

A HOLIDAY FROM THE WAR

The train ride

31st august 1939

The dead silence in the dark carriage sent shivers through my spine. The only noise was the faint click of the wheels rotating on the old rusty track. Not a person expressed any excitement though I could tell there was the tiny bit of hope for an adventure deep down. The mystery of the journey ahead and the destination was about to be revealed. I wasn't sure whether to find it daunting or grasp the moment as it might be one of the most exhilarating opportunities of my life.

Someone at the front of the carriage spoke the first words to a friendly teacher I recognised from my school. "Where are we going Miss?" the boy questioned. The teacher looked deeply into the dark fear of wonder in the boy's eyes. She looked up at us all and gave a tiny little smile desperately trying to brighten our spirits.

"The Borders, the Borders between Scotland and England," she replied. Allan stared up at me looking completely clueless. I smiled at him trying to look like I myself had some sort of clue what the words just spoken meant but I was really truly confused. All of this overwhelmed me and I found the responsibility of caring for my brother rather intimidating. I was as scared as him.

"Why are we leaving Mum, I want to go home to London. I don't like this Margaret." Allan looked at me with such a sad, innocent look it felt like he stabbed at my heart. I answered him truthfully.

"There is a war. A man named Hitler is going to bomb London. The government have forced us to leave home to a place where we will be safe." I pushed the hair away from his eyes. I regretted telling so much to a boy only the age of six. I wished I didn't know so much myself. "Don't worry, it's like a little holiday," I said trying to comfort him by sounding a bit excited.

Arriving at the Borders

We all stood in Town Hall feeling like dolls being displayed on the shop shelf. A tag hung from everybody's neck with their name and other personal details. I felt like a package being delivered except the destination was still in the dark. The seriousness of all this made me stand up straight and smile to look presentable. I rubbed at a spot of dirt on Allan's cheek, I looked at him from head to toe. We really were very grubby. I honestly couldn't remember the last time I had a bath. "Why do we have to take a filthy evacuee? They're just a waste of our time," people argued with the Billeting Officer at the front.

"I'll take that one." I heard as other people pushed and shoved to grab a child. A kind looking lady approached us with a sweet smile. She looked at us. "Is that your sister?" She bent down whispering to Allan. He nodded, not able to help himself but to smile back at her. "Do you both want to stay with me for a while?" The sparkle in her eyes would make anyone feel stupid to say no.

"This is it," Mrs. Mitchell said stopping the motor vehicle. The landscape was incredible. Back in London, Mum used to tell us stories about places with grass as green as a fresh Granny Smith apple and trees so tall you can't see where they end. I used to dream about this fantasy place never

thinking I would ever end up here. The air smelt fresh and I was finally away from dirty London and our cramped apartment. Allan was obviously thinking the same because he stood there with his mouth wide open and his eyes so big I thought they were going to pop. As we started following Mrs. Mitchell towards what must have been her house two girls started running at us. "Girls this is Margaret and Allan, they are going to stay with us until the war is over. I want you to make sure they are comfortable until their mother comes and gets them," Mrs. Mitchell introduced us revealing her sweet smile at us again.

"Hi, I'm Annie and this is my younger sister Betty," a girl about my age stood there grinning from ear to ear. Her hair was tied back very neatly and her clothes were pristine. She was so perfect she looked like a picture. Standing next to her stood a girl looking exactly the same except a little smaller and her smile seemed even bigger if possible.

"This farm is incredible," I said sounding like it was the most amazing thing I had ever seen.

"Thanks, it's been in our family for generations. We are true farmers. I have only ever lived here," Annie said in a very proud sounding tone.

"And I was born here," little Betty told us all like it was her prized possession. They all rolled their eyes, it obviously wasn't a new statement.

"I guess you children are exhausted after the long trip. Why don't you go inside and wash up and the girls can help me sort out tea," Mrs. Mitchell said leading us into the big beautiful house. The house was very grand. We walked down the hall into a room covered from top to bottom in incredibly fancy tiles; I had never seen such a fancy bathroom in my life. I never knew it was possible to have such a fancy bathroom.

"What happened to your hair?" Betty asked in a very disgusted tone running her fingers up and down my hair.

"Betty!" Annie shouted at her. "That's really rude, you don't say that." I looked at my hair in the mirror. It wasn't anything like theirs. Theirs was thin and straight and mine was all tangled in a massive clump. I must have appeared as a filthy, grotty little girl that never had a bath to them. I felt really embarrassed. Annie saw the distressed look on my face. "If you wash it I can brush and braid it for you if you like?" she kindly offered. I didn't understand what she meant but I knew she meant well so I just nodded and gave her a small smile. The bathroom smelt of the wonderful rich lavender fragrance. As it filled my lungs it warmed my insides.

"Well I'll leave you some privacy. There is a towel there when you are done and Annie might have some of her old clothes that might fit you," Mrs. Mitchell said leaving the room. "Come on girls, Betty you can show Allan your room until Margaret is done if you like."

That night as my head hit the soft, fluffy pillow my brain raced with different thoughts and emotions. I had a fantastic night. Mrs. Mitchell had given us so much to eat I felt like if I had eaten another mouthful I would have exploded. Tea was absolutely delicious though; it was something Mum had never cooked. I felt so guilty for eating so much but I couldn't help myself. After the massive meal we all sat around the fire telling funny stories and laughing until our tummies ached. The fear and dread once in me earlier had gone and we all got on together like a house on fire. I had forgotten all the worry about Mum.

A New Lifestyle

Weeks passed and the weeks turned into months. Every day I spent on the Mitchell's farm brought a new and adventurous but exciting experience. In the beginning Annie and Betty taught Allan and me all the ways they helped out on the farm. We loved getting to try out the farm life experience. We learnt about all the care and effort you put into all the different animals. I had never realised how much work a farm comes with. Mr. Mitchell took Allan for a ride in his tractor and he didn't shut up about it for ages, he thought it was the most terrific thing. Annie and Betty are so lucky to live on such an extraordinary farm. While Betty and Allan got up to all sorts of mischief together, Annie taught me things like knitting, though I was never as good as her.

That September we all started school and I had gotten used to Allan being there too. When I first started I hadn't known anyone but after some time I could say that I had made good friends. My teacher was really funny and made school very exciting and enjoyable. We learnt about interesting things and every minute of school was a fantastic new learning opportunity which I tried to grasp.

At the weekends we did different chores around the farm helping out with the animals; collecting eggs from the chickens, milking the cows and feeding the sheep. We helped Mrs. Mitchell with her magnificent vegetable patch; she had potatoes so big you had to hold them with two hands, so many carrots there were enough to feed us and all the rabbits and turnips the size of footballs. The four of us went off exploring the beautiful fields and picking the fresh wild berries. The fields had a magical feel to them and I loved nothing more than wandering through them with not a care in the world.

At night we sat around the fire playing games and telling jokes in the beautiful grand living room hidden from the bitter cold outside. It felt like we were a big family, you could never tell the Government was paying the Mitchell's to look after us. As we sat there I couldn't imagine what Mum might be doing. I desperately wished she could be here with us.

Allan had a different story to tell. Although he loved playing with Betty at home and the care from Mrs. Mitchell, he hated having to go to school. He grumped in the mornings and whinged that Mum wouldn't have forced him to go to school like we did. When he arrived at school he lost the security he felt at the farm and he was all alone. He didn't fit in with the other kids and spent his time being lonely, and not feeling the security he had the right to. I knew he was miserable at school and felt hopeless not being able to do anything. He didn't cry at first but after a few weeks he started crying for Mum every night. Listening to him cry made me feel terrible and like I should be miserable too. Every night I comforted him and told him that any day soon Mum would come and get us but I knew for certain that wasn't true.

Most days I still asked Mr and Mrs. Mitchell if they had heard any news about bombs in London and luckily, every time I got the same answer, "Don't worry about it Maggie. You know that if there are any bombs we will tell you. Your Mum is safe; you shouldn't worry so much." I felt guilty that I was enjoying myself so much. I felt like it wasn't fair that I was there having the time of my life and at home in London people were fearing for their lives. It was impossible not to have the time of your life being on the farm with the Mitchells as it was such a marvellous place with such kind, generous people.

As the weather got colder we spent more time indoors reading, playing board games and Mrs. Mitchell started to teach both Allan and me how to play the piano. Despite the war there was great excitement in the lead up to Christmas. We went in the tractor to the forest at the edge of the farm and Mr. Mitchell cut down the biggest Christmas tree I had ever seen. We took it back to the farm

house and we all helped decorate it. Looking at it that night with the lights twinkling I knew it was going to be a very magical Christmas. There were many gatherings leading up to Christmas with the local farmers and farm workers taking the opportunity to enjoy the Mitchell's hospitality. Most nights we sang Christmas carols around the fire and at times I forgot that this life was temporary.

The winter was long and we were told it had been a long time since there had been so much snow. We all loved spending time in the snow, we never got that in London. Everyone was on the lookout for spring. Gradually the days got longer, the temperature got warmer and there was a smell of spring in the air. Looking back this was my favourite time of year at the farm; daffodils lined the country roads, there were lambs leaping around in the lush green fields, there were calves needing to be bottle fed and there was a sense of happiness all around. Apart from the strict rations you wouldn't have known there was a horrible war going on outside of the Mitchells farm.

Months passed and everything was still as fun and exciting as before. School finished and the school holidays began. The school holidays meant even more fun times and adventures. Not once did I get bored of living on the farm and the holidays meant I got to spend even more time roaming the fields and helping Mrs. Mitchell with daily chores, which I loved. Allan eventually grew to like school and made friends. He stopped crying at nights but I could tell he still really missed Mum. During the holidays he spent a lot of time with Mr. Mitchell out in the fields and around the farm yards. He also made friends with the boys in the farm workers cottages. I couldn't bring myself to think that my life would return to how it was in London, it was just perfect where we were.

An Unexpected Visitor

It was a warm, sunny afternoon and Annie and I had gone for a wander into the fields to find wild berries. I was completely unaware of the events to occur. We were heading back to the house having gorged ourselves on juicy, fresh strawberries; Scottish strawberries really are delicious. We walked through the house into the living room. I stopped suddenly. I rubbed my eyes to see if I was imagining things. "Mum," a tiny squeak came out of my mouth. In the corner of the room sat Mum on Mrs. Mitchell's antique chair. Allan sat on her lap, his arms tightly clasped around her neck. She gently prized Allan off her as she stood to her feet.

I stood in Mum's arms for what seemed like ages. The tight grasp of her arms was so comforting. Having her there, knowing she was there brought tears to my eyes. It was such a moment of joy and I didn't want her to ever let go. Her lips met my forehead. "Oh my baby girl," she cried still holding me tightly. I pulled away to look at her face.

"What are you doing here?" I asked finally finding my voice again.

"As you probably know there hasn't been any bombs," she paused as if to think how to tell me it.

"Yeah," I answered slowly nodding for her to go on.

"I have come to take you home. We will be safe there. We will look after each other." She smiled at me, her eyes twinkling just like Mrs. Mitchell's. "I have missed you my gorgeous," Mum whispered in my ear.

Thoughts rapidly raced in my mind. Did I really want to leave the farm and go back to my old life in London? I knew I had to go back, but now? I couldn't think. I looked at Mum, her face looked exhausted and though she looked happy to see me you could tell she was tired and sad. Allan in the

corner looked so happy and peaceful that he finally had his Mum back, but Mum being there only confused me.

“Mum, you have to listen to me.”

“What is it?” Mum didn’t sound anything but concerned and her face looked ready to listen.

“I...I...” I stuttered looking down at the ground. “I can’t go. I can’t go back to London, not now. Please. Please let me stay,” I begged feeling sick with guilt. Mum’s face went completely blank, she stood there like that, with no expression, just staring into space.

“I don’t understand Maggie, I thought you would want to come back.”

“I love it here Mum. Of course I have missed you, I just...” I was lost for words. Why didn’t I want to go back?

“Why doesn’t she stay until the end of next term and then everything can go back to the way it was?” Mrs. Mitchell offered, smiling sweetly at Mum. “We really do love having her here you know.”

“Well if that’s what you want Maggie then you can stay. I am very sorry but we have to catch the early train if we want to get back so we can’t stay any longer. Thank you so much Mrs. Mitchell for looking after her, I really do appreciate it a lot.” She kissed my forehead. “Are you sure about this?” Mum whispered to me.

“Yes,” I whispered truly having no idea.

“Tell me if you want to come home and I will come and get you. Don’t forget.” she looked me up and down. “I promise I’ll write if you do too.”

“Promise.”

Waving goodbye to Mum and Allan was the absolute most dreadful thing I have ever done. It felt like I had a brick sitting in my stomach. That farewell played in my mind like a big blur. Letting Mum down like that was a feeling that I never ever wanted to feel again. Did I really just do what I did?

Back to Normal Again

School started and things went back to normal again. The day Mum arrived still bothered me but I tried not to let it. I asked Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell twice a day if they had heard of any bombs and you couldn’t imagine my relief that there wasn’t. I couldn’t imagine what I would do if something did happen to Mum and Allan. Mum wrote to me once a week and I always wrote back to her. She said everything was fine; Allan was happy but missed me and she was the same. At the end of every letter she always finished with the same thing. ‘If you want to come home I will come and get you. Don’t forget.’

The new school year was great. I still loved helping out on the farm and never got sick of being there. Although it was very strange not having Allan there I understood that he was happier in London.

There was a warm summer glow about and I often spent my afternoon staring at the sun shining on the beautiful green fields and reflecting on how lucky we were the day Mrs. Mitchell picked us out from the crowd at Town Hall more than a year ago.

My Darkest Day

7th September 1940

It was a dull rainy day and Annie and I had walked home together. I had a weird feeling in my stomach but I had no idea why. As soon as we opened the back door of the farm house I saw Mrs. Mitchell, who had obviously been waiting for us to return from school. As I looked into her eyes I knew something terrible had happened. I could see that Mr. Mitchell was close behind her. My mind froze. "I am sorry Maggie," Mrs. Mitchell crouched down grabbing my hands. "Our local Army Officer came to the door today. He told us that there had been a bombing in London during the night."

"Are they alright?" my voice croaked trembling with fear. "They are alright aren't they, Mum and Allan are alright?" Tears came to my eyes as I continued to stare at Mrs. Mitchell, who couldn't seem to find words. The silence was the most painful time I had ever experienced. It went on for what felt like an eternity.

Eventually Mr. Mitchell stepped forward, put his arm around my shoulders, and spoke the words I had been fearing since Mum left. "I am so sorry Maggie; they have both gone."

Despite Mr. Mitchell having his arm around my shoulders, my knees gave way, and I collapsed to the floor. "NOOOOO" I cried at the top of my lungs. I could hear the throb of my heart thumping in my head. I sat there blankly in shock, not knowing what to think. All I could see were the faces of Mum and Allan as they waved goodbye from the train heading back to London only a month before. I remember standing there, feeling guilty, not going and not knowing that was the last time I would ever see their beautiful faces again. I couldn't, I wouldn't, I refused to believe that they were gone. Surely it wasn't true, they couldn't be gone. Tears rolled down my cheeks like a river rapidly flowing after lots of rain. My body shook all over and I felt a sense of being all alone in the world. I was nothing more than a lonely little orphan. "What happened to them?" My voice coming out nothing more than a tiny squeak.

"The man said they were found holding one another tightly in each other's arms under rubble. He said the reason they were able to find you so quickly was that in your mother's bag she had all the letters you had written to her. Some of the neighbours that survived said that she never went anywhere without them. She really loved you." Mr. Mitchell said, trying to console me.

Reflecting

As I now look back to the horrible times of World War Two, although the sadness has never left me of losing my beloved Mum and brother, I know that my life was not the only one that was affected. The Blitz continued in London until May 1941. Thousands of Londoners lost their lives in the nightly bombings. Many of the local farmers faced tragedy as well as they learnt that their young sons would not be returning from the battlefields. After a few more years spent with Mr and Mrs. Mitchell they became Mum and Dad to me. Not a day goes by without me wondering what would have happened had I gone back to London with Mum and Allan that day, all those years ago. If I did, I might not be here right now telling my story. I am so grateful that after my loss I got to stay with the Mitchell's and that on the 31st of August 1940 Mrs. Mitchell took us not only into her farm, but into her family.