



BIRTHDAY

So here I am, a newborn baby asleep in a drawer borrowed from a chest of drawers, a makeshift cot. It is January and snowing. The house I am in belongs to a stranger – I have had to be farmed out to a woman nearby who has a baby of her own because my mother had a difficult delivery and was rushed to hospital from the house in which I was actually born, my maternal grandmother's, Mamam. That house is a tiny terraced house in a village near the wild coast.

My mother had travelled a hundred miles from her in-law's farm in order to have her baby in the only place a woman gets tender loving care, and that is in her own mother's home. On this occasion there was illness in the tiny house: Papa was being nursed in a bed which had been brought down to the front parlour, he having double pneumonia, while Mamam was blind with cataracts.

My merry spinster aunt also lived there and could not nurse a newborn baby as well. Hence the makeshift cot, the drawer, the glass feeding bottle with rubber teat and the absence of immediate doting family.

We all survived this crisis, apart from my mother rejecting me at birth, so goes the story, because I was born with carrot-red hair. The offending colour eventually fell out, my father's blond genes asserted themselves and my mother's maternal instincts were revived.

MILK DELIVERY

Soft voices wake me, speaking in Welsh, and I am leaning out of the window of the same terraced house, gazing down at the scene outside. It is early morning on a summer's day, the scent of sea air mingling with that of heavily green trees and tiny wildflowers growing in crevices everywhere. The slow drag of a fat little carthorse's hooves announces the arrival of Mr Jenkins the Milk, or it may have been Mr Jones the Milk. My merry spinster aunt is ordering extra, 'We've got our visitors here, Mr Jenkins!' She holds out two big china jugs for him to ladle warm, frothy milk into from churns high up on the cart. The milk is warm because it has not long left the body heat of Mr Jenkins' cows on his nearby farm. The cream has not settled yet, but when it does... 'Diolch yn fawr, Mr Jenkins, bore da.' All speech was in Welsh, of course, the lovely fulsome northern Welsh which my father used to tease my mother about due to its broad vowels. She in turn would scoff back at his 'southy' accent. I grew up in a totally Welsh-speaking environment, on both sides of the family, so that when I started school I was sent back home for a term to be taught English. Thus, I learnt English via the newspaper cartoon Rupert Bear. My mother used to spread it out on the floor, and I would slowly begin to read and speak English. I loved the adventures of Rupert and his friends.





COLLECTING THE EGGS

This painting depicts the henhouse and the marvellous expedition I would go on, with great trepidation, upon Mamgu's instructions. With a wide metal bowl tucked under my arm, large enough to hold about three dozen newly laid eggs – white, cream, brown, speckled – I would definitely be running the gauntlet because the hens and cockerels, objected strongly by attacking me, and flying at me to get this intruder, this little girl, out of their henhouse, their citadel. I had to feel around in any empty nests; very often there would be nothing in this lovely warm bowl of yellow straw. At other times I'd have to squeeze my hand underneath a heavy, hot-feathered hen, if I could see eggs peeping out from under it, 'shoo' it away, quickly seize the eggs, very gently and carefully, then lower them gently into the metal bowl.

I would race off at top speed – it had to be a very fast exercise in case I got pecked to death or feathered to death or suffocated by a million motes in the sun-beamed air, tiny feathers blinding me and choking me. Sometimes Mamgu would hear the racket and come to see if I was alright, and were the hens alright? But the pride of having such marvellous treasures to carry back, such smooth and delicate objects, nature's nourishment for enterprising mankind, was overwhelming.



SUNDAY TEA

This painting demonstrates the bounty of Sunday tea at Mamgu's. I note that it is remarkable for the paucity of women present, Gu and I being the only females. The rest were uncles, cousins, my father and brother, the reason being bachelorhood, widowhood or illness. Everyone would be in their best Sunday clothes to properly mark their day of rest. A few painting corrections leap at me, for example the colour of the fruit tart pastry tops shouldn't be golden brown but white, speckled with fine black soot from the inside of the cast-iron coal-fired oven. Strangely, the flavour of shortcrust pastry made with flour and lard wasn't affected, providing delicious support to fruits from the farm – gooseberries, redcurrants, blackcurrants, apples and sometimes blackberries from wild hedgerows. We also had tinned peaches, considered a luxury, plus tinned cream, likewise very posh. Human beings are very funny, today it's the other way round and a certain superiority lies in home-produced food.



GANGSTERS

In this scene we can see the contrast in the children's lives compared to Mamgu's life, her own childhood. I don't suppose she ever had as much fun as we had, although childhood often carries its own inner protection from too much comprehension of the enormity of adult responsibilities and struggles. So here we are, her son, my father, is driving our Ford 8, CNY 616, round and round in a meadow whilst we children stand on the running boards, balancing on one leg and clinging on by our fingernails. My father used to do the same up in the farmyard, its submerged boulders challenging our wits as we were hurled from side to side, up and down.

The scenario is 'gangsters', inspired by the black and white films we saw at children's matinees down in the town. These were a rare, ecstatic treat, made so by stopping at a sweetshop and buying a six-squared bar of delicious milk chocolate, each pair of squares filled with cream of different flavours – strawberry was the favourite. The Ford 8 merry-go-round was quite dangerous but it was lovely to frighten yourself by fearing you were going to fall off. My father seemed to get in the spirit of it, being a child at heart and a rather reckless one at that, but it meant that for a brief moment we were all converted from a crowd of Welsh farm children to a sinister gang of Chicago gangsters, the silver screen having a great influence on all our lives.