Naked Nurse
My Life in Nursing
Rose MacFarlane
“Rose MacFarlane’s memoirs are a delightful read that will appeal to fans of Jennifer Worth’s Call the Midwife series. The cover depicts a vibrant and attractive Rose in 1968 in the Jordanian capital Amman ... Rose arrived at a new hospital in Jordan as a United Nations Association volunteer, travelling to the country shortly after the Six-Day War of 1967. As the only trained nurse, she was welcomed as Sitt Malaki (Miss Queen) and immediately promoted to the position of matron. This chapter of her life, lived in the fast lane, is a particularly fascinating read that I can imagine being made into a film or TV series.

The book begins with Rose’s early family life in Derbyshire and Cornwall, and nurse training at Sheffield’s Royal Hallamshire Hospital. She writes about the ups and downs of her life and work in London in the 1960s, two marriages, divorces, childbirth, and nursing in the NHS and independent sector. The book concludes in Kent in 1985, at the end of Rose’s nursing career ...” Helen Sullivan (SRN Retired), Hove, Sussex. [Full review in the Nursing Standard 28 April 2014 issue.]

“I too trained in the 1960’s Now retired and having suffered current nursing care I believe that if the sound elements of the old SRN course had been kept and built on, nursing would not be in the mess it is in today. A good read, provoking many forgotten (good and bad) memories!!!” E A Hyde (SRN Retired)

“Enjoyed this book a very accurate account of nurse training in the 50s & 60s.” Chris Mackay

“Could not put it down. A brilliant read from start to finish. Brought back many happy memories of my days in nursing.” Michael Regan

“Hi Rose, thank u 4 book. Congrats I cudn’t put it down it’s fab. Lottsa luv Sheri. xx” Shirley Beard, Chatham. [Shirley is remembered with affection in the book.]

“Well done Sis, you certainly have a page-turner here! June burst out laughing many times when she read it.” Neil Murphy, Sheffield. [Rose’s brother’s book Neil’s War: One boy’s story of his evacuation to Ireland at the outbreak of WWII covers the family period 1939-1945.]

“Fantastic! What an achievement. I can’t remember what happened last year in my life. I just kept reading it, sometimes long into the night.” Nikki Lawrence, Chateaubriant, France
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RoseTintedSpecs Imprint
DEDICATION

To My Two Lucky Eggs

I have fallen below zero.
I sit with my cat cradling an empty universe.
The Faerie Queen looks old now and her handbag empty.
I sit and worry about my death
And whether some Roman-nosey vicar
Will creep in to steal my last words from life.
And will my girls sit, like two still harps,
    Either side of me
Trying to cheat for me a spit of life?
And the door will open
As nice Nurse Squint brings me my syringe of gin
    In her brown and crepe-soft soles.
Remember:
    All breeze is breath of me
    Singing Love to You.
Remember that and soon smile,
For you are my Two Lucky Eggs

Rose MacFarlane
I trained as a nurse within the National Health Service in the middle-1960s. In those day autocratic Matrons and spinster Sisters used their absolute power to shrivel every student nurse’s fragile ego, to re-mould her into someone as dedicated and as single-minded as they were.

Early television series gave some idea of British hospital life. Emergency, Ward 10 that ran from 1957 to 1967 was rather soppy. A more accurate portrayal of the harsh regime was Britain’s most popular film of 1954, Doctor in the House. This and later Carry On films reminded me of our allying with fellow medical students to get us through the terror and indignity of our training days.

At Sheffield’s Royal Hospital in the North of England where I trained, Matron was an awesome figure who connived with the senior consultant to run a tighter than tight ship. Matron’s two deputies roamed the hospital corridors during the day ensuring their combined wishes were complied with. From eight pm to eight am a senior Night Sister and her two deputies also kept us toeing the line. Total obedience to Matron and Sisters created a seamlessly efficient, immaculately-run hospital.

Patients fell in line also, so to speak but they were the point of all of us being there and were cared for to as high a degree as Florence Nightingale revered her casualties of the Crimean War.

Our indoor uniform was a grey dress with starched white apron, cap and cuffs, black stockings and long cape. We wore the cape with pride because for most of us, becoming a nurse was a long-cherished dream. We could only be seen outdoors with a bottle green gabardine coat and hat over our uniform. This was considered more a penance as we would hurry back and forth between the Nurses’ Home in leafy Fulwood and the Victorian hospital buildings in West Street in the centre of the city.

Some of us undertook a six-month induction in hospital ways as pre-entry cadets nicknamed Green Girls because of the mucous green overalls that looked like sack cloth and indicated we were without status. The first three months at Nursing School was a theory and practice induction. After this we were “Student Nurse” for three years. If we failed Hospital Finals or did not pass the State Finals we were downgraded to SEN (State Enrolled Nurse) status. If we passed these two final exams we were Nurse with SRN (State Registered Nurse) status. Passing Finals marked the next difficult phase, the transition from eager-to-please student to responsible Staff Nurse.
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“Good evening Student Nurse MacFarlane. Welcome to Pye-Smith Ward. Night Sister Low has only just rung to say our regular Staff Nurse is off sick this evening. This is most unsatisfactory. What are they thinking of, putting a Second Year in charge ...”

Pye-Smith Ward’s biro-thin matriarch Sister Grey tutted. She was clearly pained at having to commune with a dim junior nurse like me at Sheffield’s prestigious Royal Hospital.

“And to add to our woes Student Nurse, we’re running very late because a critically-ill gentleman has just been brought up from Casualty,” Sister Grey continued in her Northern bark. “I will go through my report with you as soon as it’s finished. Now, run along and hang your cape in the cloakroom.”

“Thank you, Sister,” I replied shaking, now I was actually on the ward.

Who wouldn’t be in status panicus from being re-routed at the last minute to take charge of the hospital’s senior ward? It is March 1964, two weeks after my eighteenth birthday and at the beginning of my second year of training as a nurse. I had been snatched from a much cosier night-duty assignment on Women’s Geriatric where we could get away with some larking about with our favourite barmy auxiliary, a real pantomime dame with red pom-pom slippers, plenty of slap and pencilled-in eyebrows that could have scared the Grim Reaper.

Sister Grey’s immaculate Pye-Smith Ward by contrast was the hospital’s thirty-bedded critical care ward for male patients. Many would be on death’s door. This is also the age before the cardiac resuscitation facilities of the NHS’s smaller Intensive Care Units (ICUs). We had learnt during our training that if a patient’s heart arrested it was likely to be kaput for the unfortunate soul.

“Ee, Rose! I’ve just ‘eard they’ve sent you up to death-watch alley to take bloody charge!” yelled Manic Myrtle minutes earlier as we’d hurtled past each other in opposite directions along the old hospital’s gloomy corridors. “Rather thee than me with old Granite Chops Grey!”

Manic Myrtle was a Barnsley Whippet and my ultra-skinny room mate at Tapton Court Nurses’ Home on nearby Fulwood Road. She
could have been an understudy for Audrey Hepburn except she was
a firecracker. Though juniors, both of us were already night-duty
ward-floaters, filling in for our student pals on their nights off. We
could also be dispatched at a moment’s notice as an extra pair of
trembling hands in various witching-hour emergencies. As rooky no-
nothings we had only been entrusted thus far to take brief charge of
low-key wards when the Staff Nurse was on one of her two meal
breaks. I say her, as there weren’t any male nurses at The Royal, at any
NHS hospital as far as I know, in those days.

The prospect of being in charge of thirty or so patients through
the night even for a few minutes with no Staff Nurse present terrified
us, as it would a new air stewardess asked to take over the controls of
an airliner. Any dozy moth could tell our gormless forms tiptoeing
around the beds of the very poorly patients expected to pop off,
willing them to hang on until the Staff Nurse returned.

To non-medical people, determining if someone is dead may seem
a no-brainer. This is how it seems in death scenes on television and
film. Cardiac arrest is an easy one to determine as the unfortunate
pegs out very quickly. For patients in slow decline it can be as though
they are having the last laugh by stopping breathing for an age, then
shuddering back to life like a wheezy old steam engine. This could go
on for hours and is very upsetting for the relatives.

Now I was walking-the-walk. I was flying solo. Sister Low, our
senior night-time commandant may as well have delegated Mad Mave
Bolsover who tramped endlessly around Sheffield’s city centre, to run
Pye-Smith Ward. Haunting memories of my older brothers’ merciless
mocking as Nurse Twitty-Toes whenever I wore my childhood nurse’s
uniform floated into my hippocampus.

As I turned towards the cloakroom I felt Sister Grey’s ferret-
brown eyes bore into me through her pince-nez spectacles.

“You have worked on my ward before, on days, as I recall, Student
Nurse MacFarlane?”

“Yes, Sister,” I nodded grimacing, hoping she wouldn’t link me
with the recent Prize Ward-howler.

“Hmm ... I trust and pray you’ll have an uneventful night tonight
Student Nurse. Now let me finish the report. And do tidy your hair
off your collar, you look a fright.”

Such sniping at trainee nurses was now almost music to our well-
tuned ears. It was rash to think of ourselves as anything above
cockroach droppings. The hospital’s punitive training regime was ring-
fenced to keep us obedient and ever desperate to please. Whatever we endured, be it low pay, no social life, constant exhaustion, scowling sisters and a complete lack of self-esteem, we were still privileged and proud to be Sheffield Royal Hospital nursing students. Add this to being brought up in the God-fearing, self-denigrating ‘Fifties and of course, we were putty in their immaculate hands.

The howler had happened a couple of weeks earlier on the ward when I had been feeding a cachexic ‘Jack Tar’ suffering from insane paralysis, the last stages of syphilis. Our miniscule but muscular Deputy Matron, Sister Foggart on her daily stomp asked my syphilitic patient a tad too unconvincingly how he was feeling. He waited until she had walked on a little way before spitting out his milk, raising his ‘skull’ from the pillow, curling his little finger and yelling in a clear Cockney voice,

“An I bet ‘er ‘ole’s only that big!”

A silence descended on the ward, as after a huge natural catastrophe. Staff and patients were aghast. Ex-Sergeant-major Foggart froze, her koala-brown eyes spinning like Catherine Wheels. Thankfully, she marched off the ward without uttering a word leaving the staff barely able to contain themselves with mirth. Those were the patient’s final words. He died that night, his skeletal body curled like a Pompeii victim.

Hanging up my comfort blanket in Pye-Smith’s tiny cloakroom, my full-length cape with blood-red woollen lining, I tidied my frizzy mop in front of a sliver of mirror. Were the broken mirror and my fear-induced migraine a twin omen goading me into calling it quits? Could I dare jack it all in and flee to London to join my Catholic school pals living the high-life in Hippy Land, so they had me believe?

As I fantasised about jumping ship before I’d even sailed, a willing moron serving in an overheated edifice, images of my stern mother came to mind instructing me to do the right thing for Queen and Country. In true passive style, Nurse People-pleaser MacFarlane trooped back to the ward and the discomfort of a lengthy report to get to grips with.

Sitting in a Ward Sister’s hallowed office for the first time is as disquieting as being called in to the Headmistress’s study. Observing Sister Grey with her permed, fading ginger hair and repaired hair-lip gave me a glimpse of her as a vulnerable old stick more to be empathised with than feared. For five seconds, anyway. The longer she spun out the day’s report on her thirty patients, the more jittery I
became, a mouse being toyed with.

She went through the report in painstaking detail allowing me time to underline in my notebook specific care requirements and to note especially the patients who might not last the night. The thought there might not be any patients left in the morning crossed my mind. Seeing the harassed woman’s tired face matching her name I hadn’t the nerve to whimper like a witless nitwit.

Sister Grey, unwittingly perhaps, left the coup de grâce to the end.

“...And we are a little behind tonight Student Nurse because the critical admission you have just underlined is His Worship the Lord Mayor. He had an acute asthma attack and requested a bed on main ward rather than a side room, Labour through and through, you know!” she whispered respectfully. “He is in the last bed by the side wards. He was very tired on admittance and best you leave him to sleep. He is critical but stable but he could go into a bronchial spasm which would be, as you are well aware, life-threatening.”

Did she say the Lord Mayor of Sheffield was on my ward, on my first night in charge ... that he could spasm and die? Headlines flashed before my eyes,  

**LORD MAYOR PERISHES, IDIOT NURSE BLAMED**

“The duty doctor is Doctor Smythe,” Sister Gray concluded, “your auxiliaries tonight are both sterling ladies. Senior Night Sister Low will have the drug cupboard keys and will be in at ten. Let us hope you have a quiet night ... Nurse!”

I thanked Sister, almost curtseying, preening for a moment on her addressing me as “Nurse.” We couldn’t call ourselves Nurse until qualified. Until then we were addressed as “Student Nurse” or more likely “brainless idiot ... stupid moron ... excuse for a simpleton ...” There would be no pantomime dame activity that night. Maybe just witches stirring a cauldron on the staircase cackling “bubble, bubble, toil and trouble for you, this full moon, nitwit nursie ... hah, hah, hah!”

After Sister Grey’s departure at about eight-thirty that chilly March night, Naked Nurse gathered up the report book in which the nurse-in-charge on all wards entered a synopsis of each patient’s progress through the shift. Sister Grey’s first entry was typical:

**Day Report: 03/03/1964**

Patient: Mr. Reg Sweeney, aged 76  
Diagnosis: Hypothermia
Slept poorly, a little agitated. Temperature: F102.00, 2 am. Dr. Wilson called. Penicillin injections commenced as per chart. Fluids encouraged, pressure-areas good. Please encourage fluids, turn 4 hrly. when in bed and ambulate if possible. Record 4 hrly. TPR.
He’s worried about his wife and feeding his racing pigeon Harry ...

As Nurse-in-charge I would have to put my skates on and rush around the ward meeting and greeting, hoping to absorb all the patients’ names, ages, diagnoses, medication and concerns. It was said Night Sister Low always knew every one of the Royal Hospital patient’s details, even on a first night back on duty. She, the Ancient One, as she seemed to us at eighteen, expected all her junior and senior nurses to know their stuff by the middle round at two am. If you failed in this task you were marked as a klutz. Demotion was subtle, taking the form of subsequent night duties as outcasts on wards like Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) where nothing ever happened except for the midnight stroll of the ‘White Lady.’
Tonight has to be a good night, Naked Nurse prayed, as Sister Grey’s black court shoes clacked off into the distance. She now had to run for the Sisters’ bus back to their designated Virgin’s Retreat, also in leafy Fulwood. I wouldn’t have left me in charge of this precious ward with its impeccable reputation, I thought, still shaking a little.
Adjusting her starched white cap, smoothing her pristine apron and patting her frilly white cuffs for luck, Naked Nurse took a deep breath and entered Pye-Smith Ward as self-conscious as John Wayne when he was made to walk across camera. The compos mentis patients turned to stare.
“Smile for the nice gentlemen,” I urged myself. “Go cure or kill, Honey!”

Introducing myself to my ward auxiliaries was my first priority as they would be my backbone for the night. One was serving the old faithfuls Horlicks and Ovaltine. The other was on the urine bottle round chatting away to the male patients about ‘owt and nowt.’ Their seasoned eyes clocked my brand new second-year belt as they greeted me with a polite welcome.
“I’m Missers Mac,” announced the chubbier one with a kindly face
that resembled a pickled walnut.

“And I’m Martha. Welcome Luv, looks like we’re in for a reet ‘ard neet. But we’ll ‘elp yer. Won’t we Missers Mac?” chirped her sidekick.

“‘Course we will! But you’ll need a special dispensation to get through t’neet, Luv. Wot with our VIP admission, ‘n’ all!”

“Thanks ladies. It’ll be a breeze I’m sure,” I lied.

Before introducing myself to our Lord Mayor dozing at the far end of the ward, I had to attend to two moribund gentlemen feverish with end-stage cancer, lying as still as stricken angels on a mini death row close to the ward entrance and morgue. As they lived, so they were dying, circumspect and uncomplaining in their neat-as-ninepence beds. None of Dylan Thomas’s “rage, rage against the dying of the light” here.

I had a vision of my own brother Damien laid out, enshrouded, labelled and carted off on a metal trolley to the same soulless hospital morgue a year earlier. He was now at my shoulder reminding me to treat all dying patients as I would a loved relative. My two terminal patients in Pye-Smith that night would need their Brompton Cocktails four-hourly on the dot. No social drink, this. It was a gin-based concoction of morphine and cocaine that would need Night Sister’s authoritative touch.

Student nurses were not allowed medicine cupboard keys or to do ward round medicines on their own. All opiates and sleep or relaxation medications were double-locked away. Items could only be checked out by a nurse with at least one other nurse or auxiliary present. Usage of all medicines was recorded on a patient’s prescription sheet, entered in a ledger regarded as a legal document and signed for.

I moved on to introduce myself to the two other critically-ill but by contrast, hyperactive gentlemen Billy and Fred. These desperadoes were sitting bolt upright next to each other in oxygen tents, distressed from laboured breathing and cruel deprivation of the Capstan and Senior Service cigarettes that had caused their demise. Breathless Billy managed a smile and drew my attention to a note he had scrawled,

‘Elp, fech Copper, I am Billy, bin eld prisner. Gi US A FAG’

With nicotine junkies a sharp eye is needed for any sympathetic mobile patient or visitor who might slip cigarettes and matches into an oxygen tent. Fag hags can be as wily as alcoholics. One match strike, however and we could all be victims of the habit. Oxygen tent patients can become confused and hostile due to their confinement
and a build-up of carbon dioxide in the brain.

Many patients like these desperadoes came from the poor areas of Sheffield and their pathetic plight was upsetting. Former grafters in the city’s steel works or “down’t’ pit” from thirteen or younger, their work was all they knew. Typically, they had pinched faces, tinged blue extremities and spoon-shaped finger nails. Their anguish couldn’t be alleviated with sedatives or opiates as this risked depressing their breathing even more. It was a harsh way to go and we couldn’t comfort them with any physical contact inside their zipped-up tent. Anyway, a reassuring handhold up here in the North of England would probably have been spurned with a “gerroff, ye daft booger!”

The Angel of Death could collect any of our five very sick patients that night and my concern was how I could also keep an eye on the remaining flock of poorly men. I felt particularly for three emaciated lads of my age with serious bowel problems. Ulcerative colitis tends to occur in younger people and I was to administer slow-release steroid enemas to them at bedtime in the hope it would help keep them off their commodes by forestalling frequent and embarrassing bouts of bloody diarrhoea.

My other patients were a fascinating mix of complex diagnoses. They included two dangerously unstable diabetics, four chronically ill kidney and liver patients, three recovering double pneumonias, one rheumatic fever and one polio case, as well as our VIP asthma patient.

There was much to do before lights out at ten o’clock. Mrs. Mac and Martha, ward fixtures of many years were a dream team settling the patients and I really appreciated their support. Their presence enabled me to visit each patient to say hello at least and check their notes, even if some were giving my youthful countenance and beginners’ uniform the Third Degree. I only recognised this wary eye years later when I found myself looking over doctors or police officers who looked as though they would have preferred being out on Pogo Sticks.

My VIP in the last bed in the ward was sitting propped up with an oxygen cylinder by him and a mask over his nose and mouth. His chest rose and fell with the effort of a very poorly asthma patient. As I removed his mask to check his tongue was not drying up I noted he was gorgeous and not the elderly whiskered worthy I had envisioned. His Worshipful, Mr. J. S. W. “call me Jack, please, Nurse,” was a forty-something Alan Bates with a grin as wide as the River Don.

While I was checking his blood pressure, temperature and pulse
we had a brief chat. He promised he would be on his best behaviour! The elderly gent next to him was busy emptying his heavy glass urinal onto the floor, set on throwing it at our VIP. With a pared-down night staff it can be a conjuring act getting everything done before lights out and my first night on this ward was already building up to being a true test. Once lights are out, ward activities can take on a surreal atmosphere. Heaven help me if it turned into a ‘full moon night’ when the moon can actually trigger bizarre nocturnal activity, particularly among seriously ill patients.

Tonight, four patients including my two in oxygen tents, were already chattering gibberish. This was not a good sign. Billy the breathless tent-scribe had managed a second note,

Elp - the Boogers ave captured me - fech Bobbies

Sister Low arrived at ten o’clock on the dot for her first round and to oversee the giving out of medicines. If all the senior staff were getting on in years, Sister Low was truly vintage. She was an awesome thickset matriarch who tramped miles of hospital corridors with an aura of Cruella de Ville. If Jane Eyre had a grandmother it could have been her. We viewed her as a cool operator who never lost her temper and who always spoke quietly, unlike most of the daytime Sisters who were arguably certifiable in their behaviour. Sister Low was unnervingly calm and feared and respected by nurses and doctors alike.

As we began the Papal tour, Naked Nurse’s memory bank of the hastily learnt patients’ details blanked as her hypersensitive ears detected the terrifying sound of desperate wheezing and laboured breathing at the end of the ward. His Worship the Lord Mayor was turning a delicate shade of grey-blue as a major asthma attack caused his breathing to spasm and constrict. We were there in a flash.

“We’ll manage alright won’t we, Nurse?” he gasped, winking at me, trying to reduce my poorly undisguised anxiety.

Sister Low drew his curtains calmly and told me to call the houseman and tell him it was an emergency call. Minutes later, after an intravenous injection of Theophylline to calm the patient’s breathing his condition stabilised. A side-effect of this drug, however, can be over-stimulation of the heart and cardiac arrest. This was a worry in the days before the routine use of ECG monitors to check a patient’s heart beat. Sister Low instructed me to stay with the Lord Mayor. She would finish the ward round on her own.

Saved by the Mayor that night from memory blanking, some
blagging and the Evil Eye, Night Sister had also reassured him I was one of the most competent young nurses she had and he was in safe hands. I didn’t learn this until later and would really have appreciated hearing it at the time.

Of five terminal patients that night, four lived for another day, another shift. It was for me as a Second Year the best and worst of nights. The Lord Mayor was wonderful and he became adept at ducking stuff thrown at him by his confused neighbour. Aggravating patients are moved but when emergency admissions occupy all spare beds this becomes impossible.

Thankfully, I also managed my first ward death competently having been alerted to it by my new friend, Jack. It was Billy in the adjacent bed who had expired. Saddened as I was at not being able to spend more time at his bedside, it wouldn’t have made much difference. A last fag wouldn’t have done him any harm either, though his time left would have been even shorter out of the tent. I supervised Martha with the itemising of the contents of his locker, laying him out and labelling him ready for the porters to take him down to the mortuary.

On my first night in charge it was not only my late brother Damien who came to mind. Maverick older brother Billy had contracted Rheumatic Fever in the late 1940s and was in Pye-Smith Ward for weeks. As he got better, he said, the fitter among them organised a syndicate betting on who would be the next to croak.

My two auxiliaries shone the long night. Martha’s only little quirk was her refusal to enter the sluice between midnight and one o’clock in the morning when yet another ‘White Lady,’ according to her, sometimes appeared. Bizarrely, at midnight exactly when the good ladies had gone to supper, I had to fetch a bedpan from the haunted sluice. Timidly switching the light on, I grabbed a stainless steel pan only to drop it on the concrete floor as the light went out of its own accord. Martha was wide-eyed with joy at the vindication of her foible.

As ever on night duty, a night of pandemonium evaporates at daylight, just as Day Staff come breezing in. It may have been my own tiredness but even the most recalcitrant and aggressive patients were sitting up fresh as daisies, smiling and sane.

My VIP boosted my self-esteem more than I could have imagined when taking over Pye-Smith Ward, despite the fact he must have felt pretty awful on admission. He could easily have spent the night being
cosseted on the detested private wing instead of spending a sleepless night on an open ward. I went to say goodbye to him and he promised an invitation to the mayoral parlour for tea. I must bring a friend, he insisted. The mayoral Rolls-Royce would pick us up!

A few days later my mate Ditzy Delia and I were chauffeured through the streets in our well-pressed, bottle green outdoor uniforms. The citizens of our good town gawped as we waved imperiously, giggling. Tea was a grand affair and I thanked the Lord Mayor for helping me through what might have been a night to forget rather than a night to remember.

He was my first ‘person of power’ patient and his tangibly giving temperament was calming. Such people never abuse their status. Instead, they go out of their way to make you feel good. The best of men, women and children I met during my career were modest, encouraging, kind and fun to be with whatever their circumstances. I have witnessed people from babies to centenarians bear intolerable suffering with astounding dignity.

The fact that I’m writing these words shows this night on the ward was a seminal moment in my early nursing and one that would make my forty-plus years as a nurse worth every moment. Before I go any further, I realise I should actually start at the beginning with my childhood in Sheffield and tell you firstly, about some of the incidents from the year dot to my teenage years that compelled me to become a nurse.
Chapter Two

#From the moment I could talk, I was ordered to listen ...# (Cat Stevens)

We were seven in our family when the war in Europe ended. I was the second to last, delivered by my father in March 1945 in a Nursing Home in Dronfield. Mother’s last child brother Simon was born in December 1946.

My eldest siblings by a decade were Morris, Jane and Billy. Pre-war infants, they spent the War years as evacuees with father’s relatives in Cork in Southern Ireland. Each returned to a cherished image of “home, sweet home” that was no longer. Morris came home early because he was depressed. Billy rose to the challenge perhaps too successfully and was ordered back to England in 1943. Jane loved Ireland and stayed the course. When she returned, the cosy family of four children had morphed into a demanding brood of seven.

“It was a shock,” Jane, told me years later. “We left as spoilt kids with servants and came back to a new and unfamiliar home with unknown brothers and sisters. I was suddenly Nanny helping war-weary parents. There was sickness too with Morris and Pascal contracting diphtheria, then haemorrhagic measles. And Billy nearly died of an asthmatic condition in Ireland.”

“The only time I saw your father break down and cry,” Mother also told me years later, “was when we were nursing two very sick children. He was on call throughout the War and running a slum area
practice night and day single-handed. Combine that with our scrambling to the air-raid shelter night after night and fitting in visits to Ireland to see the older kids ... poor man. And we weren’t always paid in full for patient consultations. I had four more pregnancies to manage while assisting your father, all without the help of our five pre-war maids. It was hell, but no different to everyone else’s ...”

What an adjustment also for my mother coming from a well-to-do background to running a large family under those conditions in the days without fridges, washing machines, central heating, convenience foods, credit and the like.

From 1944 she also grieved deeply for her twice-decorated pilot brother, Bill, often referring to him as her twin because they were so close. Uncle Bill was shot down over northern France in May 1944 on a double mission dropping equipment and an SOE (Special Operations Executive) agent during D-Day preparations ten months before I was born. Brother Billy wrote a book about his experiences in Ireland and dedicated it to Uncle Bill. Mother became pregnant with me two months after this traumatic loss.

The last time my mother mentioned Bill was when recalling her father’s death just after the War. As Grandfather took his last breath her sister Margaret whispered “Brother Bill’s come to fetch Father ...” and fainted.

Auntie Margaret confirmed years later that their recently deceased brother appeared at the foot of Father’s death-bed. He was in uniform with his cap under one arm, exactly as he had stood at their mother’s death-bed in 1941. An Australian cousin researching my mother’s Scottish family recently sent me a copy of Grandmother’s 1941 Death Certificate. Uncle Bill’s signature showed he was present.

A pregnancy with the end of war in sight should have made for a happy birth but it wasn’t so because of Mother’s grief for her beloved brother.

“I don’t know why,” she would muse, nattering away to Little Me as if I was an inanimate object “but while carrying you I craved cigarette after cigarette for the first time in my life! I smoked everything stacked in the cupboard, the unwanted gifts to your father. And you, you little pest, you took three days to arrive. It must have been the thatch of hair you were born with ... Visitors would peer in your cot and comment on my wee monster! And to cap it all Child, you cried non-stop for your first six weeks ...”

Was it any wonder, suffering from nicotine withdrawal, I remarked
when an adult. It might explain why I puffed away on Woodbines from the tender age of twelve, when I could get away with it.

Caring genes were clearly transfused to me within Ma’s knackered womb regarding the way I responded to her post-war melancholy. Assuming a caring role for her from a very early age, I became her unwitting confidante. “A woman’s place is in the home” was a cultural decree until the late ‘Sixties and my intelligent and talented mother was no different from millions of other women who had to repress any notion of finding fulfilment or independence through a career or creativity.

Watching a newsreel footage of top-hatted, grim-faced post-war politicians reminded me recently how forbidding the patriarchy was. A man’s power base was clearly in the external world. A woman’s, my mother’s domestic power base certainly, was configured to feed her frustration and misery.

Noting how much my two spirited older sisters irritated her I determined to become her cheery little minder. Suffering from an undiagnosed underactive thyroid, even with a GP husband, she would sit in front of the fire year-round moaning about being the cold. Becoming a precocious Mummy-pleaser was my way of being tolerated by her. Surely she would love me one day, wouldn’t she? If I kept on doing all I could to soothe away her troubles.

Animals do not brood after a fight or other set-back and neither do kids. They survive emotional neglect, if this is the case, by fantasising. My underwhelming and worn-out parents clearly favoured chosen siblings. My mother favouring Billy, Damien and Simon and my father Sulky Sis.

#Mother you had me, but I never had you
I wanted you, but you didn’t want me ...# John Lennon

“You, Ro, were independent from the age of five,” Sister Jane observed as she gradually took on the role of surrogate mother. It was true. I remember a summer’s evening when I was determined I wouldn’t show that I minded being overlooked. What else is a spirited and bold young girl to do to survive in a large brutish family?

As clear outsiders, Jane and I became each other’s champions. With her reputation as the naughtiest girl in the school (Notre Dame, Sheffield), then naughtiest nurse ever at the Royal in Sheffield, she
was a hard act to follow! A Joyce Grenfell hilarious kind of girl, I loved listening to her escapades. She seemed so brave. Us younger ones viewed grown-ups as terrifying “though shalt not” spoilsports whom we dare not disobey as she did.

Pa bought his first practice just after the Wall Street Crash of 1929. It was in one of the worst slum areas of inner Sheffield. He had to bob under thick rubber “Johnnies” pegged up on back yard lines with the daily washing, he said. Unsurprisingly many of his worn-out female patients suffered from “nerve trouble.” These desperate women would return repeatedly for their bottle of the calming herb Valerian, their “Mothers’ Little Helper.”

My parents survived the war and their very busy life with an occasionally-glimpsed rich sense of the absurd. My Cork-born father’s Achilles’ Heel was that he was an intellectual and social snob. This may be because he had to work harder to fit in with his English-born colleagues’ social status.

“Say but, not bu’ ... say it, not i’ ...” he would interject, correcting us at the meal table in his received pronunciation in an attempt to have us all speaking properly. It was a maddening habit from a gentle man whom I otherwise idolised. Manners and good form were sacrosanct, to the extent that he pulled up in the car one Summer evening and knocked a bag of chips out of my hands on the street. I was ordered home for a time-honoured “always remember you are a doctor’s daughter, lecture.”

He had an impeccable taste for the good things in life and retained a sense of style all his life. At eighty he could still wear the dapper Savile Row suit he wore when he married my mother in 1929. On many an evening he would teach us to tap dance or he would hide playing cards up his sleeve and perform one magic trick after another. The poor man must have been running on empty for most of the time, yet he exuded a calm presence.

During my first year of life, 1945, we lived in rural Greenhill over the practice. A still-expanding and rapidly growing brood needed a bigger home. As hard up as my parents were, they were fortunate in securing a much more majestic Fanshawgate House in the exquisitely bleak countryside on the Sheffield-Derbyshire borders. It was rented from one of Pa’s eccentric land-owning patients Poll Hattersley.

Despite her riches she lived like a character from a Grimm’s Fairy Tale by a spit-black range in a darkened hovel about a mile away from
us on the edge of the meagre village of Holmesfield. When we called to see her she would invite me to fetch a jar of threepenny bits from her damp scullery and would give us one each.

Fanshawgate House was originally the dwelling of the owner of the farm next us. In the late Nineteen-Forties when I was still a wimp of a child, blood-soaked local people would frequently knock on our farmhouse door.

“Is’ Doctor ‘ome, please Missus?” a toothless relative would squeak, anxiously seeking my beleaguered father to patch them up, hopefully for free.

Trekking out to us on the edge of the moors however inclement the weather was a preferred option to having to travel miles to the Emergency Room in Sheffield. Few owned a car, some had a motorbike and sidecar. If father was out on his rounds my capable mother would deal with them if she could, with me hovering in my little nurse’s outfit asking if I could stick one of my plasters on them. If they were too sick or injured she would call an ambulance.

In pre-NHS days most GPs owned their practices. They usually worked on their own, underpaid and on call day and night. Pa became so overworked running surgeries at Greenhill and Totley he developed a duodenal ulcer. Realising her husband was a breakdown waiting to happen, Mother insisted he took at least half a day off a week. Doctor William Joseph MacFarlane worked far harder than today’s pampered, over-paid GPs just to make ends meet. He had a wife, eight children, a car, two surgeries and two practice housekeepers to support.

Mother helped by running the dispensary when they lived over
the surgeries. She would add the Valerian, for example, to the inert liquid of green, yellow or red that made the medicine more palatable. Patients would be most upset if the colour they liked ran out, even though the dose of Valerian was the same.

“Ee, Missus, that there green medicine what you gi’ me, it weren’t ‘alf as good as the red stuff what Doctor gimme afore!”

It was a perfect example of the placebo effect. Herbal medicines and preparations were prescribed by GPs because there were so few pharmaceutical drugs available apart from M & B’s sulphur-based compounds and good old aspirin. I wish I had learnt more about them from both my parents.

Penicillin, the first of the post-war wonder drugs must have made a huge difference to my father’s efficiency and his patients’ health. On Pa’s return home from work one evening when I had a painful ear infection I was brought downstairs.

“Rose,” he informed my miserable three-year old self, “here is a wonderful new medicine that will take your nasty earache away and there’s a special glucose sweet for you, if you are a good girl.”

Mother held me firmly and taking out a ready-prepared glass syringe and hypodermic needle Pa injected me in my plump upper arm. Shocked tears at this perceived assault were pooh-poohed, as they were for the next five evenings when he continued to inject me with his miraculous Penicillin.

The placatory sweet was usually reserved for emergency diabetic patients. Post-war sweet rationing in 1948 permitted us children only two gold-dust sweets a week. Screaming my head off each time I was injected meant the longed-for sweet did not come my way. Mother would shoo me up to our ghost-cold bathroom to wee from my shivering from fear and upset when all this little girl wanted was a cuddle. The treatment worked but for a long time I feared Pa’s return home which before had been my favourite time of day.

Having lost their pre-war army of domestic staff, this Great Gatsby-era couple dealt with the harsh reality of war and austerity of post-war years as pragmatists. Mother could have organised the British Armed Forces as well as run a home efficiently.

“When I had my five servants before the war, although I happily helped your father by running the pharmacy, I still had time to draw and paint and play golf. We had a gay old time!” she would reminisce. “I could only find one part-time cleaner afterwards as they had all moved on somewhere. To better jobs, I think, I don’t know.”
When in a happy mood reflecting on better times, Mother would do the Charleston and Father would tap dance. Fred Astaire was his idol. War-time food shortages were a dire experience for these ‘Twenties high-life people. They told of being given a present of a bottle of whisky, a rare occurrence for civilians during the war years, only to drop it accidentally on the stone kitchen floor.

“We were so desperate to save it we used gauze from the surgery to try and soak it up!”

Part of Pa’s eight days a week workload was the war dance around the old Morris on freezing winter mornings and before many a winter night-time call-out around Derbyshire. Many of these would be to home births where problems had developed. Most mothers gave birth at home. He was also called out to do what he could for critically-ill children suffering from a catalogue of life-threatening diseases. Diphtheria, rheumatic fever, polio, scarlet fever and whooping cough were commonplace. They are a rarity now thanks to decades of vaccination programmes.

When I had my first daughter in 1971 I dithered over whether to have her vaccinated.

“You must,” Pa urged. “There is a no more distressing sight than a child sick with whooping cough or diphtheria.”

“Yes, and remember my Uncle David,” added Mother. “He lost two children to diphtheria and the shock of their deaths caused him to emigrate to New Zealand, to warmer climes than Glasgow.”

Brought up in an age in which they accepted their fate before their elders and betters, war-weary families like mine developed a ‘put up and shut up’ mentality. They were aware also of millions worse off around a shattered Europe. There were so many people stateless, homeless, penniless, sick, injured, without families, work or hope. Tortured prisoners from the Far East in particular, returned home deeply traumatised to receive little or no help with their psychological problems. The fate of Concentration Camp victims and survivors introduced a moral despair at how human nature and so-called civilised peoples could descend to such depths of evil and depravity.

In more comfortable times the television series All Creatures Great and Small about a country vet during the ‘Forties and ‘Fifties paralleled my father’s life as a country GP. His practices were only a skip and a jump away from the Yorkshire Dales of the television series. However grim the call-out, whether of doctor or vet, people just got on with it. Could most people today cope with the stress
endured by our families during the Blitz, for example, or during white-out winters? ‘Stress’ didn’t exist in the early ‘Forties, whereas “just gerronw’ it,” did.

In our family, my older Brute Brothers Placid Pascal and Demonic Damien were constantly exasperated by us useless girls. We soon realised they were far too preoccupied with fighting the Nazis to have time for our nonsense games. Except, that is, when we were required as dumb extras for their derring-do.

Reading became my real world from the age of four, my escape. Passionate about Noddy, Rupert Bear, Br’er Rabbit, Peter Pan (with Lucy Atwell’s iconic pictures drawing me in) and Grimm’s frightening fairy tales, the daily challenge offered in these pages made home life tame by comparison. I loved the I-Spy series too and we took them with us when we were out in the wilds of Derbyshire.

Life was brutal, except when Father came home at lunchtimes and in the evening. Surviving sibling bullying and teasing in exchange for the occasional honour of taking part in some wartime re-enactment was the order of most days.

The adjacent farm’s wooden-seated double loo became a chapel for Sulky Sis and I into which we could withdraw from the boys if necessary. While sitting warming our bums on the tactile wood we would read the cut-out squares of local newspaper strung together as toilet paper for the farm workers, as opposed to the more expensive Bronco roll we had in the house. We found Bronco too crisp but it did have the right toughness to wrap around a comb, allowing us to hum through family singsongs. An art surely lost forever with the softness of the toilet rolls we couldn’t do without today.

While we were sitting on our hidey-hole lavatory, Ma once overheard me declaring “they stink fru their bottoms, don’t they?” referring to Pascal and Damien’s sadistic behaviour towards us. She didn’t understand what it was like being constantly dismissed for being a useless twitty girl.

Incredibly, we were free to swoop into the farm at the side of the house. MacFarlane scallywags need only open the kitchen door, walk five paces to the gate and unless Farmer S. had locked it for safety reasons, roam anywhere they wished. Here was more escapist fantasy, our own Disneyland. We were already lucky living in wild and windy countryside, ferocious in tooth and claw. Pushed, pulled and chased
around gardens and farm buildings by energetic siblings was second-by-second heaven, or it was hell. It would not suit everyone but even just a taste would surely be better for today’s couch-potato, games-console kids?

Farmer S. was a six-foot two-inch wellingtoned, cockerel red-faced workaholic. He had his own take on what are known as Health and Safety issues today that would have made our childhood tractor and trailer-riding jaunts, for example, a no-no.

“Joost shut alt’ gates and barn doowers, me Ducks and don’t do ‘ownt daft,” he would bawl as we scrambled on or off the trailer bouncing back and forth between farmyard and fields. He didn’t mind and even seemed happy letting our own permanently-wellingtoned feet wander freely through a cow pat festooned, urine-soaked farmyard and fields.

Lame Daisy was my favourite cow on the farm, my own pet patient whom I was allowed to walk to and from the fields each day. It was a laborious task for a five-year old but I convinced myself she was too weak to walk by herself. When the sun was high and the grass sweet in the meadow I would wander down to chat to ever-patient Daisy. Her loomy eyes showed she was always waiting for me.

Visiting the cow shed (“’t cowarse,” as Farmer S. would say) taking in wafts of warm perfumed straw and cow poop while stroking our favourite cows or petting a new calf, was a daily routine. As was hearing the satisfying ‘squirt, squirt’ of warm jets of milk from the cow’s rudely plump udders hitting the bottom of a gleaming bucket. It hit all the senses, including the palate, as we were always given a mug of Mama Cow’s freshest of milk shakes.

So evocative is the smell of a cow house that sixty years on when my husband and I were in Denmark re-visiting his childhood Summer haunt, my infant self was suddenly watching cows being milked by hand by Farmer S. balanced on his three-legged stool, cap set front-to-back and head pressed against the cow’s flank as he worked. It evoked the same feeling for my husband about his morfar sitting on a stool in the same manner but wearing a black beret and wooden clogs.

We would then march on to inspect the smellier pig-sty, then the hen-house to seek out bum-warm eggs, finally climbing up to the hay loft above the cowshed where we’d squeal if the Brute Brothers were lying in wait threatening to throw a dead mouse or rat at us.

At fruit-picking and potato-gathering times we would help Mrs. S. “our Beattie,” carry lunches and jugs of ale to the workers feeling
“reet proud” of ourselves. On rare occasions we would be invited to watch her, dressed in cassock-white overalls and natty hairnet making butter and cheese in her pin-shiny dairy. Also rare and a great treat was an invitation into her kitchen whenever boxes of fifty or so baby chicks arrived.

“Our Beattie” was one of the few kindly souls soothing us through our Boot Camp upbringing when, on even the coldest days, we were forbidden to re-enter our house until the dot of mealtimes. Wherever we lived, third eldest brother Placid Pascal would ingratiate himself with the lady of the next door house enjoying being indulged by bosomy, busy-bee ‘mother figures.’ Never one to make a fuss, he realised early on that Ma was ‘in love’ with asthmatic Damien, a five-star bully loathed by us younger siblings because he knew he could do no wrong in Ma’s eyes.

And so, Placid Pascal and his imaginary friend Amos would creep in to toothless Beattie’s warm kitchen, happy to listen to her nattering about this and that while she slaved away preparing real grub for her ravenous farm workers. We envied Pascal’s diplomatic prowess while we were obliged to remain outside in all weathers, unless invited by nearby farmer’s kids to play in their house or barn.

Our Beattie and Farmer S. were a heroic double-act who never told us to vamoose. Their elder daughter Lanky Sonia would even lead us around like a helpful shepherdess happy to show us her pet frog or new piglet. She was always much kinder to me than Sulky Sis, who, unlike older sister Jane, acted as though I was invisible. I did my best to repay the neighbourly kindness by being present and correct, ready to accompany Farmer S., striding off with him over three or more fields to bring the cows in.

“Joost keep aht of way o’ Doris, the lively booger int’ middle. She’s got a reet sharp kick on her, me Ducks,” he would remind me, a glistening dewdrop on his wind-sail of a snout.

He couldn’t manage without me as ‘back man’ behind Lame Daisy and I knew she wouldn’t kick me. He led, crook in hand, growling weird cow talk, like my husband’s grandfather’s, to keep them in line. Although Little Nurse Twitty-Toes longed to be a tomboy to gain a whisker of respect from Pascal and Damien she was a healer, cleverly diagnosing Lame Daisy was sad-eyed because the other cows ignored and even despised her for being a disabled cow. I would frequently suffer chronic arm ache from pulling up grass for her to eat while the others chewed their cud quietly, looking on as though I was as sad a
case as Daisy. The beastly Brute Brothers would sometimes emulate Lame Daisy to see if I would tend them as well.

We moved to Fanshawgate House in 1946 as a family of ten and by 1950 only the youngest five were still at home. Morris, the eldest, opted out of middle-class life to become, “horror of horrors,” a coal miner. This was in an era when the local physician was a pillar of a fawning community along with the vicar and ‘squire.’ A Freudian memory recall of Ma throwing Morris’s lunch box at him confirmed our parents suffered from selective snobbery, an amnesia, since their eldest son’s choice of profession linked directly to the immediate ancestral past. What was so abhorrent to my parents?

Mother’s grandfather was a colliery manager in Kilsyth until the colliery closed because of strikes. Later, in the 1881 Scotland Census he records himself as a Glasgow Dockyard Labourer. Her father is listed in the same census as Apprentice Iron Forger, aged twelve. This was not bad for a man who ended up as managing director of Cammell Laird’s Steel Works in Sheffield.

Grandfather Russell was by all accounts a gentle giant of a man, a champion caber tosser and mean Scottish dancer. He could recite all of Rabbi Burn’s works. He read the St. James’ Bible three times in his life, so it was said. His expertise as a steel master in the manufacturing of big navy guns (one is on display outside the Imperial War Museum in Greenwich) was the reason he was called upon to advise on problems Harland and Wolff were having with the hull of the ill-fated Titanic. Writing this reminded me of the poster-sized sepia photograph we once had of Grandfather and Queen Mary walking side by side down a street in Sheffield.

Grandfather built his own mansion, Gartmore, in Lodge Moor, Sheffield. He had an extra long bath installed to take his six-foot four inches. All eleven of his children, including Mother, were privately-educated, with three sons going up to Cambridge, one of them achieving a Triple Blue. As a child I was fascinated by their ‘jolly hockey sticks’ mannerisms and accent. My flummoxed ears would ache comparing their P. G. Wodehouse ‘top ho!’ utterances with the gritty language of Farmer S. and his family.

“Oh, I say! This is mop-haired Ro. How absolutely splendid!”

“Ee, by gum, lass, th’art got a reet bush of curls on thee ‘an’t tha’?”

Pascal, Damien and Sulky Sis were manic in utilising every precious daylight hour re-enacting scenes from their favourite film
and comic-book heroes that included Billy the Kid, Davy Crockett and Robin Hood. Adolph Hitler was lampooned and the youngest “bit-player siblings” would hang around awaiting inclusion as extras however slavish or demeaning our roles were.

When they returned to school after the holidays I was soon bored being left with whiney baby brother Simon to play with. Lagging behind in not being at school was seriously affecting my sibling credibility and I began a campaign of begging my parents to let me start school early. The battle was won and Mrs. Eyre, the local infant teacher agreed an early start date. At long last, my four-year old brain reasoned, I would soon not be told to go away and play with a baby rattle. Little did I know how detestable and traumatising the reality of school life was. I had made a big mistake and soon began to loathe being cabined, cribbed and confined within a crowded classroom.

Trekking our little bodies across miles of scary, boggy terrain to and from Holmesfield Primary School, my disgruntled brothers would yell at me to hurry up or would simply drag me along, sometimes by my hair. Try as I would, my pint-sized legs kept slithering in the mud or slipping on ice. I would falter in deep snow trying to keep my gravity-defying cotton knee socks with frayed elastic garters up, endeavouring to keep warm and keep my puny legs from being scratched by gorse and blackberry and stung by nettles.

Sulky Sis sniggered, happy with me being the new weakling.

“If you cry like that, your fat face will freeze forever in this wind. So there, Cry Baby Bunting!”

Damien didn’t help, hissing in my face, yanking me along by my plaits.

I had imagined my first day at school mid-term would be as exciting as Christmas Day. The dream was demolished, hour by slow hour, the day swirling down the plughole of my illusory dreams from the moment Mrs. Eyre sat me at my tiny desk and left me to “look and listen.”

Looking and listening became excruciating as the rest of the class chanted away counting in indecipherable adding-up games in no-nonsense Northern twang. Feeling utterly exhausted from the slog to school, I crumpled in silence through my imprisonment with these serious kids and rote learning. Desperate to jump up and run away, Dozy Rosy drifted through playtime, lunchtime and back to class as if on autopilot. At going-home time, Mrs. Eyre helped me with my gabardine and led me outside to my aloof siblings already sullen with
the prospect of the homeward march with me in the failing light of a freezing cold November afternoon.

As we crossed the road to the fields, two boys suddenly caught hold of skinny, asthmatic Damien, dragged him down and rubbed his face in the road before Pascal pushed them off. Sulky Sis shared my angst and clutched my hand for the only time I can recall just as I leant over and wretched up my greasy mince and turnip school dinner over her new sandals. Pascal, to his credit, tried to soothe us with the promise he would bring his catapult to school the next day and bring the Foreman boys to submission. Damien wept all the way home, running ahead to inform a startled mother of the ruck.

When Father called at the Foreman house on his way home from surgery to discuss the incident, only their mother was at home. Later that winter’s night both parents came up to our house and insisted it had happened because Damien had stolen a Dinky Toy from one of their boys. Hearing hushed but angry exchanges Sulky Sis and I prayed that Jesus would cut the Foremans’ legs off.

Even though we weren’t enamoured with Damien’s general behaviour, the episode scared us and we missed the reassuring presence of older Morris, Jane and Billy. We were subdued again a few weeks later when Pa was called out to the Foreman house. Their young mother had fallen down the stairs and cut her throat on a bucket. The boys never came back to the school.

While Morris was underground in nearby Chesterfield bringing coal up to keep wheels turning and the country warm, my second eldest brother Billy was away with the RAF training to be a pilot. Jane was in the big city training to be a nurse. All three had suffered teenage difficulties because of their wartime evacuation.

Jane now lived-in at Sheffield Royal’s Nursing Home and would come home by bus on her days off. Cherished visits, as she was especially kind to me, she would bring spare farthings because she knew I collected the ones with the robin on. Once a week we would go into the sweet shop next to our Primary School after being met by Jane who would bring along our ration books. A halfpenny would buy a single Black Jack and give a farthing change. She said I had a long way to go before I had a pound’s worth, 960 farthings.

Sometimes Jane would draw mischievously anarchic fairies for me to colour.

“That’s daring Doctor Daddy with his stethoscope,” she would
whisper, starting him off with red underpants and golden wings. “And that’s Mummy, ‘Crikey Christina,’ a feared Boudicca Fairy in a kilt in her chariot with us all on board quaking!”

Soon after I had started school she came home in her smart, outdoor nurse’s uniform, asking me to go up to the nursery with her while winking at Mother. I told her about the scary Foreman boys who had bashed Damien and about Sulky Sis rowing with the girls in her class.

“All the girls in our schoolyard lined up in a chain against Sulky Sis ... and she grabbed hold of me just as I was about to join the ‘nemy gang against her. I was frightened until Mrs. Eyre came out and told them all off ...”

“I know but don’t worry. Just you try this dress on,” Jane smiled, “and if it fits, you can be Princess to my May Queen in two weeks’ time and all those horrid school kids will be green, yellow and pink with envy when they see you being crowned!”

My pretty, slim sister then put on a long white silk dress covered with a net skirt dotted with raised violet buds. Ma said she looked like Scarlett O’Hara in Gone with the Wind. It made me wonder if she would be gone with our strong wind across the moors in such a flimsy dress! Mine was a white Alice in Wonderland-style design with short bunched sleeves and embroidered violet pinny with an ermine-style bordered cape.

“There! It fits fine and Wousie (a spinster patient and devotee of Pa’s) is going to bring you a beautiful pair of shoes!”

“Will you wear a crown like the real Queen and will I wear a chiara?”

“Yes, Sweetie, a crown when I am crowned. We’ll be tying a maypole of ribbons in your lovely curly hair then you’ll be crowned with a t-i-a-r-a.”

“Who will c-crown us?”

“Oh, I expect it’ll be a very important person in the village, Ro.”

“More important than Daddy?”

“Well, yes ... and no. And you’ll have to be on your best behaviour and smile for England.”

Another patient of Pa’s sent an open-top car to pick us up on a brilliant Darling Buds of May day with only one last-minute nail-biter. Wousie hadn’t appeared with my shoes. Mother drove pell-mell to nearby Totley to pick her up. A flustered Wousie ran out of the car gasping. In her hands was a shoebox with a Cinderella-perfect pair of
jade green velvet sandals with new-smelling leather soles.

Mother flapped a lace hankie sprinkled with *eau de cologne* under Wousie's nose. She was a fussy, well-meaning spinster who loved and spoilt me. Seeing me dressed as a princess in shoes she'd chosen, combined with her spending the day with Dr. MacFarlane's Sound of Music family made it a special day for her also.

That day Little Dozy Rosy could happily have flown straight to Narnia with her favourite older sister looking prettier than any of my scrapbook photographs of Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret. Waving all the way up Fanshawgate Lane as if we were royalty, we even waved to the dopy cows and brain-dead sheep as well as to the straggle of villagers outside The Robin pub before rumbling into the fête with Jane making me cry with laughter mimicking with “ee by gums.”

Our coronation was to take place on Holmesfield’s mangy sports field where Morris and my Casanova brother Billy played village cricket matches on summer weekends. Giggly girls would flock to flirt with them, viewing the doctor’s tall sons as home-grown James Deans. Knockout Billy got special attention with his come-hither green eyes and mop of dark curly hair. Morris was more discriminating and somewhat too shy to take advantage of the situation.

To my chagrin, Jane had a regal throne to sit on whereas I had a crummy velvet cushion on the grass. The newly-crowned May Princess was about to go into a sulk when the Queen whispered it was also my role to keep the throne warm while she had a secret ciggy. Thrilled to be doing my duty I also put her gift of a bracelet on my wrist, slipping my present of a boring ABC book under my cushion. I was already a star reader.

Jane had to be back at the hospital next morning but she left her exquisite dress on a hanger in the nursery for Sulky Sis and I to parade in. We did this for the whole day, replaying every regal moment of the previous day’s ceremony until the Brute Brothers burst in, deciding it was too girlie for words. We were soon soaked through with water pistol fire and deafened by cap gun explosions. Cowed in a corner they threatened us with imprisonment unless we handed over any presents or money we had been given at the fête. This included Jane’s precious crown and my tiara.

Girlie pursuits went on the back burner when we were obliged to play out passive roles in the boy’s macho escapades. They rarely allowed us to fire their cap guns, shoot their bow and arrows, play
with their prize marbles or dress up in their cowboy, soldier and Indian outfits. They were resolutely mean and mardy with us. How I longed to be an only child, except for a sister like Jane, that is.

In the pecking order of who mattered most in the MacFarlane clan’s rowdy world, we three youngest accepted ourselves as on a par with earwigs. If it was too wet and cold to play outside, Pascal and Damien would commandeer an old shed as Biggles’ Secret Spy Den. We were allowed into the den only if we knew their ever-changing password, didn’t speak and came with slices of bread and jam sneaked from the kitchen.

Even then we were told we smelt, were not allowed a crumb of the plunder and were too stupid or scaredy-cat to be real spies or Indian squaws. Ordered to scram we’d snivel away to build our own pathetic, damp, insect-ridden den in the front garden hedge making sure we did not trample any precious flowers being nurtured for the village Flower Show as Doc MacFarlane’s potential triumphs.

The newly-landscaped gardens at Fanshawgate House became a therapeutic heaven for Pa. He would invite us to follow him around on instructional nature walks from which we would bring back specimens to dry, name and store on the nature table in the nursery. Doctor Green Fingers’ spacious front garden, rear vegetable garden and orchard were well looked after by two of his patients.

Gentle George was ‘head gardener’ and glad to have gainful employment on his return from war duty. His lisping, mentally-impaired brother, bespectacled Freddy, was his assistant. Watching Freddy lick his lunch plate clean in gratitude for one of “Mithuth Mth’s luvverly din-dins,” was a wicked pleasure for us wishing we could do the same.

George and Freddy were the first non-brusque younger men we encountered. They were painstaking and kind in teaching us about flowers and butterflies and lots of “God’s other little critters,” as they put it. Salt of the earth stalwarts who, like Puck in A Midsummer Night’s Dream cast a spell on me, making me fall in love with nature’s gentle men thereafter.
During famously harsh Derbyshire winters, raw punishing winds would brew up over the surrounding moors howling and moaning like a Banshee trying to get into the house. Rickety sash windows offered little protection in the days before central heating and double-glazing. Our tough-love upbringing ensured we endured the winter weather without a whimper, roaming the moors like the Bronte’s at Hayworth. The nearby Holmesfield’s inhabitants also shrugged off the cruel conditions with hardy Northern grit.

Edie, our home help enjoyed frightening us pointing to the patterns on the frosted glass, telling us that the wicked Jack Frost had drawn them. It was a sign he would come on winter nights to steal our noses and we would half suffocate under flannel sheets rather than wake snout-less. As silly as we were it never dawned on us the designs were etched in the glass. Any cheeky faces we might pull when out with her would stay that way should the North Wind blow, the usually kindly Edie also taunted. And we must never, ever pick common cow parsley, otherwise known as Mother-die ...

All five bedrooms at Fanshawgate were without heating. Icicles would hang from the gutters and frost would form on the inside of the upstairs window panes when North-easterlies found their way in through every crack and crevice. Being scolded for wetting the bed was sometimes the preferred choice to risking hypothermia in our cruelly cold bathroom, or even getting out of bed and using a chamber pot.

“Who wet the bed, then ...” Ma would demand at breakfast staring coldly at my forlorn face, much to the delight of my smirking siblings. To wet the
bed was the sin of childish sins since we were all potty-trained by three months.

“I couldn’t be fagged with washing and drying nappies without a laundry maid,” she would remind us, rather pleased with herself. “I put you on your potties with your bottles in your mouths and you were done in no time.”

Ma MacFarlane’s autocratic reprovals at mealtimes both shamed and ensured, through the Brute Brothers’ relentless mocking, we would be back in line in an instant. Our parents’ united approach to no-nonsense discipline was calculated and seamless. Their experience with their three wilful older children meant us five younger ones were reigned in as tight as a drum skin.

Sunday evenings during the winter was tin bath time in front of a glowing range in the kitchen because the bathroom was as cold as an Eskimo out-house. Sulky Sis would take first turn, sitting even more sulkily with Ma scrubbing her as if she was a freshly-dug spud. When it came to my turn, Silky Sis and Simple Simon would chorus “pot-belly frizz bush” as Ma flannelled me down with my week’s worth of muck splashing round the greying water, unless saved by the telephone. Then there would be some defensive splashing with the risk of a clout on Ma’s preoccupied return.

“NO ... you mustn’t ... hurry up ... you idiot ... stupid ... she’s only a girl ... because you aren’t old enough ... cry-baby ...”

Most children are bombarded with negatives from stressed parents, teachers and hostile grown-ups than ever they are showered with positive encouragement. Day-dreaming was my way of escaping a world full of portent and discomfort. Small children skip alongside their distracted parents chattering away to invisible friends in their parallel world with as much earnestness and with far more joy than they experience in irksome reality.

Winter time would have us longing for the coming of monster snowfalls in Derbyshire swathing bleak moors and steep Lows, with drifting against endless dry-stone walling six feet and more. At “snoworama” breakfasts Mother would try and quieten us with bowls of warming, treacle-smothered porridge, muttering that true Scots put salt on theirs. There would be gobbling in our collective rush to leave the table and grab the warmest mittens, scarves and hats. Wellington-ready we would slither and slide up and down Fanshawgate Lane with the boys pulling the sledges seeking out the steepest toboggan runs. It was the only time we came together
without the usual “know thy place” sibling rivalry, happily ignoring our freezing wet mitts, raw red finger-tips and wet bottoms as we endeavoured to stay out as long as possible.

Then, lovely Edie would appear with a Thermos of cocoa and squares of parkin.

“Oo er, jus look at your blue little hands, Ro. They’ll drop off for Jack Frost to eat if you don’t put on these dry mitts.”

Those happy memories of playing together on the moors and lanes sometimes with kids from nearby, snowballing and tobogganing then traipsing home frozen with faces as red as a robin’s breast are of their time. Our parents let us wander for miles around the countryside Winter and Summer as long as we were back home on the dot for lunch and tea. In those days bogeymen and scary creatures were in our ancient copy of Grimm’s Fairy Tales, not out there in a Big Bad World.

During the worst of those harsh Derbyshire winters, snowdrifts confined us indoors for days. The 1946-1947 winter is still the worst post-war on record. From December 23rd to St. Patrick’s Day, March 17th, 1947, my father slept at the surgery leaving Mother to look after seven of us on her own at Fanshawgate. From two-day old baby Simon wrapped in six shawls, to fifteen-year old Morris, all of us lived in the kitchen because it was the only room she could keep warm. Farmer S. was our saviour sledging milk to the village and returning with essential supplies when they were available. Without the farmers’ help many inhabitants of Upland Britain would not have survived the winter of ’47. The only outside assistance was from very occasional aircraft drops of hay and coal.

Mother hadn’t been able to leave the house until she made it to the St. Patrick’s Day Ball in Sheffield. Her friends were alarmed at her emaciated appearance and black eye from colliding with the back door. Pascal loved it, three months off school, when “he-men” were out daily searching for wood for the fire. How must it have been for Mother incarcerated, immured even, with six young children and a new-born in one room with the rest of the house frozen?

Although I can’t remember the notorious Winter of 1947 I do recall a year or two before we left Fanshawgate being woken on Christmas Eve because of a surprise visit from Father Christmas.

“Children, arise you sleepy heads, there’s someone to see you!” Pa called up from the kitchen.
All five of us tumbled down the stairs with Dozy Rosy last as she couldn’t find one of her red pom-pom slippers given to her by Wousie as an early Christmas present. Hopping sleepily over the cold lino to where Father Christmas was sitting on our rocking chair by the door she felt woefully undressed for such an awesome occasion.

“Ro, sit on Father Christmas’s knee. He’s flown a long way to see you all,” my bemused father said, pleased as Punch that one of his patients had been kind enough to oblige for the occasion. I sat on one of the plump gentleman’s knees while Sulky Sis sat on the other. My seven-year old self scrutinised his face through his white whiskers.

“You’ve got a big red nose like my Daddy’s!” I pronounced.

There was silence except for my father clearing his throat and Father Christmas’s leather boots squeaking as he bounced us gently up and down. Our Christmas stockings hung motionless over the kitchen range and our scrawled letters begging for presents were still on the hearth with a glass of milk and two biscuits for our distinguished visitor.

After reeling off a list of hoped-for presents ... a Noddy car, Noddy Annual, marbles, a skipping rope, a party dress, gold crown, sweets ... Pa asked us to sing We Will Rock You for our honoured guest before we climbed the stairs back to bed. Damien naughtily, we learned many years later, sang “I saw Mummy Kissing Santa Claus.”

As hard as it was to fall asleep that night, we knew we had to sleep otherwise the reindeers wouldn’t land on our roof and we wouldn’t be left any presents. I must have cried out from a bad dream because Billy who was home for Christmas, sauntered into my room.

“Shut your peepers Ro and get back to sleep or Papa Christmas will take your pressies to Little Orphan Annie instead!”

I slept only fitfully with the agony and ecstasy of that Christmas Eve. Awoken again in the early hours, actually by our parents returning from Midnight Mass, I heard my giggly mother shushing just outside the bedroom door. Sliding under the covers with my rag doll Minnie, both of us in a panic should we be caught awake, I couldn’t stop myself giggling when I heard a crash and Father Christmas mutter “Oh, Christ ...”

“Is she kissing Santa Claus, Minnie?” I whispered, trying to figure out what was happening until a weight on my feet on the end of the bed and silence told me that Santa had been and hopefully gone. When everything was really quiet, perhaps after I had dozed a bit more, Minnie and I listened for the reindeers flying off but heard
nothing.

Now my big problem was resisting opening the bulging pillow case at the foot of my bed. I couldn’t and quietly retrieved packages, opening them one at a time under the bed covers. Just as I was thinking how wonderful Santa was, the first presents were a mouldy prayer book and red and grey jumper with fluffy things on it. I knew they were from my Godmother Auntie Peggy, the new owner of the Bakewell Pudding Shop.

Thinking I had remained undiscovered, Stinker Billy returned.

“Listen Ro,” he whispered as a ‘plane passed overhead, “that’s Santa’s Old Dad! He flies behind as he’s too old to sit in the sleigh now. He stashes all the presents taken back from brats like you who open them too early ...”

Billy left the room as quietly as he had entered and I reasoned there was only one way out of the dilemma. I would open the rest of the presents, put the worst ones back in the pillowcase and hide the best under the sheet with me and Minnie guarding them!

After an uncomfortable night shared with presents and wrapping paper that made a noise every time I moved, I went bleary-eyed into Ma and Pa’s bedroom where there was already a lot of noise and activity. This is where we brought, or were supposed to bring our little sack of presents on Christmas morning and open them. A grinning Billy winked at my guilty face as Jane gently asked me to show my presents.

“Big Mouth Billy told me you opened them early!” she said. “Silly girl. You have no surprises now, do you?”

I shook my head pitifully and she started undoing the ringlet rags Edie had tied my hair up with before I went to bed.

“Oops a daisy,” she said as my curly waist-length hair tumbled, “you’ll just have to have these things from Billy, Morris and me!”

My face was a picture, Jane said, as she held up a matching set of pearl hair-slide, necklace and bracelet and a beautiful white party dress.

“Cheer up, Ro,” Billy teased again, “I radioed Father Christmas’s Dad last night. I’m a pilot too, don’t forget and told him everything was tickety-boo in the Mad MacFarlane house. Merry Christmas Sis!”

I told Ma and Pa in a hushed voice I heard Father Christmas swear. They and my older siblings cried with laughter that Christmas morning.

Spring and early Summer were also wonderful times for us. One
beautiful June morning my sister and I were called out of our junior school class by the head teacher and told we must meet our parents at the school gate. Twizzling round and round on one leg, like lopsided barley-sugar sticks, we waited until our spanking new Morris Oxford pulled up. Mother hissed for us to jump in. Sulky Sis gave me a hefty push as she went for the front passenger seat, leaving me to get into the back.

As Mother zoomed off, I realised I was sitting next to a strange old woman in a navy and white spotted dress and floppy sun hat bent over in a most peculiar fashion. Because we often gave lifts to wounded and weary patients I thought she must be a sick patient of Pa’s.

“We’re off to Bridlington for the afternoon, children,” announced my unusually light-hearted mother as we sped out of Holmesfield village. A very special treat, of course as we usually only got away on annual trunk-laden holidays to Barmouth or Looe, when Ma and Pa were relaxed and smiling and not talking shop.

“But why has the Lady got such hairy hands?” I asked loudly with genuine concern. My Mother spluttered but answered me nay.

When we were well away from Pa’s surgery boundaries of Totley and Greenhill the ‘hairy-handed lady’ threw off her hat to reveal my father crying with laughter. I was startled even more by his uncharacteristic quivering, like an apoplectic fish.

“Oh, God in Heaven, child, you will be the death of your Daddy!” Doctor Pa rasped, struggling to undo the dress. A short-sleeved shirt and rolled-up linen trousers gradually appeared.

“But your Father’s taking an extra half-day off,” mother
explained. “We had to disguise him as Dame Trollop in case any of his patients spotted him leaving town!”

Some “do you remember when Ro said ...” faux pas reeled off my mother’s tongue. The trouble with having me in on such a mission was that I was pathologically indiscreet. Throughout childhood I asked constantly inappropriate questions in a loud voice. My mother said she would have to cross the road if she saw a war veteran, for example shambling along with a peg leg knowing something like “what has that man got a tree leg for?” would issue from my big mouth.

My indiscretion took many forms. On one winter Sunday morning we went into Mass and the church was so brightly-lit I exclaimed in wonder “Oh, they’ll be able to see my sins!”

When Wousie visited us for tea one afternoon Placid Pascal, trying his best to be polite asked, “will someone pass the booter, please?”

Mother corrected him.

“It’s not ‘booter’, Pascal Dear, it’s butter.”

“And it’s not ‘booger’, Pascal, its bugger!” piped up my sparkly four-year old self. It didn’t help either when I was invited to sit on elderly Wousie’s bony knees. Enveloped in the sickly scent of violets I exclaimed “pooh, you smell!” My aghast mother ordered me to my room as poor Wousie sniffed into her embroidered hanky.

Summers rolled by too quickly but as autumn leaves and deeper skies arrived Pa made more time away from a relentless work schedule. His evening priority would be to earmark potential prize specimens of fruit and vegetables in the garden ready to be picked and plucked for various village competitions. Produce was also reconnoitred for preservation and storage in sealed glass jars in our pantry and cellar as well as for Mrs. MacFarlane’s famed fruit pies.

Under Pa’s exacting directions we would wrap unblemished apples and pears singly in old newspapers that, by 1950, featured endlessly picture-perfect royal princesses, the ‘celebrities’ of the day. The fruit was stored on racks under our beds and would last us through Winter. Our reward for bringing in these fruits was being given our own hyacinth bulbs to pot and place in our dark cellar to be ready, magically for Christmas.

Pa never needed to raise his voice for us to jump and do his bidding. We youngest three were easily persuaded to pick off culprit caterpillars from his cabbages. We would drop these into jam jars with
wax paper covers with holes for the little wrigglers to breathe but not escape. It would also cost Pa a princely penny per child to motivate us into picking dandelion heads off his pristine lawn on dry summer evenings.

Pascal and Damien would be put to bigger boys’ work in the orchard on autumn afternoons, picking the mass of ripe fruit in the half-acre of fruit trees. The Brute Brothers naturally didn’t take long to work out short cuts. They were soon sawing branches from the cherry and apple trees, commanding their well-trained skivvies below to hurry with the actual picking from the fallen branches.

Pa would be snoozing blissfully upstairs as he did each afternoon. Angst-ridden mother would be wringing her hands, afraid of him waking before the boys had disposed of the branches and boot-blackened the sawn ends on the tree. The boys would proudly display ‘their’ labour, piles of apples, plums and cherries, triumphantly pocketing sixpence a box before Pa took off for evening surgery.

Forever one step behind our older siblings we would never learn. As with the brutal massacre of our pet chickens and hens, for example we three would dumbly stand watch all morning at Pascal and Damien’s behest, scanning Farmer S.’s fields for the cursed fox who would, of course, never show. The boys would be doing boys’ things out on the range practising with their pellet shotguns for when we gave word of having sighted the killer.

Pascal couldn’t wait to boast one fine day how he had been ‘blooded,’ chopping off the head of poor Prudence who had been sacrificed for dinner. He had bravely done the deed but didn’t tell us he nearly passed out on seeing headless Prudence flapping around the garden until she finally laid to rest.

“Poor Pascal, he went as white as a sheet. I thought he had seen a chicken being killed and would know of the after-effect,” Mother laughed, as she took Prudence’s still warm body to show me how to pluck her.

She promised I could have one of the hen’s feet to scare the others with by making her claws open and close. It didn’t get this far. Quietly terrified this young hen would revive as I pulled at her feathers, I recoiled with each tug, finally slipping and hitting my head. Poor Prudence, from whose generous bottom I had proudly collected warm eggs each morning, I was happy to be judged a useless chicken plucker and retired.

Slaughter was the name of the game in the countryside, from
following the local hunt across the fields from our upstairs windows, to our pleading to watch the demise of cherished Gloria our home-fattened porker when she was judged porky enough for dinner. Strapped to a trestle her throat would be slit. Farmer S. would make us hide around the corner before poor Gloria gave out an unearthly scream. Her carcass would be hung so the blood drained and Mother and Beattie would chop and slice her into joints, spare ribs, chops and other things still lipstick pink, ready to feed her hungry family.

It didn’t worry us that one minute she was Gloria and the next a succulent roast served with home-grown vegetables and followed usually by a delicious fruit pie.

Becoming immune to the remorseless animal activity in the countryside and around the farm may have made us a little bloodthirsty as kids. There was a certain amount of pushing and pinching for pole position before a slaying or major copulation. X-rated by the grown-ups the latter activity was the one we most wanted to see, though we were unsure why as the “birds and the bees” were only half understood. We were still totally innocent to where babies came from.

Peeping on those banned days through the old kitchen gate that led into the farmyard was the equivalent of a ring-side seat. Watching some of our favourite and not so favourite cows being forced into cattle trucks abattoir-bound was not considered that scary. Most fun would be on days we were repeatedly served with a dire warning not to “cum through t’farmyard on’t pain of a slapped arse ...” On our way back from school Pascal and Damien, knowing what the ban meant, would drag us across the fields in time to catch the action. I didn’t have a clue what it was all about but tuned into their lascivious excitement nevertheless.

If Farmer S. caught sight of our bobbing heads over the kitchen gate on insemination day he’d scowl like Harold Steptoe and yell, “stay out’a bloody farmyard, lasses and lads, while t’t friggin’ bull hast bin and buggered ‘em all and buggered off! You could be killed ye sen! And take young ‘uns indoors, d’ y’ hear?”

The younger, healthiest cows were harried into place ready for some disconcerting hanky-panky with the imported Romeo we naturally called El Toro. This great muscular beast would stagger around determined to mount every one of them, with a puce-cheeked Farmer S. yelling and directing his crook like a demented Dervish
until all the young females had been done.

The one thing that did upset us and cause brother Simon and I to wonder if we might be next, was witnessing the drowning of mewling kittens in the water trough. Living in a medical family where emergency telephone calls or bloodied people on the doorstep had long been the norm did not prepare us for innocent kittens being dispensed with. What I said about my real world being in my books held good where elements of brutality introduced slowly and surely through Hansel and Gretel, Red Riding Hood and the Grimm’s Fairy Tales were absorbed by our innocent selves.

They were a preparation that failed for a real horror event one unforgettable day when I was four. I happened to be by our kitchen door when someone knocked. I opened it to a little boy before me, mute with shock with an arrow through his eye. Frightening dreams for weeks afterwards caused me to dread the sound of the doorknocker in case a headless man or woman was at the door as Demonic Damien had convinced me could happen.

Not long after the arrow trauma, Ma was driving near our Totley surgery when in front of our eyes, a middle-aged patient of my father’s slipped and fell face down on a patch of wet grit. Mother helped the shocked woman into the back next to me and I cringed at her grit-embedded facial injuries. I was doing my best to feel for this poor woman while feeling deeply ashamed at wishing she wasn’t there, terrified I would once again be tormented by frightening dreams.

Crying out during nightmares meant our risking being pilloried as mardy brats, or sissy at our boisterous breakfast table the next morning. Mother’s Scottish upbringing had been an emotionally Spartan one, if well-to-do. Her reading on child-rearing, I discovered early on in my own quest for things to read, was that of the no-nonsense Guru of the ‘Forties and ‘Fifties, Dr. Truby King.

To show one’s emotions was not the done thing. Feelings were to be contained. In my early days, the patron saints of this emotional desert seemed to be the Royal Family, particularly Queen Mary, a ghostly, ramrod-straight statue of a woman. To this day I have not seen a picture of her with a facial expression other than utterly expressionless. It is hardly surprising that in later life my own daughter chides me for hiding my real feelings when upset. My worry is that should I ever break down and “cry me a river” I would be unable to control it.

That day in the car the gritty woman apologised profusely to my
mother for the trouble she had caused. Why couldn’t I be brave like my father who dealt with the maimed and mutilated with such ease? The question troubled me even at this tender age of four. Was I brave enough to be a real nurse? It felt good making my dolls feel better but I hadn’t yet worked out how to deal with real physical trauma. It troubled me because a nurse I wished to be, like my sister Jane and my Aunt Agnes who was the youngest Matron in the country at the time.

It did not help my anxiety when one afternoon Damien fell out of a tree and broke his arm. He had to go to hospital to have it set. I didn’t mind him being banned from tree-climbing because I hated bird-nesting. Sometimes my brothers would take the eggs for their collection, other times they would prick each end with a briar or blackberry thorn, suck out and swallow the contents.

Then, my younger brother tripped over a pile of logs we were playing on in the farmyard and gashed his mouth. Screaming his little head off was bad enough but my mother’s worried face convinced me he was going to die and that I would be blamed. All I could do when she took him inside was to run round and round at the back of the farm until exhausted, convinced my world had ended and Simon was dead.

It was Lame Daisy’s mournful mooing that wrenched me out of my misery. After creeping into her far end stall and telling her about Simon’s accident I fell asleep on a pile of straw beside her.

A woman’s screams and cries for help woke me.

“Our Beattie” was up in the hay loft collecting stray eggs and had almost fallen through some dodgy planking into the cow shed. It was impossible to miss her lower half poking through the ceiling. As the distraught woman was stuck fast like a thief in village stocks, her Lyle-stocked wellied legs and long pink bloomers in full view, I called up politely asking if she was alright.

“Go and get bloody ‘elp, me Ducks ...” she bellowed.

Elated that I could be of some use, my brain went into overdrive and I bunched some straw under her in case she fell through. I then bolted across the yard to our house trying not to giggle at seeing a lady’s under-garments for the first time. Beattie was soon hauled back into the loft where she waited until Pa came to suture a gash in her leg with him also worrying about her getting a horrible disease called tetanus. From being chastised over my brother’s accident I was now the heroine of the moment.
We hadn’t a clue how adults looked undressed but we did have a healthy Freudian curiosity about our own “naughty bits.” One summer evening we were up in a neighbour’s field where we’d go to play with the two Pepper boys. On this occasion we had a pile of dressing-up clothes with us, including an exotic pink tutu we girls were desperate to try on.

Sulky Sis and the oldest Pepper boy, both aged about seven decreed we show our naughty bits to the opposite sex of our own age. Only then would we get to wear the tutu. Sulky Sis had to show hers to the elder boy and me to the younger boy and vice versa. It was also decreed we go down the hill to keep the deed private. I was about five and knew what we were up to was not quite right. Curiosity and the longing to wear the tutu, however, were over-riding all else.

We went down to the neighbour’s field a couple more evenings, as I recall, inventing more peek-a-boo games, enjoying breaking the law away from the Brute Brothers and parental eyes.

Or so we thought.

Soon afterwards when I was alone in the kitchen, Demonic Damien twisted my arm threatening to tell Mother about our little games. His sneering made my legs wobble with fear and his sinister tone implied that what we had done was a grievous sin.

Did he have secret spying powers, as we were miles from anywhere? How did he know? His nastiness upset me more than anything. From then on he would thump us younger three at will, subjecting us to Chinese burns when he was sure no one was looking. We never said anything but we knew he was taking advantage of the fact he was Mother’s favourite because of his asthma. Needless to say ‘biology’ classes were discontinued and the tutu disappeared without any of us girls getting to wear it.

What I thought was really unfair was the obviously naughty interest the Brute Brothers and their friends had in the new and glamorous neighbour who lived down the lane. There were no children in their beautiful house but we were allowed to play in the barn on the rare occasions we were not allowed to play in Farmer S.’s barn.

A reputed beauty queen, she was the local eccentric artist’s pretty wife. She had short black hair and would sometimes come to the door in the daytime in her nightie. The boys sometimes went down there with Pa’s racing binoculars and sniggered about this. Billy even wrote
a poem but didn’t give it to her.

One morning when we were playing down that way they dared us to walk up the drive and knock on her door. Sulky Sis thought it was silly and refused. They just wanted to see her pretty face, they said. We were still close by when the cake van pulled up at the end of her drive. The cake van, butcher’s van and coalman called every week at Holmesfield and farms round about. When the cake man disappeared inside the house the boys ran down and whisked up the van’s roller door indicating which cakes they wanted. I was to do the deed because I was small enough to clamber in. Besides, they had to keep watch although they seemed to know the cake man would be a while.

Cakes were grabbed out of my hand as quickly as I took them off the shelves as we were always hungry from playing high-energy games all day long. Stuffing these exotic pirated buns and tarts into giggling mouths was the nearest experience to Heaven I could recall. The equally satiated driver appeared an age later and drove off. The boys just laughed as they walked up the lane munching their spoils.

“Why is nobody hungry?” Mother queried as we pushed our paste sandwiches around the plate at tea time.

“Erm, Auntie Beattie gave us some freshly-baked bread with her home-made butter…”

Rumour has it, I heard my mother repeating to someone much later, the artist’s wife has run off with the butcher’s boy.

With the constant brouhaha around us at Fanshawgate House flowers became a passion. From an early age I saw them as things to cheer you up and to talk to. Canterbury Bells, peonies and snapdragons, lavender, Sweet Alyssum and big bright African Marigolds I found endlessly fascinating. Arriving home for lunch with my father in the crinkly heat of Summer after accompanying him on his rounds, I would step out of the car, nose-high to his prize bed of Tea Roses, their exotic colours, petal textures and scents spinning my head as we passed. It was wonderful being outside. Being a medical man, Pa always included the formal names of the plants as if we were *bona fide* Latin scholars.

The garden at Fanshawgate was in complete contrast to the dank, musty interiors of many of the houses we entered on Pa’s home visits. The main rooms of his wealthier private patients were wood-panelled and station waiting-room brown or jaundice yellow from coal fires and nicotine smoke. Furniture was “don’t touch” polished Victorian
cabinets, fussy tables, potted plants and magic carpets from China or Persia making the rooms austere and claustrophobic. I would feel like Alice in an oversize world. Gasping sometimes from an overpowering scent of lavender, heavy cologne or beeswax polish I would tiptoe around after my father or sit stiffly in a rough-fabric old armchair. To this day the smells of such houses reminds me of Mother’s “always remember you are a doctor’s daughter ...”

I did try to be polite but hunger occasionally got the better of my manners and morning house calls could drag on. It was unfortunate one morning that one of Pa’s adoring, upper-crust lady patients clutched me to her crêpe de Chine blouse and heaving bosom. Her perfume was overpowering and the words “pooh, what a pong,” left my lips. Pa was furious and it was no use protesting my innocence.

The only other time I remember disgracing myself was being sick over another of his posh patient’s prize Aspidistra, unable to contain the clumpy, mushy peas I had been forced to eat at school.

The far friendlier over-crowded, sometimes untidy houses of poorer families were always preferable, even though they could be as dark and as cold as a witches’ coven and smell of boiled cabbage and urine-soaked nappies. Ugly patterned carpets or cold lino under-foot tended to make the back-to-back houses look like Pa’s surgery or an undertakers. Those in the middle social spectrum favoured, or tolerated heavy flock paper, tasselled port-wine coloured velvet curtains, embroidered cushions and crocheted toilet roll covers. Every house seemed to an Aspidistra on a jardinière and a piano. Refrigerators, radiograms and telephones were still a rarity and the items most prized for those wanting to keep up with the Joneses. All had pristine net curtains that made the rooms crisp and gloomy at the same time.

For those of us who remember the early episodes of Coronation Street, Hilda Ogden was the stereotypical housewife scurrying around cleaning, cooking, washing, ironing, baking, shining the brasses and giving the front doorstep a daily scrubbing or whitening. The front room, sometimes called the Sunday room, was reserved for receiving visitors, special occasions and for viewing newly-deceased relatives. The family Bible had pride of place here. The “cleanliness is next to Godliness” ethos was still all-pervasive.

Monday was wash day everywhere. This was the day our own Mrs. Overalls next door would look fit to melt, labouring over a steaming copper tub, pushing and pulling, lifting and dropping her husband’s
heavy blue overalls with wooden tongs. Her hands would turn blister red as she dragged them to the washboard to scrub and pummel as if bashing the devil’s backside. Through all this she would chat, finally wiping her hands and fetching me some tasty bread and dripping or slices of black pudding for my help. My help was probably just accompanying her through this weekly ordeal.

As children, we observed life and how best to fit in with the status quo. Our inner lives, however, were where we dwelt when left alone. I spent as much time as possible out playing or in my room reading in peace or in the nursery running my ‘hospital ward.’ I dutifully joined in with the rough and tumble of family life as required while keeping my core self apart.

The day I made the decision to go it alone came about when it became clear I would never be a favourite of either parent, as other of my brothers and sisters clearly were. I also determined that no one would know how much this gutsy, good-hearted little girl minded being repeatedly passed over.

“I will make my own way from now on,” became ‘Orphan’ Rose’s Independence Day mantra.

Placid Pascal and I made similar decisions when we both cottoned on to who was in and who was not in the dynamics of this one-way Family Favourites. My favourite family figure was my late grandfather who was loved and admired by everyone. At times of strife I would chat away to Jock Russell’s family photo. He was Big Bird in a kilt with a huge heart and huge wings in which he enfolded his eleven-strong brood and troop of grandchildren.

Grandmother first saw this giant of a man in Glasgow dancing reels on a wooden stage. Tiny Jeannie MacFarlane was sitting in the audience turning the heel of her sock, uncomfortable with such frivolity. Jock’s thoughts had gone further on sighting the serious blue-eyed lassie.

“A good home-maker here, I’ll be bound ...” he mused. They married on New Year’s Eve 1890 in Glasgow.

The feeling at five years old that I had to soothe and heal anything with a pulse was gathering pace. It was the only way I could counter the fear I was experiencing listening to my doctor father’s war chest of stories of his injured and dying people on an almost daily basis.

“Did you have a good surgery, Bill?”

“Not too bad, Chris. Called out to do an emergency tracheotomy
on Shearer’s youngest who was choking to death as I arrived.”

“With diphtheria?”

“Yes. She’s not out of the woods, yet ...”

“Didn’t they lose five sons in the War?”

“Mmmh! Have to save this one. She’s in Lodge Moor Sanatorium now. I’ll call in there after evening surgery. What’s for lunch, Love?”

I wanted to shout at my parents not to talk about this constant human misery in so matter-of-fact a way but daren’t because of scorn from the Brute Brothers. I would rush upstairs instead to our old nursery where I would wave my stethoscope and thermometer and a healing hand over my injured dolls and wounded stuffed animals. These were the real patients, not the replicas my parents chewed over at mealtimes.

I also believed that if I prayed hard enough I might be able to perform the Lazarus-type miracle we’d heard about in church, whether the walking wounded was Lame Daisy or one of my nursery toys. Whenever I wore my tiny blue-check Super Nurse’s uniform with fake fob watch and white apron with red cross on the bib I was Nurse Rose and felt as grown up as my nursing student sister.

My treasured uniform would often have to be forced off me at bedtime. I thought if I kept it on in bed I would be on call like my father and could accompany him on any night emergencies. On mornings I didn’t go with him on his rounds, I would do my own in my nursery ward checking on sick and dilapidated dolls, Gollies and teddy bears. Often they were victims of Brute Brother torture, flung about or torn apart whenever they were bored or frustrated from being incarcerated on bad weather days. Teased as Nitty Nora the School Nurse I only had some status when called upon to bandage their ketchup-splodged war wounds.

When Pa returned from morning surgery, this frequently exhausted man would graciously do his rounds in Nursery Ward before his snooze. His warm cushiony hands made me feel safe and happy whenever I held them. Prior to my Independence Day, my attempting to gain his approval took much of my time as I adored everything about him. Memories of him being funny and gentle with us when we were small made it all the harder to equate with the man, who, as we grew older, became ever more emotionally detached.

Maybe the good doctor coped with the manic demands placed upon him by drifting off as the alter ego of his heroes Humphrey Bogart and Fred Astaire. They were the style icons of his day. Their
cool 'Forties cinema tilted trilby trench-coated super-sleuth look was not lost on him. I have a photo of him dressed and looking the same way.

Every Thursday afternoon on Pa’s half-day off a week, because locums had to be paid for out of his barely sufficient budget, my parents would go to the cinema. Doc MacFarlane, who resembled Astaire with his slight frame and immaculate presence would practise tap dancing routines when his last patient had departed and we were waiting in the waiting room. This was surely his way of letting off steam from the stress of the day. He would even thank his Totley Surgery housekeeper while tapping his way down the stairs.

On what must have been their most eventful Thursday night at the cinema hundreds of German aircraft began bombing the city. That was the beginning of the Sheffield Blitz of December 1940, five years before I was born. Ma was directed to seek shelter from the firestorm in the public toilet opposite. Father had to accompany a policemen who broke into Boots near Cole’s Corner for Pa to grab emergency medical supplies for the casualties of the bombing.

Ever the artist Ma, meanwhile, sketched a picture of the incendiary scene that night. She painted it over with brilliant orange and reds the next day. The dramatic “fire storm” painting ended up in a drawer along with a stack of other sketches and paintings she did over the years. I didn’t know the details of that night until reading about the incident in brother Billy’s book seventy years after the event.

Witnessing how revered my father was within our local community was not a surprise to me as he had a distinguished aura about him as a quiet well-mannered gentleman. In our innocent apple-pie world where deference prevailed and the King was happy in his counting house, everyone as they say, knew their place.

Vicars, priests and ministers harangued their obedient congregations with threats of purgatory and eternal damnation should they stray from the path of righteousness. “Remember you are a doctor’s daughter” was the meaningful yet meaningless mantra I grew up with. All part and parcel of our boringly predictable world where the cloth-capped working man whistled his way to work and giddy girls tumbled out of their factories with hair rollers clearly visible under the head scarves. They wanted to look nice when they went out in the evening. Not much changed until university-educated trouble-makers dared to begin to examine the status quo.

Large families like ours are considered freakish today but were
more common in the ‘50s, although most of my school friends with younger parents had only one or two siblings.

“Children should be seen and not heard” meant we happily skulked around tongue-tied whenever our posh relatives visited, patting us on the head and very generously slipping a pound note into our probably grubby hands. They were clearly treating their younger sister as if she was a charity case like the mindless Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe. There was occasionally some sighing over her decision to quit the Presbyterian Church and become a Papist and for having so many children as a consequence when it was no longer the “done thing.” For other people decades before, large families had been “for Empire.”

Ma’s sister had also converted and married a medic from Cork like Pa. Aunty M. had five children. They lived on the edge of a large Sheffield Council Estate where Uncle G. had his surgery. Their youngest, Connor, was two weeks older than me. My first memory of easy-going Connor was him letting me ride his tricycle, a little gentleman from the age of three! We played outside their house on the pavement near shops. It was an odd feeling when we had green fields and moors around us

Fortunately, the adult world and our world in which we were free to roam without close supervision were two different spheres about which each knew nothing.
Naked Nurse is autobiographical. The author charts her life in a boisterous Catholic family in Derbyshire and Cornwall in the 1940s and 50s, through London’s bed-sit land in the “Swinging Sixties” to Kent and Whitstable in 1985 when a back injury forced early retirement from the NHS. The book contains 39 illustrations.

Her father was an Irish GP, her elder sister a nurse and her Scottish Aunt Agnes Britain’s youngest Matron at the age of 29. Rose trained at the Royal Hospital, Sheffield between 1963 and 1966 achieving top marks at graduation. She gained experience nursing in private and NHS Care and Retirement Homes and hospitals. She also studied Midwifery at the East End Maternity Hospital, Family Planning and child-minding.

She was a UNA volunteer nurse in a Jordan hospital in 1967 and 1968 just after the Six-Day War and was made Matron at 22, probably the youngest anywhere and beating her aunt for the honour. Her nurses and auxiliaries addressed her Sitt Malaki, ‘Miss Queen.’ “Gawd help us!” she comments.

She married twice and had two children in the 1970s. Her back injury was incurred “lifting a corpse off a trolley jammed in the mortuary doorway.” The NHS would not pay Sunday rates to porters. The period 1985-2005 during which Rose set up a national charity and manned her own night help line is the subject of another book, she says.

This is a thoughtful, heartfelt story not least in her battle with Catholicism she says was an unwelcome imposition in her early life. Many times you will laugh. Sometimes you will want to weep.

Rose MacFarlane SRN (retired) is an author. She has two books scheduled for publication in 2017, one on pain management and the other a humorous look at house-sitting around Europe.