and even then, I never slept with them, we were just good friends.'

'It was about this time in our lives that I was able to find a child minder. I managed to get a part-time job working in the canteen at Salford Docks. The extra money was most welcome. It was while I was working there that I met Harry. He was an American soldier and was stationed at the racecourse camp- close to where I lived.'

'By Christmas of 1942, the Castle Irwell racecourse had already become a well-established American army depot. Over one thousand troops with their thousands of tonnes of military equipment were stationed there. To the citizens of Salford and to the rest of the country, these American troops were regarded as young, brash, arrogant and compared to the British soldiers, very highly paid. The well-known cliché, 'overpaid, oversexed and over here,' certainly did apply. The local residents were fortunate in having a large American base on their doorstep. It had a lot to offer both financially and socially. Many local shops and businesses were doing a roaring trade while the women were enjoying the attention that was afforded them by these young soldiers. The Americans were more than happy to spend their money on the local women.'

Chapter 4 – Sergeant Ledrew

Harry's full name was Harry Austin Ledrew. He was a Staff Sergeant in the American army. He was in a combat engineering company. Laura had seen quite a lot of these Americans about town and at Salford Docks, but she had never met one quite like Harry before. He was a fair bit older than the others and certainly more mature. He had an air of authority about him without needing to advertise it. He was clearly in charge of the group of younger soldiers and they showed him a lot of respect. Laura thought he was very nice and certainly good looking. She was a little embarrassed by the fact that he kept looking at her and smiling. She realized that she was also looking at him and he had frequently caught her doing so. When the young soldiers were being a little too flirtatious and boisterous with the canteen staff, he put them in their places and apologized to the canteen ladies in general, but to Laura in particular.

'Sorry about my men ma'am, hope they haven't upset you too much. They don't mean any harm. By the way, my name's Harry, what's yours?'

'No, it's alright, we get used to it. I'm Laura.'

She could feel herself blushing slightly and her colleagues were giggling at her. After they had finished eating their meal, the Americans got up to leave.

'Thank you Laura, see you tomorrow – same time, will you be on duty?'

'Yes I will.'

'Good, see you tomorrow then Laura, it's a date.'

He winked at her and left with his men.

In recounting her version of events, Laura told me that she was completely overcome by him:

'I felt like a silly school girl. My workmates didn't help the situation - they teased and continually made fun of me. He was on my mind all that

evening. I wondered whether he would come back tomorrow. I really liked him and I could tell that he liked me.'

'The following day at work, I pretended that I had forgotten all about him when the other girls mentioned anything. As lunchtime approached, I began getting quite nervous in anticipation of him coming. After a while, the same young Americans entered the canteen but he wasn't with them. One of the other girls asked where the sergeant was and was told that he would be along shortly. They had already been served with their lunches when Harry arrived.'

'Sorry I'm late. I'm not normally late for a date.' he said to me.

'Why, is this what this is... a date? I thought it was your lunch time.'

'Let's call it a date to make a date.'

'How about it? '

'You're a cheeky bugger, get lost.' I retorted.

'He continued to flirt with me throughout his lunch break. I have to admit that I was very flattered by his attention. He kept asking me for a date and refused to leave the premises until I agreed to go out with him. He sent his troops back to camp and seated himself next to the counter to await my acceptance. Eventually my supervisor made me accept the date in order to get rid of this nuisance Yank!'

'It was nearing the end of my shift and Harry insisted on giving me a ride home. He drove his truck up to the canteen entrance and I climbed in. I had to hide below the dashboard so I wouldn't be seen as we drove out through the dock gates and onto the main road. I wasn't ashamed of what I was doing, but after all, I was still officially a married woman and I wanted to be as discreet as I could. Following that first date, many others followed. As far as I was concerned, my marriage was already over and had been for a long time. I was still legally married but I didn't regard myself as doing anything wrong.'

'At first we used to meet secretly. Harry would come in to the house by the back door in order to avoid being seen. I wasn't ashamed of seeing him

but I was still married to Charlie and I had a small child. I didn't want to advertise the fact that I was seeing someone. For a while, Harry respected my wishes in this respect but eventually he said he had had enough. One day he parked his jeep outside my front door for all to see and knocked on my door and shouted my name until I let him in. I was embarrassed to death. All the residents had come out to see what the commotion was about. I knew that if tongues had not already been wagging, they would be now! I went mad with Harry but he didn't care. He had been drinking and told me that he no longer cared who saw us.'

'After this incident, Harry became a frequent visitor to my home. It was during one of these visits that Charlie came home on leave at six o'clock in the morning and found Harry and two of his friends asleep in the house. We had been having a few drinks the night before and they all stayed over. I was so scared that a massive fight would break out. Charlie was well able to hold his own in a fight but was outnumbered three to one. He ordered Harry and his friends out of the house otherwise he would call the police. I really felt so humiliated that he had caught me with Harry. Even so, my conscience was clear because it was him and not me that had caused the breakup of our marriage. I was only doing the same as he was.'

'Charlie had been unfaithful to me from the very beginning; I just did not have the necessary proof, but I knew, and he knew that I knew. He was very angry with the way I was behaving, particularly so because his infant daughter was in the house. The incident finally signalled the end of our four year old marriage. We both knew it was time for us to officially end the sham. Charlie and I separated. In later years, I was to be held solely responsible for the failure and ultimate breakup of the marriage when Charlie divorced me for adultery.

I managed to obtain a small furnished flat round the corner on Littleton Road. The flat was above a shop which faced onto the racecourse.* It was also just around the corner from Charlie's mother and she still knew everything that was going on.'

* *The significance of the location of this shop will become apparent in chapter 14.*

‘At every opportunity, Harry would make excuses to come to the docks. Sometimes he would divert his Liverpool bound, fifty vehicle convoy to Salford Docks just to see me. While driving along Littleton Road back to his camp at the racecourse, his convoy would always be greeted with the cheering and waving of hands by the local residents – mainly women and children. Harry would always look for me and I would be there, holding our Ann in my arms and waving to them as they passed the shop.’

‘After a few months, I moved again; this time to a different area altogether. The rent was much cheaper although the accommodation was very much older and in truth, was little more than a slum. However, I was better able to afford it and at long last I felt free from the prying eyes of my mother-in-law and her neighbourhood spies. Mostly, Harry’s visits to see me would take place in the evenings after work had been completed for the day. Occasionally, if a babysitter could be arranged, we would go out for a drink. Many of the larger pubs in the area became quite popular with both the Americans and the local girls. At weekends these pubs would be packed out. The local dance halls were very busy on Saturday and Sunday nights. Everywhere you went the sounds of the big bands would be belting out from the record players. The music of Glenn Miller was being enjoyed as much in Salford as it probably was in the USA.’

These were heady times for Laura and all the other young women. She was enjoying a new lease of life. She no longer cared who saw her or knew about her relationship. Many of her neighbours now held her in total contempt. In the eyes of many she was behaving in a completely unacceptable manner. Her husband was away fighting the war and she was openly flaunting her relationship behind his back. Americans would often be seen going into and out of her home - their military vehicles often blocked the street. Of course it is easy to be full of condemnation when the full circumstances are not known, but society at the time had rules of its own, and during wartime there was an unwritten but widely accepted code of conduct that people were expected to adhere to. Remaining faithful to your serving husband was one of those rules. Similarly, during the First

World War, those households whose menfolk failed to enlist were treated with the same kind of contempt.

Laura continued her version of events:

‘I eventually became pregnant and became the scandal of the neighbourhood. All of those neighbours who were full of condemnation now had something to really talk about! How smug they all were. At first I was mortified at the discovery that I was having a baby, but I eventually accepted it and just got on with things. What else could I do?’

‘Throughout my pregnancy, Harry did whatever he could to maintain my good health. He was in the fortunate position of being able to obtain fresh fruits and vegetables that were not readily available in the shops. He had access to a plentiful supply of fresh eggs and meat. Medicines were also much valued due to their shortage and cost. A combination of food supplied by Harry and any left-over food from the docks canteen that I was able to obtain, ensured that I ate a healthy and varied diet. As the pregnancy progressed, so did the war and the preparations for the Allies invasion of France. By the Easter of 1944, I was prepared and ready for the birth of my baby and Harry was readying his men for the move to the South Coast. Both events seemed to be coinciding, but we hoped that the baby would be born before Harry departed. It was a very sobering thought, and one we would rather not have, but we knew it might be the only chance he would ever have to see his child.’

‘I had been given the date of the middle of May for my baby’s birth. However, I did not go into labour until the 22nd May. Following the birth I remained in hospital for the next seven days. I was very upset at the time. Harry never came to visit us in the hospital. I never heard from him or received any messages. When the baby and I were discharged from the hospital, I found out that all the Americans had left the camp. The place was deserted. While I had been in hospital, all leave had been cancelled and without any opportunity to say goodbye, Harry and the rest of the troops had been transferred at 24 hours’ notice. Following the D-Day landings, I had no idea whether Harry was still alive or not. Months went by without any word.

If he had been killed in action, nobody would have notified me anyway. I was not his next of kin. I was not even family. I was just the mother of his infant son and he didn't even know that he had a son!

'Harry had given me his Indiana address some time previously. This was where he lived with his sister, Avilla and her husband. After two or three months I wrote to Avilla to ask if she had any news of Harry. I also took the opportunity to tell her about the baby. Avilla was registered as Harry's next of kin and since she had not heard anything, it was assumed that he was still alive. She was shocked to discover that her brother had a son in England. She told me that there was a degree of infertility in the family and it was always assumed that Harry was infertile too. She called him by his middle name, Austin. I had been under the impression that Harry's middle name was Albert, hence the reason for naming his son, Kevin Albert.'*

**It is a family joke these days that my mother didn't even know my father's name. I can laugh at the joke today but many years ago it was a different story and most definitely not even remotely funny.*

Continuing her story, Laura explained:

'Life was very difficult for me and my two children. I had managed to get Ann into school but my son was still too young to go to nursery. Finding any sort of work was difficult and my income was very limited. My friends and family did what little they could for me, but it wasn't much. I often wondered about Harry and if he was alright. I wondered whether I would ever see him again.'

Almost one year since he left for France, Harry knocked on Laura's front door.

'You Bastard!' Laura exclaimed on opening the door to find him standing there with a grin on his face.

'What do you want?'

'I've come to see you and the baby.' What do you mean, what do I want?'

'Where have you been all this time?'

Laura eventually let him in.

She now continued her story:

‘Harry’s new son was playing in his pram. He now had a son. He couldn’t believe it. He was overjoyed. He picked up his son and sat holding him and looking at him for ages. We talked about our situation and what might happen. Unfortunately, his joy soon turned to sadness. He had had much time to think about things and he came up with what he thought was an excellent solution to the problem. However, he’d not bargained on my not agreeing with him. He knew that Charlie wanted custody of his daughter.’

‘Why not let him have her? You and me and the boy can then go to the States, get married and be a family. You wouldn’t have to live here in these slums; the boy would have a good life. Charlie gets what he wants, we get what we want.’

‘What do you think I am? Do you realize what you are saying? How can you expect me to give up my daughter? Are you mad?’

‘I couldn’t believe that he expected me to leave my daughter behind. I told him it was out of the question. We discussed the problem over and over again. It was not possible to take Ann with us to America because there was no way Charlie was going to allow that – and who could blame him? In any case, Harry was not interested in bringing up someone else’s child, especially someone who had caused him and me so many problems. I wasn’t yet divorced so any consideration of marriage was out of the question. Harry had to accept the inevitable.’

‘He stayed with me for a week then had to return to his unit prior to being repatriated and discharged. On his last day with us, he went for a short walk, pushing his son in his pram. I knew his heart was heavy but so was mine. He was extremely upset at having to leave his child in the slums - to walk away from him. When he returned from the walk, he told me that he had taken his son to church to get him baptised, but the priest had refused. Harry said goodbye to us, got into his jeep and quickly drove off. Presumably to the nearest pub. That was the last time I saw him. We did write to each other for a while but eventually I met and married Billy Burns - so our correspondence stopped.’

Chapter 5 – Heath Street

Following Harry's return home to America, Laura had to learn to adapt to her new situation fairly quickly if she was going to manage. She now had a six year old daughter and a one year old son. Ann was already going to the local primary school and it wasn't too long before she managed to get me into a local nursery. With Ann at school and me in the nursery, my mother was now able to go back to work. She desperately needed the extra money. Slowly but surely, Laura's situation began to improve. Although she found it exhausting, she needed to go out to work and to see to the needs of her two young children. At least now, by being careful and counting the pennies she found that she was able to make ends meet. She could also start making some inroads into the debts that she had run up at the local furniture and clothing store. For the next twelve months, her life was one of little else but bed and work. Apart from not being able to afford one, she had been too exhausted to even contemplate a social life. She liked a cigarette and her own company, so wasn't really looking for anything else at the time. She was still only in her twenties but had suffered enough emotional traumas during the last few years to last a lifetime.

My mother was still an attractive woman and arguably still in her prime. As the domestic pressures on her began to ease, she started considering her own needs a little. It was perhaps out of loneliness or simply that she needed to feel some self-esteem again that she found herself enjoying and responding to the attention being paid to her by some of her men friends. It had taken her several months to get Harry out of her system. One fateful day at work, she met another man who she took a liking to. Arthur was kind and attentive to her and she found herself very attracted to him. He had been widowed a little over a year previously. He had a seven year old son. At first she felt a little sorry for him and his situation, but eventually she began to have stronger feelings for him. Arthur became a frequent visitor to Laura's home and before long they embarked on a relationship.

She was happy again. She began to feel like her life had regained some value. She should have learned from her past mistakes, but sadly she did not. This new relationship eventually resulted in Laura becoming pregnant yet again. Although Arthur had come to terms with the relatively recent loss of his wife, he was not able to even contemplate settling down with another woman. For her part, Laura was not looking for marriage with him either. They had enjoyed a relationship but now it was over. Neither of them wanted to consider marriage at this point in time. The relationship soon ended and they went their separate ways.

Laura now found herself in an impossible situation. She knew that she only had herself to blame. She repeatedly asked herself, how she was possibly going to carry on. She had barely started to get back on her feet after I had been born, and now she would have to give up work again and she would have an additional child to bring up. To make matters much worse, by this time, Charlie had returned from the war and had begun divorce proceedings against her for her adultery with Harry.

That she somehow managed to deal with her emotions and the practicalities of her new situation are testament to her strength of character. Of course, those individuals who took pleasure in her previous fall from grace were now in their element. Many of her immediate neighbours held her in such contempt that they didn't even speak to her. If ever a woman was deserving of condemnation, in their eyes, it was my mother. They were soon to discover that she was built of sterner stuff – she had a very strong will. She accepted her predicament once again and determined to deal with whatever issues she had to face.

It is perhaps timely to think about what might have happened in present times. Sociologically, having two or three children to different fathers is quite common and reasonably acceptable today. Financially, sufficient state benefit is available to practically eliminate any serious financial hardship.

Termination of a pregnancy would be a very serious consideration for any woman finding herself in Laura's situation. However, even in those times it would be easy to obtain a termination, and at no cost. There wouldn't be

recriminations from friends or family towards her having such a procedure because very few people, if any, would have even known that she had been pregnant. In the 1940's however, termination was illegal and although some women resorted to back street abortionists, it carried tremendous risks - many women lost their lives as well as the baby. In Laura's case, termination was never even a consideration. She already had two young children who needed her. She was determined to do her best for them. So putting her health at risk was out of the question.

In today's society, marriage amongst young couples is becoming a rarity. Civil partnerships are legally recognized and a family of multiple parents is perfectly acceptable. The vast increase in single mothers is testament to a vastly different attitude towards sex and marriage. The introduction of the contraceptive pill during the nineteen-sixties heralded a sexual revolution. Having several sexual partners has now become the norm.

It is appropriate then, to put Laura's apparent sexual indiscretions into proper context. She was not the only woman in history to have an adulterous affair. Compared to today's standards of acceptance, having four children (three pregnancies) to three different fathers is quite common and does not invoke the derision and condemnation of society that Laura experienced.

It would be almost impossible today to find a woman - or man, who has sufficient chasteness to justify them being able to cast the first stone of condemnation in Laura's direction. 'Let him that is without sin, cast the first stone.' The quote may be an extract from biblical times, but the meaning still holds as true today as it ever did.

When she thought that things could not get any worse, Laura received confirmation from the anti-natal department in the hospital that the child in her womb was in fact twins! How she coped with this news I will never know. The strength of character my mother must have had has always impressed me. She did tell me at one time that the excitement of having twins overshadowed the disappointment of her being pregnant again. She reasoned that since she was going to have another baby, if she had two

instead of one, it only made a financial difference. Any other issues from her family or members of society were going to happen anyway.

In late November 1947, Laura gave birth to her twins - a boy and a girl. They were both healthy and their births were straightforward. Because it was only four weeks before Christmas, she gave them the festive names of David and Carol. Having a second illegitimate baby would have been bad enough but having three illegitimate children might have suggested to some that she was indeed a fallen woman. Either that or she must have had some sort of mental incapacity. The truth was that she had been extremely unlucky. Be that as it may, I now had two sisters and one brother. I was by then, three years old.

Any woman with four children under the age of nine would certainly have her hands full. Without a husband to support her it would be almost impossible to manage, but somehow she did. Fortunately, she did have her trade as a cook and this provided her with full time employment. Child minding and babysitting was a serious problem but she was helped by one or two sympathetic neighbours, who in turn, earned a little extra income for themselves. Laura needed to go out to work to provide for us. The neighbours looked after myself and the twins while we were still under school age.

In those days and under the circumstances outlined, it was not unknown and neither would it be considered unreasonable, for children to be taken into care by the local authority when the welfare of the children was at risk. Indeed, such circumstances with regard to some of their children had already befallen one of Laura's brothers and his wife. The fact that my mother was able to amply demonstrate not only her determination, but a proven ability to provide for her young children, was an absolute credit to her. Although my older sister was only eight years old, she effectively became my permanent carer. Once I was old enough to go to school, she would have to get me washed and dressed in the morning and take me. We went to the same school and at the end of classes she would take me home again and take care of me until mother arrived home with the twins from the nursery. In fact, Ann did practically everything for me while I was a small

child, including a very delicate procedure relating to a medical condition that I had.

As an infant I suffered from a rectal prolapse. This was not an uncommon disorder during the 1940's, but hardly ever occurs today. It was caused by muscle weakness and was generally considered to be a result of poor diet and lack of nutrition. Occasionally I would need Ann's help with my toiletry needs. Ann had been shown by our mother how to deal with my special needs relating to the condition. This was a difficult enough task for an adult – let alone an eight year old child.

Ann was my constant companion in those early days. She had no life of her own that didn't include me at her side. I never once heard her complain about having me in tow wherever she went. I don't believe that she ever complained – not even behind my back.

Each day as Ann took me to school, mother would take the twins to a nursery close to where she worked at the docks. After work she would collect them and come home to make tea for the family.

I have no memory of the twins in my early years. In fact, I don't remember them at all until I was about six or seven years old. Our home consisted of a small two up and two down house in a small terraced street in the infamous Hanky Park area of Salford. It was very typical of many of the older properties in the city. There was no electricity in the house. We had a gas ring in the scullery for cooking, and gas lighting throughout the house. I remember thinking how clever Ann was in being able to light the gas mantles. These were extremely delicate objects and would disintegrate into dust at the slightest touch. Cold water was supplied via a tap that was situated on the wall above the slab stone sink in the scullery. I suppose we were luckier than some in that we had our own toilet in the back yard - many houses in neighbouring streets shared communal toilets. Like the rest of our neighbour's toilets, there was always a large crack down the front of the wooden seat and in common with many others, our toilet paper consisted of small torn up squares of the Manchester Evening News threaded onto a rusty six inch nail in the wall.

At both ends of our street, some of the houses had been destroyed by bombs during the blitz and all that remained was a croft – a flattened area where houses once stood. Ann and I used to play on the croft nearest to our house. We would play “house” by placing bricks in rows to mark out the outline of bedrooms, living rooms etc. We would even sweep the dirt up using a sweeping brush from home. We spent many hours cheerfully playing in the dirt on the croft.

As the crow flies, our house was less than half a mile away from the docks at the Manchester end of the Manchester Ship Canal. The canal was able to accommodate ocean-going sized ships and linked the city with the Port of Liverpool and the open seas beyond. At night while lying in bed, we could often hear the hooters being sounded on the ships funnels as they slipped their moorings and cast off for far away shores. My sister would tell me about the distant lands these ships were going to. My uncle Walter sailed on these ships as a merchant seaman. Ann would tell me about him sailing to places like India and beyond. Salford today bears no resemblance to those dark damp streets of the 1940’s. The area was cleared in the early 1960’s. All the terraced streets were demolished to make way for modern skyscraper blocks of flats.

The absence of a father never figured in my thoughts. Some of the memories I have of infancy and pre-school days are somewhat vague. Many different events run into each other and even timelines are difficult to gauge. Some memories however are clear and were going to have subsequent outcomes, which would become much more meaningful in later life. Only three people featured in my early memories of infancy. They were my mother, Ann and my Aunty Edna. Aunty Edna lived with us for some period of time before she got married to my uncle Walter. I was not short of relatives, my mother had five brothers and a sister who were all Salford born and bred. Most of them still lived in the town. I don’t ever recall any of them paying us a visit, although none of them lived more than a fifteen minute walk away.

My earliest memory of living in Heath Street was one of being abused by neighbours. At the time I didn't realize that I was being abused. It was not abuse in any cruel or physical sense. I am not sure that it was even sexual in nature. The couple who lived a few doors away would entice me into their house by offering sweets. They would each cuddle me on their lap like they were my parents. The woman would expose her breasts and encourage me to suckle them. They would then put me to bed in a child's cot and cover me with blankets for a little sleep. Even though I had long since outgrown the need for a baby's dummy, they used to encourage me to suck on one while I lay in the cot. I cannot remember how frequently this happened but it was several times. I learned in later life that I had told my Aunt Edna about it and she informed the police. The couple were prosecuted but I don't know on what charge. As far as I am concerned, no damage was done to me – on the contrary, they were very kind and gentle. Reflecting on things, I assume that I somehow represented a young child that they fantasised about as being their own. They could have recently lost a child. I never found out. In any event, it certainly made a nice change to be nurtured by this couple when many others treated me so badly. One unanswered question arising from the incident was this: How could such a young child go missing for so long and on so many occasions without anyone noticing? I cannot be sure of my age at the time, but I was certainly under school age - my sister thinks I was about three years old.

My first day at school was quite memorable although I would rather not remember it. I went to John Street School. This school had two playgrounds, one outside in the yard for the infants and the other on the roof for the older children. The building was two or three floors tall. It was a massive school. Ann was also a pupil there and she took me along on my first day because my mother had to go to work. I was extremely nervous and didn't want to go. During the morning I had an accident in my pants. I had no warning. I had diarrhoea. It was presumably the result of the nervousness of the day. Everyone made such a fuss. I was made to feel like some sort of pariah. The staff stood me in a sink and washed me down. I was then dressed in some sort of bib and brace overall - rather like a workman would wear. For the

rest of the day I was the subject of derision by staff and pupils alike because my clothing told them all what had happened.

Another of my early memories, and one of the most vivid, is that I had a pedal car. This magnificent toy arrived from America. It was no ordinary toy. I have never seen another one like it since. It seated four children, two in the front and two in the back. Each child had its own set of pedals. It was an exact replica of the jeep used by American military personnel. When I think about the size of it now, I don't know how it was possible to take it into and out of the house.

My jeep was the envy of all the children in the neighbourhood. It was also the subject of scorn and derision by the adult neighbours. They looked down their noses at me most of the time. For some reason, I was held to blame for being there. Whatever their reasons for disliking me, they always made it perfectly clear that they disapproved of me. People reading my story might find it hard to imagine that such a young child can be aware of such obvious hostility towards an innocent child, but I can assure you that I actually experienced it. In the case of Grannie Machell she was even prepared to be violent towards me. I was definitely stigmatised.

My mother was ostracised by many of those people who had branded her a loose woman who had betrayed her husband while he was in some foreign land fighting for his country. Since I was a part - albeit unwittingly, of what my mother represented to these people, they somehow managed to convince themselves that I was worthy of any scorn and ill-will that they choose to cast in my direction. This was sometimes also apparent in some of the things that neighbourhood children said to me. I knew that the things being said was not children's talk. It was coming out of the mouths of babes, but it was adult speak. My earlier reference to being called a Yankee bastard by the boy who lived a few doors away is a good example of what I mean. When I asked him what was one of them, he said, 'I don't know but me mam said that you was one.'

I was never short of willing co-drivers for my jeep and many childish squabbles took place over whose turn it was to have a ride. It was as a result

of one such squabble that I heard the very first reference to my father. I was about three years old at the time. A much older and spiteful boy taunted me by stating that my father was a Yank. His actual comment didn't mean anything to me at the time, but the tone in which he spoke did. I knew that he had said something hurtful. Even a small child knows when something nasty and malicious is being said, although they may not understand the meaning. I told my mother what he had said. She of course, told me to take no notice. She then took the matter up with the mother of the boy in question. I distinctly remember them having an argument in the street. I don't remember what was said by whom and to whom, but I was not allowed to play with that particular boy ever again. Street arguments were commonplace in those days. Almost everyone at some time would argue with their neighbours. Mostly the arguing was about gossip or tittle-tattle of some kind, but sometimes actual pavement fights would take place. I was, and I still am, very fearful when witnessing such scenes.

In years to come I would realize that my mother was one of many thousands of women who succumbed to the charms of the American GIs. She was also one of the unfortunate ones who became pregnant. The vast majority of the women who had illicit wartime relationships didn't get pregnant and I would be willing to bet that some who did were able to pass the child off as their husband's. The old Proverb, 'People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones,' would certainly apply here. It's also worth bearing in mind that because the Americans could literally have their pick of women, arguably, only the good looking ones were sought out. This in turn could and probably did lead to lots of jealousy.

Across the street from our house, there was a house that always intrigued me. Regularly, the occupants would leave the front door wide open thus allowing anyone passing by on the pavement to see right inside. I was always amazed at the frequency of birthdays in this house. At least I thought they were birthdays. On view through the front door was a table with a clean white tablecloth. In the middle of the table was a three tiered cake-stand full of fancy cakes. When I told my mother about it, she laughed and informed me that it was not anyone's birthday. She explained that the occupants of

the house were just showing off because it was Sunday. Apparently, for some families, Sundays meant cakes! As far as I was concerned, the only time I had ever seen cakes before was when I was invited to a birthday party for a neighbour's child. The birthday boy in question had received an electric train set as a present from his parents. I don't know why I was even invited to the party. The boy was not a particular friend of mine. Once again, my mother explained that in inviting me, they were only showing off and that I was to take no notice. I didn't know what showing off meant but it was a fantastic train set – even better than my jeep!

I have happy memories of Ann taking me the short walk through the narrow streets to the Hippodrome Theatre. We would sit in the cheap seats high up in the gallery. This seating area was nicknamed "The Gods." I can never remember what we actually saw, but I enjoyed the occasions immensely.

The orchestra sitting in the pit and playing real instruments was so enjoyable to me. The music created by these musicians was so beautiful that I would learn to love the musical theatre for the rest of my life. After watching a show, Ann and I would enjoy a wrapping of chips from Parkers fish and chip shop that was next door to the theatre on Cross Lane.

I don't recall any particular lasting happy periods apart from the time I got the jeep. It was not a happy loving childhood for me. We must have been poor but it is all so relative. As a small child, I was incapable of questioning my circumstances, and therefore I just accepted that this was normal. I must have also accepted the lack of physical contact. Although I wasn't particularly aware that other kid's parents hugged and kissed their children, I don't ever recall my mother hugging or kissing me as a child. Even when something made me cry, I was never really comforted or made to feel better. Most cuts and bruises and lumps on the forehead were treated with the application of butter - or what was referred to as "butter." General aches and pains were always dismissed as 'growing pains.' Even today, my own children say that I am a poor hugger. They tell me that I am stand-offish when hugging them. This is clearly a legacy from my lack of physical contact as a child.

I lived with my mother and sister and sometimes Aunty Edna lived either with us or was a frequent visitor. My Aunty Edna was my favourite aunt, in fact for many years she was the only aunt that I was aware of. She always kissed me and gave me some pennies when saying goodbye. Some of the women neighbours popped in from time to time, but I cannot recall ever seeing any men present in our house. This was a little surprising because when I was five years old, my mother sat me down and told me that I was going to have a new dad! I remember asking her why. And who it was going to be. She said my Uncle Bill was going to be my dad. I didn't know any Uncle Bill so what she said made no difference to me. She told me that she was getting married again and that her new husband would be my new dad. I never thought in terms of her not being married. What did she mean when she said that she was getting married again? What was a new dad like? Is it better than having an old dad? Are new dads better than old dads?

What did it all mean?

Chapter 6 – Thompson Street and a New Dad

By this time Laura had begun working at the local gas works as a cook. Among the employees was a nice man by the name of William Burns - although everyone called him Bill. He and Laura struck up a friendship and were soon going out together. Bill was going to be my new dad. Despite the fact that Laura already had four young children by three different men, Bill had decided that he wanted to be married to Laura. There was no pre-marital pregnancy this time. The reason for their getting married was simply that they were in love – or at least they thought they were.

My Mother seemed to be happy with the idea of getting married again. I had no idea what it all meant, I didn't understand. She was obviously pleased with the prospect of having a new husband. Lots of people were married. In fact, to me, all grown-up were married. All of the children who I knew had dads. What did I have to worry about? My mother got married to William Burns in 1949 and following the marriage, we all moved into Uncle Bill's home. We had moved from the slums of one area of the city to the slums of another area. Both properties were similar in design but Thompson Street was bigger and had electricity. It also had a front parlour. The house was about fifty years younger than our previous house, but was still in a designated slum clearance area.

On the day of my mother's wedding, I spent the time at my Aunty Molly's house. She was not a real aunt. She was the sister of Aunty Edna's husband, Walter. Her children were also present and we played together on the rug in front of the fire. The burning coals often fell out of the fire grate and set fire to the hearth rug. The man who was present used to wet his finger and thumb by licking them then pick up the burning coal and very quickly throw it back into the fire. How well I remember spending the day there. I remember it for a particular reason. During the early evening, Molly returned home from the wedding with a box of fancy cakes for everyone, - everyone except me! Molly told me that my cake was at home waiting for

me. She handed a cake to everyone else and I sat and watched while the cakes were eaten.

Shortly after that, my sister Ann took me to our new home. She explained that we were going on a bus. I had never been on a bus before. It was a long ride. She took me upstairs on the bus. I remember that we drove across a bridge with a wide river running beneath it. I was so excited, I had been on my first bus, seen my first bridge and my first river. Now Ann explained that I was going to meet my new dad – who was also my Uncle Bill. I was neither interested nor nervous. I was only thinking about having that fancy cake. Unfortunately, there were no cakes left when we got there!

William Burns was an only child. At the outbreak of World War Two he was already a member of the Territorial Army. His barracks were situated just a few streets away. His regiment, The Lancashire Fusiliers, was among the very earliest to be sent to France and Belgium at the outbreak of the war. They fought unsuccessfully against the German army and were driven back. He and his colleagues fought a rear-guard action at Dunkirk but were captured by the enemy. He spent the rest of the war in prisoner of war camps in Germany and Poland. Upon returning home after the war, he discovered that his mother had died and his father had remarried.

My Uncle Bill became my stepfather. The term dad was never used. My sister Ann called him Bill. She had her own father whom she visited often. There was never any question of her calling anyone else dad. I called him Uncle Bill. Strange as it may seem, this was perfectly accepted by everyone. To the best of my knowledge, it was acceptable to him. I don't ever recall him objecting to it. I suppose that having introduced him to me as my Uncle Bill, it was easier for my mother to refer to him as that. It was probably her intention to introduce the term 'dad' at a later date. For whatever reason, and I suspect there were many, this just never happened.

We arrived at our new home. Number 16 was situated in the middle of Thompson Street in the Lower Broughton area of Salford. A gas lamp stood on the pavement outside our front door. It illuminated the front of our house and gave off sufficient light to enable one to see the pavement while

walking down the rest of the street. Upon entering the house I saw that there were several adults enjoying a celebratory drink and laughing and talking between themselves. Nobody took much notice of me. In fact, I was told by my mother to sit and play in the corner and be quite. I remember David and Carol also being present and Carol crying constantly but nobody taking much notice. The house had a front parlour and a narrow lobby which led into the living room. Leading off from this room was the kitchen and then the back door that led into the yard. In the yard was an outside toilet (with a cracked wooden seat) and an air raid shelter which was being used to store coal. There was an overwhelming smell of cat excrement in the coal store. This smell was often transferred to the living room as coal was put on the fire. A galvanised steel bathtub hung on a six inch nail from the wall in the yard. Overall, the rooms and back yard were much bigger than those in Heath Street. The house was very brightly lit from electric lights in every room. I felt that we had moved somewhere which was very posh.

The living room was furnished with a very old ornately carved and highly polished sideboard and a three piece suit that had seen better days. The fireplace was the large black grate type that contained an oven adjacent to the actual fire. A large mantelpiece sat above the fireplace. The fire was burning well and there was sufficient heat being given off to adequately warm the room. In the kitchen there was a slab sink sitting on two brick walls. There was only a cold water tap. Opposite the sink was an old set of drawers which also substituted as a worktop for the preparation of food. In the corner was a new gas stove with four gas rings plus a grill and an oven. Built into another corner was an old boiling vessel with a gas ring situated beneath it. This was designed for boiling/washing clothes in. Next to the boiler was a hand operated mangle with rubber rollers. I didn't know what this machine was until I saw my mother using it a few days later. The kitchen floor consisted of large bare stone paving slabs - earthworms sometimes crawled out of the gaps between them. Occasionally, the slabs were treated with a "donkey" stone to make them look clean and bright. There was always an all-pervading smell of decaying brickwork and dampness throughout the house.

The front parlour was empty except for a set of drawers and a Singer sewing machine. These drawers matched the sideboard in the living room and would have been part of a dining suite at some time. There was a small fireplace that could be used to keep the room warm on winter days if desired. The best thing about this front parlour was the full length bay window overlooking the length of the street. Through the side windows it was possible to see almost every house on the opposite pavement. Upstairs there were two reasonably sized bedrooms. The front – master bedroom, contained a double bed, a double wardrobe and a matching chest of drawers. A large khaki army overcoat lay on the bed as an additional blanket. A Victorian ceramic chamber pot sat under the bed. This was to be my mother's bedroom – where she and Uncle Bill would sleep. The back bedroom overlooked the back yard and back entry. It contained two double beds with about a foot and half gap between them, a small chest of drawers, a bedding box and a galvanised bucket that we used as a toilet during the night. Things were a little squashed in here, but we managed.

Living next door but one was Bill's aunty and uncle. I don't know if they were related to his father or his late mother. They were very nice people, but a little aloof. They were kind enough but kept their distance. I imagine that they wondered what the hell was going on with this mish- mash of a family that their nephew had suddenly sprung on them.

I would spend the next ten years living here with my brothers and sisters, my mother and my Uncle Bill. Initially, Ann and I still went to John Street School. She was in her last year and would soon be going to a new secondary school. Until then it was decided that we would both continue going to John Street School. Now that we lived further away, we would have to catch a bus to school every morning. I remember after getting off the bus we would have toast in a nearby cafe before going into school. After school, Ann would collect me from the infants department and bring me home again on another bus. Whenever possible we would sit upstairs on the front seat in order to get a better view of the journey. I particularly liked it when we went over the bridges above the river and the canal. The river Irwell always seemed to be very full and flowing fast, whereas the canal

was very still with lots of men fishing from the towpaths. Some of the fishermen had young boys with them. I remember thinking that I wish I had a dad who would take me fishing.

Eventually, Ann left John Street School and it was arranged for me to become a pupil at a more local primary school. I started St Clements school in the top infants section, so I must have been about six or seven years old. My mother was amazed to see that my new class teacher was one of her own teachers from her school days. Even more remarkably, the teacher remembered my mother.

I was made to drink school milk each day and immediately afterwards I always vomited it back. I had an allergy to pasteurised milk. It had never been discovered before because we never had milk in the house to drink that wasn't of the sterilised variety. We only used sterilised milk; it was better value because it would last for days before going sour. Another daily ritual at school was lining up to receive dietary additions of cod liver oil and malt. These were both horrible and were given to selected pupils from a communal spoon. I never figured out why only some of us children received it.

The following year, we had a new addition to the family. My youngest brother Graham was born in the front parlour. I recall a lot of comings and goings that day. The midwife riding her bicycle called at the house several times to examine my mother. Neighbours were coming and going constantly. I and the other children were ordered to play out in the street and keep out of the way. Uncle Bill remained in the living room reading his newspapers. I remember he had an insatiable appetite for reading matter of any kind. He never once threw a newspaper away. He also read lots of books. He particularly enjoyed reading westerns. Sometimes he would take us to see a film. The film was often a western but sometimes a war film.

Uncle Bill was a hoarder. Just like a squirrel, he would save things for when they might be needed. In his bedroom there were piles of old newspapers from years back. The front bedroom smelled exactly like a newsagents shop.

Even today, I am constantly reminded of the smell of that bedroom every time I enter a newsagent. In the air raid shelter there were a couple of gas masks, a stirrup pump, an old bike, two paraffin lamps, tins of screws, nuts and bolts and rusty old razor blades.

Uncle Bill was in regular work. Throughout my childhood he worked mostly on the night shift. During the day he would sleep. We learned to tip-toe around the house in case we woke him and incurred his wrath. He could be very violent when angry.

From the beginning I shared one of the double beds in the back bedroom with my younger brother David and later, after he came along, Graham also slept with us. Ann and Carol slept in the other bed. David was a persistent bed wetter. Graham also would wet the bed occasionally. This problem seemed to go on for years. I can hardly ever remember getting into a lovely warm dry bed. Following these nocturnal accidents, mother would leave the bed open in order to dry the sheets and mattress. They never dried. In the summer months, the best we could hope for would be dampness when we got into bed. During the winter, the mattress was always wet. The smell of stale urine permanently pervaded the bedroom.

It was as a result of getting into a wet bed one night that I received my first smacking from Uncle Bill. There was a definite very wet area in the middle of the bed. It was also very cold. I, being the biggest and eldest, insisted that either David or Graham should lie in the wet patch. Of course they complained that I was being unfair to them. This squabbling must have gone on for some time despite shouts from Uncle Bill to be quiet. All of a sudden, the bedroom door opened and in came Uncle Bill in his vest and underpants. He dragged me out of bed and holding me under his arm, he smacked me very hard many times on my bottom. I thought he would never stop. He hurt me terribly. I screamed in pain. Afterwards my mother came in and told me to get to sleep and to behave myself. She never once asked if I was alright. As I lay there sobbing, I realized that all the others were also sobbing too. I daren't have asked them why they were crying in case I got smacked again.

My mother stopped sleeping with Uncle Bill a relatively short time after their marriage. She moved into the back bedroom and shared the girl's bed. There were now six of us sharing this bedroom. As Ann got older and needed some privacy, the downstairs parlour was made into a bedroom for her. Over the years, very occasionally, mother would sleep with Bill for a short while - but never for more than a week or so. She would always return our bedroom for another year or two!

We never had breakfast before going to school but my mother made sure this wasn't a problem. As was the practice with several other parents, she would come to the school gates at morning playtime with warm toast and a flask of hot beef tea made from Oxo stock cubes. This was particularly welcomed on cold and frosty mornings. Quite often I would have a friend with me when I met her at the gate and she always had extra toast to give them. It was amazing how many friends I suddenly used to have at morning playtimes! There was one friend called Andy Wilson. His mother had died during his birth. He lived around the corner from me with his father, older brother and great aunt. Because his father was at work and the aunt was fairly housebound, my mother invariably made sure she had toast and a hot drink for him. This was one of my mother's characteristics - she was always looking to help those less fortunate than herself. Thinking about it now, this was pretty amazing since there could not have been many that were worse off than her.

Chapter 7 – My Dad’s in America

The transition from infancy to becoming a young schoolboy did not stop me from still being able to associate with many of the sights and sounds from my early days. Although some of these sounds and images were beginning to fade and some were hidden deep in my subconscious, they would suddenly spring to mind at unpredictable moments. Whenever this happened, it always came as something of a surprise because I was never sure just what it was that I was remembering. I knew that I wasn’t imagining it or making it up. I knew instinctively that what I had suddenly remembered was true. The problem was, often the memory got mixed up with something else and it lost some of its clarity. On occasions I would say something that would cause others to question me and it resulted in me sometimes losing my confidence.

To illustrate this, I recall an incident at primary school when I was about eight years old. My class teacher was going round the classroom asking each child what their father did for a living. She went from child to child asking the same question. As each child answered she smiled and said complimentary things about their father’s jobs or sympathetic things according to each child’s particular circumstance. I was dreading my turn coming. I knew that I would become a laughing stock. How could I tell them that I didn’t know what my father did? How could I tell them that I didn’t even have a father? It wasn’t that he had been killed in combat during the war. That of course would have been perfectly acceptable, and was already the case with one child. Why was she asking these questions anyway? She was making me feel very uncomfortable. Eventually it was my turn to be asked what my father did. ‘My father is an American soldier Miss.’ I answered. Every child in the class looked at me. The Teacher opened her mouth in astonishment. I could tell that nobody believed me. I wasn’t telling lies because I most definitely knew what it was like to tell

lies, but neither did I know why I said it. I just knew that it was not a lie although it didn't make any sense either.

These were early post-war years. Toy soldiers, guns aeroplanes and military replicas were prized possessions of all schoolboys in those days. Weekly comics featured war stories and heroic exploits. Playing soldiers was more popular than playing Cowboys and Indians. By making my statement, I had just stolen all my classmates' thunder and scored an epic victory that I would always cherish. I instantly became the boy to befriend. It was like being a celebrity. 'Is your dad really an American soldier?' I was constantly being asked. The boys were in absolute awe when I confirmed it to them. To this day, I honestly don't know where that information came from, because I hadn't invented it; it was just stuck in my head. I don't even know how long it had been there. It can only have been the result of something I had either heard in the street or at home during my younger years.

The following day I was taken by my teacher to the Headmaster's Office. Mr. Carlisle was the Headmaster. He was a nice man - although a little strict. When we got to his office, there were two other women teachers there. My class teacher asked me to tell everyone about my father. I felt intimidated and afraid. I didn't speak. My teacher began asking questions of me that only needed a single yes or no answer. Questions like, 'Is your father an American soldier? Does your father live in America?' I was being intimidated by her. It would have been easier for me to deny it and just get a telling off for lying. But I was not lying. I don't know where it came from or why I said it but I firmly believed it to be true. I summoned up all of my courage and answered yes or no as appropriate, to each of the questions. During the questioning session, I definitely sensed a change in attitude towards me. At first, in order to extract the information that they sought, the teachers were smiling and friendly. As the questions were answered, their tone and demeanour changed to what I now know to be contempt of me. Either they didn't believe me and thought I was a liar, or they did believe me and thought I was an undesirable child.

These were valuable lessons to me. I learned to always be certain of my facts and to not say things I didn't mean. And perhaps most importantly, I

learned to never stand my ground if I was not absolutely certain in my argument. Here I was either being branded a liar or being considered to be someone who was undesirable. I also learned that even though you may be innocent, society may brand you as a culprit simply because of family connections. This was one of those occasions that caused me to be careful of what I said in the future. I now became quite secretive about anything to do with my father's possible origins.

However, not long after this incident and forgetting what I had learned, another situation arose that was to have a most debilitating effect on me for very many years to come. I don't ever recall being deliberately naughty as a child. I was frequently in trouble for things I hadn't done, but I was never deliberately naughty. I was always too afraid of being shouted at. But on this occasion, Uncle Bill had told my mother that I had been cheeky to him. He told her that I had been answering him back in an impudent manner. I do not remember the incident he referred to - only the aftermath. She took me to one side and told me that I must never be cheeky to my dad again. I replied, 'He's not my dad! My dad's in America!' My mother became very irate. I thought she was going to kill me on the spot. She went white with rage. She grabbed me and pulled me towards her. Her face was now within a couple of inches of mine. 'Don't ever say that again, it's not true.' she said. I could tell she really meant it. There was no actual threat of violence but it was very strongly implied. 'Your dad is not in America,' she said. 'Don't you ever say such a thing again. Do you hear me?' This severe reprimand left me feeling very frightened.

I was so traumatised that I didn't mention it to her again. Well, at least not for another 40 years. This was not only because I worried about getting hurt by any refusal by her to tell me the truth, but also, because I wanted to protect my mother from any embarrassment or pain I may cause her by bringing up the subject.

I had repeated my assertion that my father was American twice now in a very short space of time, yet I still had no idea where the notion had come from. It seemed to me that the reaction I provoked from saying these things was not consistent with them being untrue. If what I said was indeed untrue,

my mother could have sat down and discussed my comments with me and dismissed them in a kind and gentle way. She could have removed any such notions from my mind for ever. The very fact that my mother responded to my comments in the way that she did, in my mind, only gave them further credence. Of course, there is also the possibility that if my assertions were untrue, my mother would have been subject to questioning and criticism from other people. Whatever the scenario, I simply could not be allowed to go around saying such things.



END OF SAMPLE

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