

HOME... A HUMBLE BEGINNING

My mum thought she was a film star. On good days she was Ava Gardner, all cheekbones and lipstick, but on bad days she turned into Bette Davis and there was no telling what would happen. We lived with my grandparents in a first floor flat in London's East End, where Mum and I shared a bed in a cold, damp room. There was a fireplace, but Mum never lit the fire, preferring old coats thrown on the bed and a hot water bottle for our feet.

My grandparents slept in the large front bedroom where I spent hours searching for treasure in the towering wardrobes and secret drawers. Once, I discovered some newspaper cuttings about my Dad, when he was a boxer. Seems he won quite a few fights, but no one ever told me this, in fact they hardly spoke of him at all.

In the small front box room, I kept white mice in a cage. Only two at first, but they multiplied at a rate of knots, so they had to go. The room stayed empty after that, but the sour smell of their droppings lingered on.

The living room was the only warm spot in the house. It was heated by a big, black stove that we'd gather around and listen to the wireless. Sometimes, when we didn't have a shilling to put in the electric meter, we'd sit in the dark, glad of its glow, and at Christmas we'd sing carols. I liked that.

All through the winter we sat by the stove, eating meals from our laps and whiling away the hours as our legs grew more mottled by the day.

The precious wireless stood in pride of place on the sideboard while, above it, hung a large photo that was supposed to be of my Nan when she was a girl. She wore a white, embroidered blouse with big, puffed sleeves and her hair was wound like Katherine wheels over her ears. She didn't look anything like my old Nan with her miserable, nicotine stained mouth and her short, grey bob. I didn't get on with my Nan. In fact, when Mum went out, I'd hide away in my playroom just to keep out of her way.

In there I had a proper school desk, a toy telephone and piles of dressing up clothes, including two evening gowns made of satin and lace. There were old handbags, powder compacts with cracked mirrors and an evening purse covered in sequins, all bought from jumble sales. Here, in my private world, everything smelt of old, decaying by-gones but, thankfully, not of cigarettes.

The scullery, where the cats peed, was icy cold, so Mum would light the oven when she washed herself down at the sink...there was no bath. We heated water in a kettle on the gas ring and dried our underwear on the plate rack. The sink was shallow, with only one cold tap and I didn't like washing anyway so, when it was my turn, I'd kick and scream. Just catching me was a feat in itself. I'd hide under the bed, refusing to come out as Mum reached in, trying to grab me. Most of the time, she gave up and left me dirty. Looking back, there was an awful lot of dirt, but we didn't have any visitors so we didn't really care. In fact, the whole flat stank of cigarette smoke and cat's pee. It seeped through the cracked lino and into the rotting floorboards, catching my throat and making my eyes water, but I was a child and knew no different. We lived with umpteen cats and kittens because, back then, no one bothered to have their cats neutered.

It wasn't a bad life. Mum was often busy with her boyfriends, and I was left to my own devices which suited me just fine. I'd roam the streets, sit smoking on bomb sites, bunk off school and into the pictures, shoplift from Woolworths and spend hours just getting up to mischief with my fellow urchins. My grandparents were glad to have me out from under their feet, so everyone was happy.

Grandad was a quiet, sad soul, who sat all day long in front of the stove, comforted by a lap full of cats. His retirement clock stood on the mantelpiece, a reminder that he'd done his bit at the docks. Thirty years of lugging sacks with only a chiming clock to show for it. Like so many men of his generation, his spirit had been broken by the Great War, which, like my dad's boxing, was never spoken of.

Nan, on the other hand, was a small, darting whippet of a woman with a cigarette hanging permanently from her lips. She walked the length of the market every weekday, chatting to the traders, lunching in the pie and mash shop and, most importantly, betting on the horses. When I was very small, she'd stand me on a corner to keep a look out for policemen as she dealt with back street bookies. Not the best example for me.

On Sundays there wasn't any racing, so she'd stay home and cook a meal, but during the week Grandad made do with a pie from the shop or a slice of bread and sugar.. He didn't really care either way. Food didn't rate any higher than housework in our world.

Our groceries were bought 'on tick' from Mrs. Clarke's corner shop and usually consisted of sliced bread and tinned goods. I don't remember any fresh fruit or veg, but I do remember Mum's frequent trips to the Off Licence to buy sherry and cigarettes. Just like my Grandad, Mum was a dreamer and could usually be found sitting beside him with a cat spreadeagled on her lap as she searched it's belly for fleas. When the cat ran off, I'd clamber up for cuddles. Apart from dates with her boyfriends, Mum always had time for cuddles....and drawing.... and reading.... and singing songs like 'The man that got away' or 'Blues in the night'.

Sometimes she'd stir herself and take me to Annie's second hand shop where, every Tuesday, a delivery van would unload a pile of old clothes onto Annie's floor. Mum and I would wait until the man drove away and then drop to our knees to hunt for the good stuff: The balding fur coats and the fancy old frocks. Then there was the library, a sanctuary of hushed calm and order, where I would lose myself in story books while Mum, who spent her whole life in fantasy land, browsed in the Astrology and the Supernatural sections. She was not the perfect mother, but she was my everything. A wild woman, as crazy as she was lazy, who was weighed down by poor mental health and a broken broken heart.

When I was three my soldier dad died in Germany. Not a hero's death at the hands of the hun, but a purposeful leap under a double decker bus. Mum said he'd often threatened suicide, even told her how he'd do it, but nothing prepared her for the gut wrenching awfulness of the reality..

She went to pieces. Took to her bed and howled like an animal in pain.. I used to sit outside the door listening to her, longing for it to end. In desperation, Nan sent for Dr. Coen who prescribed Mandrax, a drug that has since been banned. Mum liked Mandrax..... took to it like a duck to water, and within weeks she was addicted. She still cried, but the tears were interspersed with giggles; a creepy, crazy sound that made us shudder.

I was left more and more in the care of my Nan , a grumpy, crosspatch of a woman, constantly moaning at Mum and me, especially when we giggled, which we often did: our life wasn't all gloom and misery. "It'll end in tears", she'd say, "you mark my words", and one day it did. I must have been about five or six and getting taller by the minute, so Mum decided to let down a hem on my dress. I tried to snatch the scissors and she accidentally stabbed my knee.. She was mortified! We didn't have bandages in the house, so she hastily wrapped a grubby, grey bra around my leg and carried me through the back streets to the hospital. My wound was cleaned and dressed by kind, starched nurses, but later, from behind the curtain, I heard them laughing at Mum's grubby, grey bra. I remember lying there on a trolley as familiar hot tears of shame and embarrassment trickled down my cheeks. I imagined I could hear my Nan's voice saying, "It'll end in tears, you mark my words."

Life was always unpredictable with Mum. She lived every hour as though she was up there on the silver screen. Glamorous she was, with legs like Betty Grable, which meant that men would hang around like dogs after a bitch. I played the role of her vicious, snappy terrier, and managed to see most of them off, but some clung on, especially Sid, who was forever hovering like a large shadow over our daily lives. Not the most handsome of suitors, he was, nevertheless, tall, solid, hard working and smartly dressed, but he was so boring that, when he came in the front door, I left through the back. Not least because the sheer mass of him took up most of our small living room. His great hands would flap about and he was always wiping his nose and waving his handkerchief, but he did have money, so Mum kept him in reserve, so to speak.

At one point he wanted us to live with him in his neat little house, but that would have meant Mum cooking and cleaning so it was never going to happen, although, having shared Mum's bed since my birth, I did rather fancy a room of my own, but alas, poor Sid's fate lay in the reject tray, along with many others.....including Ernie.

Ernie was dark and slimy, with Brylcreemed hair and a chalk stripe suit. Of all her boyfriends, he was the one who found me most difficult to cope with. Whether he took Mum to the cinema, the cafe or the pub, I was always there in my terrier role, hanging on...a sullen, scowling child that he tried to win round with toffees and chips, so that I grew fatter and more sullen by the day. When Mum wasn't looking, he'd often slap me. I did tell her, but she didn't seem bothered. Mind you, when he drowned his cat's kittens, she went barmy and dumped him straight away. Mum was always crazy about animals.

Ernie was replaced by Frank, and then came Eddie, followed by Doug. They practically stood in line round the block, all backed up by the ever present Sid, but Mum wasn't really interested in any one....until Bill came along. Bill was the new love of Mum's life. Tall, tanned, with dazzling white teeth and a thin moustache, he was the proverbial spiv.

He stole Mum's heart completely, but never once did he come calling as a proper boyfriend should. Instead, like a sleek and slippery lizard, he'd wait round the corner in his flashy car until she tottered out, leaving me to while away the evening with the grandparents. No amount of tantrums on my part would keep her away from Bill.

For years they kept up the romance, despite him being married with two children, then came the day when Mum found out that his wife was pregnant with a third child! I was standing with her in Mrs. Clarke's shop, waiting to be served, when two women began discussing Gladys (that was Bill's wife's name) and her unplanned baby.

Without a word, Mum stormed out and dashed to Bill's allotment where, with ferocious rage, she destroyed his beloved plot, pulling out prize gladioli, onions, carrots and any bulb she could find, hurling them far and wide with manic strength, breaking both wrists in the process. She ended up in the local hospital, having the drugs in her stomach pumped out. Bill, apparently, took one look at his allotment and laughed out loud. A bit of a Rhett Butler was Bill.

Like most addicts, Mum was often weighed down with pills and booze, and didn't know what she was doing. She'd flail about and sink rapidly into drama queen mode, playing out scenes that were in her head. The most common of which was 'The Burning of the Bed.'

She would take to said bed, down umpteen pills and a bottle of sherry, light a cigarette and set fire to the eiderdown, calling out for help as the flames took hold.

Nan and I would immediately morph into Fire Brigade mode and, armed with buckets and wet towels, we would rush to her aid. I remember Mum laying there, propped up on her pillow, taking quick, spiteful, Bette Davis drags from her cigarette, as we fought to save the bedding. This happened so often that, when she called for help, Nan and I would merely sigh and say, "Ere we go again".

Apparently, as a jilted teenager, Mum had actually put her head in the gas oven, so she was a bit of an actress long before Mandrax entered her life. Poor Mum, she was an artist, a writer, a beauty and a wit. When in her right mind, she was fabulous company and would make me cry with laughter... but those pills, those damn pills, stole her away.

Once, when I was about twelve years old, Mum stopped off at a record shop and bought 'When I fall in love' by Nat King Cole. She, herself, was all loved up with Bill at the time and in a really good mood. When we reached home she played the record over and over again, singing along with a dopey look on her face.

It didn't last. She had a row with Bill, hit the pills and took to her bed. I usually sat quietly downstairs when she went into a mood, but on this day I stupidly invited my friends in. I told them about the new record and, knowing I was taking a chance, agreed to play it very quietly.... but, not quietly enough. Despite her drugged stupor, she heard the opening bars of the song and, stark naked, came storming downstairs. She picked up the weighty Dansette record player and threw it through the window. Glass shattered out onto the pavement as my friends stood petrified then, with her head held high, Mum turned and marched back up to bed. I remember their pitiful looks as they left the house. One of them even put her hand on my shoulder, but no one spoke. They were probably saving it all up to tell their parents.

But life goes on and, although no one seemed to notice, I was growing up...too quickly. By the time I went to senior school I was well trained in the art of glamour and, just like Mum, I modelled myself on any actress who sprang to mind. At twelve, I was tall, confident and, with the aid of Mum's high heels and make-up, could pass for an adult, so when my best friend, Maggie, who was equally adept at faking her years, suggested that we try to get in to see an X film I jumped at the chance. We got in alright, but the film was a disappointing bio about a drug addict, starring Frank Sinatra. We'd hoped for unbridled passion or, at the very least, monsters, but 'Monkey On My Back' didn't even offer any Vampish women so, not wanting to waste our efforts with our make-up, we left early and went to the pub where a

nice man bought us gins and peppermint. It was almost too easy.

Maggie and I liked Vampish women. At school we always sat at the back of the class sketching dresses that we hoped one day to own. Figure hugging creations with low necklines and tight skirts that were more suited to West End whores than East End schoolgirls. We should have been concentrating on lessons, but lessons weren't cool and, if nothing else, Maggie and I were cool! She, more than me, with her peroxide hair and her love bites. We'd bunk off class sometimes and go to the pub with the motorbike boys, or get the bus to Epping forest, stealing milk from doorsteps to sustain us as we lazed all day in the sun... yep, the living really was easy.

Then suddenly I was fifteen and it was school leaving day. I stood in the playground saying goodbye to my friends with not a care in the world. No plans, no prospects and no worries because something would turn up, it always did.

My first job was in a shoe factory where I stood all day sliding inner soles into shoes. I would have been paid £4 10s a week, but I fainted on the third day and had to leave. I was obviously allergic to work, although I went on to notch up twenty two more jobs before the year was out, all of them menial and low paid. I just couldn't get the hang of this 'work ethic'.

Of course, being gainfully employed wasn't really uppermost in my mind at the time because, by now, I'd discovered boys and, just like Mum, I enjoyed shocking the neighbours.

Sometimes, when we knew they were watching, Mum and I would leave the house together. We'd saunter off, Mum towards her Bill's flashy car on one corner, and me towards my George on the other. Mum would open Bill's door, slide into the passenger seat then slowly swing her long, shapely legs in after her, before planting a kiss on Bill's cheek.

I would mimic Mum's actions and then, because I was fifteen and bolshy, I'd give a royal wave to the neighbours as George pulled noisily away. George was twenty five!

We were a blot on the landscape, my Mum and me, but we were both single, so we weren't doing anything wrong. Okay, Mum's Bill was married with kids and my George was a burglar by trade, but the neighbours weren't to know this, so why did they judge us?

Maybe it was the make up we wore, or the tight skirts...or maybe it was simply because we were having a good time...while they were stuck at home watching Sunday Night at the London Palladium with their dull husbands.

Anyway, Mum and I simply turned up the volume and let the good times roll.

Meanwhile, I half heartedly searched for jobs in the local paper and asked shopkeepers if there were any vacancies but, to be honest, I was living the life of Riley so why should I get a job? Boyfriends took me out, bought me drinks and fed me, while my girl friends lent me their clothes to go dancing, so I didn't need a regular wage. Mum grew more and more angry.

"I'll rip their clothes into shreds", she threatened as I waltzed through life looking like a model in a magazine without doing a single day's work. I thought her threats were idle but, with the aid of a few pills and a bottle of port, she rose up one day like a She Devil and tore into my borrowed treasures, reducing them to ribbons.

Wracked with guilt and the old familiar shame, I hid at home for days, afraid to show my face in case someone asked me to return their much loved frock, then one day, as I cowered in the front room, there came a knocking at the door. My friends had had enough! They'd joined ranks to retrieve their clothes and this was the day of reckoning. My shame weighed heavier than ever as I stood at the door explaining what had happened. They could

have screamed at me, demanded recompense...but they knew what my Mum was like, so they took pity on me and simply let me off. I was humbled by their kindness and swore to get a job the very next day so I could pay them all back. Needless to say, I did no such thing.

Of course, not holding down a job and having too many boyfriends weren't my only failings. I'd also developed a habit of going missing for days, sometimes weeks. Mum was a regular visitor to the police station to report my absence and my reputation grew worse by the day. One of my first boyfriends was a handsome lad who played modern jazz records from morning 'til night. He lived in a shared house in Highbury where the windows rattled, the lavatory was two flights down and the kitchen was filthy. He did ask me if I'd like to clean it one day but, being my mother's daughter, I declined. I was only interested in the good times, of which there were many. He took me to pubs and jazz clubs and dog racing at White City. I was enjoying myself too much to hurry home, and anyway, Mum was in and out of mental hospitals by now, so there wasn't much to go home to.

I'd visit her, with my Grandad, in these gloomy, gothic style asylums. One was in Woodford and the other in Brentwood so it took an hour to get there on the bus and then there was the long walk from the main gate to whichever looming tower she was locked in.

Some inmates were allowed to walk around the grounds. They'd ask Grandad for cigarettes and talk nonsense, so we ignored them. Once inside, it was yet more walking, along endless corridors where I often saw a woman silently padding along with her skirt gathered up around her waist. She wore no underwear. Mum was always in a locked ward. We'd find her staring out of the window, chain smoking, as giant tears rolled down her cheeks. These were her Bette Davis days when, try as I might, I could not reach her so, like a delinquent feral cat, I grew more and more out of control. Inevitably, I was soon put on probation.

Miss Pile, my probation officer, welcomed me with open arms. Some of my friends were already on her books and now here I was, the supposed ringleader. She took great pleasure in warning me that, unless I changed my ways, I would be sent to an approved school. I stood before her with lowered eyes, heeding her words and promising to mend my ways...and then I did what I always did. I ran away!

On a soft, warm evening in early summer I skipped out of the house, calling back to my Nan, "Won't be late". I'd planned my get away with Reg, the latest boyfriend, who waited on the corner in a rusty old van, with a mattress and a dirty grey blanket in the back. With any luck, this rotting chariot would carry me far away from Miss Pile and her threats but, whatever happened, it would be an adventure. I felt like Juliet with her Romeo as we sped off, not knowing that just like her, I was doomed...but not yet. In the meantime, we had a ball! Every morning we bathed at the public baths before heading to Victoria Park to frolic and sunbath with our friends. We ate in caffs and spent our evenings in coffee bars before curling up together for nights of passion under the dirty grey blanket. He was funny and handsome and over 6ft tall. I fell in love!

Our adventure was financed by his Mum, who spent every lunchtime knocking back pints of Guinness in the gloom of The Coach and Horses. Her generosity depended, of course, on how drunk she was, so we timed our visit for 3pm, closing time. It was all so easy. The sun shone, the nights were warm and we were oh so young...this truly was our summer of love.

But our Utopian days were numbered. September reared it's damp, misty head and the cold nights began to bite. Sleeping badly under the thin, grey blanket, we grew ratty and argued over nothing at all until one evening, desperately in need of a good night's sleep, we broke into a holiday chalet in Essex where, in a real bed with clean blankets, we slept the sleep of the innocents.

The next morning we woke to the sound of voices...angry voices. The owners of the chalet had turned up, seen us through the window and called the police. The party was well and truly over.