

CHAPTER 1

A Rude Awakening



I am awake in the middle of the night and I am cold. Not ordinary cold. Not shivery. I am frozen to the marrow. I do not know where I am and search for the sensations that will tell me.

There are draughts funnelling down both sides of my body under tight-wrapped sheets, smooth and cold as glass. I tug at the tucked edges, but they will not be moved. My knees are raised, making a tent further down the bed. They are stiff and aching. I decide to lie flat; that should stop the frigid air swirling round my body. But I cannot move my legs. Both legs and feet are angled against something solid and icy.

Under the covers I reach down to my feet and draw out a copper hot-water bottle with no residual warmth. It is cold as iron. There is a faint sighing breeze from the open window.

The month is October. I am Bella Strahan and I am in the Royal Victoria Hospital for Tuberculosis.

Around me the other patients are heavily asleep and I have a problem. There is no space on the locker for such a large item as the bottle, even if I could see where to place it in the dark. The floor is too far away for me to drop the thing and risk waking the sleepers. It is my first night here and that would be no way to court popularity.

I place the hard, cold container on the bed while I consider what to do. If I leave it there, I have only to turn over for it to fall off. I am cornered. At last I take off my lacy bed-jacket, a present from my mother meant for sitting up and looking pretty. It was not meant to be slept in, but I had been too cold at lights out to take it off. Now, leaving my arms uncovered, I wrap it round the hard, corrosive metal. Wherever it is placed, the hollowed bed will make sure it finds me and makes icy contact, but the shock will be less savage.

With some determination I take hold of the covers and heave, turning over in the same movement. Ah, that's better. I tuck the cold linen closely round my body.

As I struggle back to oblivion, the breeze rises.

It is 10 a.m. and they are waiting. Knowing that I am to have no breakfast they have allowed me to sleep on, so I am lying here, awake now, like a very thin, very clean, very tense drum, feeling the regular thud of my heart and watching the massive hands of the ward clock go out of focus at every beat.

Respectful allusions are made in hushed voices to my 'induction'. I do not know whether I am vestal virgin or lamb to the slaughter.

Suddenly, with a metallic swish, the day is cut off and I can no longer see the pleasant lawn sloping away from the ward. Close up, too close for comfort, are the enormous orange flowers and bamboo leaves of the privacy curtain. A trolley is thrust through a gap on the window side of the bed, restoring the light, and I am staring at an array of gleaming silver instruments, an orange rubber tube, and an enormous bell jar full of water. The sun shines encouragingly through it, but I am too apprehensive to be cheered by this.

They're doing it *here*, I think, startled. I had been waiting for a summons to the operating theatre assumed to be somewhere nearby. Before I can so much as gulp, three bodies, two doctors and a nurse, squeeze through the curtains and surround the trolley. They are talking as they enter and go on talking before turning to me. The handsome, dark one, Dr. McPherson, gives me a beaming smile and explains briefly why I am here.

'Doesn't take long,' he adds, as he screws together the most enormous hypodermic syringe I have ever seen

'Where does that go?' I ask in fright. It might be bad form to ask but I have to know.

'We get the tip between the chest wall and the outside of the lung,' he answers, rubbing his hands like a magician warming to his subject, 'and introduce air into the cavity with this little chap.' He throws a fond look at the six-inch hypodermic with its three-inch needle. I look at it askance. 'We'll see it doesn't hurt much.'

'What does it do?' I persist.

'Squeezes the lung down to the size of a fist,' he says, 'to rest it. That way there's much less pressure on the affected area. Otherwise any cavity opens and closes with every breath you take and it doesn't get a chance to heal.' He gestures the nurse forward, a tall woman with a starched, frilled cap and an air of command.

'Turn over onto your left side, dear,' she says.

As I turn over, I can see Dr. McPherson attaching the tube to the bell jar and I try to concentrate on what I know about air pressure from my days in the science lab. However hard I try to remove myself, though, I still feel invaded as my arm is gently lifted and the cold swab descends on my underarm area which no one but myself has touched since babyhood. As the needle penetrates my skin, the pain is almost welcome, recalling me to practicalities. Then a feeling of pressure in my chest, neck, back and shoulders mounts until the doctors, who have been muttering inaudibly to each other, sound satisfied and the needle is removed.

As soon as the trio have left and the screens are removed there is a chorus of 'Are you all right?'

'OK then?'

'How did that go?'

I lift my head and wriggle to release the tight covers. 'Fine!' I say. 'Very glad that's over, though.' I am lying in a beam of sunlight feeling new-born, but my pleasure is short-lived.

'What d'you mean "over"?''

A single voice rises above the background chatter. 'You have that done every week for the next three to five years.'

'Sometimes twice a week,' someone else adds. 'We all have it.'

But I hardly hear. My inner voice is screaming in protest and the clock has gone out of focus again.

My mind returns to the events of the past seven months. It was March, in my twentieth year and I was happily engaged on the second year of my literature degree when one day a mobile radiography van came round to test the student population. It was an innocent-looking van, rather like an ambulance, but bigger than usual with sharper corners and a separate cabin for the driver. Although it looked so neutral, like a judge withholding judgement, it was specially equipped inside for quick, revealing chest x-rays, with a screen at one end for privacy when stripping to the waist, and some unfamiliar machinery at the other. Judgements were about to be made. I was positioned against a cold panel and told not to breathe for a few seconds while the x-ray was taken.

There were a few other students there with me. We dressed again and went heedlessly on our way, but by the time the questing vehicle's rounds were finished, seven students were found to be suffering from one or another of the many forms of the disease, of which pulmonary tuberculosis, TB of the lungs, was the most lethal. Seven lives were changed.

At the time I did not know why there was this sudden concentrated interest in finding cases of TB. Certainly it was a dire and deadly disease, but one that had been with us for a very long time. It had always generated hushed voices and secrecy, sad looks and a hand to the mouth, as if its name

dare not be spoken. Why now? Of the few people I knew who suffered from it two had died and the outlook for the others was not good. Maybe this new initiative would offer them a better chance.

I assumed it was an area of public concern that had been neglected, like so many others, during the recent war. Indeed it was, but that was not the whole truth. In fact, the government had decanted eight thousand TB patients from sanatoria the length and breadth of the country during the war in expectation that the beds would be needed for wounded soldiers, sailors and airmen as well as civilian casualties. The explosive result was that mortality figures for the disease had shot up almost to the 20% mortality rate of Victorian times at their highest point. The rising death toll was completely out of hand. The most stringent measures were necessary.

Two or three weeks after my x-ray, I set out to attend a hospital appointment. I was to see a senior doctor at the Victoria Dispensary in the unfortunately named Spittal Street. The dispensary was only about a hundred yards from the Co-operative department store, where we bought household goods like our recently purchased dining table. The proximity seemed strange, like seeing a friendly, familiar face wearing a menacing expression. It was with extreme reluctance that I dragged myself past one set of doors and on to the other.

I was ushered into the presence of a doctor with dark, wavy hair and deep lines etched down each cheek and across his forehead. Facing the lighted panel on the wall where the x-ray of my chest was displayed, he lifted a small pointer and I turned to face my mortality. When I was a child, I was always fascinated to see my toe bones, surrounded by the luminous halo that was my flesh, in the machine used to check shoe size. Now here were my ribs, reminding me of the cartoon skeletons that appeared in the weekly comics *The Dandy* and *The Beano*. They were what we had instead of *The Simpsons* and we read them with the same enthusiasm that we now bring to watching Homer and Bart.

The doctor, Dr. Chivers, pointed to a vaguely white area like a little cloud on one side of the x-ray, a cloud from which odd wisps rose at the edge like smoke and, to those who could read it, no doubt carried a message. I could see a semi-circle of smaller white dots strung from one collar-bone to the other just like beads in a necklace. The doctor talked quietly of calcified deposits, which they were, as being the body's attempts at healing itself, leaving me to draw the conclusion that, if they had been successful attempts, I would not be needing his advice.

My heart plummeted. Three-quarters of the academic year had gone and it looked as if it had all been for nothing. If I could not sit my exams there would be no credits. A year wasted. I would have to do all the work again if... I did not allow myself to finish the thought.

Then, Dr. Chivers questioned me further and established that I had no cough which meant that I was unlikely to infect anyone. He said that I could finish my studies for that year before starting serious treatment. I relaxed at this good news and realised that I had been holding my breath. It surprised me that I should have minded the possibly lost months so much when my whole life was at risk, but no one likes to spend time and care on something for absolutely no return. If my life were to be curtailed I certainly did not have time to repeat something that I had already all but done.

My spirits lifted again when he said that my condition had been caught at an early stage and that a few months of bed rest might do the trick and let me get on with my life. I nodded eagerly. I was young and optimistic. If this expert thought I would escape with a few months of suspended living, I was ready to believe him. A few minutes later I was on my feet ready to leave, but after looking me earnestly in the face for a long moment, he made me sit down again. Once he was sure of my full attention, he went over the ground already covered, while my mind made its own, sometimes rebellious, reservations.

'You must rest as much as possible until the long vacation.'

'No outings? No dancing?'

'No! Go to bed early!' he answered sharply. It was clear there was to be no negotiation.

But what do I do after eight o'clock at night? I asked myself, picturing my solitary self beneath the covers listening to the sound of laughter downstairs, and my friends, disconsolate, outside.

'Avoid strenuous physical exercise!'

Good, I thought, someone else will have to do the shopping now.

'You must rest completely in bed during the long vacation!'

What a prospect!

‘Drink as much milk as possible!’

Not my favourite tippie.

‘Eat as much butter and cheese as possible!’

Hate cheese. Don’t like butter much either..

‘Eat as much protein as possible!’

So no more vegetarian meals.

‘Avoid stressful situations!’

I don’t go looking for them; they just find me, I thought soberly.

He then made me promise to obey to the letter every word of advice he uttered. The unspoken subtext was: ‘If you want to live.’

I had wanted to cheer up this harassed man and smooth out the lines that life had etched in his face, but had only convinced him that I was not taking things seriously. I left feeling chastened and thinking wryly of the year I had just spent eating vegetarian lunches in the Students’ Union Refectory in George Square. Still, nut cutlets had been my usual choice. At least there was some protein in nuts.

On my way home to report to an anxious mother, I wondered whether the cloud that had descended on me was visible to the other travellers, as I stared unseeingly at the busy crowds. Literature, my subject, was a rich source of information on ‘consumption’, as it was known. I thought about the operatic Mimi in *La Bohème* dying from the loss of her lover, Rudolfo; Marguerite Gautier in *La Dame aux Caméllias* dying tragically just as she discovered that her love was returned; and Katherine Mansfield, just dying with so many stories still untold. Was there no end to the misery engendered by this fatal condition? I felt there must be a better way. Was I really cut out for a romantic heroine, I wondered. Life had handed me a wild card. It was up to me, I thought, how I played it now.

I did not have a long journey to reach home; three miles by municipal bus. If you were a Scottish student at a Scottish university, you were encouraged to attend the institution nearest your home. Although this was sometimes considered ungenerous, I am not complaining. It allowed me to do what I needed to do; totally immerse myself in books in one of the best universities in the world.

Two months later, all my second year exams were over – English language, English literature, Latin and history, all over and done with. Students from far places had ebbed back home and I was back, twenty-four hours a day, in the bosom of my family.

Although it was some years since the war had ended, we were still riding the crest of the wave of optimism that began then. We were all at work or studying. My father was safely home from the Far East and we had settled into family life with two parents again. My elder brother, Ned, was studying at Edinburgh College of Art and I was at Edinburgh University. My younger brother, Laurie, was at George Heriot’s School and my young sister, Louise, at Boroughmuir Senior Secondary. Breakfast was grabbed on the hoof, but we enjoyed our evening meal together with a free exchange of views and lots of laughter and, although my recent news had subdued the hilarity, there were much worse places to be.

The bed rest seemed easy enough until a domiciliary specialist visited me. (An attempt was being made to optimise sanatorium beds by encouraging care at home, where and when that was possible.) He was a beautifully groomed and manicured man who perhaps felt a little uncomfortable in his pinstripe suit that was more appropriate for the corridors of power in a large hospital. No doubt he felt even more uncomfortable when he tried to leave through the door of the built-in wardrobe, burying his face in a row of hanging clothes. For some reason I had foreseen this, but was powerless to avert it. I wrestled with both his embarrassment and my own wicked amusement.

He told me that he had decided to include me in an experiment; he believed that an edge could be gained in the fight against TB by increasing the supply of blood to the victim’s lungs and his method was to raise the patient’s bed at the foot by eighteen inches. So up went the footboard of my bed onto wooden blocks.

The head-down-feet-up position made my neck ache and made books, even paperbacks, extremely heavy. I could manage to hold them for half an hour at a time, but Russian novels such as

War and Peace or *The Brothers Karamazov* were definitely out. Even without the weight of books my arms would often feel heavy and congested.

Sometimes I resorted to embroidery, with a special danger to add a bit of spice – if I dropped the needle it was more than likely to fall into my eye. In spite of this I completed a supper cloth and a rather summery-looking tea cosy with swathes of flowers in twining green and various shades of gold.

There was a constant tendency to gravitate up the bed, jack-knife at the head end and have to wriggle back, feet first, into the advised position. I only knew that it had happened when I started to have a normal view of things and could see the room laid out in front of me; the small, upholstered chair in vivid tapestry and the dressing-table and book-shelves that Lou and I had painted white with green reeded edging. Usually I just had an extremely boring view of the ceiling.

Pyjamas were the best wear, otherwise my nightdress, obeying the laws of gravity, would end up round my waist or even higher in an uncomfortable mass. Considering the cautions I had been given against exertion and even moving, it was quite a struggle to hoick it down again, or rather *up* to where my feet were.

Louise and I had shared a bedroom for years and now I had it to myself. No more cosy chats at bedtime. No more watching her wriggle across the bed to her own side with closed eyes. No more seeing her vulnerable sleeping face. There was not so much pleasure in having my own room, after all.

During the day the radio was my life-line. Once the sounds of family leaving for work, school and college had died away, along with what passed for busy traffic in our quiet street, and the clamour from the playground of a nearby school had hushed, the wireless took over with *Housewives' Choice*.

It was a request programme faithful to its simple aim of playing music that someone wanted to hear. There was everything from the pop music of the day through grand opera to sacred music, sung both by amateurs and by every trained voice from bass to coloratura soprano and counter-tenor. It was a pleasure to listen to, a painless introduction to the musical world, and it drew a massive audience. It was introduced by a cheerful tune by Jack Strachey called *In a Party Mood* to which one of the presenters, George Elrick, sang his own lyrics, ending with, 'I'll be with you all again tomorrow morning...dum-de-diddle, dum-de-diddle, dum-dum-dee.'

Quite often on radio you would be invited back in this way. Henry Hall of *Dance Band* fame would sign off with, 'Here's to the next time!' And most programmes told you what to expect during the coming hour or half hour. *In Town Tonight* began with an excited male voice proclaiming, 'Once more we stop the roar of London's traffic and, from the great crowds, we bring you some of the interesting people who have come by land, sea and air to be In Town Tonight.'

After the first broadcast thousands of people rang the BBC to ask about the opening music. This was tuneful, energetic and jaunty and, for further atmosphere, almost drowned out by the background blare of traffic and street cries. It was the *London Suite* and its composer, Eric Coates, found himself famous overnight. It was all thrilling and involving stuff and gave young people a glimpse of the world they were anxious to enter.

I would have been content to listen to music all day, but my real favourite was the drama then enjoying its heyday. We all revelled in the serials *Paul Temple* and *Dick Barton, Special Agent*. *Paul Temple* was incredibly London-oriented; to its author, Francis Durbridge, Potter's Bar might have been considered 'up north'. The voice of the hero's wife, Steve, played by Marjorie Westbury, fascinated me. It had a very individual timbre, clear, distinct and very easy on the ear. It seemed to breathe opulence and breeding. What a surprise to find then, in a rare actor-before-the-mike snapshot, that she looked plump, cuddly and quite ordinary. The plays themselves, running to several episodes, were detective cases solved with wit and intelligence by the famous pair.

Dick Barton, Special Agent was a cult experience, attracting an audience of 15,000,000 listeners. At 6:45pm, Dick Barton with his henchmen, Jock Anderson and Snowy White, saved the country from ruin in nearly every episode, but it was so thrilling and cleverly done we were all glued to our seats or, in my case, bed. The series had such a hold on the national memory and affection that there have been many attempts to revive it. Films have been made and even a pastiche radio series called *Richard Barton, General Practitioner* in which Dick Barton's supposed son, Richard, a

country doctor, tells of his senile father, who is constantly fantasising that he is surrounded by enemies, who must be fought off.

Any play was an exciting listen, but a late afternoon series, an early soap, had a special place in my life: *Mrs Dale's Diary*. It was broadcast at the time of day when things began to feel a little feverish and fretful. The light would be fading but this unexciting drama relaxed me and made me sleepy. During my long spell in bed at home, the million miles between *Mrs Dale's Diary* and *Shakespeare* shrank and I grew quite fond of the soap's characters, especially Mrs Dale. Her comfortable middle-class voice and the ease with which she instructed the gardener and imposed order on her artificial environment were soothing. This new addiction would have amused my friends of the 1950s, never mind today's more sophisticated listeners, but it took me away from my static life into a different world, a reassuring one where actions were governed by reason.

Cut off from University life, I waited eagerly for visits from friends. They were my second, vital life-line; a living link with reality, although inevitably as time wore on, I found that the animated conversation went on above my head and did not include me. They usually spoke of the strange behaviour of the lecturers we shared. The one who had lost his temper at the late arrival of a student; the one who was now conducting his tutorials in a nearby coffee bar; the one who was skipping lectures, although they could hardly take place without him. We found it all hilarious.

Lecturers were life 'writ large'; intensely individual men and women whose idiosyncrasies brought them under a sometimes distorting spotlight. The lecturer who showed up for two introductory lectures and vanished from the map was possibly having a breakdown, but his students assumed he was out somewhere enjoying himself and did likewise, usually in the Students' Union. The lecturer in Mediaeval Literature, who would get out the map to trace the modern counterpart of Camelot and suggest that Lyonesse was not far away drew a few stifled yawns, but where else would you find such involvement and enthusiasm? Our cool assessments had to be excused on the grounds of our age and ignorance. I laughed with the tale-tellers. I could contribute nothing except laughter. I was a ghost in the land I had recently lived in.

Occasionally, however, I would introduce a friend who was not known to the others and then I would be able to take a more active part in the conversation. The usual hullabaloo was in progress in my bedroom one afternoon in the vacation when my mother appeared with the very caring minister of the church where I was baptized, St. Bernard's in Stockbridge. She went off to make one of many cups of tea and I set about introducing my other visitors to him. Rev. D was a delightful man to talk to and I had hopes of shrinking the generation gap in his company. 'This is George,' I began. 'George is studying science at the Heriot-Watt College.'

George smiled his transforming smile and Mr D nodded, as one professional man to another.

'Cathy,' I singled her out with a nod, 'is doing classics at EU.' A deeper acknowledgment this time. Clergymen approve of classics. 'And Shirley and Helena,' nodding towards Shirley's fair skin and natural curls and Helena's dark, straight crop, 'are doing the M.A. course at EU.' An indulgent, approving smile this time.

Finally I came to my friend, Marie, who had gone further afield than most of us and was attending the London School of Economics at a time when Beatrice Webb was still padding the corridors there.

'And this is Marie,' I said. 'Marie studies in London.'

Oh,' he said with deep sympathy, having completely misheard, 'so Marie's daddy's in London, is he?'

It would have been easier to ignore, if he had not, at the same time, patted her on the head. At five feet eight inches, she was not much below his own height. A flicker of amusement went round every face but his and mine. I managed to take a keen interest in the quilt. Marie was the most sophisticated friend I had and had hit the road to London running.

The cat, Shelley, became a constant companion and did her best to keep life interesting, mainly by sleeping. She spent hours on my bed but seldom joined me before mid-morning so when I woke early one day with something furry tickling my leg, it took a massive effort of will to peel back the covers and investigate.

There she was, lying alongside me, tail beating a slow tattoo against my leg. This was not her normal behaviour. I noticed too that she was staring up at me in a trusting, excited way. I was flattered. It is true that dogs love attention and love to be chosen, but cats are normally the ones to do the choosing. Why had I been chosen? I gave her a closer look and knowledge leapt into my head as if I had taken a bite from the apple. She was about to have kittens.

Sleeping household or no, I yelled for help and my younger brother, Laurie, who had the family tropism towards animals in strong measure, took her away to a more suitable nesting place. He sat by her most of the day, stroking her, while she purred and presented at intervals another little mouth to feed. By evening the family had grown by six new members. She obviously believed, like the poet whose name she shared, in free love.

The cat was not there the day I was threatened by the spider. It was offering to come down its silk rope on to the bed so I fixed my gaze on it to make sure I would see where it landed and could send it on through the open window. I waited for it to come down in vain. As long as I watched, it was static. As soon as I looked away, however, it hurtled down, closing the gap between us. We played this kind of cat-and-mouse game for a long time until we were both tired.

The creature's movements were so clearly defined by my own that I cannot see it as coincidence. I have since heard of a class of boys, set by their science teacher to record the pathways taken by insects in a makeshift maze, who found they could actually direct their charges. Clipshears to the right, millipedes to the left, chuggy pigs straight up the middle! Maybe the Greeks were right and there is more than one God. Maybe we are all exercising powers that we don't even know we have.

In general there was little excitement of an unexpected kind, but I remember one noisy day. It was windy and the sky was full of the flying clouds and gulls that are such a feature of the Edinburgh sky-scape. Children seem more excitable and shout more. Dogs bark more. We had fastened the flapping muslin curtain to the steel rod for extending the window outwards and I was enjoying watching the fresh air fill the curtain like a spinnaker when a more forceful breeze suddenly billowed the curtain. This lifted the rod right off the catch so that the window was driven against the wall and broke. I watched it come bouncing back with a jagged hole in the bottom segment and heard the mocking tinkle of broken glass as it hit the ground.

My immediate thought was what about the night? I had grown used to the window being open during the day but it was always closed at night. Who, after all, wants to be rained on while asleep?

The chink and clatter of china and cutlery as the soup-plates were placed onto the bed tables on the ward recalled me to the present. The five months of bed rest at home had not improved things and the new academic session was well under way without me. Now I was on Younger Ward with a newly collapsed lung and windows open day and night.

I looked round at the expectant faces, mostly smiling, as they waited for my reaction and my mind adjusted to these new circumstances. I hadn't bargained for the weekly stabbing sessions that they were telling me about, but so be it. If other people survived it then so could I. I looked round at my ward-mates curiously, exactly as they were looking at me.

We were going to be together for some time.