

PROLOGUE - PATTERNS OF OUR LIVES

NOVEMBER 2010

Cameras flash as I mount the steps to The Forum Exhibition Centre. A glittering crowd of city dignitaries and well-wishers waits to greet me and other celebrated Norfolk names. There's a buzz of conversation, a sea of excited fans, arms holding up cameras and mobile phones.

'Mrs Freeman,' someone calls above the clamour, 'how does it feel to be famous at your age?'

My agent hurries me along.

'There'll be an opportunity for questions after dinner,' she tells the press.

But the question has lodged in my thoughts. I've often searched for the answer to that one. It still amazes me that all these people want to talk to me. I never sought fame. How *does* that make me feel?

Unreal.

I take hold of my agent's arm and I'm still thinking about the journalist's question as we enter the dining hall. The room is very grand. High ceilings and lots of chrome and glass reflecting light from massive light fittings. I couldn't call them chandeliers; they're too modern for that with arms that go off at unusual angles. I rather like them. I appreciate a mix of old and new, a bit like this building and me.

There are waiters everywhere wearing livery and serious faces. But, I'm just Audrey Freeman. How did all this happen?

Who could have guessed the impact of my paintings and bronzes of a goose playing with a baby? Who could have foreseen the popularity of Walsingham Matilda? She's a household name today. She's why I'm here.

We're moving toward the top table where there's an ice sculpture of one of my own creations. It's very good. I tell my agent so. The artist has captured Matilda's expression, her way of tilting her head at you.

Matilda the goose is with her own kind now where she belongs. She was literally a flying visitor in my life who stayed for the briefest time and in that short episode changed everything. Her image will stay with me forever. I often look at the photographs I took of her.

We take our places at the top table. The waiter behind my chair looks like a schoolboy, very nervous. I smile at him and I can tell he doesn't know whether he's supposed to smile back. No matter. I can't worry about that just now. The room grows noisy; voices buzz. I want to laugh at the heavy seriousness of all this ceremony. I want to tell my mother about it.

How strange to think that now.

You want to tell your mother, Audrey? Good grief, woman, get a grip.

But, even elderly women like me have those thoughts from time to time. I don't think you ever stop thinking about your mother.

Everybody keeps old photograph albums, don't they? With all those little black and white snaps glued inside? Pictures of your parents or grandparents sitting on a picnic rug in the park with a huge *Silver Cross* pram in the background. Hundreds of little photographs taken with an old *box brownie* in the days before digital cameras and computers and all the rest?

I will always treasure all my old albums. Family pictures are important to me. I often take them out and look at them. But I know now those small, square prints are only illusions. They are veiled

images of fleeting moments exactly like the ones taken outside just now. They are like covers on a novel; they don't tell you everything.

I have learned the truth behind the snapshots in my family album and it doesn't matter. It isn't a problem. When I think of my mother, it's still the face of a young Jean Thompson that I see. There she sits in the favourite photograph I have of her, proudly posing with the silver trophy she had won for her gymnastics. Jean Thompson, with her long legs sprawled in front of her and her thighs disappearing into a pair of woolly gym knickers. She was a remarkable woman. Her story couldn't happen today. Nor mine.

PART ONE

ONE

SNAPSHOTS 1935-1937

Jean Thompson raced along the street, the soles of her shoes ringing against the sandstone pavement. People stared and made way for the twelve year old as she flew past, her hair tousled and bouncing around her face, her arms pumping at her sides. Long legs stretching out, she crossed over the main road in six easy strides and continued on around the corner by the grocery store. Down the lane and past the Drill Hall, she darted around another corner and disappeared into a narrow alleyway between two rows of houses. She slowed at the end of the passageway where it opened into a large shared courtyard at the back of the houses. She came to rest on the doorstep of her sister's house. Catching her breath, she hammered on the door and bellowed.

'Hilda. Hilda! Let me in. It's me. Let me in. Quick.'

A man's bespectacled face appeared at the window, disappeared and then the door opened. Jean fell inside.

'George, I want Hilda,' she gasped, collapsing into a chair by the fire grate.

'She's not here, love. She's on late turn today. Won't be back for another couple hours.'

Jean leaned forward, rested her head on her knees, threw her arms over her head and sobbed loudly.

'Now then,' George said, his voice kind and soft, 'what's going on?'

George had a different way of speaking. He was the only foreigner Jean knew. His English pronunciation was a mixture of the sounds of his Polish roots and the Yorkshire accent he'd acquired since leaving his homeland as a small boy. Jean knew her parents disapproved of Hilda's choice of husband. He was five years younger than Hilda and Jean had heard her parents call him names. But it didn't matter to her that he was a foreigner. He was kind and she liked him. She admired his thick black hair and Clark Gable moustache. When he took his glasses off he was quite good-looking.

'Come on, Jean,' he said. 'Tell me what has happened.'

'It's them, me mam and dad,' she said between sobs. 'They're at it again. She's got him pinned up against the mantelpiece with the sweeping brush against his neck.'

Jean heard George sigh. She'd lost count of the times George had done his best to intervene. It made no difference. Mary and Charlie, Jean and Hilda's parents, would never stop having a go at each other, whatever anybody said. George knelt beside her and stroked her hair out of her eyes.

'How did it start this time?' he asked.

'They came in from the Black Horse and me mam started to make us our tea. Me dad sat down at the table on a stool, and forgot he wasn't on a chair. He leaned back and fell right over backwards. I couldn't help laughing, George, honest I couldn't 'cos his legs went up in the air and he rolled over backwards. He just looked so stupid all in a heap on the floor. I couldn't stop laughing.'

George put his hand over his mouth. Then he said,

'What happened next?'

'He got mad. He got right mad with me. He got up and started unbuckling his belt. Me mam saw what he was going to do and grabbed the sweeping brush. I legged it. George, she'll kill 'im. He's so drunk he doesn't know where he is. She'll kill 'im!'

'No she won't, no she won't. She'll get him into bed to sleep it off, that's what she'll do. Now come here, and sit up at the table and I'll get you something to drink. We've got Dandelion and Burdock. You like that, don't you?'

Jean stopped her sobbing and wiped her eyes. She got up from the fireside chair and went to the table. George took the fizzy drink from the cupboard by the sink and handed it to her. She drained the glass and thanked him.

'George?'

'Yes?'

'Do you think I could come and live with you and our Hilda?'

'I think we'd better wait till she comes home before we start talking about that, love. Now don't start crying again. You'll give yourself headache. Just be patient a bit. We'll talk about it later. I promise. Right then, let's go to the park, and on the way back we'll get some fish and chips. How does that sound?'

'It sounds nice. But George?'

'What?'

'Do we have to go to the park? I'm too old for swings.'

'Don't be daft, lass. You're never too old for swings. Come on, Twinkletoes, I'll race you.'



By the time George caught up with her and came puffing into the playground area of the public park, Jean was sitting waiting for him. She was trailing her toes in the dust below the swing, rocking gently to and fro, her arms wrapped around the chains.

'What kept you?' she said.

'Less of your cheek,' George said.

'Ha, ha,' she laughed. 'You'll have to do better than that if you want to catch me.'

'Jean Thompson, where did you learn to run like that?' George said as he took the swing next to her. 'You're the fastest thing I've ever seen on two legs.'

'I know. I don't know why. I just can, that's all. I can even beat all the boys.'

George smiled. It wouldn't be long before she learned different. The time wasn't too far away when she'd know to slow down and let the boys catch her. She had a pretty face underneath all that wild hair, a slim figure and long legs. She was at that age when girls needed guidance about growing up into nice, young ladies. She wouldn't get that from her parents. Hilda would be the best one to help Jean with all those women's problems.

'Miss Linford says I might be able to go in for some competitions when I'm a bit older.'

'That's good news. What does your mother say?'

He regretted the words as soon as he said them. Fool, he told himself. The child doesn't need reminding about that useless pair, propping up the bars till throwing out time, making a comedy of themselves in front of the whole town.

'She says I have to leave school and get a job.'

'Well that won't stop you going to your evening club, though, will it? You'll still be able to do your sports.'

Jean stopped rocking on the swing and her face clouded.

'It might stop me if I have to go down the mill. Hilda says working down there isn't good for you. It made her cough.'

'Yes, love that's why she left and went on the trolley buses.'

'She told me how being out in the fresh air, even if it's raining is better than breathing in all that fluff. Do you remember, she used to come home with fluffy bits all over her hair and clothes?'

'She did.'

George smiled at Jean's innocence. There was no doubt, she was a lovely girl and she didn't deserve to have Mary and Charlie for parents. He would like to take her in and help her grow and develop into a proper young woman. She didn't have Hilda's strength and determination. She couldn't stand up to her parents like Hilda had. She needed someone to look out for her. It would be an honour to step in and help the only family he had. As far as he was concerned, the time had come to put things right. Let Mary and Charlie continue their carry-on. Let them give all their money to the landlords, making a laughing stock of themselves. Let Jean come and live with them, where she'd have some security, some stability. He and Hilda would love her as their own daughter. And if ever they did have little ones of their own, why, it would be better still. He could hardly wait for Hilda to come home from work to tell her the news.



They heard her coming. Jean recognised the rhythm of her sister's footsteps echoing through the narrow passageway as she strode up to the door.

'Hello,' she said, kissed her husband and kicked off her shoes. 'Have you come for tea, Jean? Everything all right, love?'

George pursed his lips and signalled to Jean not to say anything yet.

'Fish and chips keeping warm in the oven,' he said. 'Are you ready to eat, Hilda?'

'Just give me a minute.' She put her jacket on a coat hanger and hung it behind the back door. At the butler's sink in the corner of the room, she washed away the grimy evidence of all the coins she'd handled through her day's work.

Proudly, George regarded his wife. She was twenty six and beautiful. In her stockings feet she cut a neat and tidy figure, more petite than her young sister with smaller features and paler colouring. She wore her fair hair in a short bob that stopped at the collar of her conductress's uniform, which she kept immaculately pressed.

'Look at these,' she said, holding out her hands. 'I'll never have nice nails in this job. I've broken two today, scrabbling for change in my money pouch.'

She pulled on a cotton wrap-around pinafore over her white shirt and rolled up her sleeves. 'Come on, then. Let's tuck in.'

George waited till after supper was finished and things cleared away. He winked at Jean.

'Hilda,' he said. 'Jean's got something to tell you. Haven't you, love?'

The story wasn't long in the telling. Jean raced through the events culminating in the sweeping brush, the mantelpiece and the unbuckling of Charlie's belt. Hilda dashed up from the table.

'Did he touch you, Jean? Did he? I tell you now, George, if he so much as laid a finger on our Jean, I'll do me mother a favour and kill him meself. I'm sick of him!'

'So can I stay with you then?' Jean pleaded.

'You can stay tonight. Tomorrow, we're going round there and sort him out once and for all.'

'I've got school tomorrow and I won't have any clean clothes to put on.'

'I'll lend you one of my nightdresses, love. Go and put it on now and bring me down your underwear and socks. I'll wash them in the sink. They'll dry in the oven and be ready for you in the morning. Now, you're not to worry about a thing, Jean. Leave it to me and George. We'll take care of it. Won't we, George?'

'Yes, love,' he said with a satisfied grin.

It warmed him to know his wife and young sister-in-law felt they could depend on him, trusted him to do the right thing. He drew himself up to his full height and smoothed his moustache in the mirror over the fireplace. He adjusted his spectacles. *Bottle bottoms*, the kids at school used to call them. *Specky-four-eyes* they used to shout after him whenever he walked past a group of boys.

All that didn't matter now. He never felt more of a real man than he did at that moment, with his own small family around him, needing him. He sighed with contentment and began to plan how he

would handle the Thompsons. A few well-chosen words would avoid further trouble, he believed. Carefully handled, without appearing condescending he would be able to encourage them to see the right thing to do. If he could get Mary Thompson on her own first, he'd point out the mutual benefits of the arrangement. The matter just needed a bit more careful thought.

Jean appeared at the bottom of the stairs holding out the things to be washed.

'Hilda?' she asked quietly.

'Yes, love?'

'Why are me mam and dad so horrible?'

'It's just how they are, Jean. Take no notice.'

'Have they always been like that? Was it the same when you were at home?'

Hilda put her arms around her little sister and drew her close.

'Jean, sweetheart, I couldn't wait to get away from them. They should never have had children, those two. But I'm glad they did or else we wouldn't have each other, would we?'

TWO

Kingsley Modern School lived up to its name. Designed at the height of the Art Deco period, in 1935, after the first few years' intake, it still looked brand new. Its iconic clean lines fanned out smartly behind a colonnaded foyer encompassing blocks of spacious, airy classrooms surrounded by grass playing fields that ran down the slope to the river. Tall windows on every side ensured that corridors and classrooms were always bathed in light. It was a far cry from the gloomy Victorian-era primary schools, where the windows could only be reached by a long pole, and where the dark brown and green tiled walls made the narrow corridors dark unwelcoming places.

The Modern School breathed; it breathed life and hope into the young minds attending classes. There were new subjects to study; there was new equipment and there was a brand new body of staff, pleased and proud to take their places in the first of a new generation of educational reform.

Sandra Logan cared nothing for these new opportunities. As she crept down the riverbank, out of sight of the staffroom and the caretaker's lodge, she chuckled to herself at the stupidity of the out of bounds rule the school had placed on her favourite hidey-hole.

'Come on, Jean,' she called. 'Be quick. Come on. Stop faffing. Nobody can see us.'

'Are you sure? I don't want to get into trouble,' Jean whispered, edging along the grassy bank on her backside.

'Course I'm sure. Look, sit down there behind that tree.' Sandra delved under the tea towel covering her domestic science basket and brought out a packet of Woodbines. 'Want one?' she offered.

'No thanks. Where did you get them?'

'Off our Ronnie. He gives me them sometimes.'

'The teachers will know you've been smoking, Sandra. They'll be able to smell it on you.'

'No they won't. They all smoke. They're in there smoking now. Haven't you ever been to the staffroom at dinnertime? When they open the door the smoke nearly knocks you out and you can't see to the other side of the room. Smokers can't smell smoke on somebody else. And anyway, we've got Mr Travis next and he stinks of smoke all the time.'

Jean leaned back against the trunk of the tree and gazed up through the branches, watching the sunlight flicker through the canopy as leaves twisted and shifted in the breeze.

Sandra took a long drag at her cigarette. 'Ronnie says he saw your mam and dad last night in The Cavendish.'

'Did he? Well I don't care who your brother sees and who he doesn't see.'

'I'm only saying . . .'

'Well don't. I don't want to know.'

Another puff of smoke. 'What's it like at your Hilda's?'

'I like it. They're both really good to me. They say I can stay on at school for another year, if I want to.'

'Stay on? Jean, you must be barmy. I can't wait to get a job, get some money, buy me own fags, get a fella. Don't you want to have some money of your own and a bloke to smooch?'

'I suppose it'd be nice to have money. But I don't know so much about fellas. I wouldn't want one that turned out like me dad. George is nice, though.'

'Have you seen a man's willy yet?'

'Sandra!'

'Well, have you? You still haven't, have you?'

Jean liked Sandra. She admired the older girl's couldn't-care-less attitude, her flouting of authority. She enjoyed being in her company most of the time, but could never understand why

Sandra often wanted to bring the conversation around to men's *things*. Why would anybody want to talk about what they wee out of?

'Give over, Sandra,' she said, pushing her on the shoulder. 'That's dirty talk.'

'Who says it's dirty? I don't think it's dirty. It's only natural. It's what everybody does. Our Ronnie's got a right big willy when he gets up in the morning. Sometimes I can see the shape of it pushing up the front of his pyjamas.'

'Sandra!'

'Well, it does. I asked him once about it.'

'You never.'

'I did. He calls it a piss-hard.'

'Sandra!'

'Yes. It does it by itself in the mornings. But Ronnie says that's not like the other times it does it.'

'What other times?'

'The other times when a man's willy gets hard.'

'What does it do that for?'

'Oh, Jean. Don't you know anything? It happens when a man wants a shag. You know what shagging is?'

'I think so. I've heard about it, but I'm not sure really.'

'Well, you know how babies are made?'

'They grow inside the mother's belly.'

'Yes, but I'm talking about how they get there in the first place. The man puts his willy up the woman's hole.'

'What hole?'

'We've all got a hole underneath. You can find it with your fingers dead easy. It's just behind your knobbly bit.'

'You don't mean where your business comes out of?'

'No. It's in front of that.' Sandra rolled her eyes. 'Jean, you've got a hole for your wee, a hole for your business, and in between you've got a hole where babies come out of.'

'I haven't. I haven't got anything that big.'

'Well, it's not that big now. It gets big to let the baby out. But before that, it's just the right size for a man to put his willy in and make a baby.'

'Ugh! I don't think I'll be doing that. It sounds disgusting.'

Sandra stubbed out the cigarette and hugged her knees.

'Course,' she continued, 'you can only make a baby after the woman has started her periods. I've got mine. Have you?'

'No, not yet. Hilda's told me about it, and we've got some pads and stuff ready for when it does. I'll be fourteen soon. Hilda says it won't be long before my monthly begins.'

'Well you'd be all right then if you wanted to have a go at shagging. You wouldn't have to worry about making a baby. Once you've started your periods you've got to use a rubber johnny. Ronnie told me.'

'Ronnie knows a lot about it, doesn't he?'

'All fellas do, Jean.'

Jean shook her head. 'I don't think George does. Our Hilda has never had a baby.'

THREE

Hilda pulled back the lace curtain and peered out at the weather. Sky the colour of cigarette ash hung low over the chimneys, dull and threatening.

'Shit,' she said, 'wouldn't you just know it? Weekend again. Jean!' she shouted up the stairs. 'Give us a hand, love. We'll have to go to the washhouse today. Quick as you can. I want to get it all done before my shift starts. And bring down a couple of clean towels from the chest. We'll have a slipper bath as well while we're there.'

'Can we take some of your bath crystals, Hilda?' Jean shouted back.

'If you like. I'll get them.'

Hilda opened the gate to the cellars and went down the stone stairs to the wash-cellar below, where she kept her gas boiler and the mangle and a wicker basket for her dirty laundry. Jean threw on her clothes and ran down to help her sister. She thought Hilda and George were lucky to have so much space in their house for themselves.

The back kitchen was a lovely big room with a shiny black fireplace and a brass fender that Hilda kept brightly polished. Two fireside chairs were arranged around a large tab rug that George had made himself to cover the stone-flagged floor. There was a big old white sink in the corner of the room with cupboards built in to the alcove and a gas heater so you could get hot water any time you wanted it. At the other side of the chimney breast Hilda had her gas cooker. There was an oven in the fireplace, too, where people used to cook their meals and even bake bread, but Hilda said those days were gone, and she wasn't going out to work in all weathers to put up with that old nonsense when she got home. George and Hilda used the fireplace oven for warming their clothes in the winter, or drying out the last few bits of washing.

The dining table was at the back of the room. It was real French-polished and Hilda kept it protected with a thick piece of felt under the tablecloth. The back door opened out into the shared courtyard, which was usually strung across with loaded washing lines, so you had to bob and weave to get into your house.

The front room was hardly ever used. It had a proper wooden floor and a beautiful white fireplace. There was a three piece suite in there that looked nice but was very hard to sit on. An old upright piano that George had picked up cheaply at the sale rooms stood against the back wall but nobody in the house could play it properly. George kept his gramophone and his record collection in the front room, and sometimes they would have a musical evening. George let Jean choose her own favourites, from time to time. He even showed her how to change the needles in the pick-up, and how careful you needed to be to place the arm of the pick-up onto the clear band at the outer rim of the records so the needle could find its way into the groove. He wouldn't ever let her do the winding, though. He said if the gramophone was wound up too much it would break.

A small vestibule connected the front room with the outer door to Larksholme Lane, and the cellar-head connected it with the back kitchen. Above these ground floor rooms were three bedrooms. Theirs was the only house on the street with three upstairs rooms and that was because one of them was directly over the passageway below. It was a much nicer rented house than the back-to-back basement flat where her parents lived with only one door to the outside.

But there was no bathroom and no inside toilet. Each house on the street had its own toilet in a block across the courtyard. Jean hated going across to it in the dark. She knew there were spiders in there and at night she couldn't see where they were.

She helped Hilda bundle the bedding into two large sacks. They carried one between them; George carried the other. He went with them as far as the washhouse entrance, but he wouldn't go inside.

‘Not on your Nelly, love,’ he said to Hilda as they reached the steps. ‘I’ll be in the library changing my books. Send Jean round when you’re finished, and I’ll help carry it back home.’

He slipped off, and with a smile and a wave turned the corner towards the library.

The washhouse was women’s territory. It was hot and steamy and noisy. The massive drying cabinets creaked and rumbled as racks of sheets and clothes slid open and closed. The wheels of metal trolleys screeched across tiled floors as the women pushed their loads from the washing machines to the drying area. Copper boilers gurgled and spat as strong arms wielding large wooden tongs pummelled and lifted hot wet clothes, separated the twisted garments and pushed them back under the foam. The women shouted their conversations across the machines and between the aisles.

‘How’s your Francis?’

‘Is your father any better?’

‘Have you seen our Theresa’s new boyfriend?’

‘Just look at the size of these!’

And somebody would hold up their grandmother’s brassiere to hoots and howls of good-natured laughter.

There was a separate entrance for the slipper baths but one pay kiosk, so people could pay for both and while the washing was in the drying cabinets take their towel and wash bag into one of the private cubicles where there was just enough room for a bath, a chair and a mirror. Toilets were along another corridor.

Hilda was anxious to get the laundry finished. She knew several of the women working at the machines alongside, but was reluctant to be drawn into their conversations. Chatting and gossip was all well and good, she explained to Jean later, in fact that was why most of the women enjoyed the communal washhouse so much. It was as much a social gathering as it was a workplace, but Hilda had a shift on the buses to do, and she needed the bedding quick sharp for the next lodger.

‘Why have you started taking in lodgers?’ Jean asked as they waited in the queue for two private bathing cubicles.

‘Because one day, sweetheart, I’m going to get out of this shit-hole and live in a decent place.’ Hilda looked up and down the queue of women in their well-worn clothes and down-at-heel shoes and lowered her voice. ‘Look at them, Jean. I know it’s not their fault they’ve got nowt but I don’t want to end up like them. It’s not enough for me. It’s not enough for you either. That’s why me and George want you to do well at school, get a good job and get yourself out of it as well.’

‘Won’t I be coming with you, Hilda, when you have your new place?’

‘Jean love, you won’t be with us forever, no. You’ll grow up and want your own place.’

Jean fell silent. They took adjoining cubicles. The partition walls were so thin you could hear everything the person next door was doing. Jean heard Hilda’s plug chain chinking and the swoosh of water from the taps. She heard Hilda taking off her shoes and dropping them on the floor. Then there was a squeaking noise like a chair dragging across the hard floor. Jean threw her clothes on her chair and climbed into her bath.

As she lay back in the warm water watching Hilda’s purple bath crystals dissolve into the water Jean felt a shudder of fear. The future was frightening.

It meant having to have periods every month where blood came out of the baby-hole and she would have smelly blood-soaked pads to dispose of in the fireplace when there were no men to see what she was doing. It meant growing large bosoms and having to wear a brassiere; learning how to wear stockings and fasten them up with suspenders. It meant sitting with her legs pressed close together, and it meant finding out about men’s *things*.

When you got married you had to get into bed with a man who had a *thing* and you had to let him put it in the baby-hole when he wanted to. And you had to do the washing and cleaning and cooking and go to work as well.

She didn't want to grow up; she was afraid to. She wanted to stay just as she was, forever. Underneath the bath water her hands slid between her legs, and her fingers probed for what was there. She hoped it was missing, that she didn't have all the bits Sandra had told her about, but there it was, the knobby bit and the cleft between fleshy pouches. That must be where the hole is, she thought, but dare not investigate any further.