

## **PROLOGUE - an open door**

*There is always some moment in childhood  
when the door opens and lets the future in.*

Graham Greene

*Monday, 15 October 1945.* The night ferry from the Hook of Holland, still fitted out as a troopship with racks of light green, metal-framed, double bunks in the public lounges, is entering the port of Harwich, Essex, at daybreak. The sea is calm, the weather overcast, as the grey-camouflaged vessel slips slowly through the entrance to the harbour and enters her berth. A basketwork of black wooden beams protects the end of the jetty. On the main deck the crowd of passengers, anxious to disembark, instinctively clears a space round a couple with a straw-blond boy about six years of age who loudly demonstrates that his whooping-cough is at its peak.

Long queues form at immigration and customs before the passengers are allowed onto the grimy platform of the adjacent railway station, Harwich-Parkeston Quay. A filthy steam locomotive waits at the head of the boat-train which will take them, slowly and with many unexplained delays, to a no less grimy Liverpool Street, in the heart of the City of London. Another long queue forms in front of the terminus, on a pavement under a glass roof so dirty that it admits no light. Eventually a rattling old London "bull" taxi takes the boy and his parents with their heavy suitcases northward, to a three-storey, terrace house in Londesborough Road, Stoke Newington, part of the London borough of Hackney. Next door but one is a recent and roughly cleared bomb-site, one of many all over the city. A V2 rocket landed there in the last weeks of the war, destroying a few houses and damaging several

others, including number 31. The shock of the blast caused damage from the foundations to the roof, but essential repairs had been completed quite quickly.

The house belonged to my maternal grandmother, Harriet, née Imber, and her second husband, Charlie Williams. They already shared it with my mother's youngest sister, Ivy, her husband, "Sonny" Gilson, a Post Office telephone engineer, and their son, my cousin John, aged four, but they put us up (and put up with us) for about three months, until my parents could find a place to live, a rented detached house in the northern London suburb of Muswell Hill. It did not take John long to catch my whooping cough, for which my grandmother and aunt were duly ungrateful. At least it was a slightly exotic Dutch germ...

There was a surprisingly large living room on the first floor, across the front of the house. When we arrived, it was already decked out for a welcoming family party, with flags of the Allied nations (including the Netherlands, of course, and also the Soviet Union (Uncle Sonny was a devout Communist) hanging on the walls. After dark as the party continued, the blackout curtains were drawn shut as they had been throughout the war, although there had been no need for this for six months: but better those stark, black drapes than none at all, I suppose.

As a welcoming present I was given a small, open wooden cart with a towing handle, maroon on the outside and black within. This was a generous gift when money was tight in the double household and everything except such odd items as aniseed balls and rabbit meat was strictly rationed. But to eyes used to the very short commons of Nazi-occupied northern Holland, liberated only in the very last week of the war in

Europe after the notorious "hunger winter", the simple spread of cakes and sandwiches, which could only have been assembled by lavish expenditure of precious ration coupons, constituted a proper feast.

The death of Harriet's first husband, Tom Devanney, in 1917 left his large family in acute poverty. My mother, Kathleen Susan (1905-1994), had to give up a scholarship she had won to a foundation school near the family home in Spitalfields and go out to work at fourteen, something she always regretted. Her education performance fell far short of her intellect, but she was able to make up for this later.

My mother's elder brother, John, who might otherwise have been a breadwinner, had been an underage volunteer in the British Army, and was killed in France in the dying weeks of the 1914-18 war. Their eldest sister, Mary, died giving birth to my cousin, Brenda, adopted by the next-oldest sister, Lily, whose only child she thus became. Indeed all six surviving siblings - five sisters and one brother - had just one child each, perhaps a reaction, conscious or not, to childhood in a large, financially struggling family headed, until his untimely death, by a vegetable-porter at Spitalfields Market.

Nearly all of my mother's generation in this extended family came to welcome us to London, although my one British blood-related uncle was still with the RAF and unable to be there. It was both a delight and a shock for my mother to return to London, which she had left on her marriage to my Dutch father before the war: she was rejoining a close-knit family, but in a city showing all the accumulated damage

and dirt of nearly six years of war. What had not been bombed was severely neglected.

The childhood door that, in Graham Greene's words, let in my future thus opened, not on Alkmaar, the beautiful market town, almost unscathed by the war, in the province of North Holland where I was born in October 1939, but on tired, battered old London. My father, Daniel (Daan) Gerhard van der Vat (1909-1977), had been sent there as its correspondent by *De Tijd*, the leading Dutch Roman Catholic (but also liberal) daily published in Amsterdam (it closed down in the 1970s but briefly lived on as a weekly, which was in turn absorbed into another). My mother was overjoyed by the move after five grim years as an Englishwoman in German-occupied Holland.

I arrived bilingual, but inevitably my mother's tongue rapidly superseded my father's. Coming to England just in time for my sixth birthday, the starting age for school in Holland, ensured that my first language would be English, a fact of unsurpassable significance for someone who would earn his living by writing. Barely twenty million people speak Dutch as their first language; at least twenty-five times as many have English, alongside the hundreds of millions, not to say billions, who have it as a second language. Thus was a small space reserved for me in advance in the world's largest international linguistic marketplace, where I eventually set up my stall as a full-time author after three decades of journalism.