

Chapter 6

This chapter should cover the period we were in Brighton in 1947; I think we returned to Mauritius in 1948. If we arrived in England on 8th May 1945 I can imagine a period of about a year in London and Buxted, but my mother would have needed a job. Surely we must have arrived in Brighton in May or June 1946. I don't know how these dates work out but it is not really important.

My mother got a job with Brighton Corporation and they provided a flat for us to rent. What a flat!

Number 115 Marine Parade was on the front, and from the drawing room we had a view of Palace Pier and West Pier in the background. The Victorian lift which took one from the top of the cliff to the beach was almost opposite. There were air raid shelters on the small crescent below our balcony. We were technically in Kemp Town.

During the war the front was kept clear for fear of an invasion or anyone inadvertently showing a light or even sending a morse-code message to The Enemy who may be just off the coast. The threats were real, the under-cliff was full of barbed wire and junk, it took a long time for it to be cleaned up. Wood was scarce but I remember the day Palace Pier was re-opened for the public. I had a pair of clip on wheels but never learnt to roller-skate properly, the skates were primitive.

The living room at the front was very large; we had a pair of Japanese battledores over the mantelpiece. The curtains were very long and were mainly to keep the sun out. One Christmas they caught fire from the candles on the tree, my mother panicked but there was not too much damage. She was very careful ever after.

Our living quarters were across the landing. My bedroom had very flimsy walls and was quite small, it was really just partitioned from my mother room, the kitchen was just an add-on.. Rationing was a big thing. Sweets I kept in a jar and had my allotted amount every week. I liked brussel-sprouts and beetroot, as a special treat I sometimes had cocoa made into a paste and put on a biscuit.

I can't remember anyone on the ground floor. Above us were a couple who lost a baby while we were there and at the top was the Maxwell family who had a boy a little older than I.

I went to school, a convent within walking distance. My mother would take me there in the morning and collect me in the evening. It was basically a girls school and Roman Catholic run by nuns. I hated it and don't think I learnt a thing. I do remember that the girls were not allowed to whistle or run anywhere. The food was terrible; I hated potatoes. The Nuns were not sympathetic and seemed to think that running and whistling were the worst sins ever.

I went to the hospital and think I was given eye exercises to do. They must have been successful because I did not need any glasses until I was in the late forties.

I remember a barrel organ coming down our street, the music reverberating against the tall buildings. Ex-army soldiers had to make a living somehow and it was difficult. My mother knew the curator of the Brighton Pavillion, they had a son whom we would visit, I don't think we were firm friends. The family name was "Musgrave" and I used that name frequently when mine was too difficult. Specially in shops when having films developed.

There are a couple of holidays or other times I spent away and I am not sure where these fit in so will mention them here.

George Little, of whom more later, contracted TB and needed recuperation. The family went to Norfolk, to Beeston where the North Sea Gas pipe line now reaches

the coast. I spent a summer there with them, it was great. The sea was just down the road. We would let ourselves down a short cliff on a rope. There we could search for cornelians and once a cargo of oranges came loose and floated ashore. There was a tennis court and a well and walls we could climb. Thelma and I went there in 1997 but did not find the house although I think we were in the right place.

Another time was spent with a family who had a pony and trap, they lived in an unmade-up road with woods at the back. The railway went by not too far away and the steam trains were noisy. The surrounding fields were unkempt and the town dirty. I remember nothing of why I was there or of the family perhaps I was a “paying guest” being looked after during the holidays.

Eventually I went to a boarding school: Normansal in Seaford. To be at boarding school was a bit of a shock, I think it was here that I really realised that I was different. I had an accent, I cannot have been the only foreigner there but I cannot remember any others. I did not feel part of the class, system or what-have-you. Manifestations of this were always cropping up, not the fault of anyone, just that my culture or upbringing had not prepared me for this. I remember a “quiz night”; we had to pair up words—bucket and what? sand? water? No, spade is the answer: why? I never did find out. We had to swim in the indoor pool, it was cold. More potatoes. In the nativity play I had to say “myrrh I bring”, inevitably I forgot my lines.

I did not join any group or “gang”, I don’t think I fitted in, I believe I wanted to, but was possibly excluded or had nothing to add to the group. I remember once being invited to a “gang social” which was held in the headmaster’s wood-shed which had been excavated to make a den. Why we thought the headmaster or his wife knew nothing about this I now find extraordinary. I had no interest in field games, music or art. I hated the games master.

One or two things I remember: Sunday we would be invited to the headmaster’s wife who read to us and we may have been given a sweet. Mrs Bolton who was really ancient—she must have been over 40 years old. Lining up for meals and having to show our clean hands. The pond which had an island in the centre, at one spot we could jump across. Water-boatmen and dragonfly larvae were abundant. One day it snowed and several groups were given the task of building an igloo, there were all shapes and sizes reinforced with whatever we could find. The model railway track which anyone could use; some had interesting locos. My tuck-box, I think there was a room dedicated to these boxes, mine is still in the loft. Pet’s corner, I suppose there were guinea-pigs there. The swimming pool was covered over in winter and used as a hall. We saw films there and I remember seeing dinosaurs fighting, I was impressed, or maybe frightened. The windowsill in my classroom was wide and we would try to get our dinky toys to go from one end to the other, very difficult as they never went straight. I think I owned a “Packard”. Silver paper was a novelty and we would collect different coloured bits.

Thelma, the boys and I went to Normansal once, it must have been in the late 1970’s, Mr Seagrave had died and there was a proposal that it should be sold for building land to pay Death Duty. I believe it is now a housing estate. The place had not changed much.

Was I happy there? I was not at home, my father was overseas, I was home-sick and did not “fit”. It was a comfortable, predictable existence and probably good for me at the time. I am sure the staff did their best.

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Holiday time was short and term time long.

We lived in a super place for a child of eight or nine.

1947 was an extraordinary year for weather, in the winter 47/48 the sea froze. It was not a lot but it was very cold for about a month, fairly dry but cold. There was ice in the sea for about three feet into the water. I remember going for a walk along the beach.

In the summer of the same year we had a really hot summer with no rain for ages. I could go on the pebbly beach every day.

At some stage we had a van which we used. I think that a man called Martin had something to do with this. He was a ships doctor and he may have been on one of the ships we were on when we came from Mauritius. I have a child's spoon and fork with a bear on the handle; these were given to me by him. I think he was from Yugoslavia or somewhere near there.

My mother had to work of course and that is why we had someone to look after me. I think we started with a young English girl, she did not last long. I was quite difficult to control. We then had Suzanne, a Belgian from Liege, she was more mature. Not good looking but a pleasant disposition, a Roman Catholic smoker. It was she who got my mother smoking, she continued for another forty years or more, it did not do her health any good.

Suzanne remained a friend for the rest of her days. In the 1950's we spent a holiday with her family in Liege. Although close to the centre they had much land at the back. There was a pigeon loft which was well used to provide food, an orchard, and much else besides. Her father owned a factory in Brussels producing charcuterie. It was said that she had won the Luxembourg lottery and was well off.

I remember particularly going to some religious ceremony at a pilgrim site, I was not going to have anything to do with it and felt out of place. I had no reverence for Saints and felt that they should not be prayed to. I still feel that this is in some way wrong and that we should pray to the Lord alone.

A great experience was going to a harvest festival at a farm in the country where all the farm workers celebrated the harvest in the traditional manner. This was held in the barn. The harvest was so important in those days, horse power was used and much labour. The atmosphere and circumstances of this will not be experienced in the same way again in the western world.

The milk was delivered daily by dog-cart

I think I had helium filled balloon which I played with; they may not have been around before the 1950's.

I travelled with Suzanne and was met in Ostend by her father, but remember that my mother was there. Did I go twice?

Suzanne (Suzanne Vignette, Place St Paul 51063, 4000 Liege) acted as companion to a "Curé" for many years and about six years ago my Christmas card was returned "deceased". I was rather shocked at that.

One day my father turned up in Brighton, I cannot remember anticipating his return; one day he was not there, the next he was. I went to the cinema with him and near the clock tower we saw an exhibition of cars including Campbel's "Blue Bird" which had broken the world speed record for a car (Google says the record attempt was in 1931). Walking along the front one day I mentioned Martin and remember being questioned about him.

At some stage we went back to Mauritius, I think I was about nine, which would make it 1948. As far as I remember we embarked in London Docks. The ship was a

cargo vessel called the “Umtata” bound for Durban. She was the fourth ship so named; built as an oil burner in 1944 with accommodation for only 12 passengers. I really enjoyed this journey which must have taken several weeks. There were two race horses on the front deck. When approaching The Cape in fine weather I was sick due to the Cape Rollers. I cannot remember Maxine Raffray (well known Mauritian family) being on the trip with us, but when in Mozambique she certainly was, and we went on to Mauritius together. We stopped off in Cape Town and went up Table-Top Mountain. We used the colourful rickshaws, I had a Knickerbocker-Glory in The Waldorf where the live band played “Buttons and Bows”, a tune we had on gramophone in Brighton: discs were Bakelite 78’s in those days. In Lorenzo Marks (now Maputo) the Raffrays bought a ‘fridge. My father did the bargaining: it was a scream—we did not speak Portuguese. The main-line station is a wonderful building and the museum showed many animals. I remember the foetus of elephant showing each of the twenty four months gestation period and a two headed chicken: fascinating things.

1947/48 must have been formative for me but in what way? It is for others to decide.