

Chapter 4

Juniper: 1934

Juniper stared glumly at the pound note, a half-crown, three florins, two threepenny bits, four pennies, one halfpenny and four farthings on the table before her. Maureen's new shoes had set her back a pretty penny; more than she could really afford. But the poor girl could not keep wearing shoes that were falling apart and much too small for her anyway. What was left after the visit to the shoe shop would just have to last the week; no two ways about it. If only Bill were a year older; then he could be working and earning a little and at least paying for his keep. Well, not necessarily. Jobs were still very hard to come by. His father could count himself lucky that he'd still got his, really. With the lack of demand, his firm had just about managed to stay afloat, but only by putting the workforce on short time. Which of course meant short wages too. And if you had any income at all, no matter how paltry, there was no dole of course; although even it had been cut anyway, even if you *could* get it. And there was his disability; even if there were plenty of employment to be had, he would find it difficult to do a full day's work.

But things were gradually starting to get better, so the Chancellor of the Exchequer was telling the nation, now that we had left the gold standard. Whatever that was; she did not begin to understand the workings of high finance, although Father, still mentally sharp in his sixty-ninth year and knowledgeable about such things, had opined that they should have left it years ago. Well, be that as it may, it didn't feel as though things were getting very much better to her. It was still a struggle from one pay day to the next. Many had been the time she had pretended she just wasn't very hungry, secretly slicing a doorstep off the loaf during the day and adding a smear of

dripping so that the breadwinner and her growing children could at least have something moderately substantial in their bellies, and had gone to bed with her belly aching with pangs of emptiness.

At least Lisbeth was off their hands now though, so that was one less mouth to think about. Indeed, she had fallen comparatively lucky, marrying a builder. There was plenty of that going on, anyway. Semi-detached houses were springing up on the outskirts of town, good solid basic houses that working folk – those fortunate enough to be in work at least – could afford. She would quite like one of those herself (apparently, so Lisbeth's husband said, even the cheapest ones had full indoor bathrooms). No, not 'quite like'. She'd *very* much like one, although it seemed an impossible dream. And for the middle classes there were more luxuriantly appointed ones, usually detached. But was not that always the case? The better-off always survived hard economic times more easily than the poor. It had not been entirely easy for her parents though; Mother had lost her job and Father had his had his salary reduced because of the public spending cuts. But it was the people in the North, in the mines and shipyards, places like Jarrow that she really felt sorry for. They must have no hope left at all.

She raised her gaze and glanced disconsolately around the dingy room with its tired furniture, walls in need of re-papering and worn carpet square. This was her reality: a three-bedroomed terraced house in a back-street, into which until recently the six of them; the two boys in one bedroom and the two girls in another, had squeezed. It was certainly a come-down from her parent's comfortable detached villa and a complete world away from the one she had once, briefly, known all those years ago. Twenty-eight years it was now; a gulf of time and a void of unachieved aspiration, like a false bad memory, except that Lisbeth was the living embodiment that it was real enough.

Things were not entirely gloomy though. Lisbeth had produced a beautiful baby girl last year. Now, already, little June was eleven months old: a sweet child with a mop of almost black hair, apple cheeks and solemn hazel eyes. She was a little treasure. Juniper really hoped that there would be more to follow.

Juniper was awoken from her reverie by the front door being rapped and then opened. She heaved herself up and went out into the hall, knowing who it would be, as Lisbeth manoeuvred the baby's push chair through the door. This would cheer her up. She bent to pick June up. 'Hello my little love! Come to Grandma. How are you this fine day?'

The baby chortled and squirmed, undecided as to whether she preferred Gran or the interesting floor. Gran won the contest. Juniper carried her through into the kitchen, savouring the rediscovered pleasure of cuddling a small person, and one-handedly set the already-filled kettle on the gas cooker. Lisbeth followed her in, turning on the gas and applying a match. As usual, Juniper felt a little mortified that she could not offer biscuits, never mind cake, but her daughter well understood. After the tea had mashed in the pot and Lisbeth had poured it, and a little milk had been spared for the baby, they made their way into the living room. Never one to miss anything, Lisbeth spotted the pile of money on the table. 'Oh, have you won the bingo?' she joked.

Juniper sank into an armchair, still holding June. 'That'll be the day, but in order to do so I'd first have to play it, and I can't afford the luxury. It would be a fool's game.'

Lisbeth chided herself for her insensitivity. *No, of course not*; she knew how difficult things were for her parents with her brothers and sister still at home. Juniper explained. 'It's all I have until next Friday. I'm a bit short this week because Maureen needed new shoes.'

Lisbeth went over to the table and counted the money, stacking the coins in descending order of value, silently mouthing the running total. She looked at her mother, aghast. 'One pound nine and five pence-ha'penny. Is that it? But you've done your food shopping, surely?'

Juniper had to confess that she had not. Today was Sunday, tomorrow wash-day and she could just about last until Tuesday; she'd go then. 'No, but I'll manage.'

Lisbeth was appalled. 'Well I don't know how you do. We have twice that money coming in a week and we only just make ends meet. I know we've got June now, but we haven't got three children to feed, especially two greedy great boys.'

Juniper laughed her daughter's concern away. 'Don't worry; things aren't so tight now that you've left. We used to really scrimp then, do you remember?'

Lisbeth remembered only too well.

'Anyway.' Juniper wanted to change the subject. 'What have you been doing with yourselves since I last saw you?'

Lisbeth hardly dared own up to it. 'Well, we went to the pictures last night, as a treat.'

'Oh, that's nice.' A thought struck Juniper. 'But what happened about June. You didn't take her with you, did you?'

Lisbeth laughed indulgently. 'No, of course not! Young Brenda from next door baby sat for us.'

"Baby sat?" What's that?'

'Oh Mum; you must know. Someone you can trust comes and spends the evening in your house so you can go out leaving your children in safe hands.'

Juniper sounded dubious. 'Well I've never heard of such a thing. It didn't happen in my day.'

Lisbeth put on a pretend-mocking tone. 'Well perhaps not, but this is the twentieth century now you know; things have moved on. Everybody does it. We gave Brenda sixpence for doing it and she was as pleased as Punch. And June does know her. It wasn't as if she was a stranger.'

Juniper seemed mollified. 'Well, I'm sure you know what you're doing.'

She returned to the subject. 'What did you see at the pictures?'

'The Gay Divorcee. With Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.'

'What was it about?'

'You know. Singing and dancing. It's a musical comedy.'

Juniper didn't really know. She had gone to the Music Hall a few times in her childhood, her parents strictly vetting the advertising posters for performers reputed to be risqué. Later, back in the twenties, and even less frequently, she had gone with Lisbeth to the Picturedrome to see flickering silent Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton films, when they had almost wetted themselves with laughter. And she had heard of Astaire and Rogers, of course, not that she had seen any of these new-fangled 'talkie' pictures. How on earth did they get *sound* onto the film too? She could just about grasp the theory of moving pictures (wasn't it something like a sophisticated magic lantern?) But sound too? It was a mystery. Fred and Ginger were all the rage with today's youth, apparently. But from what she'd heard, they seemed very trivial, peddling impossible dreams. Anyway, they were quite outside her experience and unlikely to loosen her purse-strings.

But she had to show polite interest. 'Yes, I know. I've heard of them, of course. Are they really as good as they're made out to be?'

'Mum, they're absolutely wonderful! Fred is so handsome and dashing, and Ginger wears simply gorgeous frocks. They really take you out of yourself. You ought to see them sometime.'

Juniper laughed, a laugh slightly tinged with bitterness. 'Well, one day maybe,' she said, 'when I win the bingo.'

In spite of her (she had to admit) twinge of envy the Sunday afternoon wore pleasantly on. At least little June took Juniper's mind off her worries, enlivened her dull grey life a little. The child was a joy. And at least, thought Juniper, her daughter's first child had been born the proper way, in wedlock, to a husband; a good man as far as she knew (he certainly seemed so anyway). She was very happy for her. She often wondered what her own mother had really thought of the dismal circumstances of Lisbeth's birth. Although her parents had never once, bless them, made her feel delinquent in the slightest. And they had always shown Lisbeth quite as much love as her later, legitimate children. But then they were very modern in their outlook. To some extent – perhaps a large extent – it was probably their religious faith, Juniper thought. Unlike some people she knew, theirs was more than skin deep, more than a veneer of respectability, more than simply being seen to attend church for the sake of appearances. Theirs was genuinely compassionate. She was glad that it had rubbed off on Lisbeth, who had been going to church with her grandparents – at least up until she began courting, when other attractions had come to the fore. Religion had passed her by though; she found it difficult to believe in a caring God who seemed to have been utterly indifferent when she had been so abused all those years ago. It had been her brave, normally so unassertive, flesh-and-blood father who had gallantly ridden to her rescue then, not some deity.

The front door opened again, admitting her husband and youngest children. Bill would be away somewhere with his friends Henry and Samuel, an immigrant from Germany; no doubt patrolling the town eyeing the young ladies, who would be engaged reciprocally in the same pursuit. Dickie and Maureen bounded into the living room first,

Juniper's second daughter making a beeline for little June who was still sitting on her grandmother's lap. Herbert stumped in after them, looking pained and irritable. Lisbeth hastily got out of his armchair and joined Juniper on the lumpy horsehair sofa. Herbert took off his jacket and slumped gratefully into the chair, his right leg held stiffly ahead.

Juniper relinquished charge of June to the willing Maureen and looked at him, concerned. 'It's hurting you again, isn't it?'

Herbert grimaced (at least the undamaged, unscarred left-hand side of his face did; the expression on the other was undecipherable) and confirmed the observation. 'Yes, a little.'

It was not only the pain in what was left of his right leg, with its damaged nerve endings, but phantom discomfort too, as if his shin and foot were still there, ruined beyond saving by that German machine gun. Without ceremony he began to undo his braces and drop his trousers. His children ignored the procedure; they were well used to seeing him in his underwear. He unfastened his artificial leg from its body harness and eased it away from his stump, dropping the cumbersome prosthetic on the floor beside him.

Then he removed the wadding from his half-length thigh. The stump was angrily red and sore-looking, and grotesque, the flesh crudely wrapped around the limb's premature end, the result of a hasty necessary amputation in a dressing station on the Western Front where finesse had been out of the question. There had been neither very much point in spending too much time on this soldier nor the resources available for greater attention; he had been only one of thousands. But at least he had got a Blighty, a permanent one, and his war was over. He was of no further use to the army.

Juniper fetched a bowl of cold water and a flannel from the kitchen and bathed it, as she had done so many times before. Gradually some of the pain left his face. 'Thank you dear; that's a bit better.'

As she had also done many times before, Juniper admonished him gently. 'I really don't know why you have to insist on going out Herbert. You know you'll only suffer for it. You could have one day of the week resting it at least.'

His reply was predictable in its ill-tempered familiarity too. 'Yes, yes, I know. But I spend all my time at work sitting down to set like an invalid, with others running around after me. There's nothing wrong with my lungs though; I'm not a complete cripple yet.'

Lisbeth watched her parents sadly. Things were hard enough for Mum without having to contend with her father, this broken bitter shell of a man who had once marched off so proud and excited and patriotic to war. They really needed something to cheer them up.

'Mum,' she said, 'I was just thinking. It's your birthday next week. What if we treat you both to the pictures? They're holding the Fred Astaire film over for another week due to popular demand. I'm sure you'd love it.'

Juniper looked up, taken aback, but Herbert seemed unconvinced. 'That's very kind of you Lisbeth, but I don't think I could sit comfortably in a cinema seat for a couple of hours or so,' he grumbled.

He turned to Juniper. 'But you go dear; I'm sure you'd enjoy it.'

Lisbeth would have none of it though. 'Now don't be difficult Dad! That's just an excuse. Mr Wallace at the Picturedrome: he was in the Lincolns with you, wasn't he?'

'Yes, that's right. He was my captain.'

'Right then; I'll have a word with him. I'm sure something could be arranged.'

Herbert looked dubious. 'But I don't want to be any trouble . . .'

'Nonsense! Do it, if only for Mum's sake. She wouldn't want to go by herself.'

And so Herbert, first grudgingly but then tempted by the proposal, let himself be persuaded.

The following Saturday evening found them ready and waiting for their conveyance. They were going to the pictures in style, in their daughter and son-in-law's motor car. Lisbeth had reasoned that if Herbert avoided any unnecessary walking he would be more comfortable in the cinema. Juniper had looked out Herbert's mothball-smelling one-and-only decent suit from the back of the wardrobe. He had only worn it seven times: three times for their wedding and two-day honeymoon fifteen years ago, then four more for the children's Christenings and Lisbeth's confirmation. So it was still pristine, if decidedly dated. Juniper's get-up was no more fashionable; it was her honeymoon going-away suit, also only worn seven times, for the same celebrations. But fashionability was hardly their prime concern this Saturday night; leave that to the youngsters. Although Maureen had had to stifle a giggle when she saw them both all togged up.

At seven-fifteen a *honk-honk* summoned them outside to their carriage. Juniper folded herself into the back of the little black Austin Seven, Herbert manoeuvred himself and his leg into the front passenger seat and off they set, in some style. At the elegantly stucco-facaded Picturedrome they thanked their chauffeur, who promised to be back at ten-fifteen. Lisbeth had bought tickets mid week and dropped them in, so thus pre-armed they made their way grandly, like Lord and Lady Muck, straight past the best-suited and best-frocked (although some of the clothes, like theirs, were far from new) Saturday-night queue that looked at them a bit askance, up the wide flight of steps and in through the elaborately glazed doors into the foyer. Although he hadn't seen him for nineteen years, and in spite of his Brylcremed hair and tuxedo, Herbert recognised the

figure waiting for them immediately. He did not expect to be recognised in return as they approached the man, who looked considerably more relaxed than when he had last known him. Then, this now prosperous well fed-looking individual was a young nervous officer with a pronounced facial tic, clearly not long out of Sandhurst and probably younger than himself.

‘Good evening; Captain Wallace, I believe?’

The cinema owner looked at Herbert and Juniper indulgently. ‘Well, yes and no. I finished my service with the rank of major, as a matter of fact. I take it you are Mr and Mrs Wilkins?’

Herbert felt himself automatically coming to attention. ‘Yes Sir, we are.’

The erstwhile Major Wallace snorted good-humouredly. ‘No, please, my good fellow, it’s just plain Mr Wallace now. That dreadful war is long in the past. I left, or rather I was invalided out, of the army in nineteen-eighteen.’

Herbert was suitably polite. ‘Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘Nothing to be sorry about. At least I managed to survive for the duration and ended up with nothing worse than a dickey left shoulder that unfortunately didn’t qualify as a full Blighty, so they kept me in until the Armistice. So many poor devils weren’t so lucky, or if they did make it home, did so with ghastly injuries or blindness.’

Wallace realised the significance of what he was saying and changed tack. ‘As you yourself were left mutilated. When did your injury happen?’

‘At Loos; September fifteen. I was in your company. I don’t suppose you remember me. So I didn’t see a great deal of action I’m afraid.’

‘Ah, yes, the first of the Big Pushes, which gained no territory at all and simply resulted in enormous waste of life. I’m sure you know; the Lincolns alone lost over four hundred and eighty men and the

Scots even more. And don't apologise for getting injured too soon. At least you got out of the ghastly mess.'

Herbert relaxed a little. This ex-officer seemed to have become as disillusioned as he. 'I must admit it turned out to be a much nastier affair than we were led to believe.'

Wallace agreed. 'Good God, indeed it did. It was all going to be so adventurous, so glorious, such a noble endeavour, or so we were promised at Sandhurst. What we actually got was a bloody nightmare. Please excuse my language Mrs Wilkins.'

Wallace had been ushering them towards the door to the stalls. 'But enough of all that; it's all over now, thank God. Anyway, now I do something much more pleasant: I purvey escape and dreams.'

He opened the door for them. Just inside, on the left, an armchair had been placed next to the rearmost aisle seat. He indicated it with a flourish, like a waiter showing diners to table. 'This is your seat Mr Wilkes. I trust you'll find it comfortable.'

Herbert felt suddenly weak with gratitude. 'But . . . this is so kind of you Sir— Mr Wallace!'

Wallace patted his arm. 'It's my pleasure Mr Wilkins. Do enjoy the performance.'

And with that he left them: Juniper to squeeze in and settle in the aisle seat and Herbert to sink gratefully into the armchair, his prosthetic extended stiffly ahead. Juniper looked anxiously at the other seats in the row. The armchair took up half of the aisle, although people could still get past, but it did rather obstruct the access to the seats. But then she realised; the bespoke seating had been carefully considered. It was the central seating block and people could easily get in from the other side. As they sat gazing around them, thrilled by the theatrical opulence not seen for many a year, the stalls gradually filled up, and as they did a buzz of excited anticipation hovered over the throng. Then it died as the house lights

went down and with a sudden flickering and strobing and, miraculously and slightly unnerving, music too, seeming to come from nowhere, the b-feature began. It was a typical offering: a low-budget western starring an up-and-coming young actor called John Wayne. It was corny and formulaic but they didn't mind that; any collection of moving pictures with sound attached would have been amazing.

Then there was another thrill: seeing recent world and home affairs reported not only in sound – they had had a wireless receiver since nineteen-twenty seven, saved up for and bought back in the days before Herbert had his hours and wages cut – but vision. The Pathe Gazette newsreel spellbound them. Look, there was Fred Perry beating Jack Crawford to win the Australian Championship! And there was Al Bowlley crooning *The Very Thought of You*. And, a little sinisterly, there was newsreel of massed German soldiers swearing allegiance and raising palms in salute to Adolph Hitler, the newly self-proclaimed Fuhrer, the leader, of the monoparty Nazi state.

But any worries about unfolding events in Germany evaporated after the interval when the main feature started. Soon they were transported (Juniper certainly was, at least) by the music, the dancing, the fast wise-cracking humour, the glitz and glamour of Mr Astaire and Miss Rogers. Juniper had never seen the like. How times had moved on since last she had enjoyed Chaplin's silent antics and thought then that his films were the latest, the technological apogee, apart perhaps from the absence of sound. She abandoned herself to the intoxication of the moment. She understood what Herbert's captain had meant about purveying dreams. Of course it did not alter anything about her insipid hand-to-mouth existence, or her suffering of her grumpy difficult-to-live with husband (not that it was his fault) but for a little while she could escape.

The film ended and the credits rolled, and they stood for the National Anthem, and she floated from the cinema in a daze. The Austin Seven was awaiting them. She was borne home, head full of *Dancing in the Dark*. What a gorgeously romantic number that was! And what a wonderful film. Later, in bed, for the first time in years, she asked Herbert for love (she was still only forty-four, after all) and, briefly happy too, he readily obliged.

13th February 1955

Mum is home after her hysterectomy. She looks fine. I'm not sure how I'd feel after such a radical thing being done; it sounds dreadful. But she seems to be taking it in her stride. Apparently she's to have some radiotherapy too, 'just to be on the safe side,' as they put it at the hospital. How wonderful it is that you can have all this amazing treatment now, on the National Health Service, and it doesn't cost you a penny – although you still pay for it in taxes, of course. But it's far better that we all pay a little whether we need treatment or not than people who are unlucky enough to fall ill have to pay a lot – or simply go without if they can't afford it or aren't in an insurance scheme.

I've noticed a change in Dad's attitude to Mum now. Before, I sometimes thought he didn't actually like her very much, but now he doesn't shout or get irritated with her; at least, not so often. I wish he'd always been like that. Granny Juniper seems to be being overly emotional though. When she visits I catch her looking at Mum tearfully. Why can't she just be pleased that Mum's a lot better now? And she's being a bit silly. She told me the other day when we were alone that with that particular part of her body going wrong, it's almost as if she's been cursed because of her birth circumstances. I asked her what she meant, and at first she wouldn't tell me; said

she'd already said too much. But I told her that having started, she'd now have to finish, so after a lot of prodding she did.

What a revelation! Poor Gran; I'd no idea, just assumed that Mum was her and Granddad's natural child. Just think: if it hadn't been for the terrible way that dreadful man treated Gran, I simply wouldn't be here either. What a good man Granddad was though, to marry Gran in spite of her past and accept her illegitimate child. It makes his getting wounded and all his years of pain afterwards all the more unfair.

As for my dear father, he seems to have been less understanding, until recently anyway. For goodness sake; so he found out that he'd married a person who shouldn't really have existed, was created in the most brutal of circumstances, but that was hardly Mum's fault! She didn't ask to be born! But then Dad was always a rather moral, disapproving sort of man, in some ways older in his ways than Granddad Herbert. But this is the middle of the twentieth century; attitudes are more liberal now!

Anyway, all that matters is that Mum gets well again. I certainly don't hold her unfortunate (to put it mildly) conception against her, or feel any less a 'legitimate' person myself.

