

# A Fickle Wind

*a novel by*  
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## Chapter One

I have often been doubted when I have said that I remember events that took place when I was two years old. But I do. Isolated incidents, really, but I know I was two, as I remember living at my maternal grandparents' old house in London, where I was born, and we moved from there when I was two and a half. It was a very significant time in British history—world history, actually—as it was the year that Britain decided to defy Germany and its plans to crush Europe in its quest for world domination. It was the beginning of World War II.

My grandmother wasn't of the loving, indulgent, sunny disposition we usually associate with that role. She ruled with a rod of iron! She was stern and disapproving, and I really didn't like her. Anything considered naughty that my mother didn't see me do, my grandmother did, and I could always be sure she would tell on me.

My grandfather was nice but was so much in the background that I really don't remember him well from those days. I don't recall too much of my father then, either. He was probably out working during most of my waking hours, but what I do recall of him is lovely. He was amused by almost everything I did, paid no attention at all to complaints about me, played with me, and gave me hugs and kisses.

Not so my mother. She never seemed very happy and certainly didn't play with me. And I could be sure I wouldn't have any sisters or brothers to play with either, because I had cried so much as a baby that I gave her headaches, and I was always enough of a handful! Or did she say that a little later? I can't remember exactly when, but I know it was said more than once; I always knew it was all my fault that I had no one to play with!

My mother's siblings, two brothers and one sister, all lived on the same street as we did. In those days, it was safe for young children to just wander in that rather protected neighborhood. I recall doing so quite frequently to visit our relatives, because I was usually bored with what was happening at home. I generally would be able to find a cousin to play with.

We grandchildren were sometimes all called upon to line up in front of my grandmother if she had been on an outing, say, to the seaside. We would each receive a stick of peppermint rock candy or some other treat she had brought back for us. I remember one such occasion when I was removed from the line and did not receive my rock

because I was fidgeting too much to meet her standards. She was definitely on my list!

The kitchen—scullery, we called it then—had a stone floor that my grandmother would often sweep. Potatoes were sold in the condition in which they were dug from the ground—encrusted with earth. I knew they were kept under the sink. One day when I particularly didn't like my grandmother, I watched her sweep the scullery floor and stand back to admire her handiwork. I moved over to the cupboard, grabbed the bag of potatoes, and shot them across the floor, scattering the soil as they rolled.

I ran, of course, as she yelled for my mother, and I found sanctuary in the nearby home of my Aunt Amy and Uncle George, who I knew would protect me. Uncle George particularly had fun with me and often teased me to the point where I would lose my temper. He would then pick me up, turn me upside down, and swing me, and we would be friends again. It was decidedly a better place to hang out than my grandmother's house.

In those days, people served a cooked meal in the middle of the day—dinner at lunchtime, so to speak—and something lighter called tea as the evening meal. Most men worked locally and came home for the midday meal, as did children from school. Married women often didn't work, so preparing the midday meal was part of their morning ritual.

A more elaborate meal was prepared for Sundays, and it was usually served a little later. In my Aunt Amy's house, it was served at one o'clock, and in my grandmother's house

about two. I think the later time was to accommodate pub hours (Uncle George didn't go to the pub). The staggered mealtimes worked for me. I would usually manage to drop by Aunt Arny's around one on Sundays, and she would put up a small plate of food for me to join them. If I were really lucky, my cousin Les, five years older than I, would find some fault with his food, push the plate away, and refuse to eat it. I had a voracious appetite, so I rather hoped he'd find a hair in his potatoes or some other problem. I recall them saying that he was always finicky.

After that meal was over, I'd have absolutely no trouble going home for a second dinner at about two o'clock. I think I hung out at Aunt Arny's more than at the homes of other relatives because Les was closer to me in age and would sometimes deign to play with me.

With the exception of my Auntie Lily, who was my father's oldest sister, we didn't see much of the rest of his family because they lived a bus ride away. I loved it when my Auntie Lily would visit, as she always made a big fuss over me and brightened up my whole day. She had red hair, wore pretty clothes, and used makeup. A role model in the making? She brought me sweets, let me sit on her lap, and played games with me. Definitely a keeper.

I have always been concerned about my appearance and love to dress well to this day. I was really no different then. Sunday was the special day when we all dressed in our best. My mother would usually braid my long, straight, dark hair, and on special occasions she would put it in ringlets. I recall I had a yellow and mauve outfit with a mauve hat. I loved it and felt so grown up walking

down the street alone to visit my relatives in turn, ending up at my Aunt Arny's, of course. One day, as I approached her house, the wind took my hat and blew it way down the street much faster than my little legs would carry me. Uncle George came to the rescue, however, and retrieved it. I recall being so happy to have it back.

Oh, yes, I remember when I was two. I also remember a lot more, if you have a few hours to spare . . .

## Chapter Two

As I said, we moved when I was two and a half. I know this, only because that was what everyone said. Our new home was in a row of houses in what could be described as a suburb of London called Romford, surrounded by strangers. No cousins to play with, no uncles to swing me. And my father was away.

My father had gone to sea at age fifteen, the euphemism being that, "John had run away to sea." My Auntie Lily corrected that misconception when I was older. You see, their father had died at age thirty-six after returning from WWI, where he had been subjected to mustard gas poisoning. With six children to feed and no breadwinner, my paternal grandmother had to do the best she could for the survival of the family.

She walked my father down and registered him in the Navy, as she knew he would be fed regularly, and this

would mean one less mouth for her to feed. So my father went to sea as a boy and signed on officially as a sailor at age eighteen. Times were very difficult for the poor in Britain in those days. It brings tears to my eyes as I write this to think of the hardships they suffered.

My father left the Navy at age thirty when he had completed his tour of duty, as they termed it. He and my mother married. A few years later, with the threat of WWII on the horizon, and in preparation for the coming storm, he was one of the first to be called to serve. My mother wasn't a happy lady, so my life wasn't very interesting or enjoyable. I sought other children in the streets to play with and spent as much time as possible out of doors. My memories are of incidents—those that have had a lasting impact on my life.

When I was playing in the street at about age four, a boy several years older and quite a bit larger started picking on me. He hit me and made me cry. I went running home to my mother, crying and saying that Roy had hit me. I received no loving affection or sympathy for my tears, no kiss or hug, nothing heartwarming or reassuring. She asked if I had hit him back. "No!" I cried. Her response: "If you can't hit them, kick them, but don't come crying to me."

Those words have resonated all my life. Sometimes they have made me sad. At other times, they've made me grateful; they have stood me in good stead when I have faced some of life's difficult passages. But I never felt nurtured by a loving mother. She made me strong, and I appreciate that.



I can still recall the startled reaction I felt that day with my mother. I quickly understood that there would be no solace there, nor would there be love or respect (not words I knew at the time, but words that convey the realization I reached that day). Unless I showed her I could deliver the kind of strength she seemed to expect of me, I would be a disappointment. So I shifted gears. I wasn't very big, but I wasn't dumb. I determined a method by which I could bring anyone who picked on me to his knees. Quite simply, I bent his fingers back. It was very effective.

German bombers were overhead day and night. Many children in the London area were being sent to the country under a national evacuation program. I recall that my father was adamant that I not be sent alone to live with strangers. Given some of the stories I heard in later years, I am very grateful. My maternal grandmother's sister and her husband owned a farm in a place called Leighton Buzzard, and arrangements were made for my mother and me to stay with them.

I was so excited. The Prentiss family had a grown daughter, Edie, who was a Land Army girl. They also had chickens, ducks, rabbits, sheep, and cows. This was a place with lots of activity, food, and smiles. Edie would take me around with her to feed the animals, collect the eggs, and help in the allotment where she was growing vegetables and fruit. It was heaven, and I loved it. I don't recall how long it lasted, but it was over far too soon.

One day my Uncle Ern arrived. He was my mother's oldest brother and he had three daughters who were too old to bother with me, so I hadn't visited these relatives very

frequently when we lived in London. We had no warning of his arrival, as there were no phones.

My mother was distraught to learn that our house had sustained much damage from a bomb that had been dropped in the vicinity. The ceilings had collapsed, windows had been shattered, doors blown in. People had boarded up the house for security, but my mother needed to go home to organize the repairs. I stayed on with the Prentiss family and was very happy to do so. But soon my uncle came back again to take me home to Romford. My mother had decided not to return to the Prentiss farm, so she and I were to risk life and death together.

I have memories of air-raid shelters, boarded-up buses (so glass would not shatter and injure the passengers if bombs were dropped, of course, if it were a direct hit, then it wouldn't matter), ration books, food shortages, clothes shortages, coal shortages, petrol shortages, no sweets, no toys for Christmas, and no parties for birthdays. It seemed endless. I heard the expression "Before the war . . ." so frequently that I believed it must have been an idyllic, magical time.

At first, my mother and I didn't have our own air-raid shelter in our garden. Neighbors had to share. I recall that when the siren sounded in the middle of the night, my mother would lift me out of bed in total darkness—we didn't dare show a light—and carry me through the back gardens to our allotted shelter by the light of the moon (if we were lucky enough to have moonlight). I actually looked forward to this. I could listen to all the adult conversations, and I was still young enough to be fussed over.

I recall one young, married couple saying they wanted to adopt me. That might have been fun, and I kept waiting and waiting . . .

My sophisticated, glamorous Auntie Lily used to come to visit sometimes. It was a long journey for her taking several buses and a train. Her visits were so exciting for me—a bright spot in my otherwise dull existence. I loved her so much, and it was clear she loved me. She started to bring me her old makeup, old high-heeled shoes, and sometimes junk jewelry—all my most treasured “toys.” My favorite pastime was to sit on a cushion in the corner of our living room with a hand mirror and make up my face, don the jewelry, and then prance around the room in her shoes.

There was some mystery attached to her that I couldn't quite understand, and my mother would often roll her eyes when Auntie Lily was discussed. It was clear that some things were simply not talked about in front of me. Auntie Lily had one son, Alan, whom I had always known, but now there was another one, Len, who was a recent addition to her household.

Auntie Lily's husband was Uncle Joe. As it turned out, the secret that was never discussed was that he was not her husband! She had done something that, generally speaking, no one did in those days. She had divorced Alan's father, whom I hadn't known at all, and was now “living in sin.” Len was her stepson, loosely speaking. Joe worked for the gas company, and our war-torn existence made his job vital; escaping gas from bombed buildings was hazardous, so his expertise was in great demand. I think Auntie Lily met him on a bomb site near her house. I also figured out

that this was where a lot of the junk I was given to play with came from!

Auntie Lily arrived one day and said that she had come to see my father. The last my mother had heard, he was in Egypt, I believe he was helping to protect the Suez Canal. My aunt had seen a spiritualist medium—one of her favorite pastimes—who had told her that if she visited us that day, she would see her brother. She also gave us assurance that her medium had told her that her three brothers would survive the war unscathed. She stayed all day, and as evening approached, I was finally put in a stroller so we could walk with her to the station for her journey home. As we rounded a curve in the road, she saw a white sailor's hat above the hedges and exclaimed, "That's John!" And it was. I have been a great believer in psychic phenomena ever since.

My whole world was different when my father was home on leave. I was so special to him, and he spoiled me to bits. I had been drooling over a dress in a local store for ages. The whole bodice was covered in smocking in beautiful shades of mauve. According to my mother, it was too expensive, and we did not have the coupons to spare. She wanted me to have a white dress with a pink bolero, but I was a holdout! With much excitement and in positive anticipation, I took my father to see my choice. You know the rest of that story! I think I could have been developing a little of the divide-and-conquer technique, don't you?

So now I was to go to school, even though I was still under five years old. We would probably call it kinder garten today. If I couldn't live with the Prentiss family on their

farm, this was the next best thing, as far as I was concerned. I remember running ahead of my mother on my first day. Change has never daunted me. I have always liked the excitement of new experiences and new opportunities.

I loved school from the beginning. I would do anything not to miss a day, and my lessons came easily to me. Going to school was a different experience in those days. We carried our gas masks everywhere—for children my age, they were red and looked like Mickey Mouse. Our classes were frequently interrupted by air-raid sirens, and many of our lessons were conducted in air-raid shelters. But we didn't know this was unusual; we had never known anything else.

I recall one summer morning, during one of my father's infrequent leaves, when I awakened with a terrible pain in my side. My mother had gone grocery shopping, and my father was digging in the garden. Somehow a seed had been planted in my psyche that illness was weakness, and I was expected never to be weak. If I fell in the street and was grazed and bleeding, I never cried. If I had to go under a dentist's drill, I took it like a champ. That morning, I lay in bed, worrying that the pain wouldn't be gone by the time my mother returned and that she would find out about it!

She did return home and called me to come down for breakfast. I couldn't get beyond the top stair, as the pain was so severe. When I didn't appear, she came to the bottom of the stairs to call again, and she saw me. I had to own up to my "crime," and she called my father from the garden.

Of course, no one was angry with me, and they called a doctor. It didn't turn out to be anything serious, and I

was fine later that day. But I have so often wondered about my reaction, which was almost *fear*. I wasn't supposed to have frailties, be a nuisance, or make a fuss. I wasn't ever supposed to cry if I were hurt. I was supposed to be self-reliant and strong. I was supposed to be brave, not weak. And I was five.

I loved to go out with my father, and I joyfully skipped along at his side. I thought he was so handsome, and I recall telling him on one occasion that he was too nice looking to be a man and should be a lady. He laughed easily. I always encouraged him to stop for a drink in the local pub and was very willing to wait outside. I knew, of course, that he would bring out a lemonade for me, which was the big treat for which I was angling.

One time he brought home some bananas, the likes of which I had never seen. I desperately wanted to take one to school in my lunch, which my mother didn't think appropriate. My father's opinion was entirely different and prevailed. He said that if he put his life on the line on a daily basis fighting for his country and our freedom, it was okay if his kid were made to feel a little special one day in her otherwise deprived existence.

But then his leave would be over, and I was back to the routine of school, bombs, shortages, sometimes a Thursday after-school movie if the local theatre were playing something my mother wanted to see (I, of course, loved everything), and visiting a few relatives.

We went to see Uncle Ern and Auntie Lucy at their house in Beacontree one day. Their daughter, my cousin

Doris, was home on leave from the ATS (the Auxiliary Territorial Service, known as the women's army) and was in uniform, which added to the mystique.

When it came time for us to leave, Doris walked with us to the station, as her visit was over and she was returning to base. She was on the platform across from ours, and we waved to her as she boarded her train to return to . . . what? In my mind, it was sure to be something exciting, exhilarating, and infinitely more interesting than what I would be doing. How I envied her and wished we could have changed places. About ten years later, with three little mouths to feed and an indolent husband, she would come knocking on our door to beg for money from my mother. Do be careful what you ask for, because you just might get it!

But something was about to happen to brighten my days. Auntie Arny and Win and Les, my cousins, moved into our house for as long as it took them to find another place to live, which was quite awhile. Their house had been destroyed by a bomb, and we were all grateful they had not been at home. I don't recall Uncle George being there, as he was away somewhere helping with the war effort. I haven't mentioned Win before because she was much older than I and we really didn't interact very much.

But I loved their company. It brought life to our household and interest to my days. Les would play with me, as he had no one else but was old enough to set the rules that controlled our games. Mostly he wanted to play boxing; he was always Joe Louis, who was the World Champion, and I was Bruce Woodcock (I think he was only the British Champion), so I was always doomed to lose. But, what the

heck, I was desperate! These relatives eventually moved, and I was back to my own devices.

The war continued. I particularly recall one night when the adults around me were sure we were shooting down every plane Germany had sent to destroy us. One after another seemed to be exploding from our anti-aircraft guns. We were cheering on our military from our shelter. But, to our horror, the next day's newspapers announced Germany's new secret weapon. An unmanned missile accounted for the explosions we had heard. The doodlebug had been launched to wreak further havoc on our country. We nicknamed it the buzz bomb, as it emitted a humming sound as it cruised over. The dreaded seconds came when that buzzing stopped and the missile continued stealthily along its path of destruction before it fell to obliterate anything and everything after its deadly descent.

We eventually had our own air-raid shelter in our garden, so our nightly rendezvous with our neighbors ceased. As things dragged on and I got a little older, my mother often eschewed the cold and damp shelter altogether, taking the fatalistic approach that if our time were up, so be it. We had had enough. We were tired, drained, and at the end of our tolerance.

There was the constant worry over my father's and uncles' safety. My father had been torpedoed in the Baltic; had survived the German U-boats in the Atlantic, where Royal Navy destroyers were protecting American ships bringing food to Britain; and had served his country in harrowing situations in Egypt and Africa. How much longer could his luck hold?



Nearly everyone had lost family and friends. Many had lost limbs, sight, and sanity. We were sometimes elated by news and other times in despair. I often lay awake at night worrying that Hitler would invade our shores and subjugate us as he had done in all the European countries he occupied. But, as a country, we held on, albeit with our fingernails, exhibiting that stiff upper lip for which we Brits are noted.

Finally, the war was over, first in Europe and then in Japan. My father and uncles all survived. My aunt had it on good authority, after all! Everyone was elated. People danced in the streets, and every neighborhood held parties with long tables running down the center of the road, where we sat down to the best meal they could muster. We children, who knew very little about what made the world go around, were so excited. Now all the promises of a different existence would be our reality. We expected great changes: sweets, toys, holidays—a wonder-world. But not quite yet. In fact, not for a very long time. Now came the challenges of postwar Britain.