

# Resident Visitor

Part One  
of the memoirs  
of

Malcolm Macdonald

covering the years  
1932—1978

## Sample (Chapter One)

### Chipping Sodbury 1932-39



I was born with three first names – Malcolm, John, and Ross – and the surname Macdonald on Leap Year Day, 1932, in the local workhouse ... which had recently been converted to a cottage hospital. This is me at three days, but is that one of the nurses? Or my own nanny? I would ask my mother but she died more than a decade ago. See what I mean?

The doctor (Haig Serafian, a refugee from the Turkish genocide of the Armenians) strode into the room and, finding my mother lying in bed and reading a book, snatched it from her and flung it across the room with the words: “Not now, Brenda – you’ve got work to do.” She could have had no idea how true that was.

In those days they believed that women needed to convalesce after giving birth so it was two weeks later before I was taken home – to a brand new house that is now a faded flower, on a country lane that is now a dual carriageway, overlooking a wildflower pasture that is now a comprehensive school, in a small Cotswold market town called Chipping Sodbury, which is now a suburb of Bristol. If anything should warn one against the folly of trying to recapture old memories, that says it all.

Still, here goes.

First, some background. My Macdonald grandfather, whom I never met, started his professional life as a doctor in Edinburgh. But then he married a Henderson whose forebears included a Campbell and so lost his Macdonald clientèle overnight. The Campbells betrayed the Macdonalds to the English as recently as 1692. So, two centuries and eight years later, my father, Alan Ross Macdonald, was born a cockney within the sound of Bow Bells. He had an older brother, Wallace, who was severely shellshocked in the Great War and never left the asylum after it, and two younger siblings, Louis and Mary, of whom more later. At 18 he joined the Royal Flying Corps, 212 Bomber Squadron, and flew many bombing sorties over Germany. The bombs were stacked under the seat so, when they were above the target he fished them out and dropped them over the side of his open cockpit. He said they always tried to keep one “for the stationmaster at Cologne,” on the way home. He remained on the Class A Reserve of officers after the war and so continued flying. For a lark one Sunday morning he flew through a short railway tunnel on the line to Bury, then ran out of fuel and had to make an emergency landing in Bury High Street. A kindly old lady brought him into her home and, knowing that victims of shock need to be kept warm, put him next to the fire. He started to sweat heavily inside his leather flying suit but couldn’t take it off because he was still in pyjamas underneath. The dye from his leather suit ran down his face and stayed until it grew out.

Another time, motor-cycling home from a dance, he fell asleep and lay unconscious on the grass verge with the hot exhaust pipe pressed against his left calf; the skin there was always parchment-like, thin and white.

When he left the RAF he had no idea what he wanted to do in life but his closest friend was going into mining, so he, too, signed up at the Camborne School of Mines, where the rugby was also a great attraction. He studied electrical engineering there. In the General Strike of 1927, he was a scab train driver, but did not manage to write off any engine. To amuse himself one vacation he joined a small group of students who ‘borrowed’ some Westminster City Council equipment (*Road Up* signs, coke braziers, picks and shovels ...) and camped for a fortnight around a hole in the tarmac on Westminster Bridge.

His somewhat casual attitude to his career persisted after he graduated and, short of cash in the depression, he ended up driving a lorry for the West Gloucester Power Company. When one of the director’s daughters was getting married, he was chosen to drive her Papa’s limousine to the church. She soon twigged that he was an educated man, discovered he had a degree in electrical engineering, and turned to her father, saying it was a scandal he wasn’t employed in that capacity by the company. So, shortly after that, he was. Throughout the ’thirties he supervised the erection of most of the pylons and power lines in West Gloucestershire. I seem to have inherited his attitude toward the idea of a career.

Mummy was a shorthand typist in the same company and, in 1931, after what passed for a trial marriage in those days – a summer holiday together in Cornwall – they got married. After I was born, in 1932, David and Sandy followed at almost exactly 17-month intervals. Daddy was settling down and adopting regular habits.

He loved word games. Our earliest poem was: *Beg your pardink / Mrs Hardink / There’s a donkey / In your gardink*. Also: *As I was going to the stailway raytion / I met a bark and it dogged at me. / So I ran down the stone / And picked up a street / And nearly necked its knock off*. When he belched he covered it by forming the sound into the word *Wasps* with the rest of his vocal apparatus; and when the big bass drum went Boom! at the start of the national anthem, he always said, “They’ve shot the king!” And to enlist the three of us he said, “Come on, brats!” Once, Mummy and the three of us shot into the house and locked the front door while he was parking the car. We ran up to laugh at him from an upstairs window – only to meet him grinning at us on the top landing; he had shinned up a drainpipe and climbed through the open bathroom window. His nickname for Mummy was Tags.

On her side of the family, our maternal grandfather, Walter Bushby Edwards, was a telephone engineer with the Post Office. He served with the Signals Corps in the Great War but never talked

about it. He had bound copies of *The Wypers Times*, the humorous newspaper of the Poor Bloody Infantry, with the classic cartoons by Bruce Bairnsfather, which probably did more to inform us about our grandparents' war than any of their reminiscences could have done. (Samples: Two privates are sheltering in one of several dozen waterlogged shell craters in a devastated landscape; one says to the other: "Well, if you know a better 'ole, go to it!" / A novice in the front line looks at the bullet- and shell-holes in the wall of a ruined church and asks an Old Soldier, "Blimey, George – wot did that?" George answers: "Mice!"). Grandpa was a gifted amateur painter, the grandson of John Bushby Nichol ra. (Sometime around 1950 my Uncle John (Mummy's younger brother) walked around the Bungalow writing his name on the backs of all the best pictures. When Grandpa and Grandma died, his three sisters duly gave them to him. But he made no provision for them to come back into the family after him, so they were either sold for peanuts or trashed.)

Grandma worked as one of the earliest switchboard girls in Post Office Telephones. Their watchword was a little piece of doggerel: "*Speak softly to the telephone. / Just modulate your tongue. / A still, small voice is better far / than Stentor's brazen lung.*" She married Walter in the early years of the century and set up in a rented home in a new housing estate in Preston Avenue, Newport, Mon. A year later only two out of two dozen houses had been let and Grandpa asked the landlord if they could move to Number 20, next door to the other tenant because they felt a little isolated. Mummy was born, the second of five children, in 1909. May, the eldest, was the only one they could afford to send to university, though it would have been much more suitable for Mummy to go; all her life she went to extramural study groups of some kind, trying to make up for what she missed. She and Pauline, the third daughter, learned shorthand-typing and went into offices. Aunty Pauline married Ernest Baldwin, a Cambridge don who worked with Gowland-Hopkins on the discovery of vitamins and later became professor of biochemistry at University College London; they had our cousins Nicola and Nigel, of whom more, much more, later. Maxwell, who was next, died of a burst appendix aged 12; Grandma often saw him sitting at the end of her bed, assuring her he was happy where he was, but Mummy said she never got over his death. John, the youngest, followed Grandpa into Post Office Telephones and worked most of his life in Kenya. Here they are, sometime around 1928 – with John, Pauline, and Brenda; May must have been away at University.



And here are the three sisters around a quarter of a century later, in August 1952 (Pauline, May, and Mummy):



As a girl, Mummy had a reputation as a bit of a tearaway. She and another girl once opened every gate on a flight of locks on a canal near Newport and drained out all the water.

But to get back to Chipping Sodbury and Cults – our first home. (“Cults,” by the way, was the name of William Henderson’s estate near Perth in Scotland. He was my four-times-great-grandfather. It was built for Alan and Brenda by the power company, but there’s a rumour in Chipping Sodbury that it was built by a coven of witches. That’s how history gets written.)

If you turned right out of the gate and walked a hundred paces or so to where the lane used to dip (it's now a flyover), you cross another lane. Turn right there and you went past the vicarage, past the magic cupboard, and on through a narrow lane to emerge at the top end of Chipping Sodbury, which has one of the widest main streets in England. In earlier centuries it was a great market (chipping means market). Turn left, however, and you went down a lane that crossed the railway cutting, passed by a rabbit warren, passed the isolation hospital, and vanished out of memory. Each autumn it yielded armbreaking baskets of blackberries.

Just before the railway viaduct was a narrow cart track that skirted a field full of grazing lions; you could *just* make them out through the hedge. Later, when you took your mother back to show her the lions, they had all gone, and ordinary sheep were grazing the turf in their place. At the corner of the cart track there was a pigsty inhabited by a goat. Goats are om-ni-vores. They eat anything. What, anything? Even tin cans? Yes, even tin cans, darling, don't be tiresome. Come away now.

Mothers in those days were blackmailed by the childrearing guru of the time (Dr Grantley Dick-Reid?) into feeding their babies only at mathematically set hours, ignoring their cries, never picking them up, and *never-ever* hugging them. Mummy used to have to wheel me out into the remotest lanes before she dared reach into the pram and pick me up for a hug and a kiss.

I didn't discover the magic cupboard until I was four, after I had started school. It was a strange sort of thing – a vertical wooden box, about 30 inches tall, 15 wide, 12 deep, set in an ancient garden wall of Cotswold stone, and closed with a round brass knob and simple deadbolt lock. Strangely, it faced outward, into the lane, not toward the garden behind the wall. I had tried to open it many times before the day on which it finally yielded. Its sudden capitulation scared me and I closed it again before I could even get a peep inside. Then I held my breath and reopened it, gingerly. Inside was a toy railway engine, brand new, made of wood, painted in bright red, blue, green, and yellow. It was about 18 inches long and so rested inside at a diagonal.

I slammed the door on it at once. My heart was beating like a woodpecker's drill. This was the Temptation we daily prayed not to be Led Into. I ran. When I went back in a calmer mood next day, determined to yield to Temptation, the cupboard was empty. Like the grass-eating lions, the toy had vanished. Four or five years later, when I read *The Faraway Tree* by Enid Blyton, I came to understand how something could be there one day and not there the next. Not gone, you understand – just *not there* any more.

If you turned left out of our front gate, you went down a gentle slope to a junction. If you turned left there, down the lane, you once again entered the Chipping Sodbury main street, this time near the bottom of the town. If, instead, you went straight on, you could go to the railway station or onward to Old Sodbury and the Cotswolds proper. On our side of the junction lived the Evanses, who had their own dairy and milk round. They had machines for washing the bottles, with lots of steam, and bottle-brushes whizzing round. The waste water started all milky and ended up clear – or black, which was the colour of the drain. The Evanses had twin boys around my age.

Across the lane from them was the Council Depot, where they kept tar and gravel – and huge steam engines that smelled of hot asphalt and went *ping!* when they were put to sleep for the night. Notices said *Trespassers will be prosecuted* but I overcame my fear in time and once drove a cold steam engine to Africa and back. Like Christopher Robin.

Across the road from the Evanses and the Depot was a stagnant pond, surrounded by fields full of cowslips, and the Council Estate. Stagnant water could kill you, though the frogs and newts relished it. On the Estate, one family – the Byrds – had so many children they were given two whole houses for themselves. I used to envy the children who lived in the other house – the one where their parents didn't procreate – because it seemed to me they could stay up as long as they wanted, sneak into the pantry whenever they liked, and read in bed until they dropped off. Blanche Byrd, 4, was my first love. We used to walk home from school together, which was the first time I learned that girls piss differently from boys. I loved her even more than Shirley Temple.

The steam off the trains at the railway station smelled of fish. Maybe some extract of fish oil was blended into the train driver's oilcan. Or maybe there was fish-something in the glue they put the labels on with: ... *Excursion Special...* or: *Return Empty to Didcot ...* or (never explained): *Not in Common Use*. Or maybe it was just the boxes of fish and ice, which the fishmonger in town always waited impatiently to collect.

In Old Sodbury lived my father's chief clerk. Gibson, I think. Daddy was Chief District Engineer for the West Gloucester Power Company by then. Gibson was a dab hand with the scissors and so he cut our hair – mine, David's, and Sandy's. Once, for a joke, he did it by putting a basin on my head and cutting up to it. They left it like that because there was a pageant in the grounds of Doddington Hall and I fitted into the medieval bit. That must have been in the summer of 1939, just before the war. The only thing I remember about the pageant is a Viking longboat,

rowed by real Vikings – surely the first ever seen in Cotswold waters. People were surprised to see that some of them wore watches.

My only other public performance was as triangle player in Miss Bowles's infants' band, which practised in the Old Grammar School in the middle of the town, near the town clock. We learned Schubert's *Marche Militaire* and played it at a music festival in Bath, winning no prizes. We played it again at the coronation celebrations for King George VI, after Edward VIII abdicated. We were given a mug, an orange, and a bright new penny for that – but so was everyone else. For listening to us without complaint, probably.

We had a mongrel terrier called William, who got run over that summer, too, on the road between the railway station and Old Sodbury. I must have cried a million times before, but that's the first time I recall. I have the vaguest memory (reinforced in later years by Mummy's retelling of our 'day of shame') of going to a farm on the hill above Old Sodbury – William, her, and us three boys – and romping on a hayrick. We wrecked it so thoroughly that Daddy made her (and us) go back and apologize to the farmer (a family friend) and do our best to rebuild it. All I really remember is the romping and William's hysterical excitement.

Farther north from that farm, along the ancient Roman road, the Fosse Way, stood a monyumpt – Hawkesbury Monyumpt – from whose uppermost platform you could see enough landscape to give you vertigo. Nightmares of falling were centred there long after I had learned to call it Monument. In a field nearby we went out mushroom picking once, before dawn. As the light grew we discovered there were at least two dozen others in the same field. But it was large and we all came away with full baskets.

Daddy's salary was £400 a year, plus the company house (Cults), which was designed to Mummy's specifications. We could afford a daily cook and a daily general maid, who was also nursemaid to us. And there was a fourteen-year-old girl called Ruth Savory, who lived near the station; she used to come and take us for walks – me in reins, David and Sandy in pram or pushchair. She generally took us to the rabbit warren, where we rolled down the velvet slopes until we felt sick. Then we spent ages brushing off the rabbit dung before going home. One day I must have brushed her skirt in an indelicate way because I can still remember the look of shock and dubious accusation in her eyes. Two kids in different modes of innocence.

We had a part-time nanny, too, whose name I've forgotten. She had to make sure I did Number One after breakfast, which she did by sitting me on the potty, holding my 'wetty' between thumb

and forefinger, and jerking her hand backward and forward as if milking a cow. Or masturbating me? There was that kind of grin on her face. Nowadays it'd fill the tabloids for a week and she'd go down for a couple of years and stay on a register for life.

We could also afford a car – a Morris Cowley with a dickey seat in the boot lid. We only sat there on short trips. It never occurred to anyone to belt up. Were there even safety belts then? All cars smelled of leather, hot, leaking oil, and imperfectly burned petrol. Their 'silencers' reduced the engine's explosions to a deep, throaty roar. When we drove down to G'ma and G'pa Edwards at 14 Ashford Road, Iford, Bournemouth, we took it in turns to sit in Daddy's lap and steer. Sometimes, on straight stretches, he steered sharply right-left-right-left, which threw us from side to side in the back. All my memories of our prewar visits to Bournemouth have been overlaid by later ones from 1941 and 1944. Except one.

At the age of four I went to someone's birthday party and as I crossed the threshold I told the hostess, "Mummy says I'm to eat nothing but cake." When we returned to Bournemouth in 1944, I being 12 by then, this memory was thrown in my beetroot-red face. The point is that in those days you couldn't have nice jelly unless you also had nasty brown bread with it. Most pleasures were Bad Things and had to be diluted with Good Things, like plain brown bread.

At the age of three I must have entered an experimental phase. When some torch batteries ran down, I pulled a table into the middle of the bedroom, below the light, put a chair on it, climbed on the chair, unbayoneted the bulb, got down, switched the light socket on, got back up, and thrust the battery into the live socket. The result was spectacular but I was thrown unconscious to the floor and never did it again. In my determination to write like grown-ups (the gift of the evil fairy) I spilled ink across the new dining room table, which was when Mummy decided I'd be less trouble if I went to school – less trouble to her, anyway.

Here we are in 1936:



Lady Grigg at Doddington Hall started a private Froebel school for her son (later Lord Altringham, who said unkind things about the Queen's accent), but it came too late for me; David and Sandy went there, though. I went directly into the village primary school, next to the house of old Daisy Grace, niece of the great W.G. If you were late for school she'd come out and fly at you with a horsewhip, though she only ever managed to thrash the pavement at your heels. At weekends she turned into angelic Aunt Daisy and let us play with her exquisite miniature garden-on-a-tray, with mosses for plants, a powder-compact mirror for a lake, and a little toy swan for elegance.

At school we wrote with stone pencils on slates for one term and then graduated to ink and paper. Each child was given a nib-holder and a nib. The nibs were of brass, preserved in some kind of wax, which we had to suck and lick off the metal before it would write. The ink was in eggcup-sized inkwells at the top of each desk. You could also soak blotting paper pellets in the ink and flick them at people with a ruler. The stain was effective and difficult to remove. If you banged the

desk hard, the inkwell became a howitzer that could shoot a blob of ink a fair way, but it was impossible to control the direction.

Boys and girls had separate playgrounds. At my first breaktime there I discovered how to become (not simply imitate but actually *become*) a steam engine and spent the whole of the time running up and down against a wall, flailing one arm like a piston and shouting “Choof-choof!” Another time I swung on a loose, vertical drainpipe, which came completely loose and fell on my big toe, breaking the bone. When I tried to attract Miss Eyles’s attention, she told me to stop being such an utter nuisance. (So I was already a pest.) Later, a guilty conscience drove her to put me on the seat of her bicycle and wheel me home. My leg was in plaster for six weeks and I had crutches, just like a war hero. I missed Sunday School and never did manage to complete my collection of saints.

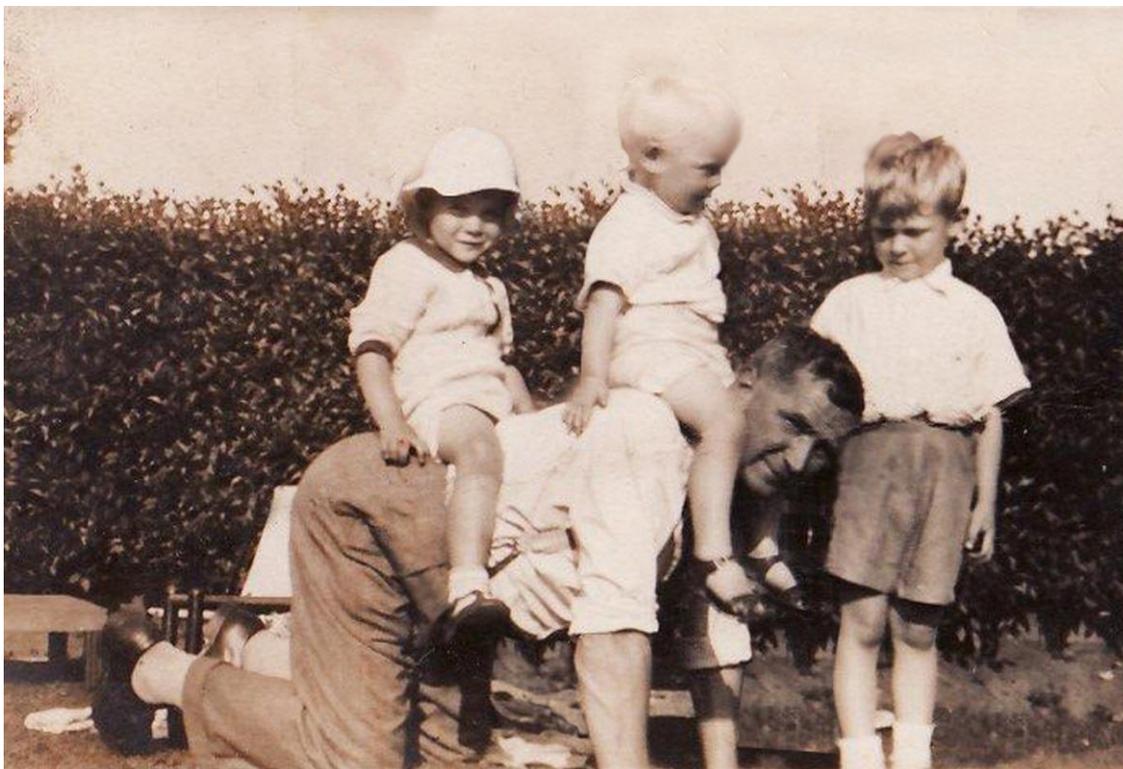
The way to and from school was down the lane between the Evanses’ Dairy and the Council Depot. One of the dairy’s pastures skirted it, then came the village sports field, then the smithy. There was almost always a farm horse being shod there. I have an image of burnt hoof-smoke rising in sunlit wreaths around a permanent group of idlers. Behind the smithy, overlooking the sports field, was the nonconformist chapel. One day, on the way home from school with Blanche Byrd, we saw a crowd on the path outside the chapel. An old, scruffy man was lying unconscious, twitching every now and then. They said he had bitten through the stem of his clay pipe and swallowed it. He was having a fit. I worked it out that the clay pipe exactly fitted his windpipe, hence the ‘fit’. Everyone was arguing about how to get it out. Someone said, “Throw a bucket of water over him. It’ll make him cough and splutter and that’ll fetch it up.” In fact they threw two buckets over him, without any effect. We left when the ambulance men came. They said the bucket brigade had been lucky not to kill the poor fellow.

Our family went to the Anglican church, on the northern side of the huge main street, a little way up the road to Wotton-under-Edge and Stroud. Some of the graves were built in the form of huge stone coffins, above ground. Where the stone had broken you could put your hand inside, but we could never fish out any bones – not for want of trying. The vicar had a piggy face and the pulpit was an alcove with an ogee arch in one of the massive Early Norman pillars, reached via a small circular staircase inside the pillar. During one sermon I whispered, “Pig in a bottle,” to David and Sandy and we giggled so much that we had to be taken outside to shake ourselves.

Just beyond the church, on the other side of the road, was a flooded quarry, brim-full. The walls were sheer, so you were either on dry rock or in 90 feet of water. No shallows. We used to swim out on Daddy's back, terrified he would sink. One day, when I was riding him, he did sink and so, after a bit of spluttering and threshing about, I discovered that I, too, could swim. Then he had to forbid me to go swimming there on my own, but he only had himself to blame for that. (I realize now that he may not have been intending to teach me to swim; he might have had a more sinister purpose; but, whatever about that, swimming was the result.)

There was a huge working quarry on the opposite (western) side of the road but all my memories of it are from 1944, when we returned to the village. Beyond the swimming pool, up the hill a bit, was a patch of waste ground where someone had dumped a 45-pounder gun from the 1914–18 war. All the moving parts still worked, which was fun. I don't know how many Huns and Boche and Fuzzy-Wuzzies and Frenchmen we killed but it must have been thousands.

Our favourite pre-war game was *Trains*, played in the garden. Like this: we put out planks on boxes and beercrates and upturned pails ... anything solid of about the same height. Sometimes we set out a figure eight, sometimes two circles connected by a single-line section. It was important to have places where one train had to wait for another to pass. The crossover point was controlled by a signal, fashioned by nailing a short, narrow plank to the long handle of one of those heavy pounders they use for flattening new-laid patches of tarmac. Our outhouses had a good selection of Power Company tools as well as one of their transformers. Daddy operated this signal while we choof-choofed round the elevated-plank tracks, flailing our arms like pistons. He could also be a horse.



I remember only one picnic, when we all squeezed into the car and drove to Castle Coombe (where they later filmed *Doctor Doolittle*, with Rex Harrison). G'ma and G'pa Edwards were there, too – which is why I remember it. We used to go into the field beside the stream and paddle there all afternoon. I found a waterlogged bit of wood that refused to float, so, of course, I drew everyone's attention to it (and to myself). G'ma said I was very clever. G'pa said he didn't see anything at all clever in recognizing a bit of wood. She said I had never before come across wood that didn't float so it was, indeed, clever to have recognized it at once. Instinctively, I felt she was right.

Discipline? I only remember one smacking but there must have been many. It was when I came home from school with two new words: *bloody* and *bugger*. For some reason a group of teenage village girls used to gather at our gate and giggle. So I knelt on the nursery windowsill and shouted, "Go away, you bloody buggers!" and they did that screaming "Oooh!" followed by fits of laughter. So I did it again ... and again ... until I was yanked backward by the pyjama collar, dumped on the bed, and dealt one stinging smack on the backside. But I fell in love with those girly screams and a decade later, when we were back in Chipping Sodbury and I was in Form iib in the school that had been still only half-built in 1939, I used to sneak up to the blackboard whenever the teacher was out of the classroom and scratch it with my fingernails to bask in that cats' chorus once again.

We must have had holidays away from home but I remember only two. One was in a caravan, probably in Wales, which had to be reached via Gloucester and Monmouth in those days. It rained almost incessantly and David fell down a small cliff and broke his collarbone. The second holiday was at Port Eynon in the summer of 1939. There was a *camera obscura* on the beach, which is like standing inside a giant camera with the shutter permanently open. The lenses, in a sort of periscope sticking out through the roof, project an image of whatever is happening outside down onto a table painted white. People stand around the table and say, “Look! There’s Aunty Flo! ... And the donkeys you and Jim rode on yesterday ... and the man who collects the money for the deckchairs ...” and so on. There were table-tennis bats painted white on which you could carry people as they walked off the edge of the table. It was a spooky feeling, carrying a man you didn’t know around the room on a bat, and him knowing nothing about it, either.

A man drowned while we were there. They drew him up the beach and tried to give him artificial respiration, with a couple of hundred people all standing around in silence. No mouth-to-mouth in those days. I still remember the quality of that silence. I hung around until they’d taken him away and all the crowd had gone. The sand was one vast, wet, gleaming circle – obviously created by all those milling feet, though I thought it was the water they had squeezed out of the dead man, water that, having ‘tasted man’ would never go back to the sea.

But most of our holidays were marked by Daddy’s sudden appearance – and equally sudden disappearance – in some biplane from Yate airfield, where he kept up his flying hours. It must have been explained to me that, in the event of war, he’d go off and fight almost at once. That was when I wrote my first-ever letter – to Adolf Hitler, asking him to please not start a war so that my father wouldn’t need to go away and fight. We posted it, with all the right stamps, but he never replied. Instead, he invaded Poland and Daddy was immediately called up. He was posted to Training Wing at Ternhill Air Station, near Market Drayton in Shropshire. We stayed behind, intending to join him as soon as he had found us suitable quarters. I didn’t want quarters, I wanted halves or, best of all, an undivided house to ourselves.

Sandy was out of the pram by then so I got into it, pulled a blanket over the arch of the hood, stuck a gramophone horn out of it, and got the Evans brothers to wheel me round the Council Estate, while I shouted out, “This is the BBC. War has been declared. Do not panic. Do not hoard food. Do not show unnecessary lights ...” and so on. We fooled everyone.

Shortly after that some army unit was billeted in the village. They set up a table in the market square and asked for people to volunteer rooms in which the soldiers could sleep. I volunteered my bedroom and went skipping home to announce to my mother and some visiting lady friend, “Mummy’s got a soldier! Mummy’s got a soldier!” They had to dash into the village and cancel the offer. But he was a nice young lad. He turned up in his spare time and dug the garden and repaired the hen run, even though he was billeted elsewhere.

Shortly after that, in the late autumn of 1939, we boys and Mummy squeezed into the car among enough luggage to break the springs, and chugged through the rain and mist to Shropshire. We had a new car. I forget the make, but the reg was CAD 834.

## End of Chapter One