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SUSSEX PLACE

The Boarding House

Janson Woodall

ArtJanson

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4 **Sussex Place**

Thank you to everyone who help make this book possible and for putting up with me endlessly talking about it. A special thanks to Jonathan Elford, Ian Tucknott, my wife Jane and to my many friends at City Lit, London .

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Paddington Life

All the illustrations, stories and events in the book are from my childhood memories. The illustrations were created on an Apple iPad..

INTRODUCTION

My mother ran a boarding house in Paddington from 1953, when I was six years old, until the snowy winter of 1963.

During those amazing ten years the house was populated by refugees, sex workers and eccentric tenants, as well as the occasional fire, shooting, dead body and much more. This book contains the stories and memories of my childhood at 4 Sussex Place.

These stories are also about my mother. She was unmarried, gay and

had fiery red hair just like me. During the Second World War she served in the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service) in Palestine. These experiences gave my mother a different outlook on life. In those days she would have been described as bohemian.

Those years at the boarding house were some of the most exciting and difficult of my life, the best and worst of times. This book is about sharing those times with you.



The Boarding House

4 Sussex Place was a stone's throw from Paddington station and Hyde Park in central London.

After the Second World War this area of London was a land of Victorian and Georgian grand houses that had been turned into boarding houses. 4 Sussex Place was one amongst many. Here you would find those new to London, the old and lonely, refugees, those broken by the war and those looking for sex and love. Here were the workers of London: secretaries, shop assistants, nurses, transport staff and those who made London tick. They were to be found in the cafés and pubs of Paddington, out for walks in nearby Hyde Park, in the evening in smoke-filled cinemas, or coming back from the West End on the tube from a night out on the town.

Meanwhile the sex workers would be in the bombed-out houses, in the dark corners of the garden squares and in the rooms of my mother's boarding house.

The boarding house consisted of twenty rooms in total, some bedsits and others for bed and breakfast. The bed and breakfast rooms were for travellers, lovers and sex workers. The bedsits were for the long-term tenants and had just enough space for a bed, wardrobe, gas fire, washbasin and gas ring for cooking. The bedsits were like little universes, each one reflecting a tenant's life and dreams.

My mother had a partner and lover Summy. They met in the ATS during the Second World War. Women were not called up to the ATS, as it was a voluntary service. The photograph is of my mother when she was in Palestine. She returned to the UK after the terrorist bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946. She wasn't hurt, but lost friends in the bombing and it affected her deeply.

I'm not certain where the photograph of Summy was taken but she's looking glamorous, which is how I remember her.



Mum



Summy

Life before The Boarding House

Before moving to London my mother and I lived with Summy on a caravan site near Windsor. Summy was my mother's lover, and also a great mother to me. Women living together with a child wasn't unusual after the war. Those who had lost husbands and boyfriends often came together to make ends meet.

I loved Summy. She had dyed blonde hair like Jean Harlow, horn-rimmed glasses and bright red lipstick. Living with two women I got used to the suspenders, the moans about laddered nylons, the peroxide for bleaching hair, the smell of nail varnish and all the countless other elements of womanhood in the 1950s. I never knew my father and I didn't miss having one. It was only later that I realised there was a world of men that I felt somewhat excluded from.

Those early memories of Summy and my mother in the caravan are the foundations of who I am today. I guess it is true for all of us that those long-lost experiences are the bedrock on which our personalities develop. For me, the sound of rain on the roof and the steamed-up windows in a caravan give me a sense of profound security. But it was also in the caravan that some of my deep-rooted insecurities developed, ones that still affect me today.

In 1953 everything changed. Summy left us, and we moved to London for my mother to take over the lease of a boarding house.

Why did my mother want to run a boarding house for which she was seemingly ill-equipped? She came from an upper-middle-class well-to-do Birmingham family. Being the black sheep of the family she needed to show to herself and to her family that she was strong, that she was a good person, and that she was as good as any man at running a business. Being gay, unmarried and having an illegitimate child, she had much to prove.



Summy and me

A Caravan Childhood



My mother is the one with the red hair and Summy has the bleached hair. Although I never knew my father I now ended up with two mums. The caravan site was near the summer quarters of Bertram Mills Circus.

In the 1950s Bertram Mills Circus was one of the most famous touring circuses in Britain. Sometimes late at night I'd heard the circus lions roaring.

Here are Mum and me in the spring of 1953 with all our belongings travelling to London and the boarding house. After we left the caravan Mum rented it out to a holiday camp by the sea. In a storm later that year the caravan was blown off the campsite into the sea. We never lived in the caravan again.

The photo is at my new London school. I was five and it was 1953 the year of the coronation and the new queen.



From the Caravan to
4 Sussex Place

THE BOARDING HOUSE TENANTS

The Boarding House

My mother took over a Georgian house in Paddington with five floors and a basement. In the basement were the kitchen, cellars and storerooms. In Georgian times the ground floor would have been for dances and entertaining. The other floors were bedrooms and living rooms with the servants living in the loft. Horses would have been stabled in a nearby mews.

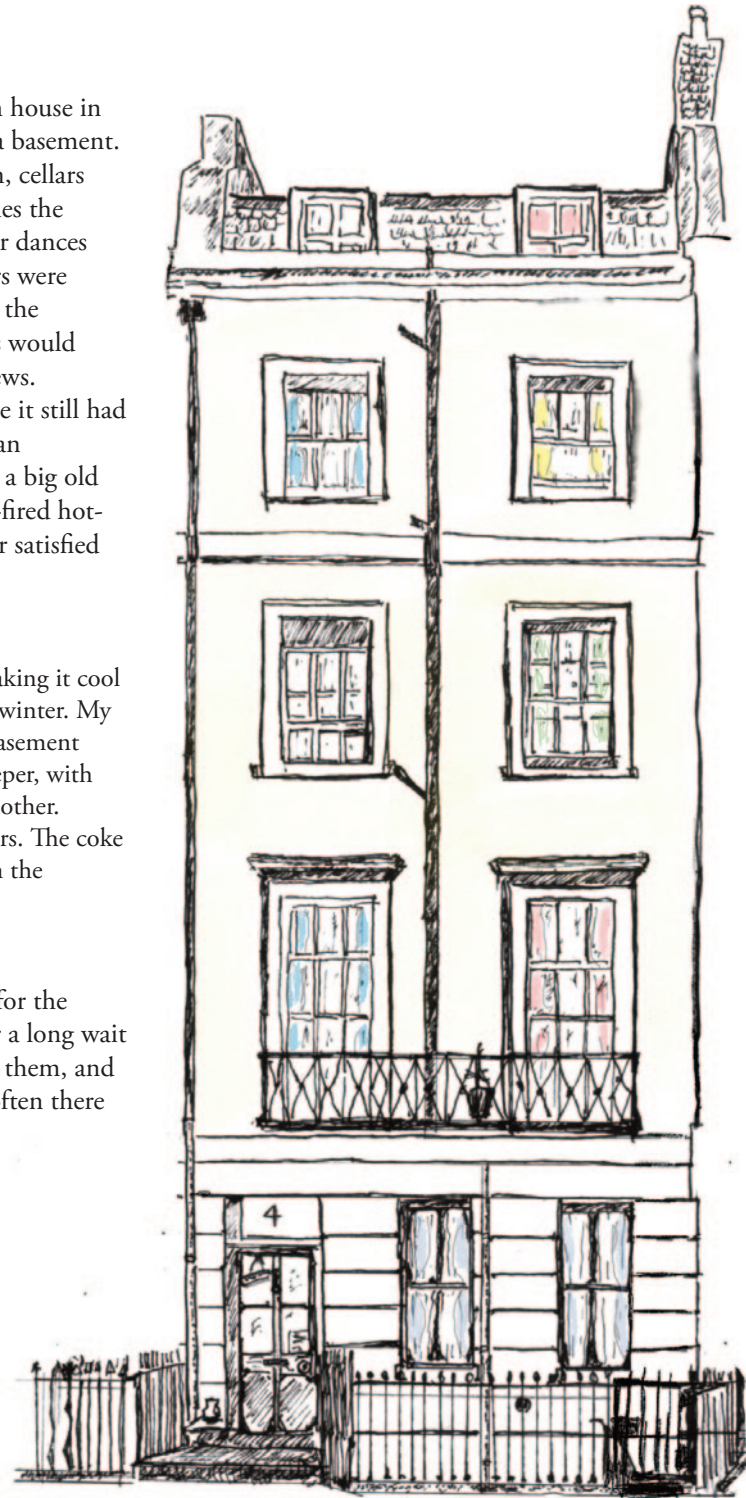
When we moved into the house it still had many features, including Victorian bathrooms, a grand staircase and a big old kitchen. There was also the coke-fired hot-water system that somehow never satisfied the needs of the tenants.

Basement

The basement had stone floors, making it cool in the summer but freezing in the winter. My mother and I lived in one of the basement rooms and Margaret the Housekeeper, with her husband and child, Alex, in another. Below the pavement were the cellars. The coke was delivered through manholes in the pavement.

Bathrooms

There were only two bathrooms for the whole house. You could be in for a long wait to get a bath if others were using them, and then hope for hot water, which often there wasn't.



The Tenants

On the other floors of the boarding house could be found the tenants and guests.

Ground Floor

These rooms were for the bed and breakfast customers and sex workers. It was in one of these rooms that Margaret the Housekeeper found a dead body.

First Floor

This was the most interesting floor. Here you would find Blondie The Sex Worker, The Mad Lady with her odd shoes, and the tenant we called The Naked Man.

Second Floor

On this floor lived the tenant we called Father Christmas; next to him in a small room was The Lady Who Was Learning to Type.

Third Floor

It was on this floor that The Two Road Sweepers lived; next to them were Summy and Peggy in a room at the back of the house.

Fourth Floor

These were the attic rooms and here lived Stanley The Tailor. It was in another of these attic rooms that the terrible fire happened.

A Cat, Mouse and a Monkey

We had a house cat that I loved, mice everywhere and, for a short period of time, a monkey. The monkey was a sailor's pet. One day the monkey escaped and the tenants had a fun time trying to recapture it, which they did eventually.

Blondie The Sex Worker

Blondie wasn't just a tenant, she was also a sex worker. She was nice and friendly to me and the only person in the house with a fridge. She regularly gave me cold drinks, and I often wondered if she also gave them to her clients.

My mother also let rooms out by the night to other sex workers. The boarding house was leased from the Church Commissioners, who were agents for the Church of England. My mother lived in constant fear that the Commissioners or the police would find out she was running a brothel, which they eventually did.



A Client of Blondie

I would often answer the front door to Blondie's clients.

"Hi, lad, is Blondie in?" I ran up the stairs to her room on the first floor. Knocked on the door and asked Blondie if she was free. There was a muffled reply. "Tell him to come back in 15 minutes."

I told him to come back in 15 minutes. And he did and she was free.

Jock

The man in her life was Jock. He was a small Scottish guy with a cigarette in his mouth and ash always down his shabby suit. I would often see Jock around Paddington chatting to other men in the street.



The Mad Lady



We had a tenant we called The Mad Lady. Looking back a rather harsh name but she was very eccentric and lived in a parallel universe. Because of my mother's own character, she was happy to rent her a room even if she didn't always pay the rent.

Here she is with her odd shoes, broken radio and her wastepaper bin on fire.

The Odd Shoes

The Mad Lady's shoes were obtained by stealing them from racks outside shoe shops. In the 1950s shoe shops often had single shoes outside the shop for customers to try on. The shoes were always single shoes, never in pairs. That's why there was never a pair of shoes in her room and she always wore odd shoes.



The Broken Radio

She had an old-fashioned floor-standing broken valve radio that she had found. She played it at full volume and the sounds were a mixture of crackling and whistling. Her radio could be heard throughout the house and other tenants would complain to me. When I asked her to turn it down she would reply, "Can't you hear all the lovely music and voices from all over the world."

The Wastepaper Bin on Fire

She would also frequently set fire to her wastepaper bin and I would have to ask her to put it out to stop the house burning down.

She would often hide the bin under her bed hoping I wouldn't see. She would then reply, "Which fire? I can't see a fire!" When I pointed it out, she would reply, "How did that get there?"

I would often ask my mother why we rented a room to this tenant. Her answer was "Who else would rent a room to her?"

Stanley, The Polish Tailor

Stanley was a friendly Polish tailor who rented a room in the loft. The rumour was he had escaped from the Nazis.

I remember watching him sew, drinking his black tea with lemon, the warmth of his

gas fire and listening to Children's Hour on the radio. It was comforting being with him in the loft as it felt like a long way from the dark cold basement at the bottom of the house.



The Day Stanley Cut My Hair

Before the Haircut



One day my mum, rather than giving me half a crown to get my hair cut at the local barber shop, decided that Stanley could do it.

He had been keen to do it, as he said it would save money, and stop me nagging my mother for haircut money. I also hated going to the barber's by myself. I felt embarrassed with my mop of curly red hair and having to cope with the men's world of jokes and banter, so it seemed a good deal.

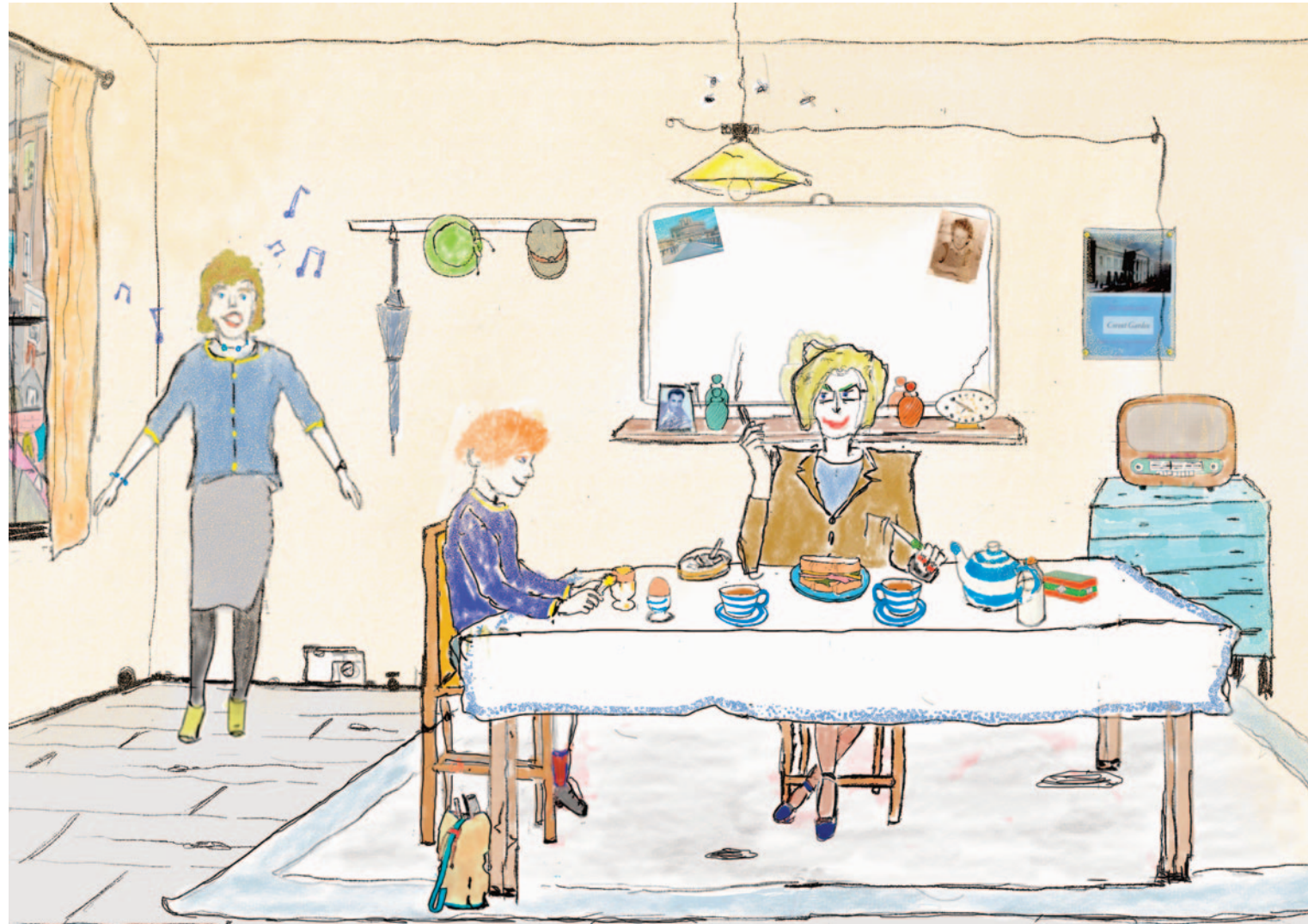
After the Haircut



I didn't realise that Stanley's idea of a good haircut was a Polish army crew cut of the 1940s. He couldn't stop cutting until the top of my hair was perfectly flat, so it gradually became shorter and shorter. It was a disaster. The next day the whole school made fun of my extreme crew cut. The experience still haunts me today.

The only positive thing was that Stanley didn't ask at the end of the haircut, "Something for the weekend, sir?" In those days barbers sold condoms and this phrase was a coded message in case you wanted to buy them. When I went to the barber's it was often said to me, much to the merriment of others.

Summy and Peggy



When we lived in the caravan, before the move to London, Summy was my mother's partner. She didn't move with us. I loved her dearly and missed her not being with us.

Summy returned to us when she took a room in the boarding house with her new partner, Peggy. I was overjoyed. Their room was a haven for me, it was warm and friendly with endless tea, food and sweets.

They read to me, entertained me and looked after me. Peggy was practising to be an opera singer and would often fill the house with the sound of arias.

Summy was my other mother. She did the things my mother didn't do, like taking me to the theatre, trips to the seaside, walks in the parks and events in London. She was the receptionist at the Football Association and

got free tickets for the FA Cup Final. When I told my schoolmates, who were mad keen on football, that I had been to the final they were horrified. It was inconceivable to them that I, with no interest in football, had had the opportunity to go.

The Lady With The Typewriter



This tenant from overseas was new to London and training to be a touch-typist. To achieve this she had a typewriter and on her wall a chart of the typewriter keys with the home keys in different colours. I remember her determination to master the typewriter, together with the exotic smells of the food she cooked and the beautiful traditional clothes she sometimes wore.

The sound of her typing became part of the symphony of household sounds. Those noises were Peggy's opera arias, The Mad Lady's radio, Stanley's sewing machine, the doorbell, the telephone and the water pipes creaking and knocking. Added to this was the melody of street traffic with taxis making their way to and from Paddington station.

The Two Road Sweepers



We had two Irish Road Sweepers who lived together in a room on the third floor. They enjoyed each other's company and my mum told me they drank methylated spirits, which I never believed. Often I would see them in the streets of Paddington and when they saw me they would shout, "Hi, Ginger!" They used to enjoy the greyhounds, so here they are. I hope they have a win.

The Naked Man



We had a gentleman tenant who liked to have a bath with the window fully open. He also sang while bathing, providing the neighbours with a full show.

The Man We Called Father Christmas

We also had a tenant we called Father Christmas because he looked like a sad version of Santa Claus. He couldn't pay his board so my mother would give him odd jobs to do instead of the rent.

He was useless at the odd jobs and the other tenants complained bitterly about him. Eventually my mother plucked up the courage to ask him to leave. He wasn't

happy about it, and came back in an angry mood and tried to destroy our front door. Looking on are my frightened mother and Margaret the Housekeeper. He didn't return after that.

I still have a book dated 1957 that he gave me for my 10th birthday. The title is *From Magic to Medicine*.



BOARDING HOUSE LIFE

It's Friday Rent Night

Friday night was rent night and the kitchen became the hub of the house. Tenants would come to pay their rent while my mother and I sat at the kitchen table. I would help by counting and bagging up the money. I remember those nights being warm and friendly with the tenants gossiping, complaining and talking politics around the table.



Tonight we have, from left to right:

Stanley the Tailor wearing a tie for the occasion.

Jock, Blondie's boyfriend and pimp, paying her rent.

My mother with a glass of her home-brewed stout mixed with Complian.

Me, keen to hear all the gossip.

The Mad Lady telling my mother that the voices on her broken radio told her not to pay the rent.

One of the Road Sweepers clutching his rent book.

A social gathering amongst the fly-papers,
mice, fag ends, cockroaches and underwear!

Mr Nutton Chases Margaret The Housekeeper



Mr Nutton, the window cleaner, liked to chase Margaret the Housekeeper around the kitchen telling her dirty stories of the ladies he had met when he was in the war. Margaret, who was Irish and Catholic,

seemed to enjoy these encounters surprisingly.

At the end of the stories Margaret would often say, "You're embarrassing the lad." I was that lad and indeed I was embarrassed

and red-faced. Margaret also had a gay younger brother whom I, too, had to avoid.

Margaret Finds A Dead Body



One morning Margaret the Housekeeper found a dead man in a room used by a visiting sex worker. The man had had a heart attack and the sex worker had long disappeared, leaving it for her to find.

She was a Catholic and was appalled at what went on in the boarding house. She would complain about the things left behind by visiting guests, but a dead body was the limit. She would often say to my

mother, who is standing in the doorway, "It's a madhouse working here"... and indeed, in many ways, it was.

The Fire

One terrible night a loft room at the top of the boarding house caught fire. The tenant and his girlfriend had been drinking and they knocked over a paraffin heater. They both died. I remember showing the firemen how to get onto the roof so they could break through to the room.

Before the fire, I remember visiting the tenant who lived in the room. He was keen on Frank Sinatra and together we listened to his records. This made me realise what a great singer Frank was. Sometimes when I hear Frank Sinatra I am reminded of that moment.



During the 1950s and 60s paraffin heaters were a popular form of heating. They were cheap and you could buy paraffin from local shops. I remember Esso had a popular TV ad for Esso Blue paraffin at the time. But paraffin heaters could be dangerous and fires were not uncommon.

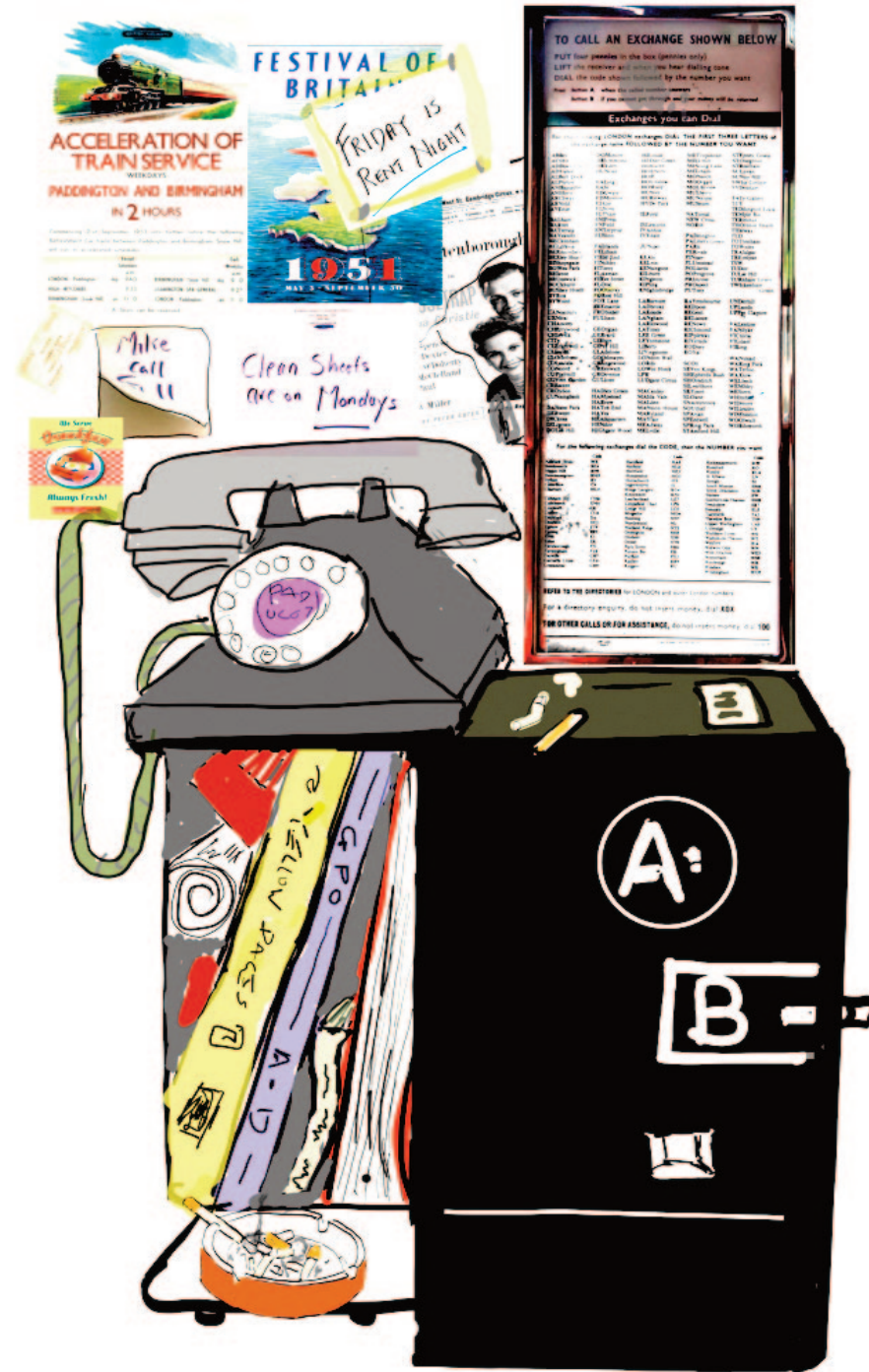


The One and Only Phone

Before the days of mobile phones, there was one coin-operated phone box for all twenty house tenants. It was the only phone in the house. Local calls were cheap and this led to tenants hogging the phone, much to the annoyance of others.

Long-distance calls were those outside of London. You had to pre-book these with the operator. When you got your allotted time you would need coins for the phone box. These calls tended to be short and to the point.

I remember spending my time running up the stairs telling tenants there were calls for them. If they were out I would then have to write a message, which was a challenge as I was dyslexic.



MOTHER'S LITTLE HELPER

My mother assumed that family members should help her with the running of the boarding house. As I was the only family member, I was a busy little boy. My tasks included cooking breakfasts, emptying the tenants' gas meters of coins, washing up, fixing the fuses, answering the front door and telephone, keeping the boiler lit for the hot water and, occasionally, collecting the rent. Collecting the rent was often a challenge with the tenants we had.

Coke Deliveries

We had a coke boiler for heating the hot water. Coke was what was left after the gas had been extracted from the coal. The coke was delivered through a manhole cover in the pavement into the cellar below.

It was my job to count the number of bags of coke being delivered to ensure we

weren't being delivered short. Not having a father made me terrified of the big muscular strong coalmen who made the deliveries. I never counted the bags and always told my mum they delivered the right number. They probably didn't.



Coke And The Bogeyman



Following the delivery, it was then my job to take the coke from the cellar to the boiler in the kitchen at the back of the house. I did this by filling up old dustbins and then dragging them along the stone-floored corridor to the kitchen.

I hated doing this. It was hard work, and I

was terrified of a bogeyman hiding in the cellar. Throughout my childhood a bogeyman would be under my bed, hiding in wardrobes or following me around the gaslit streets of Paddington.

Even now I'm not certain if the bogeyman isn't still around.

Cooking Breakfast



On Sundays, it was Margaret the Housekeeper's day off so I had to cook breakfast for the bed and breakfast guests. In the background, there is the old cooker, a gas poker and a flypaper.

Little did the guests know about the

cockroaches and mice in the kitchen. Nor did they know we didn't have a fridge, so often the food wasn't as fresh as it could have been; despite this, I often got favourable comments on my cooked breakfasts.

Shocking Moments



One of my other tasks was fixing the fuses when they blew. The fuses were porcelain with wires, and they often blew because tenants plugged irons, toasters, hairdryers and a variety of other things into their lighting sockets. Watching is Margaret the

Housekeeper and The Mad Lady with a bag of shoes.

My friends and I would often get shocks from putting bare wires into sockets without a plug, sticking screwdrivers into the backs of TVs and replacing valves in old radios.

Electric shocks weren't the only shocks during my life at the boarding house.



Home Entertainment



The Tray

I shared a small basement room with my mother and space was limited. It was difficult. She liked to relax by reading detective stories that I got from the local library for her. While she read she also liked to have a glass of her own home-made stout. She made the stout in the kitchen. The buckets of stout bubbling away made the kitchen smell like a brewery. I relaxed by sitting on the floor listening to the radio and record player. They were my escape from the reality of the situation.

The Radio

I would spend hours in the evening listening to the hit shows of the 1950s, such as *The Goon Show*, *Hancock's Half Hour*, *Life with the Lyons*, *Journey into Space* and, of course, *Pick of the Pops* with David Jacobs on Saturday nights.

The Dansette Record Player

My mother gave me a Dansette record player which had come from a tenant in lieu of rent. I endlessly played 'Climb Ev'ry Mountain' from *The Sound of Music*, which

drove my mother mad, but I hoped that the record would give her the courage to carry on running the boarding house. The Dansette followed me after I left the boarding house in 1963, when I moved to a Salvation Army hostel in Camberwell, and then on to lodgings in Acton.

The Eagle Comic on the Floor

My other escape from reality was the *Eagle* comic. The illustrations of Dan Dare and his adventures were the beginnings of my interest in graphic art.

The Newspaper Round



I also had another job doing a newspaper round. Setting out on a bike in all weathers I delivered both the morning and the evening papers.

I remember delivering the evening newspaper with the headline “Marilyn Monroe Found Dead”. I also remember on foggy Saturday nights queues by newspaper sellers of those waiting for the football results edition. The football pools were big business in those days and many of those waiting would be keen to know if they had won big.

PADDINGTON LIFE





Rattling The Railings

Ann, a friend of mine, and I would go out rattling the railings of bombed-out houses with sticks. Part of the fun was we would disturb the local sex workers in the cellars

under the pavements of the bombed-out houses. They didn't like this and thought it might be the police. When they found out it was us, they told us to "fuck off".

Our Gang and The Explosion



This is the gang that I was part of. The four of us are Myles, Trevor, Carlo and me.

We used to meet at Myles' house. I first met Myles at junior school when I was seven. We are still friends with over 65 years of shared memories. When we were teenagers, our passions were pubs, the

Beatles, Radio Luxembourg, girls and long discussions about the meaning of life.

We also mucked around with broken radios, televisions, cars, motorbikes, guitars and in this case fireworks. We intended to make a super rocket out of other fireworks. We lit the fuse, waited and waited and then

there was the most almighty explosion that rocked the street and blacked out the sky.

Today the bomb squad would have closed down half of central London. In those days neighbours just shouted, cursed us, and said they would call the police (which they didn't). They were used to our antics.

Saturday Morning Flicks and Friday Night Nudes



In the 1950s cinemas had Saturday morning shows for children.

Friends and I would go to the local ABC cinema in the Harrow Road, Paddington. ABC stood for Associated British Cinemas. We were called the 'ABC minors'. The manager, who was an ex-Sergeant Major, wouldn't start the show until we sang the ABC Minors

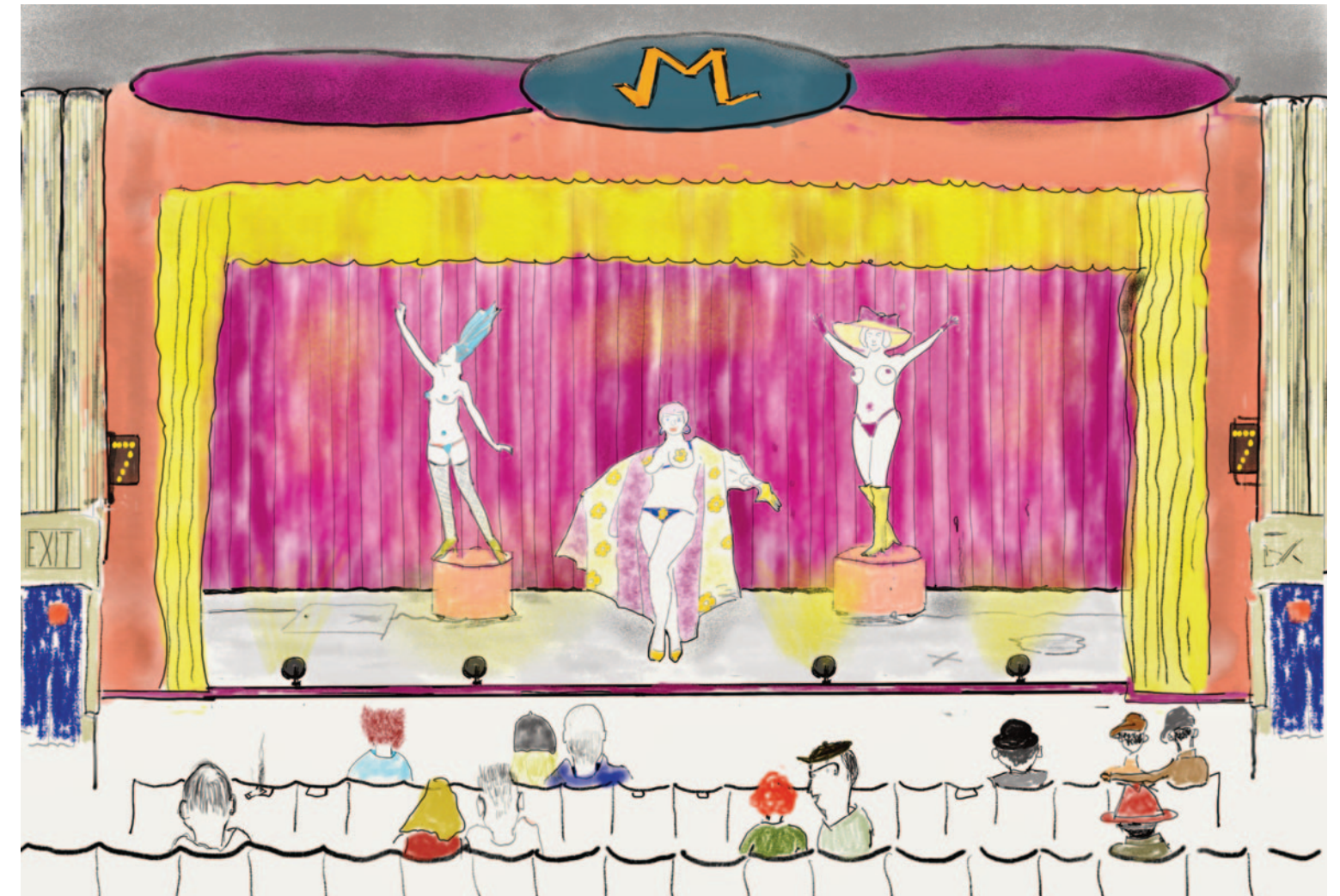
song with the gusto of a football crowd.

Once he was satisfied with our performance and before the films started, Minors whose birthday it was or who had won a competition would go up onto the stage. Here these Minors' treat was meeting Robby the Robot from the sci-fi film *Forbidden Planet*.

Once the films started the hundreds of

kids would start shouting, booing and laughing at each scene. Together with sweets flying about, chewing gum being thrown and occasionally bits of ice lollies landing on your lap, it was a fun time. Leaving at the end of the show couldn't happen until we all had stood properly to attention for the National Anthem.

The Metropolitan Music Hall



The Metropolitan was on the Edgware Road, a short walk from the boarding house. Music halls like the Metropolitan were once found in the towns and cities of Britain, but the coming of television meant that gradually families no longer went to music halls for entertainment. The Metropolitan was one of the last.

When I was 13 I started going to the

early evening show on Fridays. As audiences declined they started putting nudes on between the other acts of magicians, trapeze artists, comedians and musical numbers. The law then was that nudes had to stay still on the stage between the other acts. This meant models were often on trollies and pulled across the stage between scenes.

At one show a guy sitting next to me said, "hey, lad, aren't you a bit young for this?" I guess I was, but I had been surrounded by women in various stages of undress all my life.

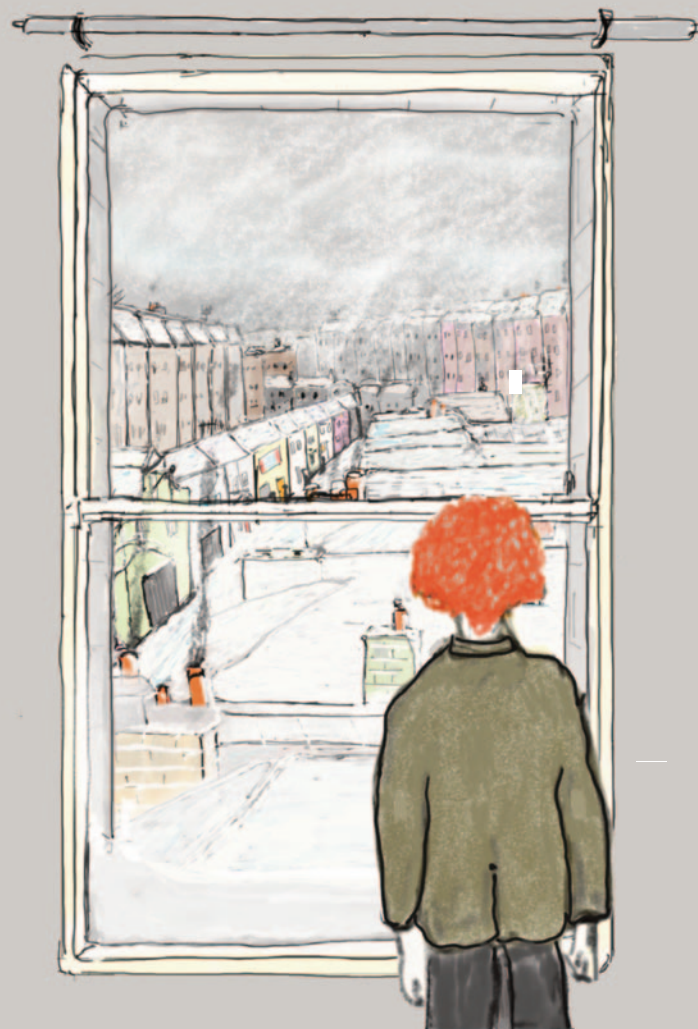
Winter 1963

The winter of 1963 was the coldest for 200 years with blizzards, snow drifts, the sea freezing, and temperatures lower than -20°C in parts of Britain.

This was the view from the back of our house. Snow covered the many Georgian houses, like ours, that had become boarding houses, bedsits and flats. Frozen ice covered the side of buildings where pipes had burst. From the window you could see me and the snowman in Bathurst Mews.



January 1963 I woke up to one of the coldest winters on record.



It was during that winter that my mother and I left the boarding house. Leaving was the end of my childhood and my mother's dreams. Life for me would never be the same again. The boarding house was sold and that crazy world full of lovely, eccentric tenants ceased to exist.

My mother was now a broken woman and had to go into hospital with nervous exhaustion. I was taken into care by Westminster Council, and the next stage of my life started at a Salvation Army hostel in Camberwell ... but that's another story.

4 Sussex Place is a hotel. It looks exactly the same as the day I left. The building has so many memories, and not a day goes past when I don't remember my life there. I still miss it. I could book a room for the night, but I never have.

Horton Hospital Epsom



This is my mother at Horton Hospital. After six months she moved back to a flat in Paddington. Here she rebuilt her life, met up with old friends and had a series of jobs. But like me she never fully recovered from our lives at 4 Sussex Place.

4 Sussex Place as it is today,
looking much the same as in
my childhood.

