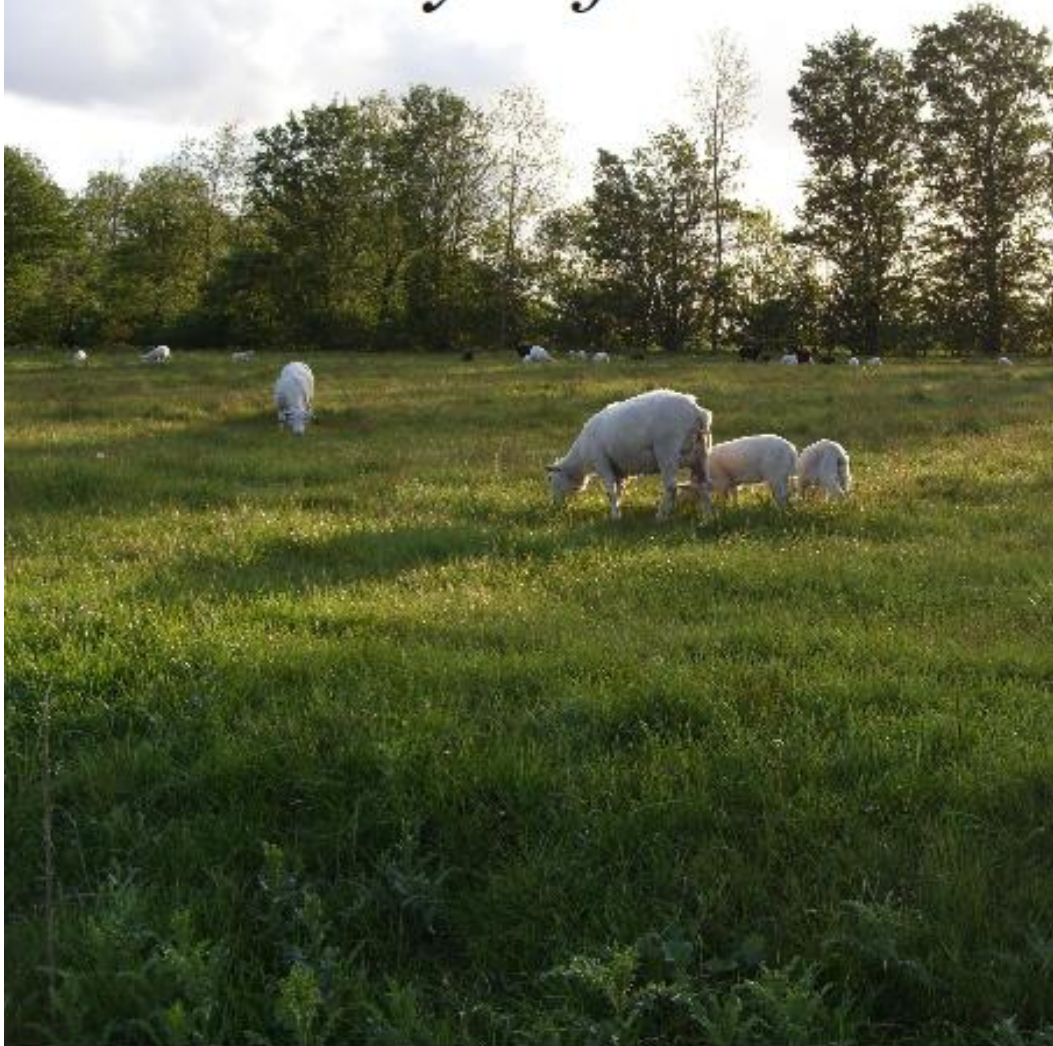


Thursday Afternoon



a novel

John C Nash

The outbreak of WW2 means a Canadian teenager spends his formative years growing up in England. Intelligent and thoughtful, slightly naive, he does his best to fit in. A skill with electronics helps, but he's always a bit of an outsider.

As Brussels falls to the Allies, a German mine blows up the truck he is in, killing his comrades, and he and a young Flemish widow with an infant daughter must deal with the aftermath, both immediate and in the post-war period.

Thursday Afternoon

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Preamble

Thursday Afternoon is a work of fiction. However, some of the characters who appear were – in fact still are to me – real. I have tried, within the bounds of the writer's freedom to tell a story, to use historical events, situations, and context. Also there are anecdotes borrowed from other areas of life and mixed in. However, in some cases, I was unable to determine the historical detail of how things were done, or what was feasible and likely. In such cases, I have had to make a best guess, but am open to learning the actual story and context.

Given they appear in the narrative, I need to acknowledge the lives of the real people. The RAF 247 China British Squadron was real. It was my father's unit from late 1943 until he was demobilized in 1946. I have written elsewhere about his life, based on his own memoirs, in "Across an Ocean and Time". Some of the people mentioned in connection with that are real, some are inventions. Moreover, my mother and some members of her family appear briefly, but their conversations are imagined. A couple of people appear in connection

with Oxford, in particular, (Sir) Maurice Bowra and Brebis Bleaney, and their role in this story is invented.

I would appreciate hearing of any errors in the historical context, and can be contacted via email at

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John Nash, Ottawa, 2012

The mine

September 7, 1944. Thursday afternoon. West of Brussels, Belgium.

Martin was sitting in the back of a Bedford RL 4-ton lorry. Or rather, he was trying to sit as the truck bounced over the badly repaired roads west of Brussels. The road ran unfenced between fields somewhere south of a town called Ninove. The truck had blown an engine gasket while the squadron – R.A.F. Squadron Number 247 – was at Glisy. A shipment of wireless parts was expected, and as one of the wireless mechanics, Martin had been detailed with two other aircraftmen to bring them and some “supplies” – otherwise known as booze – once the lorry engine was repaired. As it happened, only one box of wireless parts came.

Jack and Jim were in the front of the truck. They had made sure the gasket didn’t fit right the first time. Why rush? Glisy was near Amiens, where one could find a nice place to relax. And work awaited them at the new field, B58 Melsbroek.

There were a dozen crates of wine in the truck, a similar number containing bottles of beer, along with the wireless bits, some supplies, a couple of tents and some of their personal gear.

It was raining hard, windy and cold. They ground along the small road, occasionally sloshing through long

narrow ruts in the minimal tarmac. The truck moved left and in a couple of seconds Martin saw that they'd done so to avoid a woman walking along the road.

He was just looking back at her when the world seemed to come apart in a blinding flash. Martin was in the ditch. There was mud on his face, some even in his mouth. Where was he? How did he get here? As the confusion in his brain cleared, he started to remember....

The old country – a new home

March 24, 1938. Thursday afternoon. London, England.

Over six years earlier, and Miriam Tremblay, Martin's mother, was house-hunting. Father – Robert – was already at work in the Canadian High Commission where a pompous-sounding title covered up his real duties, which were to make sure all the administrative and logistic details were dealt with. Often this meant doing them himself. Penelope, Martin's sister who everyone called Penny, had elected to remain in Ottawa. She had finished high school and was working on a degree at McGill. Despite the Tremblay name, the family was English speaking. Great-grandfather Tremblay married a young Toronto widow. Grandfather had similarly married Agnes, an English Canadian girl, and taken employ

as a teacher in Ottawa. And Robert had met Miriam, who came with her American parents to Ottawa as part of the US delegation.

The Tremblays had come to England on the S. S. Duchess of Bedford which had sailed from St John, New Brunswick, stopping at Halifax, Greenock, and Belfast before docking at Liverpool. The weather was fairly good, but the ship lived up to its reputation and they had one ‘lively’ night when the wind got up. For the moment they were staying in a modest hotel near Hyde Park, but Miriam wanted their own ‘place’.

The Tremblays were reasonably well-off, but part of the reason they were was that they held onto money by being careful, without, however, being tight-fisted. So a newspaper advertisement for a house in Bethnal Green at a very attractive rental captured Miriam’s interest. She liked the sound of the name, Bethnal Green, too.

She decided to look at it. Martin – then 13 – went with her. They took the Tube. Exiting the train, along the platform, up the escalator, then 7 steps to a dimly lit and grimy landing, and finally 19 rough steps to the grey East End street. There wasn’t even a handrail.

Martin could sense Miriam’s tension right away as she realized this was not the type of area she would choose to live. But as they moved up the Cambridge Heath Road, things got decidedly worse. Moving along the street towards them was a noisy crowd shouting

about unfair business by Jews and sticking posters on some businesses. Some of the crowd wore black shirts. Martin had seen a couple of news headlines about 'Black Shirts', but really didn't know what they were about.

Miriam suddenly turned about and grabbed Martin's arm to pull him back to the Tube. They got tickets to Morden. Miriam had another address in Sutton. Martin was not unhappy with her decision.

At Bank station, Miriam got up to change to the Northern Line, but Martin said, "Wait Mum. If we get off here we have to walk a long way underground. Tottenham Court Road is better." He had asked the hotel doorman about the meaning of the funny elongated station symbol at Bank and been told how there were essentially three stations connected by subterranean walkways, and that the distances were inconvenient.

About an hour after running into the Black Shirts in Bethnal Green they were in Morden, and found a bus to Sutton. As the bus proceeded, Miriam said,

"This looks a nicer area. What do you think?"

"Yes. I didn't much fancy the area near Bethnal Green. And those men were pretty nasty. Does that happen often?"

"I don't know. But the last few years there have been a lot of people joining these gangs who promise a good life by taking it away from others. In Germany and Italy and Spain they have taken over the governments.

There will be people here and in Canada and the States who will try to do the same.”

They got off the bus in Sutton High Street and found the office of the estate agent, as it was called in Britain. A bespectacled young man – Mr. Broomfield – gave Miriam the details of the house. Semi-detached, sitting room, dining room and kitchen on main floor. Toilet, bath, and three bedrooms upstairs. Garage and outside toilet. Covered ‘conservatory’.

“Can we see it today?”, asked Miriam.

“Well, it’s usual to make an appointment. But I believe you Americans prefer to act quickly.”

Miriam avoided explanations. “We’re from Canada. My husband is with the High Commission at Canada House.”

Mr. Broomfield became noticeably more friendly. “Well. I have my car. I don’t see why we can’t go right away if you’d like, as the house is not occupied.”

So they went to look at the property, which was about a mile back towards Morden on a pleasant street called Rose Hill Gardens. It was plain but clean. Coming from Canada, they found the small fireplaces in each of the major rooms a strange way of heating. The empty house echoed, and despite the outside mild weather, was chill. Only later would they find the lack of heating in the bathroom – separate from the small toilet, labelled ‘WC’ – a challenge to their centrally-heated past expe-

rience.

Miriam asked about the rent and conditions. Getting to understand what the ‘rates’, or local taxes, meant was new territory. The electricity, gas and water were metered, and they would be expected to pay those bills directly.

With the High Commission paying part of the rent, Father would have to sign the lease, but Miriam paid a deposit of two pounds on the spot and got a receipt from Mr. Broomfield. They could move in as soon as they had some furniture.

There was a pantry just off the kitchen, but it was really just a cupboard. Apparently, English housewives shopped every day and did not ‘need’ a refrigerator. In Ottawa, they’d actually had one, though it was still more common to have an ice-box and take regular delivery of blocks of ice.

Four weeks later, another Thursday, and Martin was walking home the mile and a bit from his new school, Sutton Grammar School for Boys. It was ‘different’ from home – if Canada was still home. He’d been put into the Fourth Form. At home he’d been in grade 10 – younger than the rest of the class in general – and the headmaster, Mr J A Cockshutt, had suggested that he likely would do better with a group more his own age, especially as he adapted to the curriculum. His

mathematics and English were fine, and he had always done well with them. Thanks to some street friends in Ottawa, he had a good handle on French, though his usual accent was, to all but locals in Ottawa, “épouvantable”. Still, he easily outpaced the French teacher, who was a pleasant young man who had studied the language almost entirely in England. If Martin tried, he could be fairly precise in pronunciation. Besides that, he had acquired a certain richness of vocabulary, some of it decidedly non-European, emanating from the backwoodsmen of the Ottawa valley.

History was not too bad – Canada still taught a lot of dates and monarchs. Geography was, however, quite literally new territory, especially in respect of the British Isles, which were studied at a scale that was an order of magnitude smaller than anyone in North America would use.

The Tremblays decided to omit Latin and Greek from Martin’s education. This might be dangerous for the future, but they felt he would be better to learn modern subjects well. So he was enrolled in all the scientific subjects. He found this suited him very well, as he had always been technically inclined.

The move to England had excited him, but also left him wondering if he would be happy. He thought he could. He’d already found a couple of boys he could chat with easily, and he wasn’t one to be public with

comparisons to ‘home’ that the locals could take the wrong way. Instead he fell back on a habit that his grandfather Tremblay used, one of asking leading questions – an old schoolteacher’s trick – that let people tell you about themselves rather than having to listen to you tell about yourself.

He was walking with Joe Carr, who lived on Rosewood Gardens.

“I heard the School is choosing a cricket team. Do you play, Joe?”

“Nah. I like football. I’ll play cricket if I’m asked, but I’m not so good at it. And I find it slow.”

“Well, at some point you’ll have to tell me the rules. It all seems pretty strange to me.”

“You don’t play it in Canada?”

“I think they may play it in a couple of places. Probably former Brits. We’re more likely to play a form of football that is like your rugby, based on the American game. And in winter, we play hockey of course.”

“You mean ice-hockey, right?”

“Yeah. I don’t think I knew there was another kind until I saw some girls with those sticks like a stretched letter J.”

“Hockey here is the field kind. And some of those girls can be pretty vicious with the sticks. My sister Jill came home with some nasty bruises last week. It’s a foul, of course, but the ref can miss a quick hack.”

“If we don’t do cricket, are there other sports?”

“There’ll probably be some athletics. Mostly a cross country run. Probably out on Epsom, by the race-course. By the way, they fly model aeroplanes out there. If you get a bike, we could ride out sometime.”

Martin did get a bike, though he found he still walked to school. On wet days the bike could splatter his clothes. But it let him explore the area around Sutton, and allowed him to fit in with his peers at school.

Peace in our time

Thursday, September 29, 1938. Sutton, Surrey.

Martin was now in the Fifth Form, in a mathematics class. They had started doing trigonometry. Martin liked this. He had already learned a little, since it was useful for radio theory. But today his mind was elsewhere. There was a crisis over the Germans demanding the Sudetenland and right at this time the Prime Minister, Mr. Chamberlain, was in Munich for talks with Hitler, Mussolini and Daladier, the French PM. From muttered comments by his father, Martin knew that not much good could come of the talks. Either the French and British would concede, or the Germans, supported by the Italians, would take what they wanted. The outcome would be the same at least for the residents of the affected territory, and Czechoslovakia, at least in the

form in which it had been known, would be gone.

Neither France nor Britain were ready for war, and the Americans were insistent on staying out of European squabbles, as they called them. However, many people were clear that there was going to be a great deal of unpleasantness, to euphemize the situation.

Martin's mental excursion was hauled back to the classroom by a question from the maths master, Mr. Crowder. Fortunately, Crowder said his name first, so he had the question.

"Tremblay. What would you do if you only had tables of the sine function and needed a cosine?"

"I could get the magnitude of the cosine easily by Pythagorus' rule. And I could get whether it is positive or negative by positioning the angle on a graph and noting which quadrant it is in, since cosine is positive in quadrants I and IV and negative in II and III." Martin wondered if Crowder were testing to see if he'd read the Radio Amateurs Handbook from which he had almost quoted. But all he got back was:

"It's nice to see someone takes the reading assignment seriously". Crowder was not, of course, referring to the Handbook, and indeed Martin hadn't done more than skim the readings that had been set.

At break, some of the boys sought to find out how he knew.

"You must've known what question he was going to

ask. Bet you have a friend in the Lower Sixth and Crowder asks the same thing every year.”

“Nah.” said Martin, starting to drift into the local London drawl, “I’ve been reading a book on radio – wireless – and some of that comes in all the time. Just blind luck.”

“Yeah, we know, lucky old Trembler”. This, said with a bit of a sneer, could have been indicative of hostility, but somehow Martin didn’t engender that sort of reaction. The nickname was a badge of membership in the loose ‘crowd’ of boys in his form. They knew he messed about with electricity, and had helped one of them set up a crystal receiver. That was his peculiarity and they accepted it, in a way that was a bit more tolerant than in Ottawa. Yet when it came to food and clothing, they were more narrow. Yes, they ate cockles and whelks, but they thought the idea of maple syrup decidedly strange, and none of them had tried Chinese food, though a couple knew about Indian curries. Spaghetti was known to one or two, and macaroni – as macaroni cheese – to most. Smoked meat, bagels, and pretzels were definitely foreign.

Winter 1938-39

December 21, 1938. London

Miriam and Martin were shopping on Oxford Street

and almost felt at home. It was cold and snowy. Not as much snow as in Ottawa, but here they were not used to it. People didn't have the proper clothing or boots. And the Tremblays had not brought their full winter gear. Still, they did have good coats and hats, scarves and gloves, so were reasonably comfortable outdoors.

It was at home they suffered. Eating dinner (tea or supper to the English) with your breath fogging in front of you was not only a novelty but uncomfortable, since you had to wear layers of sweaters. Fortunately Miriam had had the good sense – and the warning of a friend who had spent time in England – to pack one set of long underwear each, and this was keeping them warm as they visited the shops.

“What should I get Dad?” Miriam asked. So far she had largely been getting treats for Christmas Day in Selfridges. Crackers, which were not much known in Canada, and a few bits and bobs of edible treats.

Martin thought that he was not a likely source of wisdom on what to get his father. However, he recognized that to answer with that information would be counter-productive. And he'd already bought his father a notebook in a protective case for use in birdwatching, which Robert did haphazardly, rather more as a way of getting some thinking time than as a serious hobby. For his mother he had made a tray in the school woodworking class. Actually a rather nice tray in two contrasting

woods. Parents were hard to get presents for.

“How about the new Graham Greene book ‘Brighton Rock’?”, he said.

“Oh good. Then I can read it too.”

That was not quite Martin’s thought, but Miriam was suddenly in a better mood, so he was satisfied. They didn’t have to buy for Penny. That had been taken care of in September, in time to get a parcel away with some British chocolates and humbugs – though whether she would like these no one knew – as well as a very attractive sweater, here called a jumper. Ah, the trials of translating English into English.

“Let’s try Foyles”, said Miriam. “It’s on Charing Cross Road, and we can have a cup of tea before we have to meet Dad, then we can all go home together.”

This was indeed a plan. They easily found the Greene book in Foyles.

Martin also went looking for books on wireless and electronics. He had asked his parents for a subscription to Practical Wireless, and was also hoping for a bit of money too, so he could buy some parts to build some circuits. However, a nice book on how to build a valve amplifier would be useful.

As he was browsing, a middle-aged man with a Foyles badge came up to him.

“May I help you find something, sir?”

Martin was not used to being called ‘sir’. However,

he told the man what he was looking for.

“Something with amplifier circuits and perhaps some resonators and tuners?” The accent was quite strong. Germanic. But the English was precise and proper.

“Oh, absolutely!”, Martin was surprised that the man had this knowledge.

The man walked along the shelf then up a bit and pulled a book from the shelf. “This one is almost four years old now, but it has a quite simple but well-designed push-pull amplifier in the second or third chapter as I recall.”

Martin took a look. It was very nicely laid out. Many electronics books were too cramped and with too-small print to make reading comfortable. This was rather nice. And it was not very expensive. Martin asked,

“You understand vacuum valve circuits?”

“In another life, I’m afraid. Then I taught students how to build such things. But please do not say anything to the managers. Here I am just a bookshop clerk.”

Martin had the same uncomfortable feeling as in Bethnal Green with the Blackshirts. He said simply, “I really appreciate your help to find this. Thank you. I’ll take it.”

The man took him to the sales desk where the bill was written up, then he had to go to another counter to pay, then come back for his book. Very strange.

Still, when the clerk gave him his book, it was carefully wrapped in brown paper and tied with string.

He dawdled to the front door where he and Miriam had agreed to meet, and then they joined the throng heading down Charing Cross Road. Robert would not be finished until five at the earliest. By arrangement, they had met by a particular front door in Foyles at a quarter to four. It was already almost dark outside. London was farther north than Ottawa. Strange to think that.

They went into the Lyons Corner House on the Strand to the First Floor ‘Café’. The place was busy and felt warm. Probably all the people. They were directed to a table by one of the staff.

The waitresses all had the same black uniforms. Someone at school had said they were called ‘nippies’ because the management wanted them always to be quick and busy. A small dark-haired one brought them menus and soon returned to ask what they would like.

“I’ll have coffee and a toasted tea-cake please.” Miriam answered.

“And monsieur?” An interesting touch.

“I’d like a welsh rarebit and a cup of tea with milk, please?” said Martin. He had tried the melted cheese on toast before, and especially liked the Cheshire cheese. He didn’t say anything to his mother that coffee was not normally the drink of 4 in the afternoon here in

England. Well, she could be her American self.

“Thank you very much”, said the waitress, and disappeared.

“You found a book for yourself in Foyles?” Miriam half asked, half stated.

“Yes, a book on valve circuits. The clerk was very helpful. He said he’d taught electronics.”

“But now working as a bookshop clerk?” Miriam expressed surprise.

“I got the feeling he was a refugee. Probably Jewish from Germany.”

“Unfortunately a great many people are losing their jobs in Germany because they are Jewish”, said Miriam. “And there are many trying to get to Canada and the U.S., but the politicians think they will be a burden and are set against them.”

Martin said no more. He’d read the news, and seen the Blackshirts last spring. There were people in trouble simply because of their ancestors. And some because of their politics. And some because they were called homosexuals, though he really had no idea what that actually meant. It seemed there were too many people wanting to blame somebody else for their troubles, and a sort of chill went by in the noisy restaurant. He ate his rarebit and drank his tea.

“I’d better go to the toilet before we take the Tube,” he said, getting up.

When he came back, Miriam had the bill.

“Wait here while I go too”, she said.

In the nearly 10 minutes she was gone, Martin watched the Nippies, and realized that they worked much harder for a wage that was likely much smaller than he would be prepared to take for the same work. He must make sure to get a job that was better paid and more fun when the time came. Miriam came back, looking a bit annoyed.

“They need more cubicles for women. There was a line up out the door.” Martin thought to himself that the English would have said ‘a queue out the door’.

They paid and made their way downstairs and out into the now fully night-time street. Crossing over the Strand they walked the few yards towards Trafalgar Square and up to one of the main doors of Canada House. As they got to the door, Robert came out.

“Right on time”, he said. “Things were quiet so I was able to be here and save you waiting.”

He and Miriam kissed. If friends from school were around, Martin would be embarrassed, but in ‘private’, even with a street full of Londoners, it gave him a sense of assurance that things were as they should be. His parents were not gushy, they didn’t ‘Dear’ and ‘Darling’ each other, but there was a quiet affection and cooperation. They still liked each other. Martin found it very uncomfortable when he heard adults making negative

comments about their spouses. His parents' togetherness, more than anything, meant 'home' to Martin right now.

Excitement and bother

September 7, 1939, Sutton, Surrey

On Sunday, Britain had declared war on Germany. There'd been a broadcast from Mr. Chamberlain, then the air raid siren had gone. It had been a false alarm, but nobody quite took it seriously in Sutton. The Tremblays didn't live close to a public shelter. Since February, some people had been getting Anderson shelter kits, and Robert had managed to get one, paying £7 for the kit of corrugated iron panels. Martin and Robert had spent the whole of one weekend in mid-August digging the hole and putting the shelter together.

They spent another weekend banking the soil around and on top of it, and setting sods along the sides and seeding the top. When war was declared, they still had to make it possible to spend time there.

Robert, with his practical mind, saw that the wet British weather would make the four foot deep shelter miserable. Fortunately Rose Hill Gardens was on a hill, so they put the shelter at the uphill side of the garden. He also had had a local builder deliver a load of gravel, and dug the hole deeper than suggested and

filled the bottom of it with a foot of gravel, in which some weeping tiles were buried leading to the downhill side to the shelter where they built a sump with some bricks. The local hardware shop, here called the iron-mongers, sold them a stirrup pump. They drilled a hole near the corner and made a channel to drain the water away. The shelter would be bad enough on wet winter nights. Others eventually found them too miserable to use, and later on the indoor Morrison shelter would be introduced. However, the Anderson turned out to protect very well against any bomb except a direct hit.

When the siren went at 11:35 on Sunday, they had been listening to the radio – the Brits called it the wireless of course – as Chamberlain, sounding desperately tired, gave the unwelcome news. Robert had phoned the Under-Secretary. The Tremblays had a telephone installed because of Robert's job. Ordinary English folk would have to wait several years. He hung up – again the Brits would say 'rang off' – and said that Canada was not going to be at war until Parliament in Ottawa had debated the matter.

School had started, though things were far from usual. Martin was now starting Form Five. All his class had their gas masks, but there were a couple of boys who had left their masks 'somewhere' and there were stern words from the Headmaster, and they had to go home to find them, which was possibly their intent. In the

school yard there was much discussion of who would get called up, whether air raids would mean the School would evacuate, and how long things would last. All the boys assumed that the 'Empire', as they called it, was in the fight. Martin knew it was now the 'Commonwealth' since the Statute of Westminster in 1931, even though Australia and New Zealand had not yet ratified it. And when he told his schoolmates that Canada had not yet declared there was some shock and annoyance.

Today – Thursday afternoon in England, but morning in Ottawa – the recalled Parliament was discussing a declaration of war against Germany.

"What's to discuss?", said Jones Major. "If the King's at war, then Canada is."

"A lot of Canadians think we were taken for granted in the Great War." Martin responded. "I think we'll declare in a few days. We're an independent country and need to make our own declaration."

This didn't go down well with the English boys. Martin was given a cold shoulder for the rest of the recess and indeed the rest of the day. In truth, he wasn't terribly sure himself how he felt. He went to a corner of the school yard with his notebook and pretended to be studying a circuit, but in reality was trying to sort out his feelings.

The late-spring saga of the St. Louis and her 907 Jewish refugees had made him feel very uncomfortable,

like his own Canadian government was conspiring with the Nazis even as they did nothing direct. In Canada, he had had almost no contact with Jewish people that he knew of. Possibly some of the shop owners or businessmen in Ottawa were Jewish. He didn't know or care, but he couldn't see why any group deserved to be treated so badly. Perhaps there were some whose business was shady. Then surely those should be brought to account, not everyone of the same religion.

Of course, now he did know Mr. Rosenthal from Foyles. He had gone back at half term near the end of February to browse for another book on circuits. There were not many people in the technical section that day, and they had been able to chat a little. Rosenthal had asked him what school his blazer belonged to, and when Martin said Sutton Grammar, he mentioned he lived a stop or two from Morden.

Rosenthal, very proper, said he would not ask Martin for his address, as his parents might not approve. However, he wrote down his own and said that if his parents approved, he would be happy to talk to Martin about electronics. He didn't get much opportunity.

Robert and Miriam invited Rosenthal to tea one Sunday shortly after, and found the former college lecturer – now likely in his mid to late forties – an extremely courteous and pleasant visitor. He examined the two circuits Martin had built and some of the drawings he

had made. Several very gentle suggestions had resulted in great improvements in both the practical and theoretical work.

Martin's parents also found Rosenthal interesting. Without prying, they learned that he had been employed in the State Academy for Applied Sciences in Nuremberg, which in 1933 was renamed 'Ohm-Polytechnikum Nürnberg' in honour of the scientist whose name is the unit of electrical resistance. However, being Jewish, in that year he was dismissed. He managed, with some difficulty and the help of distant relatives, to get to England in 1936, but was now employed as a clerk in Foyles.

"At least I can support myself, and I was fortunate in a way to have no dependants. My wife and baby died of the Spanish Flu in the winter of 1918-19, just after I got home from serving as ground crew for the Luftstreitkräfte, the Imperial German Army Air Service."

He had come to tea three more times, on each occasion bringing some pastry or biscuits, and they occasionally exchanged letters about circuits.

The delay until Canada declared solidified Martin's nickname 'Trembler'. Oh well, at least he rated a nickname. Now it was Thursday afternoon. The Canadian Parliament would be back in session to discuss a Declaration of War. Indeed, that evening the 9 o'clock news would note that fact, though it would be Monday before

the news was out that the King had been asked to give Royal Assent to a declaration of war on Germany.

But for now, Martin was left as an observer of events. At home, his mother was in an even odder position, as Americans were busy underlining their neutrality, but she was married to a Canadian and living in England. Martin, with eminent good sense, avoided any conversational line that might lead to discussion of taking sides.

Yesterday there had been a 'scramble' of fighter aircraft. Sadly two Spitfires had shot down two Hurricanes by mistake, and one pilot was killed with two aircraft lost. A bad start.

At least no bombs yet. Not like Guernica.

Waiting for something to happen

December 14, 1939, Thursday Afternoon, Sutton, Surrey

Martin had just come home from school. It was already dark outside, and the weather had been dull and cool. Not as cold as last year, but the grey damp that he had begun to associate with living here in Sutton in the winter. He hung his overcoat on a hook in the hall, and slung his gas mask box over that.

Miriam was not at home. For a moment he wondered where she might be, then remembered she had gone to visit Janet Murrow, a fellow American, somewhere in

the West End. Janet was married to the broadcast correspondent Edward R. Murrow. They had some friends in common somewhere, probably from schools or colleges they'd both gone to.

Martin – as it would turn out correctly – figured Miriam would come home with Robert. While he waited, he made sure the blackout was properly in place in the living room, then turned on a small light behind a wing chair and lit the gas fire, setting it on 'low'. Miriam had arranged that the gas fire was put in, and it saved a lot of fuss with getting a coal fire going, then wasting the heat when everyone left the room.

He picked up today's newspapers from the rack beside the chair. There'd been a naval battle off Montevideo yesterday. There were claims that the German pocket battleship Graf Spee was damaged. No comment on any British losses. It was difficult to know what was really going on.

There was certainly a lot of fighting going on in Finland. At the moment the Finns seemed to be doing a lot of damage to the attacking Russians. David doing damage to Goliath. One wondered if that would last. Stalin didn't seem to care if he killed millions.

Term would be over on Friday. He was trying to think what he'd get his parents for Christmas this year. There were fewer and fewer things in the shops as resources were diverted to the war effort. So far only

petrol was rationed, and they didn't have a car, though sometimes Robert had borrowed one of the several cars belonging to the High Commission. If there was something really important, there was the chauffeured one that was for the High Commissioner or his delegate, which could be Robert if there were an important errand.

Martin was reading Brighton Rock, the book he'd got for Robert the year before. He was just settling in, when he heard the key in the lock and his parents came in.

"Hi, We're home." Miriam called.

"In the living room." Martin replied.

They came in, having removed their coats and hung up their masks. Robert was carrying a package that exuded the strong smell of the oil used for frying.

"We brought fish and chips. Mum didn't feel like cooking."

"Oh. Good. Is it cod or haddock?" said Martin.

"We got three pieces of each. And plenty of chips. Pity they don't use ketchup here, but there's some in the pantry. Can you get it and we'll eat before it gets cold?"

"If we're eating in the dining room, I'd better close the blackout curtains," Martin said as he moved to the hall. It was appreciably colder out here and he shut the door behind him. He could hear Miriam upstairs. The

toilet flushed and she went to the bathroom to wash. It was pretty close to freezing up there.

“Mum. Do you want trays in the living room?” he called up.

“Good idea. Not elegant, but we’ll be warmer,” she called back.

Martin went to the kitchen and found the trays. They had been glad they bought these – a set of simple ones with slightly raised edges – as in winter they’d taken to eating with the trays on their laps in the living room while listening to the wireless. He also got cutlery from the drawer and plates from the cupboard, as well as the ketchup – Heinz of course – from the pantry, then returned to the living room. He would have had to balance the stack of trays with the other items on the top of the bannister to open the living room door, but Miriam was just at the bottom of the stairs, and she got the door for him.

“Better wash your hands. Dad’s upstairs, so use the kitchen.”

He did so and he and Robert arrived at the living room door together.

“After you, son.”

They opened the newspaper parcel and Miriam divided the fish and chips onto the plates. She was on the sofa, Martin and Robert each in an arm chair.

“Shall I put the wireless on?” Martin asked, using

the local vernacular rather than ‘radio’.

“Please.” Miriam answered. “It’s almost time for the news.”

There was music, and then a break and a time signal.

“Here is the News, and this is Alvar Lidell reading it,” came the start of the six o’clock news.

There was some regurgitation of the fact that the Navy had engaged the Graf Spee off Montevideo. Now it seemed there were diplomatic discussions because the German pocket battleship had gone into the Uruguayan harbour and would have a limited time before the ship would be seized. What the Uruguayans would use to seize a ship with six 11-inch guns and other armaments was not clear.

There was also a review of the case of the sinking of the neutral Dutch ship the *Tajandoen* a week ago. Six crew had been killed, but 47 crew, including the captain, as well as 14 passengers survived. A Belgian ship, the *Louis Sheid* had seen the sinking and rescued them, but was fearful – even though also neutral – of being attacked, so went full steam ahead for the Cornish coast, unfortunately hitting a submerged rock near Warren Point in the early morning of December 8. It was also eventually destroyed. Fortunately the *Salcombe* lifeboat rescued everyone in several dangerous trips.

Neutral ships meant American ones too. The United

States had sent the British a diplomatic note concerning the diversion of such ships to British or French ports to look for contraband. Martin remembered that this was an old message, going back to the early 19th century, in fact the War of 1812.

And the Soviet Union was expelled from the League of Nations. But what was the League going to do about the reasons for the expulsion?

“I was talking to Janet today about evacuation of children from the UK,” Miriam said. “I’m wondering if Martin should be sent back to Canada.”

“You just heard that the Nazis are torpedoing neutral ships. I wonder if it is not safer here,” Robert countered.

“It’s so hard to know. What do you want Martin?”

“Well, if the war goes on a long time, it won’t make much difference, as in a couple of years I’m likely to be called up either in Canada or here. Though I think I’d volunteer to get some choice of what I’d be doing. In the meantime, I’d like to finish up my schooling here. And I think I’d rather be with you for now.”

“It might make sense for much younger children who wouldn’t get into the services, but, for them, being away from parents is going to be harder.” Robert said.

“Yes, there’s some worry about that in Janet’s group. Also uncertainty about the suitability of the people who will be looking after the children in the US. They’re generous, to be sure, but possibly not ready for English

kiddies who will no doubt be homesick and missing their families.”

The conversation circled the topic several times, but it was clear that they wanted to stay together and also clear that they were uncertain what dangers lay ahead. So far things had been surprisingly quiet, even boring.

March 21, 1940. Maundy Thursday, Sutton, Surrey

The news had just reported that, in France, Daladier had resigned and been replaced by Reynaud as Prime Minister. He'd not aided the Finns during the Winter War, and now the Soviets were imposing harsh terms on the smaller nation, which had punched a good deal above its weight in the conflict, but eventually was overcome by sheer numbers.

Martin kept up his work on electronics. With the war, parts were getting harder to obtain. He still managed to see Rosenthal from time to time, even going up to Foyles to look for books. After the initial flap, there had been little direct sign of enemy activity, though there had been the naval actions. The sinking of the Royal Oak in October had been avenged with Graf Spee's scuttling. But Starfish had been lost – damaged and scuttled. On the other hand, ‘The Navy's here’ was the cry as Cossack men boarded the Altmark and saved the prisoners taken by Graf Spee.

The score was not as simple as football. More like a test match in cricket where you had to weigh runs against wickets and time remaining.

June 13, 1940, Sutton, Surrey

Martin was home from school and listening to the BBC on yet another modification of a crystal set he had built. Paris was now declared an open city. In other words, the French and British had given up on France, though there was still some evacuation going on. Dunkirk had been evacuated by an armada of small boats, but at what cost? Martin could not imagine London being occupied by the coal-scuttle helmeted German soldiers. But then, not many days ago, nor could most of the French imagine them in Paris.

“Martin. Do you want some tea and biscuits?” Miriam called up.

“Be right down.”

Miriam had set up tea in the shelter of the overhang. It was reasonably sunny and dry, but last week there’d been rain.

“Managing your school work all right?” she asked.

“Yes. School is fine. It’s the rest of the world that isn’t.”

“It’s difficult not to worry. Dad says there are quite a few Canadians still in France. I suppose that’s not for general distribution, though I expect the Germans

already know. I hope they get them out, but I'm sure a lot will be captured. I hope to God not killed."

"Me, too. But it looks like we're in the soup for a while."

"I'm afraid so, Martin. Just remember how much we love you."

"You, too, Mum."

"Have you heard from David Rosenthal?"

"No. Nothing for over a month."

"There's a lot of silly talk about spies and fifth-columnists. I think that internment will be expanded. Oh. It's so unfair! He's one of the people with the most to lose if those awful Nazis succeed."

"They've even changed the location of the Derby. They ran it yesterday at Newmarket."

"I didn't know you were interested in horse racing, Martin."

"I'm not, really, but Joe and I and some others from school have ridden our bikes up to Epsom. It's got some soldiers living in the Grandstand and some AA guns on the course, so we couldn't wander about."

September 9, 1940, Sutton, Surrey, Monday

Martin was walking over to Joe's house after an early tea. It was about 5:30. He'd got to the top of Rose Hill Park West and was about to enter the park and work through to Joe's back yard. Not the proper route, of

course, but favoured by the boys as it saved a few feet, though at the cost of a rough path through untended copse. Of course, the Carr family cats used this route all the time.

In the distance he heard an air raid siren, then a closer one started. This was a bit of a nuisance. He was still some distance from Joe's and too far to run back home. Right now he was in the partly treed park on high ground. Looking to the south east, he could see a dog-fight developing. Over Carshalton way, first one, then another machine folded up and fluttered down. Martin had a small pair of field glasses he carried, and managed to get a bead on one. Bad show! A Hurricane. If both were, that was not good for the good guys. Then he saw another plane on fire. Through the glasses he saw it was a twin engine job, probably an Me 110.

Now the planes were closer, the Germans trying to press towards London. No they were heading more westward. Yes. Definitely 110s. As he watched the melee he could now hear the rattle of machine guns. He moved partly under a tree. Didn't want shell casings or spent bullets on his head. Pity he didn't have a tin hat. He pulled his school cap down tighter, not that it would do much good.

Now another 110 was on fire. He saw it going in under power over by Worcester Park. There were already some fires there. Bombs? Incendiaries? Well, now a

crashed plane. Through the glasses it looked like it was not on a building at any rate.

Now that the raid was past, he quickly made his way to Joe's. The Carrs were in their Anderson, and he said "I'm going to head home to let Mum know I'm all right. And I saw two Messerschmidt 110s brought down, though they may have got a couple of Hurri's."

"You'd better be smart about getting home. Your Mum'll be that worried," said Mrs. Carr.

"See ya' at school," said Joe.

October 17, 1940, Sutton, Surrey, Thursday

It was afternoon break at School. Martin was outside – it wasn't raining for the moment, but there had been a lot yesterday. Monday a bomb had done a lot of damage to the Balham Tube station, and many people sheltering there from an air raid were killed or injured.

"Think they'll fix the Tube quickly?" said Jamieson to nobody in particular.

"Nah. 'ave to rebuild it. Take years." Varley was the class pessimist.

"Wha'd'you think Trembler?"

"Dunno. There's a lot of pressure to get it running again. My Dad, for example, used to take the Tube every day. Now there's diversions to buses and such. "

"Yeah. And one bus diverted down the bloody bomb crater!"

“Varley. We’ll have none of that language.” The duty master was patrolling. That, at least for the moment, had not changed.

“At least it seems the Nazis won’t invade this year, thanks to the RAF,” Martin said.

“Yeah. Looks like the Jerries are gonna try and bomb us into submission, or keep us awake all night,” Varley persisted.

“Looks like it,” Martin agreed. “Bit like when Napoleon took over in France. Let’s hope for a similar outcome.”

The Blitz

20 March, 1941. Thursday afternoon, Sutton, Surrey

The first class of the afternoon was missing a couple of boys. Last night there’d been 750 people killed by bombing of the East End, and while most of the boys came from the Sutton area, a few had family members in the affected areas and were excused to allow them to assist in funeral arrangements or helping to salvage belongings and rehouse those bombed-out.

Martin was sleepy. The sirens had sent the Tremblays to their Anderson shelter, and the unsettled weather meant it was an uncomfortable night. He’d finally slept about 4 hours in all, but that wasn’t enough. Others, of

course, had it worse. The teacher was struggling, too, trying to present one of the topics in physics. After about half an hour, the teacher decided that the class was not working. It was, in any case, a small class, usually just eleven of the Sixth formers, and today down to eight. One sick, Two away.

“Perhaps, given the hostilities last night, we should undertake some private study,” said Mr. Rhys-Jones. “And if any of you finds it necessary to put your head down, I will not consider it an infraction.”

There was a murmur of appreciation, and the boys turned to different books or papers, or in one or two cases simply put their heads on their arms.

Martin took out his workbook on radios. He was working with some circuits from the *Radio Amateur's Handbook* and *Practical Wireless* to try to learn how to calculate the voltages and currents needed for different parts of a circuit. He'd found a 1938 *Osram Valve Guide Pocket Reference* which gave the data for Osram valves – tubes in North America. That would have to do for now, and hopefully the Public Library might have books for valves by other manufacturers.

He started a table to record voltages and currents on different parts of a simple amplifier circuit he was hoping to build with some parts he had bought in a junk shop in Croydon a few months before, along with things in his growing ‘parts inventory’. On the opposite page

he wrote his equations and the numbers for the cathode heater of one of the valves, and took his slide rule out of his satchel and worked out the heater current at two likely low tension battery voltages.

Mr. Rhys-Jones was beside him. He hadn't heard him come up – soft sole shoes!

“Tidy work, Tremblay. What are you calculating?”

“I'm trying to work out whether a valve I found can be run with a couple of bicycle lamp batteries in series or parallel,” Martin responded. It was the truth, and no need to hide it.

“And you've learned to use a slide-rule. Useful. But better not get too dependent on it. The authorities allow no aids in the university exams.”

Rhys-Jones moved on. His advice was valid, but for the real world, a slide rule was going to be what was used.

The university exams! The final ones were about a year away. Then what?

Easter 1941

April 10, 1941. Sutton, Surrey

Another Maundy Thursday. The Thursday before Good Friday.

Martin's Spring term had ended the Friday before. He would in normal times be enjoying the holiday, but

the general situation and news were not good. Also he had written some college entrance exams and the results were still pending. Postal disruptions from the war would not help that either.

Joe Carr from school was coming over soon. They'd see if they could get the amplifier circuit Martin had built to work smoothly. Given that radio bits were hard to come by with the war on, the rig was made out of several wrecked radios. Back in 1940, Martin and Joe had seen damaged contents of a bombed out house being piled for disposal. They noted a smashed radio. While they could have just taken it, Martin approached an ARP warden who was monitoring the cleanup and asked him if they might take the radio and see if they could cannibalize it.

The ARP warden ran a small newsagent and confectionary. He was volunteering on early closing. He'd seen the boys going to and from school, and if they'd done a runner with the radio would probably have reported them. Martin's direct approach caught him off balance. He walked over to the rubbish pile and the obviously badly damaged radio and looked at it for a few seconds.

"You think you can get it going again?" he asked.

"Not likely this one," said Martin. "But if we get two or three we may be able to make one work, or else use the parts for something else like an amplifier for a

record player – er – gramophone.”

“All right. Give it a try.”

Mr. Cartright, for that was his name, took to picking up damaged electrical and electronic gear and giving it to the boys. But he always asked them how they were doing. Since he had become their source of supply, Martin and Joe would show him their results. Mostly this was a carefully ordered collection of resistors and condensers – the latter Martin called capacitors from his Canadian background. They put these in a cigar box in which they put cardboard divisions, all properly labelled.

They did manage one crude amplifier, but it distorted badly. They showed it to Mr. Cartright, but couldn't demonstrate as it needed several batteries hooked up, and the ones they had were not at all portable. He was, nonetheless, satisfied they were 'doing something useful' rather than getting into mischief.

They were very careful to keep the valves apart and hidden. These were getting pretty rare, and the boys rightly figured that in addition to being useful for their circuits, they could also turn into cash at some point.

Martin was in his room at the back of the house overlooking the garden and going over his circuit drawing of their new amplifier. The big problem was that they had two valves for which they didn't really have full specifi-

cations. The valves had already seen considerable duty, and were meant for amplifying a wireless signal. Joe and Martin were trying to get a microphone and loud-speaker arrangement going. Their own public address box. The voltages and currents from the microphone might not be a good match for the circuit input, and the speakers from two smashed radios might not have the right impedance for the output. Still, it was worth a try.

There was a knock at the door. Martin ran down and let Joe in.

“Hi, Joe. Come on up. Mum! It’s Joe. We’ll be upstairs.”

“All right. Let me know when you’re nearly done and I’ll put on a cup of tea.”

The boys went up to the room.

“How you doing, Joe?”

“Not bad, but the news is none too pleasing. Our army was doing OK in North Africa against the Eyties, but now Rommel is pushing us back towards Egypt, and his paratroops seem to have pushed us out of Yugoslavia and Greece.”

“Yeah. The invasion in the Balkans and Greece was last Sunday. Even the bit of good news that day about the torpedoing of the Gneisenau in Brest harbour has a sour taste with Flying Officer Kenneth Campbell getting killed with his three other crew in the attempt.”

“And eighty killed and lots injured at the Café de Paris. Of course, the *Times* didn’t say where it was, just played up the heroism of passers-by who gave aid. My Mum heard where it was from one of her friends who ripped up her petticoat to use as a bandage to stop a woman from bleeding to death. Said the woman was in a fancy gown. Mum’s friend is one of the barmaids in a pub nearby. Now she’s wondering if she’ll get some allowance to get a new petticoat.”

“Yes. Dad said he’d heard it was the Café de Paris. Someone from the High Commission was supposed to meet some people there, but fortunately got delayed by the air raid warning. Lucky for them, but not for the people on the dance floor. Seems we get to know pretty quickly where things happened. I sometimes wonder if the Germans find out too.”

There was a noise at the front door.

“NO!” cried Miriam.

Martin wondered what had happened. Someone killed! Dad!

“She’s got married!” said Miriam in a high pitched and loud voice.

“Penny?” asked Martin.

“Yes – read it!”

MARRIED DAVID STOP LETTER WILL EXPLAIN ALL STOP
LOVE PENNY

“Well. We’ll have to wait for the letter. But it’s not surprising. Her letters have been ‘David this’ and ‘David that’ for at least a year or so.” Martin extemporized. He knew this would at most minimally reduce the uproar that would envelop the house for a while.

“But it’s so selfish of her!” said Miriam. “Not waiting until we could be there.”

“But Mum, travel’s pretty much impossible across the Atlantic unless you want to serve in the Merchant Marine or on a corvette.”

“I’d better get home,” Joe said, recognizing domestic upheaval when he saw it. Miriam’s polemic about thoughtless daughters became over the Easter weekend a four-day grumble, and it was two weeks before Penny’s letter arrived.

Penny had been going out with David Stedman, who it turned out came from Ottawa, too, since the beginning of her second year of three at McGill. Penny was studying modern European languages, in particular Italian, but keeping up her French. When the rest of the family moved to England, she moved in with Grandma and Grandpa Tremblay. Richard Tremblay was 65 when war was declared, but the general shortage of manpower meant that he stayed on as a high school teacher, generally filling in wherever he was needed.

Moreover, the Tremblays Senior cleared out another

room and took in two young women out of the many who streamed into Ottawa to fulfil the needs of wartime administration in the wooden ‘Temporary’ buildings. Accommodation was in desperately short supply. Their two tenants walked to and from work along 5th Avenue – not at all like its New York namesake – and through some side roads to one of the two new ‘temporary’ buildings by Dow’s Lake. They were a pleasant, rather ungainly pair of sisters from rural Manitoba. However, they worked hard, and were energetic and friendly. Despite being far from pin-up appearance, each had a steady boyfriend in the local police force. This in a town notorious for having six girls for every boy, if you believed the scuttlebutt.

Martin had pieced this together by comparing letters from his Grandma Tremblay – there was always a two-sentence addition from Grandpa, but it rarely said much – and the gossipy epistles from Penny. She was good at filling a ‘regulation’ two pages. Martin tried to reciprocate, and the war happenings had provided material, though he was always careful not to put anything in his letters that might help the enemy. The self-censorship came as second nature with all the stories of spies and intercepted communications.

Penny’s explanatory letter told the Tremblays that David had decided to volunteer for the RCAF on completing his engineering degree. Both he and Penny

would be graduating at the end of May. He had been accepted into the Commonwealth Air Training Plan and was scheduled to leave as soon as his exams were over. He'd done well, and the professors had said he would have to do something surprising not to get his degree.

In the circumstances, he and Penny would be apart. There were the wartime risks. David and Penny could wait, and the war looked like taking a while. Or they could marry now and seize their chance at life. As the wife rather than girlfriend of an officer, Penny would have a better chance to live near whatever base David was posted to, at least in Canada.

Given the shortage of time, they decided to use the Easter weekend for a honeymoon. In this Miriam's father provided the 'honeymoon suite'.

Miriam's mother, Joan, had died in 1935 of breast cancer. Miriam's father, Allen Ryan, was a diplomat still working in the State Department in Washington. He was due to retire soon, but with the world situation, it was likely he too would stay on in some capacity, since he had very good connections with both Canada and Britain, and previously in France. Robert's father – Grandpa Tremblay – phoned him right after Penny announced that she and David were going to get married. She had done this in a phone call from her rooming house in Montreal on the evening of April 4.

On the other side of the wedding party, David had an

uncle who was a United Church minister up the Ottawa Valley, and David's parents offered their living room. They would skip their Thursday classes and get married that afternoon, despite the general conflict with the ecclesiastical calendar.

Richard Tremblay remembered that the Ryans had a cottage in the Thousand Islands. After Joan died, Allen Ryan had only been there once. He had an agent in Ogdensburg who looked after the place and arranged rentals for a 50-50 split of the gross rents. He kept the place properly, if modestly, maintained. A couple of phone calls between the grandfathers, despite delays with wartime operators in Canada, plus one call to the agent in Ogdensburg, and things were set. The agent remembered Penny as a child, so made a present of some firewood and extra groceries. A key would be waiting with a neighbour when the couple arrived in David's father's car via Brockville and over the quite new Thousand Islands Bridge to Hill Island.

Richard had guessed correctly that rentals didn't happen much at Easter. The cottage was not on one of the islands – too expensive – so it could be reached by land. And gas was not rationed in the US – they weren't even at war. David found a couple of jerry-cans so he could bring some extra back. In Canada, unlike Britain, there was not yet gas – in England petrol – rationing, but there had been shortages.

Miriam was not, of course, placated by the explanations, nor by the promises of a future ‘late’ wedding reception after the cease of hostilities – who knew when that would be. But Martin, though sufficiently younger than his sister to be of a generally different mentality, could appreciate the rationality of David and Penny’s choice. They would go back to school – still living in their own accommodations, at least officially – until the end of the term, then see what they could arrange.

June 26, 1941. Sutton, Surrey.

There were still a few weeks of school left before the summer holiday. Martin was walking home from school. In September, he would start the Upper Sixth, his final year before University? Military service? Things were unclear. On Sunday, the Germans had invaded the Soviet Union. Just today their “friends” in Slovakia and Hungary declared war on the Soviets. The Russians in turn had bombed Helsinki, renewing the fighting there. People had mixed feelings about the Finns. They weren’t really the kind of enemy one wanted, and the Russians seemed to be acting the bullies.

Only a month before there had been the emotional up and down of the Hood and Bismarck sinkings. The weather was also up and down. On the 21st it had been very hot – 85 Fahrenheit. Very un-British. Now it was cool again.

The household uproar over Penny's marriage had died down. Miriam was, in fact, rather pleased that her daughter was now a respectable married woman. David and Penny had each kept their accommodations until the end of term, when David had reported for duty. However, almost immediately, he was sent to the Central Flying School in Trenton. This was at least close enough for Penny to arrange to see him when he got a 48 hour leave after doing the mandatory eight weeks of basic training.

The details of this were not in her letters. In this respect, she was careful to include nothing that would, if intercepted by an enemy agent, reveal where or what David was doing. However, Robert and Miriam knew that David wanted to fly, and from the High Commission, Robert knew Trenton was the likeliest place not far from Ottawa where training would take place, so they figured things out.

Penny arranged to live with Grandpa and Grandma Tremblay in Ottawa. Not ideal for her, but she managed to get a clerical job with External Affairs. She didn't say more, but possibly her Italian studies were proving useful. Robert's association with the Department may also have been a help. People knew him and some would already have met Penny outside of work.

Martin had been walking and his thoughts had been wandering, but as he turned into Rose Hill Gardens,

he noticed a girl of roughly his own age sitting on a low garden wall. She was sobbing quietly, tears running down her face.

“I say. Are you all right?” he asked, feeling foolish because clearly she was not ‘all right’.

“It’s so beastly,” the girl answered, “My granny died last night. Gramps was killed in the bombing on May 10 up in London, but they pulled Granny out. But she got pneumonia and last night she died. I forgot my key, and the neighbours aren’t home either.”

Martin didn’t know what he should do, but walking away was not a possibility. He sat down near, but not too close, to the girl.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s difficult to know what to say. But I know how much my grandparents mean to me, though it’s been a while since I saw them.”

“You’re American, aren’t you?”

“No. Canadian. My name’s Martin Tremblay. My father’s with the High Commission. We got stuck here with the war.”

“I’m Julia Smith. I guess the Canadians are helping us. The Americans don’t seem to be.”

“Not yet, anyway. Though they seem to be getting a bit shirty with the U-boats and providing some convoy escorts.

Do you live nearby?”

“Here in the street, next door there.” She nodded at

one of the houses.

“I live near the top of the road.”

“And you go to Sutton Grammar.”

“Obviously. The uniform is a give-away. Do you go to school?”

“I finished last year. Wasn’t much good at school. So now I’m working in a shop in the High Street. But today I couldn’t concentrate and they sent me home early. And I forgot my key this morning with all the upset. I hadn’t cried about Granny until I couldn’t find my key and realized that I put it on my dresser last night.”

“With the war, it’s sometimes hard to figure out when we should be laughing or crying or both. People are all mixed up. Sometimes they seem very rational and the next minute they’ve gone to pieces.” Martin responded.

There was a pause. Then Martin asked,

“Do you have anywhere to wait? I think we can offer a cup of tea. My Mum should be home.”

He added the last sentence quickly. Julia might be even more upset if she were alone in the house with him. He knew nothing bad would happen to her, but she didn’t. And it seemed the neighbours were all away somewhere. With the war effort, many men were in the forces and the women were working, volunteering, or on a sunny day, visiting family.

“All right. But I should leave a message.”

Martin had some paper – it was getting scarce, but he tore off a piece from a sheet that had been written on one side and they wrote a message that said Julia had forgotten her key and the number of the house where she would be waiting. There was a nail on the door – clearly already there for messages.

They walked up the hill. Martin opened the front door and called out,

“Mum. Mum. Are you home?”

“Here. Anything wrong?” she came out from the dining room.

Martin introduced Julia and summarized her story. Miriam put on the kettle. The Tremblays were adopting the stereotypical English ‘cuppa’ response to every emergency. Over the tea, they exchanged social information. Julia’s parents both were involved in local government and would be home around six o’clock, another hour.

“I’m glad Martin brought you here,” Miriam said. “It wouldn’t be good for you to be waiting on the street there.”

Martin had some of his radio pieces on a tray in the dining room. He had shifted to working in the dining room with the government ‘save energy’ messages. It was warmer there, and they used just one bulb most of the time.

“Oooo. You fix wireless sets?” Julia noticed.

“I’m interested in wireless and electronics. This is an amplifier I’ve been building with my friend Joe, and we hope to attach it to this chassis when we finish it as a Very High Frequency or VHF receiver.”

“Will that pick up the BBC?”

“Actually we hope to hear aircraft voice transmissions, Either RAF or Luftwaffe. Mainly we want to learn.”

“Won’t you get into trouble doing wireless. I thought the government were listening for spies and such.”

“We aren’t transmitting – they are certainly listening for that. Though we do use a superheterodyne receiver, and there are sometimes signals that can be picked up at short range, like out in the street. But a lot of ordinary wireless sets use the same principle, though not on as high a frequency.

We – that’s Joe Carr and I – want to learn as much as we can about wireless and such because it’s becoming so important to modern warfare. If we learn now, it will save training time later if the war’s still going when we’re called-up. You only have to look at all the antennas on aircraft flying over. Strange toast racks sticking out of the nose of the black night-fighters. And Joe said his uncle down by the sea had mentioned there were huge masts for something hush-hush.

This rig is an amplifier for a public address system.

But we also have tried another very high frequency or VHF receiver, as well as a directional antenna. We want to see if we can get the bearing of aircraft and pick up the R/T – that’s the voice communications – traffic of RAF or German fighters. If we can build two antennas, then we can get horizontal and vertical angles.”

Despite Martin’s enthusiasm, Julia’s attention was beginning to fade. However, Martin hooked up the amplifier and set it up as a public address system. It ‘worked’, though the sound quality was not terribly good. There was some work to do to figure out the source of the distortion – mismatched parts were a good guess, but there were likely other reasons that related to the design Martin had chosen. He’d have to work on that.

Demonstrating the amplifier used up the hour. The doorknocker sounded and they all got up to answer it. A woman said, “I’m Charlotte Smith. I think Julia’s here.”

“I’m Miriam Tremblay, and this is my son Martin. He found Julia in some distress without her key, so brought her here.”

“I’m much obliged to you Mrs. Tremblay. It’s been a bit upsetting with the deaths of my parents.”

“I’m afraid I can only try to understand that,” Miriam responded. “I do some volunteer work to help bombed-out families, and there is often one or more members

of the family that have been killed. It was very difficult to keep my composure after the April 19 bombings when 34 of the fire service men were killed. I was trying to help a lady whose husband had been killed and she was bombed out the same night. I'm ashamed to say I suspect her courage helped me more than I was able to help her. She even let me have her smashed-up radio so Martin could recover the parts."

"We can't let the Nazis win, though." Julia jumped in.

This was generally seconded by everyone and the conversation moved to farewells, and the Smiths left.

"Quite a nice girl," said Miriam.

"Yes. She seemed all right," Martin answered.

"Perhaps you should invite her to join you at the pictures. I think you are too often uncomfortable with girls. I wouldn't want you getting into any mischief, but you should learn how to behave socially."

Martin knew this was good advice, but he actually wasn't shy, just a bit detached, and there had not been much opportunity to meet girls. However, he decided he'd leave a note on her door on his way to school next day.

Julia Smith

Julia,

My friend Joe and I plan to see Citizen Kane this Saturday.

Would you like to join us?

If so, leave me a note, and I'll come by at 6 on Saturday.

Martin Tremblay

This was not quite what Miriam had in mind, but it turned out to be the right formula for a rather unorthodox evening between two boys and a girl that each found agreeable.

**Christmas Day – Thursday, December 25, 1941.
Sutton, Surrey.**

This was the fourth Christmas the Tremblays had spent in England. And the bleakest. The month had been dry except for one day with nearly half an inch of rain. It had now turned frosty, but no white Christmas. The family had decided to do just one present for each of them. David Rosenthal was going to join them – it might seem odd to invite him for a Christian holiday, but such was the friendship and the general lack of religious intensity in both the Tremblays and Rosenthal that there was no awkwardness in the invitation or its acceptance. As was becoming normal, David said what food he would bring. It appeared that he had some connections and managed a few items that certainly came from unorthodox sources, including some bars of chocolate, one of which was his present to each of the family. They gave him a woolen balaclava Miriam managed to

knit up by pulling out the wool from several socks that had lost their mates.

David arrived around 11 – he would aim to leave around 4, and even then would get home in the black-out – so they had the dinner, such as it was, at 1:30 in the English fashion, even though none of them would normally do so. On the savoury side, David had managed to get some smoked salmon, which they put on toast. There was really very little, but it was such a remembrance of pre-war times. Miriam had managed to get a chicken from a neighbour who had a run in the back yard. She had traded two cans of tinned peaches that the High Commission had allocated them for ‘entertaining’, even though they had not had to receive any official guests or visitors. Plus, truth be told, Martin’s skills in repairing the neighbour’s wireless set had accounted for part of the chicken. They were becoming scroungers.

Martin’s wireless expertise had even been called into play at the High Commission, which had held a fairly quiet party for staff and families. Mike Pearson, the No. 2, said his radio didn’t work. It turned out to be a simple matter of a loose valve. Martin had been toasted. It was all a bit embarrassing.

They had also managed to use some points to get a Dundee cake in place of a Christmas pudding, and over this and some hoarded decent coffee – not the awful

Camp liquid instant that seemed to be everywhere now – they were able to catch up.

“David, how long have you been back from the Isle of Man? I know you sent a letter, but I forget the details.” Robert asked.

“I was let go after about 4 months and got back to London just after New Years last year. I think because I am a man on my own there was a bit more suspicion over me. The threat of invasion caused a panic, and the authorities got in what the British call ‘a bit of a flap’. But to their credit, they sorted things out fairly quickly. In the camp I met a lot of nice people, plus of course a few I’d prefer were at the bottom of the Irish Sea.

Almost as soon as I got back, I went to the Labour Exchange and found that Murphy wanted people. I can’t, of course, say what I’m doing, but it is useful for the war effort. And it is a lot more interesting for me and a lot better paid than before. So I suppose they’ve done me a good turn.”

“When your letter said you often rode a bike to work, I got the idea for the balaclava,” Miriam said.

“And I think it will be of great utility to me. The wind can be cold.”

Martin and David talked about the projects Martin and Joe were building. In particular, there was the problem of the distortion in the amplifier and David made a few suggestions to try which Martin wrote down,

the main one being that perhaps the circuit was being operated at too high a gain ratio. As they were finishing this discussion, a knock came at the door. It was Julia and Joe.

“Come in, come in. But don’t let the cold in with you.” Robert commanded.

Introductions were made. David commended Joe for his work with the projects, and Joe of course said that Martin was the clever one. Julia smiled, happy for Joe that he’d received some recognition.

“Joe joined us for Christmas dinner,” she explained, begging the question of why he was not with his own family.

“Mum and Dad went to see my Mum’s folks in Wales with my sister Jill, but there’s hardly any space there, so I’m staying here. Besides there’s the cats to look after.” Joe explained.

“Those cats are mostly good for generating static,” said Martin “One of the best sources is rubbing cat’s fur on an amber rod. Nothing in the books says the cat’s fur can’t still be on the cat.”

“They even like it – it’s like stroking them. Unless they get curious and try to smell the rod, then they get a spark on the nose and go off in a huff the way only cats can,” Joe added.

“Can you find enough to feed them these days?” Miriam asked.

“Not easy,” Joe replied. “But with the park, there are enough voles and fieldmice I think. Betsy and Heavens are both pretty active hunters. Neither is getting too thin, anyway.”

Joe lived in a house backing onto the park in Rosewood Gardens. The cats had a flap and could come and go. It was fortunate. Pets – even in animal-crazy Britain – were a luxury in wartime.

The three younger members of the party decided to walk with David to Morden. Buses were pretty sparse on Christmas Day, but the tube should be OK. Along the way, David asked them what they were planning to do now school was coming to an end.

“I think I should have a go at university,” Martin offered. “I could go in the Forces, but I think I can do more good if I’m specialized. What about you, Joe?”

“I’d like to be of use, and I think my Morse code should be of value somewhere.”

This was true, Joe was pretty good. Martin had made a crude relay device to move a pencil down onto a strip of paper and in an experiment Joe had managed 17 words in a minute. Not a record, but pretty good. And he had copied down a message – they didn’t know the meaning as it was clearly in code – when they heard a transmission one day. Martin estimated that it was being transmitted at over 20 words per minute, yet Joe transcribed some of the message. Of course, they

couldn't tell if he'd got it right or not.

"What about you, Julia?" Martin asked.

"Well, I'm just coming up 17, and they're only calling up single girls 20 to 30 yet. But I can volunteer at 17. Or I could stay in the shop – they still need people, but I don't find it very interesting. I'll keep a look-out for something that I can do well and make up my mind before Mr. Churchill sends me a letter."

"People are hopeful the Americans coming into the war will mean it ends soon, but I think we've all got a lot on our plates with the Japanese. So far they've been making mincemeat of everyone." Martin observed.

"Maybe we didn't take them seriously," said Joe. "But they've been fighting for years in China, so they probably have some pretty experienced men. And apparently their planes are better than everyone thought."

There was a silence as they walked. Then they passed a house where there was swing band music coming from behind a window, and the mood lifted. Talk turned to entertainment, dancing and films. David turned out to be a fairly avid cinema-buff, so the walk went quickly. They saw him into the Tube station and started the trudge back, now essentially in darkness. Martin had a small torch with a slit cover if he needed it, but mostly there was just enough light to see where they were going. There was less conversation on the way home. Joe and Julia held hands, Martin noted. He didn't mind. In

fact, he was glad they had each other. In these times, friends helped you keep going.

To Oxford

20 August 1942. Thursday afternoon. Sutton.

Martin was in his room at home, working on the second radio receiver for direction finding that he and Joe were building. The first one had been a high frequency set, but they discovered that the RAF was using even higher frequencies, and when they finally got the coils and capacitors right, they could occasionally catch a bit of chatter from nearby planes.

The new set was simpler, since they planned to ‘detect’ the BBC. Joe was coming over shortly, and they’d give it a try. Pity biscuits had just gone on rationing. He wouldn’t be able to offer Joe anything but what the Brits called ‘squash’, a lemonade-like drink, which was itself getting hard to find.

Despite the excitement of airplanes and events, the war was getting to be tiresome. The biscuit rationing was just the latest in a line of restrictions. Earlier in the year, all coal, gas and electricity was rationed, so they would have a cold and unpleasant time of it whenever the weather was, as the Brits put it, ‘inclement’. And they’d reduced the clothing ration. Good job Mum had the foresight to get their Canadian stuff sent to them

by Penny before war broke out.

There was a knock at the door. Martin yelled, "I'll get it! Should be Joe."

He bounded down the stairs and let Joe in. They went up to Martin's room. In the summer, he could work up here and leave things lying around.

"Coming along nicely," said Joe, looking at the chassis Martin was working on.

"Yes. Just need to put in the valves and power it up – and hope it works!"

"Did you hear about Dieppe?" Joe asked. "Canadian effort mostly."

Martin replied, "Yes, I read the papers today and heard some of the BBC reports. They talk about a 'raid' or a 'reconnaissance in force'. I know I should be gung ho about it, but it seems to me bloody foolish – mostly bloody – to go where the Gerries probably are well dug-in. Unless of course they're trying to get at something like new weapons or equipment, or else kidnap or kill some SS poohbah. Otherwise it's just some tinpot generals wanting to show off."

"I have to agree with you that the news made it sound like the 'good show' type of effort they always make things out to be when we haven't done so famously. It's 'ard to see what gains were made, and it does seem that there were possibly heavy losses, especially when you read between the lines."

“Yes. When the Americans came into the fight last December, I thought we’d see things get a bit better, but they’ve been pretty dismal all year.”

Martin thought how the euphoria after Pearl Harbor was tempered by terrible losses afterwards. In the East the losses of Malaya, Singapore, Hong Kong, the Dutch Indies, the Philippines. Off the US east coast, huge shipping losses to the U-boats. Even successes like the Campbeltown raid on Saint-Nazaire in March, though it destroyed the naval port, suffered two-thirds losses of the attackers. And the Americans sank the Japanese carrier Shoho but later in the battle lost Lexington in the Coral Sea.

“Scratch one flattop” was the triumphant signal from the American pilot, but a Japanese translation was probably published in the Tokyo papers too, but for the American ship. At least almost all Lexington’s crew were saved, and the Americans could build more ships quicker than train the men. Even with the loss – and Lexington was bigger than Shoho – the Japanese had not attacked Port Moresby in New Guinea.

There had been some sort of big naval battle in early June near Midway Island. Nobody had ever heard of the place out in the middle of nowhere. Apparently the Americans had had a big win according to the news reports, sinking three carriers to the loss of one. Yet the ships had never seen each other. Everything was

with airplanes. Possibly it had been a close thing at one point. Still, the Japs didn't seem to be expanding their territory quite so fast.

In the Med – Mediterranean if you were stuffy – Malta had been a meat-grinder. But the island was still holding out and seemed likely to survive, though at what cost?

Still, voicing his thoughts could do no good and possibly lead to despondency. So Martin simply said,

“Let's give the receiver a try. We can see if we can pick up the Daventry BBC transmitter.”

Martin put the valves into the chassis. They didn't yet have a case for it, and wouldn't bother unless it was a huge success. Joe took the clumsy battery pack they'd built with both a low-voltage output for the valve heaters and 'high tension' for the actual circuits. He also carried the rather ugly wire contraption they'd built as an antenna, which had a wooden base with a geometry protractor around the pivot and an arrow line they would align with a compass.

They carried all this through the so-called 'dining room' and out the French window – now covered with tape to protect in case of bomb blast – to an area that in peacetime had a glass roof. Robert and Martin had taken away the glass and stored it against the wall in the garage – the Tremblays had no car – covered with some old carpet. The glass they had managed, just before

war was declared, to replace with some wood covered with tar-cloth. This made the dining room dark, but it did give a dryish workspace and sitting area outside. It meant that the showers that seemed to be an ever-present feature of England would not inhibit the radio enthusiasts.

“Hello, Mrs. Tremblay,” Joe mumbled to Miriam who was knitting in a chair by the dead fireplace.

“Hi Joe. How’s your Mum?”

“Fine Mrs. Tremblay. Grumbling more every day about the rationing, which means she is over the flu she had last winter. And complaining about the cats leaving half-eaten ‘trophies’ in the dining room.”

The boys put the receiver on one side of a rough table that was in the covered area. They set the antenna on the outer side of this table, and Martin put a compass he had for hiking on the base and gently moved the base until the arrow lined up with the compass needle.

“The magnetic declination here is about 1.5 degrees West, so we have to remember to adjust our measurements to the east by that amount,” Martin said.

They proceeded to connect the receiver to a ground – there was a metal stake Martin had driven into the ground at the edge of the covered area – and then to connect the battery. First the low tension so the valves would come up to temperature. Then the meter that would measure carrier signal amplitude. This was Mar-

tin's multi-meter set to the right voltage scale. Finally the high tension wires were connected and they saw a minor jump in the meter needle.

"I'll tune to the Home service on 200 kilohertz or 1500 metres," said Martin.

"The speaker is turned on, isn't it?" Joe asked. They checked and turned up the volume and could hear some music.

"Try about 20 degrees to the west of the arrow," Martin asked.

The needle did increase, but it and the sound level bounced around as they gently rotated the antenna. Sometimes the sound was mushy.

"Try another 10 or so degrees and we'll see if Droitwich is there," Martin suggested.

This gave a similar sort of down and up. To some extent the maximum of the signal was where they expected, but the variation around the maximum was not smooth.

"I think that they are broadcasting all synchronized signals," Martin said. "That would make for interference patterns and not let Gerry planes be able to use the BBC signals for direction finding. Clever Dicks."

"At least we can get the BBC," Joe sympathized.

They turned things off and disconnected the valuable batteries. Then they carefully took everything inside and put it away in Martin's wardrobe. Clothes were

given second place to the precious electronics.

Coming downstairs again, they went in the kitchen and made up some very watery orange squash.

“Sorry, no biscuits,” said Martin.

“You wouldn’t get any at our ’ouse either, so no need to worry,” Joe responded. “It’s still good to be able to get together. Won’t be able to soon. You’re off to Oxford, and I’m going to ’ave a go at getting into something in signals.”

“What does Julia think of that?” Martin asked.

“Bit cut up about me going away. We’ve been getting along pretty well. I’m sort of feeling a bit uncomfortable that we don’t have you along sometimes. We started out as kind of the Three Musketeers.”

“Don’t fret too much. I like Julia a lot, but I think you and she have a lot more in common. When I talk about Canada, she isn’t really interested. Nor in when I talk of University. That doesn’t mean Julia and I can’t be friends and enjoy things together. And I hope we’ll manage that. But the two of you seem to really hit it off.”

“Yeh. Things seem to be going that way. But now I’ll be off in the Services, I don’t know if that will last.”

“Depends if you both want it to, I think. Better learn how to write good letters.”

“Yes. She gave me a pen for my birthday. Must be a message there.”

“Is she staying with the shop?”

“No, I don’t think so. Says she wants to do something that gives the Germans something back for what happened to her grandparents. Though she’s been having a look at the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry. What a name! Anyway, the FANYs are often drivers, and she says she’d like to learn to drive.”

They went on in this fashion, and Martin decided to go back to Joe’s house to see the Morse practice setup Joe had built based on the earlier rig Martin had set up. They used a clockwork toy train motor to pull ticker tape; Robert had ‘liberated’ a roll for them from the High Commission. The Morse key simply powered a doorbell solenoid, salvaged from a bombed out house, which pulled a lever that pushed a pencil against the tape. This let Joe practice his coding and have a record.

It had been harder to figure out how to record transmissions, but by changing an amplifier so it essentially put out ‘on’ or ‘off’, they could use the same mechanical arrangement to record a message on tape. So Joe could find a transmission, switch on and start transcribing, then go back and check his accuracy. Of course, the messages were usually in code, but he got practice.

Joe’s changes to Martin’s rig were mainly refinements that made it easier to use. The main improvement was that he’d built a box for it, and a switch to change from recording from the wireless to recording

from his keying.

“That looks much better than when I built it,” Martin said.

“But your ideas were the trick to getting it to work,” Joe answered.

“Teamwork! Wins every time. Has it improved your keying?”

“Yeh. A 20 percent speedup, both sending and receiving. But mainly fewer errors. When you check yourself, you can’t get annoyed with the person marking your work, so you can start to see which codes cause you trouble and try to improve.”

The conversation moved to more general topics, in good humour, and Martin left after another half hour to get home for ‘tea’ as they were now calling it.

Thursday, November 27, 1942. Wadham College, Oxford.

It had turned quite cold, and there was really very little heating. Nothing new. Put on more clothes. Martin had been to a tutorial and was having a cup of tea in the JCR – nobody ever said Junior Common Room.

Sunday November 8.

Dear Martin,

I’ve owed you a letter for too long. My big news is that you will probably see David at

some time in the not so distant future. I won't give any details in case the Nazis read this and learn anything. But his training is coming to an end. For me that is not so nice, and I'm going to miss him terribly. It has been bad enough with him away on training. How tall are you now? I still think of you as little brother. Probably not true any more. From different letters, it seems you are destined for a career in radio or electronics. Good for you. I must say I find the names of the school years strange. You are now at Oxford! Does that mean you are exempt from British conscription?

From what we hear (I won't say how), it seems that some goods are pretty difficult for you to get hold of, but you seem to be managing. We are starting to see some rationing here, but so far just sugar, tea and coffee, and of course gasoline, which I think you call petrol. That's made it a bit more difficult for David and I since it went into effect last April, but there were shortages before that. At least with the rationing you can get the fuel. Next month the US will have gas rationing too.

Grandma and Grandpa are well. Besides me, we still have a couple of girls in the house. The two Manitoba girls both got married around Thanksgiving - they had a double wedding back in Manitoba. Their husbands are both transferring to the Military Police and the girls are together in the house of one of the men, since they're off to serve somewhere.

We've got just one new lodger, a girl from Quebec. She speaks English OK, but it's great for me to practice. She has a pretty good accent. Not the duck quack that you hear in the street here. I know - you used to be able to do it.

I've been improving my knitting and sewing. It's the only way to have something that looks new. Also David is terrible with socks. His toes must be pointy. I've been teaching him to darn, or he'll have cold feet when he gets near you.

Must run. David gets a leave this weekend and ...

Love, Penny

Martin decided to reply right away.

November 27, 1942

Dear Penny,

Thanks for your letter. It's good to hear about Canada. I sometimes miss it a lot, especially when the weather is grey and wet.

We'll definitely look forward to seeing David. Perhaps he'll be able to share Christmas with us, though we'll then have two Davids for dinner if Rosenthal comes again. I hope he can. I haven't seen him since last Christmas. He is a German Jew, though not religiously observant I think. He was four months in internment on the Isle of Man. Prior to that, and when I met him, he worked as a clerk in Foyles bookstore. But he was a university lecturer in Germany - electronics and wireless (radio to you). Now he's doing some work in a factory that makes wireless stuff, and even gets paid better. Given the persecution of the Jews by Hitler, I think he's plenty of motivation to ensure things get done where he is working.

I'm now 5' 8" and probably at the height I'll be as an adult. I'll guess that's an inch or two higher than you are. Mum is only 5' 3". Dad and I are the same height.

I'm enjoying University. It isn't clear whether I'm subject to conscription here. The fact

that Dad works for the High Commission probably means not. I want to do something for the war effort, but I think I can do more if I get my training in electronics first. The degrees are now being shortened to just over two years by studies going on through the holidays. The Oxford system is a bit different from that in Canada as far as I can understand. The colleges are really the base, and the University more like a federal umbrella over them, but rather subject to their collective will. The University provides labs, the Bodlean Library system, lectures, and degrees, but the colleges deliver the tutorials, provide housing, and employ most of the academics as dons or tutors.

Rationing is getting tighter here. I think it will get a bit worse before it gets better. The US took a terrible bloody nose from the U-boats before they got into convoying better, but I think they'll now start to help that battle, which seems to be getting more intense. It is a worry, but the Allies are in North Africa now, and the Russians seem to have surrounded a big German army at Stalingrad.

Do keep sending news - as I wrote, I do miss Ottawa.

Your brother,
Martin

As it turned out, David did not make it for Christmas, but had a 48 hour pass for the weekend of the 2nd and 3rd of January, so Martin was still at home. David was on his way to one of the new RCAF 6 Group stations in Yorkshire and Durham. They didn't ask which, though they did write down his squadron number which was part of the postal address that went through a special post office in Nottingham. 6 Group was the result of Prime Minister Mackenzie-King insisting that, as a sovereign nation, Canada should operate its own units. 'Bomber' Harris had not been pleased.

War made for strange meetings. Here was a son-in-law / brother-in-law meeting his new family for the first time and without his wife. Nevertheless, it was a good start. The Tremblays and David found they liked each other. There was plenty of news to catch up on. They took some time in London to show David the city, battered though it was. Some of the destruction clearly made an impression, but David himself commented that it was the small things like the rationing and shortages that struck him as most disconcerting compared to life in Canada.

Martin and David were able to compare notes about

engineering. David's specialty had been mechanical engineering, and he planned to return to it after the War and get his professional designation, hopefully to work in something relating to transport. He was now a Pilot/Officer on Halifaxes.

Joinup – square bashing

April 1, 1943. Thursday. Oxford.

Martin had been working in the Radcliffe Science Library, looking up some data he needed for some calculations on the theory of electronics. Hilary Term was officially over, but he had managed to arrange to stay 'up' and continue his studies. Given the compressed wartime degrees, he still wanted to cover the full curriculum material. Dr. Bleaney, a youngish researcher at the Clarendon, was attached to Wadham and was willing to read Martin's essays and help him advance his studies.

Oxford seemed to be strangely exempt from the War. True, there were many service personnel about at other colleges, doing special courses or running some or other necessary function that hadn't had an office before. And some government agencies had been moved out of London. But there was rarely a sign of hostile aircraft. Even friendlies weren't that in evidence.

The newspapers were, of course, full of it. And of

stupidities like the panic in a London Tube station that was used as an air raid shelter when some or other new-fangled anti-aircraft rocket was fired. More than 170 killed when someone tripped. The papers weren't allowed to say where, but one of Martin's fellow students knew one of the deceased and said it was Bethnal Green. Martin's blood ran cold – he remembered the dingy steps.

Martin walked back along Parks Road in the late afternoon and into Wadham. He automatically turned left into the lodge and checked the 'T' pigeon hole and found a letter, which was from Miriam.

He didn't open it right away, but walked round the quad and through into the Holywell quad to his staircase, ascended to his rooms and sat down to read it.

March 30, 1943

Dear Martin,

I'm sorry to have bad news. David is missing in action. He was flying on the night of March 12. Penny had a telegram. We've only just had her letter. It got here quickly - one of the airgraphs. She is, naturally, distraught. And it turns out that she is expecting a baby sometime in the late summer. I wish I could get back to Canada, but I can't leave your father here on his own, and don't want to be

on my own either. Grandpa and Grandma Tremblay are being absolutely super. I've written to them to let them know we'll provide money if needed, though Penny is already getting much of David's pay. As yet we have no details, and 'missing' could mean he is still alive. I will write as soon as we have more information.

We hope your studies are going well. Oxford seems to be an oasis out of the general War zone. Dad is keeping very busy at the High Commission as there is a lot of extra effort to arrange things with shortages and difficulties in laying on transport. He's also, as you know, been in charge of fire watching for the CHC buildings. Since the Blitz died down, that has not been quite so much a burden, but still a concern. The garden is planted with vegetables - even at the front I've managed to put in some potatoes and carrots and cabbages.

We're not very religious, but say whatever prayers you can for David, and now for Penny too.

Love,

Mum and Dad

Martin decided to write to Penny immediately.

April 1, 1943

Dear Penny,

Just a quick note to let you know how sorry I am to hear about David. He is such a great guy. We got along famously in January.

If, as you get more news, there is anything I may be able to do, don't hesitate to let me know at once. I'll do my best. No longer kid brother - seem to have been forced to grow up, both in height and mind. For example, if you need someone to go somewhere in Britain for any reason, I'll gladly do so.

Keep strong, for David, for the baby, for Mum and Dad, and for yourself.

Love,

Your brother Martin

After he sealed the aerogram, he went down to the Lodge and posted it. He went back to his rooms and in a desultory way tried to get to grips with his essay. The work was far from his best. At seven he stopped and walked over to the Hall and joined others for dinner, which included some short term military students, as well as a couple of regular students who were bombed-out at home. However, it was a smaller than normal group and only some of the tables were set up.

Clearly his mind was elsewhere. He realized someone was talking to him. Barrett, a grammar school type from Kent, reading PPE, was one of the bombed-out refugees.

“I say, Tremblay, are you with us. We were just speculating when the Allies will push Jerry out of North Africa, but Johnson here is worried about U-boats starving us before we can capitalize on the victory.”

“Afraid I’m a bit scattered tonight. My brother-in-law is missing in action. He was flying a Halifax for the RCAF. My sister’s expecting their first child.”

“Bad luck, old chap. Hope he will turn up safe. We’ve been losing quite a few bombers too, sadly. Just wish we’d got the Jerry one that flattened our house. At least all the family was out of the house.”

The conversation among the others at his table continued. In the dull light, Martin noticed the portrait of Robert Blake. He was Cromwell’s ‘General at Sea’, now referred to as ‘Admiral’, but that was not the title used in his time. Martin thought that he could be an asset right now. Even Nelson had looked up to him.

May 20, 1943, Thursday. Oxford.

Martin had been back in Oxford for Trinity Term. The weather had been unusually warm and fine. Breakfast in Hall was beans on toast this morning, one of

Martin's favourites. He decided to have a cup of tea in the JCR before going to the Library, but first went to the Lodge to check for post. There was a letter from Miriam with the usual day-to-day events, but she had enclosed a letter from Penny.

7 May, 1943

Dear Mum, Dad and Martin,

I'm finding this difficult to write. A letter came today from an RCAF Casualty Officer here in Ottawa that the Red Cross had forwarded a report from a Dutch priest that the crew of a Halifax who died in a crash on March 12 are all now buried in Uden, Holland. David's name was listed.

So far I just feel numb, and cannot really believe it. Grandma and Grandpa are both very upset too, but we must carry on, if only for the baby.

I don't think I can write more now.

Love,

Penny

Drinking his tea, Martin felt particularly uncomfortable. He was sitting on his bum in a pleasant place, well out of the conflict raging in the world. Only this week

had the RAF bounced bombs on water to smash dams in the Ruhr. They'd lost planes in doing so, however, likely as David had been lost.

He'd mentioned to Dr. Bleaney that he felt he should be doing something, but had hoped to be able to use his skills. Bleaney said he'd noticed that Martin had very good skills with real equipment. In the labs he was often the first one finished in any experiments, but also his work was almost always the best or next to it. Bleaney said he felt that it would be good for Martin to continue his studies, but if he felt he really must do something for the war effort, then he should make sure he was able to use those practical skills. As with the last war, there would almost certainly be arrangements for servicemen and women to complete their degrees at the end of hostilities, and Bleaney himself would be glad to have Martin as a part-time assistant to help with some experiments. In fact, if he were to be delayed joining up for any reason, then Bleaney would see what he could do in the meantime, though the pay would not be very great.

How to find the right place to serve? That was the question. Then Martin realized that he could do a good job with various radio equipment, getting it to work when others could not, and that there were wireless bods in all the services. Having built a receiver that picked up RAF R/T transmissions, he found his deci-

sion made. He would finish the year and the exams that went with it, then volunteer.

There was a bonus to this. While he was a Canadian, it was not at all clear whether this meant he was exempt from British call-up. It might be awkward to try to get into the RCAF, but it had only been a few months since the RCAF and RAF were actually separated in command structure, and operations were in any case coordinated, sometimes sharing airfields. But he should be able to volunteer for the RAF, and he'd heard that some Canadians had been able to transfer.

Having made a decision, Martin felt much calmer. He'd have to find out about applying, but that shouldn't be too difficult. So it was with a much more optimistic outlook that he left the college after a quick dinner to walk to St Giles Church Hall. In the Autumn he had been walking along the Woodstock Road near St Giles and heard music. He poked his head in and a friendly young woman said: "Come in. We need men!"

In the process he had discovered an English country dance club. The young woman, whose name he learned was Cecilia Clitheroe, was the daughter of two local schoolteachers who were involved with the Headington dance group that did Morris dancing and claimed to be able to trace their dancing lineage to the Doomsday book. Cecil Sharp had gathered some dances from this group, but the English 'country' dances involved both

men and women and many were derived from a book by John Playford called 'The English Dancing Master' that had been published – in an act that took some courage under Oliver Cromwell – in 1651. While some dances were traditional or 'country', many were the product of the dancing masters who instructed the aristocracy and nouveau riche.

The dance group was of mixed age, which Martin found a welcome change from the youthful adult atmosphere of the JCR. He soon learned it was considered proper etiquette to ask different women to partner. However, the women, being in surplus, were fairly forthright in asking themselves, and sometimes had to dance the male position if they were to avoid standing out. Martin particularly liked dancing with a woman called Jane Strong. She was about fifty-five, but lively and ever so easy to dance with. Martin discovered she had been widowed in the last War, when her husband was an officer on the Western Front. He had been a don at Keble, but volunteered.

The group therefore became a part of Martin's social circle. He had on a couple of occasions gone with Cecilia to the pictures, and once with Jane. With Cecilia he could have possibly formed a boyfriend / girlfriend friendship, but even though she was attractive in a breezy, sports playing, forthright and very English sort of way, she was still finishing her Sixth form, and

made it clear she was going to study medicine. Martin could sense her commitment, and did not feel like getting in the way. After the pictures one night, he'd tried kissing her, and it was clear she wanted to try it too, but they both found it awkward. Perhaps it was because they both were curious but really didn't want to get to the point of having to come to a big decision. It was enough to enjoy the dancing and pictures and other social interaction that went along with the dance group, where it seemed people were happy to avoid pairing off.

Miriam, when she learned about the English dance group, expressed surprise.

"But I thought you wouldn't be able to dance your way out of a paper bag! Oh! I'm sorry, Martin. I should have more confidence in you. You just never seemed interested in dancing."

"I'm not too interested in some of the modern stuff. I just don't know quite what to do. But with the English dances, you have to move to various places on the floor – execute 'figures' as they're called. It's like a pattern or plan, so I know what I'm to do, and I just have to listen to the music and get to the right place at the right time. And I can seem to remember the dances in my feet."

In this respect, he could manage to have a conversation while he danced. However, sometimes his partners didn't have the same ability to dance and converse.

Jane remarked on this a week later, May 27, while he was at her North Oxford house fixing her wireless set, which needed the main volume control re-soldering after she had tried to turn it on too energetically.

“Martin, you have a lot of mechanical and technical skill. You can do a lot without thinking. But some of the girls have to pay attention or they forget where they are going.”

“Yes. I’ll have to mend my ways. With you it’s much easier.”

“But I’ve been doing it for donkey’s years. And I do it because it is in my bones. I sometimes think it’s already in yours. But you watch and you’ll see that some of the girls and a few chaps too are there simply because it’s a good way to meet members of the opposite sex without the pressures of the modern dance hall or the pub.”

“That’s true. I find the dances fit my temperament, and I do like the fact we are a social group, all ages and shapes and sizes, and we all dance with each other.”

“The mixing of different ages and types is one of the best aspects of folk dancing. It’s helped keep me sane, especially after Geoffrey was killed. And now this new war, or at least what I think of as new. A terrible waste, but we must stop the madmen in Berlin.”

“I’ve actually decided to volunteer to be a wireless mechanic in the RAF. I was going to finish my degree first, but with my sister’s husband being killed over Hol-

land, I feel I should do something.”

Jane’s face clouded.

“That was rather what Geoffrey said, though there were more pressures in 1915 and 1916 to be in uniform. We’ve advanced a bit. There are not people handing out white feathers this time.”

“I’m glad of that. And I’m not particularly anxious to get in the way of flying metal. It’s just I’d like to contribute, and I think my electronics skills can be useful. Dr. Bleaney says I’m one of the best on the practical side.”

“That’s obvious. And for a reward, you shall have some sweets with your tea. I was delving in the back of the pantry and under some baking tins I rarely use I found a tin of Mackintosh’s Quality Street. I hope they’re still all right. I bought them in 1938 for a Christmas present for my sister’s family, and put them in a safe place!”

“And then forgot where the safe place was?”

“Yes. I hope I’m not getting dotty.”

“I don’t think so. I’ve managed to hide a few things and forget where I hid them until there was a big clearout.”

The sweets were surprisingly good.

“Have another”, Jane urged.

“I’ve already had two. They are quite all right. You can tell that they have been stored because they are a bit dry, but they taste fine.”

“Then have another – can’t let them go rancid, can we?”

“Absolutely not. Thank you.”

Martin had only once had them before. He probed, “These seem very English. I don’t think we had them in Canada.”

“They only came on the market in 1936. Didn’t you say you came to England in 1938?”

“Yes. Without the war, we’d have had two years, possibly extended to four, then home after my father’s assignment with the High Commission.”

“I’d ask what he does, but nowadays that is considered bad form.”

“It’s not a secret that he takes care of a lot of the administrative stuff, and I think he is listed publicly as something like Administrative Officer, but the details are probably pretty sensitive, particularly when there are travel plans for the big-wigs.”

“Do you think you’ll go into the diplomatic service?”

“No. I want to do something in science or engineering, probably the research side of electronics. I like making things work, and I think there’ll be a lot of interesting stuff happening. Well, there is already, even if we only get a whiff of it as civilians.”

“Unfortunately, we’re getting a whiff of something else as civilians with all the bombing and such. We’ve been fortunate here in Oxford that there has been very

little. But look at poor Coventry, and it is no further away from Mr. Hitler.”

“How do you manage, Jane?”

“Well, as you know, I have a job with the University Gazette. I make sure all the degrees get published and so forth. It doesn’t pay pots of money, but with Geoffrey’s pension and some rooms I rent here, I get by all right. As you know, we never had children, well, none living. I lost several to miscarriage.”

“I’m sorry. It must be hard.”

“Perhaps harder to lose them to the fighting. We’ll never know.”

August 26, 1943. Penarth, Wales.

Martin was ‘square bashing’ with a large number of other RAF recruits. This was his fourth week. The RAF recruitment officer in Oxford had initially been quite hostile when Martin said he wanted to be a wireless mechanic.

“So you want a nice, safe job here at home, sonny?”

“If you’ll notice, sir, I’m about 3500 miles from my home in Ottawa, where I’d be a lot safer.”

“All right. But it’s still safer than a lot of other jobs.”

“I’d like to use my skills if I can.”

“Can you fix our radio?”

“I don’t know. I can try. But I didn’t bring my tools.

Shall I come back in an hour?"

"All right. You do that. And if you can get it running, we'll put you in for a wireless mechanic."

The recruitment officer later admitted he didn't think Martin would come back. When he did, and discovered that the problem was, as is often the case, a poor connection, and the BBC was coming through loud and clear, Martin had an ally in the cause. He was, by mid-July, on his way to Penarth, near Cardiff.

In the meantime, the war was still going on. The desperation in the Battle of the Atlantic of the first few months of the year was giving way to some hope. The government had decided to consolidate its reports about U-boat activities into a single monthly report released on the 10th of each month. The July 10 report noted that 30 subs were sunk in May and there was a convoy in June that suffered no attacks at all. Indeed, June had the lowest sinking losses of the war.

Of course, on June 1, BOAC 777 with Leslie Howard on board had been lost, assumed shot down, on its way from Lisbon to London. Civilian flights were nominally respected by both sides, but ...

Sicily had been invaded, and Monty and Patton met up in Messina a week ago on the 17th. There'd been some vicious bombing of Hamburg at the end of July that caused a firestorm. Martin thought back to the Blitz in 1940-41. Poor sods. One wanted to kill the

Nazis, but it was not likely they were that large a proportion of the population. One wondered how many were killed. Then the Americans bombed the oilfields in Ploesti in Romania. Tightening the screws. Well, they'd done it to us with the U-boats.

On the family front, Robert was still busy at the High Commission, and was also with the ARP in Sutton as far as his duties allowed. Miriam was doing volunteer work in part with Janet Murrow, but was also still with local women in Sutton helping to rehouse people who had been bombed out. Penny had had a baby boy in late July, and was naming him Desmond, which was the name of one of David's grandfathers.

As for Martin, he was now marching in the rain – not quite what one thought of as a war effort. As the fourth circuit of the parade ground finished, an officer emerged from a building and signalled to the drill sergeant, who halted the column.

“At ease, men,” said the officer. Referring to a clip board that he was trying to keep dry, he continued, “The following men will report to the Postings office in ten minutes. Adams, J., Adams, M., Baker, Cartwright, Donaldson, Jackson, Myers, Pope, Tremblay, Woods.”

Martin's name was mispronounced, as in ‘tremble’. The named men walked quickly to the Postings office – it was some distance away, and they fortunately knew where it was. When they got there they made sure

their uniforms were in order and presented themselves properly to the duty officer one at a time and were told to wait 'here'. 'Here' was not very large, and they were glad when the officer came out of an inner office. They all snapped to attention, but were quickly told "At ease."

"Men. It's been decided that we need wireless mechanics ASAP, so we're abbreviating the square bashing and sending you to Shrewsbury. Formally you'll be attached to RAF Shawbury, but you'll actually be studying at the local Technical College and billeted in town. Sergeant Williams will give you warrants and orders and there'll be transport to the station at 0830 tomorrow morning. You report to Squadron Leader Hitchens or his representative who'll be at the Technical College to receive you tomorrow night, assuming the railways co-operate."

This was a look up. Martin was getting a bit tired of the spit and polish and saluting and marching up and down. With the other men, he returned to his bunkhouse and began to pack. It would have been nice to do some washing. He quickly scrubbed some collars and rinsed some socks and underpants and hung them on the lines in the 'ablutions'. The others were doing the same. Martin's, and most of the others, were discreetly marked in indelible ink with their service number.

It was unfortunate that it had turned cold and wet.

Still, if he was lucky, they'd be dry enough to pack in the morning. He'd pack them at the top of his kit bag, with an oilcloth ditty bag between them and the rest of his stuff.

A week later, Sept 2. he was leaving the classroom at the Technical College to go for a tea break when the civilian instructor, Mr. Leavitt, called his name.

"Tremblay. Could I 'ave a word?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Tremblay. You seem rather bored here. Is something wrong with the course?"

"Actually, I think it's a wizard course, sir, but I've just spent the last year doing this stuff and, well, a bit more."

Leavitt's eyebrows lifted.

"So we're old hat? Where were you studying this?"

"I was reading engineering at Oxford, mostly electrical, and a Dr. Bleaney was giving me extra instruction. He was attached to my college, but like most of the boffins, I expect he's doing some war work he can't talk about."

"So this is pretty much re-plowing the field?"

"I'm afraid so, sir."

"Tell you what. I'll dig out the exam from the last course and let you sit it on Saturday afternoon. If you

get a good pass on that, I'll take it up with your commanding officer."

"Thank you very much sir. I'd be happy to try that, and it's on my own head if I do poorly."

Martin did not do poorly. He had almost a perfect paper. Leavitt was impressed with his answers, which were not only correct but more complete than strictly required. The C/O said he could see no reason that Martin should not move on to the Radio School in South Kensington. There was, in fact, a minor flap because he was a week late into the cycle, but the C/O was a Great War officer brought back to get the manpower where it was needed, and he knew a man who knew a man and Martin was fitted in. Of course, he was cautioned that he'd have to catch up with the rest.

The most unhappy people were his billeting family. They would probably lose some rent. Martin kept a stern face, gave the line 'orders', all the time with a big inward smile.

The Number 7 Radio School, South Kensington, held its lectures in the Science Museum. Accommodation was in Albert Court, very near the Museum. Discipline was maintained by 'Parade' every morning, which was held on Prince Consort Road near the Royal Albert Hall, often with an RAF band that seemed to know

only 2 tunes.

The lectures were about the different RAF radio equipment. The students were all RAF, but included a few WAAFs. The powers-that-be had realized women were just as effective as men in fixing wireless equipment. Martin noticed the language in classes was a lot less salty than in some all-men classes. Besides lectures, they had to learn to take the equipment apart and put it together, then later were given ‘broken’ equipment to fix. Martin was usually the first done.

After a few weeks, one of the instructors – a Mr. Samson – approached him.

“Tremblay. You seem to have a knack for this equipment. Perhaps we should give you more of a challenge?”

“As long as I don’t get penalized for failing the really difficult stuff when I could do the regular jobs, I’d love to try different things.”

“You’ll have to do the regular things too, but I can set out some things that might be, well, a bit experimental. You could try them when you’ve done the regular material and the others are still working on theirs.”

“Thank you, Mr. Samson.”

After this there were two tray-like boxes on a side ledge. They each contained a chassis and some parts, along with a few pages of diagrams and notes. These were hand written, fairly carefully. On the chassis, Martin noticed some words which seemed to be in German.

“Pulled from a couple of German bombers. See if you can get them working lad, or at least figure them out. The boffins claim they know what they do, but they like to keep us on our toes,” Samson explained.

Martin looked at them after he finished his next assignment. They were some sort of receiver. The trays were labelled He111 and Ju88. He decided to look at the He111 chassis first.

Given the lack of signs of heating around the base of the valves, he thought it might be quite new, or at least had been when recovered. The front had a small line of 7 lights, the middle light being slightly coloured green. It also had a power switch, and a jack for what was likely a set of earphones. At the side there were three screw connectors, two marked with the antenna and one with ground symbols. The two antenna symbols had 1 and 2 beside them. The notes said that both antenna connections led to omnidirectional arials, with the ground to the airplane metal frame.

On the other side of the chassis were connectors that looked like they were for power. Two black and two red with 6V and 90V markings. The notes said that these had been connected to appropriate batteries.

The most interesting part of the chassis was a playing card sized board that was plugged into a connector. This had two pairs of screw blocks. Between one were different precision resistors, between the other were two

devices Martin had not seen before. Looking at the notes, he saw that they were tuning crystals. He also noted that there was a note 'exploder removed'. Like RAF sensitive equipment, it probably had a small detonator wired to a switch that the wireless mechanics would put in just before the planes were released for ops. 'Detting up' was the term used in the RAF. You didn't want those things connected when you were working on the apparatus. RAF equipment used pencil-like detonators – probably borrowed from some standard munitions. Samson cautioned them to NEVER let the aircrew be helpful in testing the circuits, but to always do it only with other wireless mechanics or by themselves. They had a lamp and could test that the circuits were ready. But Samson said he'd been in a plane and the wireless operator/navigator said he'd help. The detonator had gone off more or less in Samson's face. Fortunately he had on glasses that were fairly thick and just got some minor, superficial burns. And there hadn't been too much other damage, but the plane had to be taken off the operation and there was the usual stink with the higher-ups.

Martin wondered if the device were some sort of targeting indicator. Two crystals suggested two transmitters. But if they were transmitting, our people would try to transmit on the same frequency and jam them. If they only transmitted infrequently, that would be more

difficult. Or they could use regular broadcast transmissions of the same program from two transmitters, much like the BBC, and use the difference in time of arrival to get a partial measure of position. The BBC always went off the air during raids – Martin could see why now.

Martin drew a diagram of two transmitters and the receiver. If he made the x axis the line between the transmitters, and started at the mid-point, the receiver would show him the green light if he stayed on a perpendicular to the line between the transmitters. That wasn't so useful to a bomber, but if he set an offset from the midpoint, which would give a difference in time between the received signals, he would have a slightly curved line. And there was a precision resistor marked in some strange way. Martin looked at the chassis and saw it was in some sort of delay circuit. He measured the resistance and other quantities and got a rough value for the delay. That didn't help him much unless he knew how far the transmitters were apart.

Still, he could guess at something like 200 km. With the delay he had of about $1/10000$ of a second, he got a 'start' at about 40 km from one transmitter and a line that bent away slowly in the direction of the nearer transmitter where the signals – one now delayed appropriately – would be coincident. This did assume that the Germans transmitted at identical times. Very Teu-

tonic, but not out of the realm of possibility.

This didn't give any indication of when to bomb. Maybe that was going to be added later. And was this accurate enough? It could be a rough positioning tool for very bad weather or inexperienced pilots. That would allow them to use shorter training times. But now the class was breaking up for tea.

"Find anything interesting?" Samson asked.

"Interesting, yes. But I may be following a red herring."

"So tell me what you think."

"I looked at the He111 chassis. I think it's some sort of device to give a port/starboard guide toward the target, using comparison of transmissions from two transmitters. But I can see all sorts of problems to be overcome."

"Well, you and the boffins seem to have similar ideas. And they also figure it may have been a nice try that didn't go too far. What sort of transmitters do you figure they were using?"

"I haven't checked the devices that the notes say are crystals yet. Do we have equipment to measure the resonant frequency of crystals? A wild guess is that they use things like Lord Haw-Haw's programs on regular broadcast frequencies."

"Interesting. Yes, we have a way to measure the crystals. I'll let you use it tomorrow. Your ideas are inter-

esting, even if they turn out to be wrong.”

It turned out Martin was likely right, and Samson actually talked to his boffin contacts who also said the idea was ‘reasonable’. The consensus they had come to was that this equipment was tried and then dropped because the accuracy of the position was too poor beyond a few miles of the channel coast. The accuracy would decrease as the receiver got further away from the transmitters. And they also thought synchronizing the transmitters precisely might be a demanding chore. Besides this, the RAF and USAAF had a penchant for trying to knock out German transmitters, which would render the device useless if either one were disabled. The receiver almost certainly had to be set up on the ground before the plane sortied.

Since Martin was in London, he could meet with Robert and Miriam when his schedule permitted, which was actually more frequently than his parents were able to oblige. On Saturday, December 4, he got ‘off’ at three o’clock and met Joe and Julia who had both managed a 48.

The three friends had intended to go to the pictures, but after having a meal in a Corner House they decided that they’d prefer to spend their time talking in a pub near Trafalgar Square and nursing a drink or two.

“Anybody allowed to say anything about where they are or what they’re doing?” Martin asked.

“Well, I’m a WREN now,” Julia said. “Mostly doing filing of all that paperwork the Forces seem to generate to tell men and women where to go, and what to do, and to keep track of all the odds and ends that they need. I won’t say where, then nobody can complain, but it’s not too far away. I had hoped to try the FANY’s, but it seemed difficult to get in.”

“I’m training to be a wireless mechanic in the RAF,” Martin said. “And I’m in the London area too.”

“I guess I can say I’m in the general London area as well,” Joe commented. “Beyond that, I’d best just say I’m doing a lot of Morse transmission and receiving. But I will say it’s really interesting stuff, though when I’ll get to talk about it, only God knows.”

“So far nothing too interesting from my end. Perhaps that’s to be preferred in the long run,” Martin responded.

“Yes. It would be nice if we didn’t have a lot of horror to remember, either doing it or having it done to us. There’s already been enough. But I don’t want to come to some agreement with those monsters in Berlin who started it all. I couldn’t live with that,” Julia said.

“Apparently Ed Murrow the American broadcaster went out on a Lanc. the other night when we gave Berlin a pasting. Called it ‘Orchestrated Hell’,” Joe

said.

“Yes. I wonder if he’ll get some flak for that – no pun intended. My mother knows his wife, Janet, who’s working for the British-American Liason Board to try to make things easier between the GI’s and the locals. I think they are considered sort of valuable celebrities. Hitler might like to get hold of him, dead or alive. I gather two reporters on the mission Murrow was on didn’t come back,” Martin commented. Then he added “And reading between the lines, I think our side got caught with our pants down in Bari. The reports seem to be covering up a lot more than they are revealing.”

“We’d better not talk about what we’re doing then,” Julia said.

“OK. So can we talk about our food and accommodation?” Martin asked.

“Oh, yes, I think that’s OK as long as we don’t say exactly where,” said Julia.

“Yes. I overheard an American flyer in a restaurant and he gave away an awful lot of information that could be useful to an enemy. Some of them like to talk ‘big’ but it could cost them their lives and those of their friends,” Joe said. “I guess I could even say I’ve come across examples in the work I do, so it makes me rather cross.”

“Well, I’ll just say I’m living in some commandeered flats that we’re packed into, and we use a well-known

institution for our lectures and labs. And I'm enjoying learning about our RAF equipment and also getting to fiddle with a bit of captured stuff too."

"You were at Oxford. Didn't they offer to make you an officer?" Julia asked.

"I hadn't completed my degree, and I really wanted to use my practical skills. As an officer, I'd be managing people rather than working on equipment. So far the RAF has been pretty good at recognizing what I know, and they've had me skip some of the preliminary stuff most men – and a few women too now – have to go through."

"Yes. I've been lucky that way too," Joe said. "My Morse skills were noticed quickly, but they also made me work to improve them too."

"It would be pretty hard to improve yours, I think," Martin interjected.

"Well, I can't say too much in detail, but sometimes it is important to be able to use a particular style in how you key. Apparently I'm quick to learn that, but it has taken some effort to get it right. Also to learn how to hear and recognize different operators."

"Oh. Yes. That could be very useful in knowing, for example, that a particular sub did several transmissions," Martin said.

"Something like that." Joe said, obviously wanting to avoid particulars.

Martin changed the subject.

“What sort of digs do you have, Julia?”

“I share a Nissen hut with about a dozen other girls. We eat at a common canteen not far away. The ablutions are the least attractive aspect of things. They’re always so cold and draughty. One of the girls – a really down to earth East Ender who is actually a gem, but has a pretty rough vocabulary – said the other day ‘If it gets any colder, you won’t see my tits for the goose-bumps.’”

“Better not tell that to your Mum,” Joe said. “I think that’s the first time I’ve heard you say ‘tits’.”

“Bad company, I guess. But it’s only words and Marg isn’t a bad sort. And I’ve got to say, I rather agree with her. It really isn’t conducive to keeping well-bathed.”

Martin responded,

“Guess we have it fairly good that way. The place I’m living already had bathrooms, and they even have a bit of heating, though it’s rarely on. We did figure out how to hang a wet cloth over the vents when it is cold, however, and that keeps the draughts down. And one of the fellows sorted out a charcoal burner that was used to keep you warm in church, and we’ve managed to get it to burn some coke. A bit smoky, but we put it in the bathroom on bathnight. How about you, Joe?”

“We’re pretty lucky. Where I’m based, we live and work in the same building. It has pretty good accom-

modations, though a bit old. And our equipment keeps things fairly warm in winter, though in summer we could sometimes use some fans. Our main problem sometimes is getting enough exercise, especially when there's a 'flap' on. Fortunately, we're near a sort of park, and there's some good paths to walk or run. I do that whenever I can."

"What about food?"

"That's pretty good too. I'll just say that we share with some Yanks and some of you Canadians too, and the powers-that-be decided it wouldn't be good for morale if conditions were different for different groups. So I can't complain on that front."

"We do all right, I suppose. There's a canteen we march to for our meals a few hundred yards away. The food's not exciting, but I can't really complain. Nothing rubbishy, and there's enough of it so we don't feel empty during our classes. And the marching to and fro gives us some exercise. How about for you Julia?"

"About the same. From what Mum says, I think we have better food. In fact, I have to keep a bit quiet at home so they don't get jealous. I've even put on a pound or two."

"Yes. She's a bit more comfortable now," Joe added. Martin saw Julia give him a sharp look.

"Mind your Ps and Qs, Joe Carr, or you'll be losing your privileges."

The conversation turned to films and shows, and they compared notes about the different ones they'd seen. Martin seemed to have had more opportunities than the other two.

"What did you like?" Julia asked.

"Well, I don't go to contemporary dramas, particularly about the war. I like comedies and things that let me escape. However, I did enjoy 'The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp'. And 'Princess O'Rourke' was nice for being well out of the current situation. 'It comes up love' was good for an hour of so away from everything."

"We saw Colonel Blimp," Julia said. "What about music?"

"I seem to fix gramophones rather than use them," Martin said. "And I got used to doing English Dance in Oxford, but there's not a lot of the music on records in any form I recognize. It uses music by well-known composers like Handel and Purcell, but their popular tunes rather than the stuff that tends to get played in concerts. Though I do like some of the big swing band stuff, even if I'm not much for that form of dancing."

"We've a girl who seems to be able to get all the records. I think her family is in the business," Julia said.

"We get plenty of records supplied," said Joe. "I think someone in the place where I'm stationed is working on recordings, and they can make copies of gramophone

records or music off the wireless.”

Martin didn’t respond, but remembered how they had wanted to record Morse transmissions, and could guess that it would be very useful to record things when there were not enough operators to transcribe things. In fact, he could think that there must be a way to automate the transcription. He’d have loved to ask Joe about that, but knew it would just cause his friend trouble.

The three friends chatted over a couple of drinks apiece. Martin made an excuse to leave in time to give Joe and Julia some time alone. He was glad they had each other, but didn’t feel badly that his friendships with women were so far not terribly intense. Too many hearts were being broken by the nastiness of war.

He could have tried the Tube, but decided to walk. It was chilly and a bit misty with some clouds, but the moon was between and half and full, so there was enough light to see where he was going. It was less than three miles, down the Mall, right past Buck House and Hyde Park Corner, then Knightsbridge. As he walked, he wondered if he’d get leave for Christmas. At least it wouldn’t be too far to go to see his parents.

Early 1944

Feb 10, 1944. Thursday. Merston, Sussex.

Martin had just arrived at RAF Merston in Sussex. The Radio School had passed him out, and he'd been promoted to Leading Aircraftman (LAC). He was showing his transfer papers to the orderly at the Guard House to join 247 China British Squadron.

"Better present yourself to the Adjutant. He's in the C/O's office that is in the low green shed about 200 yards up the path here," the orderly told him.

"Many thanks, Sergeant," Martin replied.

Martin shouldered his kit bag and proceeded to the green shed. He entered, and presented his papers to the clerk, giving his name, rank and number.

"You're expected. Trains must be running on time despite Gerry's Little Blitz going on in the last couple of weeks."

The man picked up a phone and spoke into it.

"New wireless mechanic, Tremblay, is here, sir." Followed by, "You can go straight in. Leave your kit bag in the corner there."

Martin put the bag where he was told and then knocked and entered an inner room. He saluted and stood to attention. A man quite a bit older than himself sat behind a desk.

"Ah, Tremblay, at ease", he pronounced correctly.

“Welcome aboard. We’re down to just two wireless mechanics and they only seem to know how to exchange boxes. I’ve heard you’re a wizard with the valves and condensers.”

“I hope my reputation is not too overblown, sir. I seem to have some success in getting things to work, but I can only do so much,” Martin responded.

“Well, we’ll be glad of all the help we can get. If the R/T goes out on our Tiffies, we can’t do a lot of good to help the fellows on the ground. We really need a couple more wireless mechanics to bring us up to strength. In the meantime, you’ll be reporting to Sergeant Morse – he’s actually a fitter himself – who will assign your tasks. Get Mitcham outside there to tell you which tent you’ll be in and where things are, stow your kit then see Morse. He probably can use you right away.”

“Certainly sir.”

“And welcome to the China Brits, Tremblay.”

“Thank you sir.”

“Dismissed.”

Martin did as he was instructed. His tent was further down the path and Mitcham had already told him which bed to take. There was a sort of cupboard where he put his bag, but he took out his AVO meter and a couple of tools. Things could get stolen, and he liked his own equipment.

He then walked over to the dispersal area where there

were several Typhoons and saw a man with sergeant's stripes.

"LAC Tremblay reporting. I was told by the Adjutant to find Sergeant Morse to get my assignments."

"Glad you're aboard, Tremblay. I'm Morse. Here at Merston we're mostly under canvas, but I've managed to get a couple of huts for working on wireless and engines etc. You can see them over there. Mostly, however, we just swap in sets, but that means we're sometimes down a plane or two. Similarly engines – these Sabres are bloody primadonnas and they have the lifetime of a Guy Fawkes firework.

I'll introduce you to Johnson and Cochrane. They're our only two wireless mechanics at the moment. We lost one invalided out with TB and another in one of the recent Gerry bombings in London. Not killed, but bashed up and won't be back, I fear."

Morse introduced Martin to the two men, then pointed him at three Typhoons at the end of the line and said

"We'll let Tremblay check the R/T on those three at the end of the line. I'll expect you two to tell him where to find things and help him land on his feet so we get back to our proper strength in aeroplanes."

"Thank you, Sergeant Morse." Martin said.

Martin had actually never seen a Hawker Typhoon before, except one flying a great distance away, and he was not sure that was actually a Typhoon. The R/T

was in a compartment behind and below the pilot, accessible from a door on the outside port side of the fuselage. Johnson showed him where it was, and where the switches were in the cockpit.

The equipment could only be tested for sure by doing an actual transmission and reception. The checks that the ‘erks’ could do were mainly that the transmitter and receiver were powered up. And of course they could check the receivers and make sure the frequencies were set. Martin always checked the power supplies – his old AVO meter was useful for that. Reception was testable if the controllers were broadcasting on a frequency the receiver could tune in.

Once he’d finished his checks, it was nearly 1600 – 4 o’clock – and a van came over and stopped which turned out to be a NAAFI wagon with tea and buns. After tea, Morse took Martin to one of the pair of sheds. Inside were some R/T units and a small bench.

“Those units are dud, but if we can fix them, we can get another plane or two into the air. The Adjutant said you had a bit of a reputation.”

“People may expect too much, Sergeant. But I’ll give it a try.”

The shed had electricity, and there was a soldering station on the bench. Martin switched this on, as well as a light on a pantograph, and put one of the R/T units on the bench. His own personal tools included a small

dentist's mirror and a magnifying glass that folded into a protective case. He started to examine the set, which was one that he'd worked on at the Radio School. Soon he spotted a cold solder joint, partly hidden between two valves. He removed the valves to gain better access.

Yes. It looked like that could at least be one problem. He took a look at the things round and on the bench. There was a sponge for cleaning the tip of the iron – dry. Martin dipped it in the fire-bucket, which had water, as it should. There was also some old flex wire from an old lamp. Probably for picking up excess solder, an old trick. And there was some rosin solder – Kester, the American brand in its little tins with the flat ribbons of solder inside with the name moulded into the ribbon. Also some flux paste.

Martin stripped about a half inch of the insulation off the flex with his pocket knife, dipped it in the flux and used it with the now-hot iron to remove the solder from the suspect joint. Then he resoldered it. After a minute to cool, he plugged the valves back in. At the back of the bench were some labelled connectors leading to batteries under the bench, as well as a couple of antenna and ground connections on wires leading outside. Ah. Power to test things, and the labels gave the voltages, and the antennas and ground too.

Martin looked over the chassis and, since everything looked ship-shape, he plugged in the power and then

switched on. There was a labelled connection for receiver and transmitter antennas. He decided not to transmit, but plugged in the receiver antenna and looked around and found a set of headphones with microphone hanging on a peg. He plugged these in, and immediately could hear the controller talking to one of the pilots.

“Blue one, OK to land. Mind the wet spot.”

“Roger control.”

Clearly some kind of private joke. Martin could here the sound of an approaching plane, and looked out the window – taped of course against blast – and could see a Typhoon landing. It landed, and as it slowed made a definite detour around one point on the field.

Martin switched off and disconnected the power and antenna, but left the set on the bench. There was a notebook marked "Log 247 Wireless Repair" with a starting date underneath. He opened it and found the last entry was 3 weeks before. He looked up the serial number of the chassis, entered it, and wrote

“Repaired solder joint between valves 2 and 3. Receiver working. Transmitter not tested.” along with the date, his name and initials. Then he went outside and walked over to where Sgt. Morse was struggling with some part for a Sabre engine. Martin waited until Morse could safely look round, then asked,

“Sgt. Morse. Is there a procedure for doing a transmitter test?”

“Oh. Tremblay. You want to do a transmitter test? Did you get one of the boxes working.”

“I found what seemed to be a cold-solder joint on the first box I looked at. The receiver definitely works. That Typhoon just came in and the controller told him to ‘Mind the wet spot’, which seems to be over there somewhere, since he did make a bit of a wiggle. However, I don’t want to create trouble by transmitting when I’m not supposed to.”

“Yes. The ‘wet spot’ is where one of our pilots managed to put the nose in. It’s now a muddy mess until the field maintenance people get some sand and fresh turf on it.

We can phone the controller – there’s a phone in the corner of the shed – and ask if it’s OK to do a transmission test. We’re 247 Ground Mechanics as a call sign. If you’ve got that box working, your first beer’s on me.”

Martin went back to the shed, picked up the phone and asked for the controller, explaining that he needed to ask permission to do an R/T check. The controller said he could go ahead as long as he kept it short and listened for any traffic, in which case he was to switch off immediately, as there was a plane up on test due soon.

With the connections made, Martin switched on the receiver and listened. There was no traffic so he turned

on the transmitter and pressed the transmit button.

“247 Control this is 247 Ground Mechanics, do you read?”

“Loud and clear, 247 Ground Mechanics.”

“Roger and out.”

Martin switched off. He recorded the transmission test and tied a label to the chassis as ‘Ready’.

That evening, as Martin was finishing his meal in the enlisted men’s mess tent, Morse came in with a bottle of beer and put it in front of him.

“Well done, Tremblay. Looks like you’ll be flying that bench a lot from now on.”

“Thanks Sergeant. I hope I’m as lucky with other sets that are out of commission.”

“Well, I’ll be more than happy if we can have a few ready to swap in as they are needed. The Sabre’s rattle causes a lot of problems. See you in the morning.”

And he was gone. Johnson and Cochrane, whose names were Fred and Bill, came and congratulated him.

“You must be a real wireless man,” said Fred. “I was working in a greengrocers and some fool recruiter tells me I’d be great as a wireless mechanic. I can change them over, but fix ’em. Never!”

“I was sort of working in a bank. Nearest I came to wireless was tuning in the BBC Home Service,” Bill followed. Fred laughed at this, though Martin didn’t know why. He explained his expertise,

“My hobby was radios. I built a few crude ones as a kid, then got more and more into both the theory and practice. I hope it won’t make it difficult between us if Morse puts me indoors while you two get wet in the rain.”

“Don’t worry. Morse’ll ’ave you out in the rain too. Part of why things quit workin’,” Bill countered. “And on this squadron, we tend to try to use each person’s skills and trade off, like. You do this for me, and I do that for you, and as long as things are roughly in balance, everyone has an easier time.”

“Suits me,” said Martin. “I’ll do my best to make sure I pull my weight, and I’ll hope you’ll both let me know if you think otherwise. Things that are kept under hats can build up some nasty steam.”

“Right oh,” said Fred. “And in case you weren’t told, about two dozen of the boys in the squadron – about a fifth – are from the program that gave guests of King George a chance to serve for the duration.”

“Yeh. That’s what I meant about banks,” Bill joined in. “The beak gave me 5 years for a bit of wiring work I did with an alarm on a vault. I’d three to go and decided I didn’t like the view from my cell. This outfit’s pretty good. If we keep our noses clean All Will Be Forgiven, as they say. And you don’t have to worry too much about your stuff here. Honour among thieves sort of thing. We watch out for each other unless someone is a

right no-gooder.

But you don't sound like you come from England."

"I was born and lived in Canada 'till I was 13. My Dad's with the Canadian High Commission. We sort of got stuck here when the war broke out. Haven't seen my sister since 1938. She got married and her husband came over here to fly Halifaxes, but got killed over Holland this time last year, leaving Penny about to have their baby. Made me want to do something, and I figured the best thing was to use my talents with wireless."

"It'll be tough for 'er on 'er own with a sprog," said Bill. "I 'ad a girl and we were going to get wed – she was expecting – when I got nabbed by the Old Bill. She took up with one of the toughs on the manor where I lived, but 'e turned out to be a mean one, then a Gerry bomb got the lot of them when they were 'aving a barney and didn't go to the shelter. My little girl too, though I never seen 'er, so I 'ave a 'ard time picturing 'er."

"Sorry," said Martin.

"Maybe for the best. The RAF's given me another chance."

"Me too," said Fred. "Couldn't see cabbages and carrots as my life's work. Maybe learn a bit more about wireless and have a chance at something later."

Martin realized these two had very different life experiences from his own, but he liked their straightforward

attitude. He figured he could get on with them.

After the meal, he went back to his tent and met his tent mates. Two armourers, Harry and Les were there. They introduced themselves to each other. Les had been a bookie – correction, Licensed Turf Accountant – in civvie street. He was 26, pretty old for this squadron. Harry was from Kent, where his people ran a small grocery shop. There were a couple of others, all ‘erks’, the slang term for ground crew.

The ablutions were in a small, special hut. These had been pointed out to Martin by one of the men earlier in the day. At least they had running water, which they might not later on. The chaps said that they even had hot water for morning shaves, and for showers on Saturday, but you needed to dry quickly, as there was no heat and the place was far from draught-proof.

As Martin went to sleep, he felt that he could fit in.

After D-Day

July 13, 1944, Coulombs, Normandy.

247 Squadron had moved over to B6 Coulombs on D-Day + 13. B6 was hectic and dusty. It had been a couple of farmers’ fields until the Engineers laid down what was glorified chicken-wire on the grain crop and called it an airfield. One day four Tiffies were lost to collisions on the ground, and the dust also played havoc with

the Sabre engines. Better filters were added. Dust also stuck to grease and jammed the cannon ejector ports. A temporary solution was being worked out with paper from old magazines – Woman's Weekly seemed popular – pasted over the ejectors with airplane dope.

Gerry's planes didn't seem to have problems ejecting shells. Harry had a burn on the back of his neck and a souvenir MG131 casing when an FW 190 strafed them. For a few seconds he'd thought worse – a lot worse. Now the invasion was well under-way, but the front had stalled in front of Caen.

July 1, 1944

Dear Martin,

Just a quick note to let you know we are doing all right. We know you cannot tell us much of your own situation, but we do hope you are taking as much care as you can. Here at home we find ourselves listening a lot to the BBC news, though I don't suppose we are getting the full story.

There has been some excitement, if you can call it that, with the new flying bombs. At first a lot got through, but now it seems that the RAF and the AA gunners are knocking quite a few down. I heard one go over yesterday. Awful things. Of course, Dad's ARP duties are now increased, though there's less concern for blackout since the doodlebugs are aimed from the other side and

can't steer for the lights.

I'm doing some work with Janet Murrow on restarting evacuations of children, though that will depend a bit on how much the RAF and AA folk can keep the flying bombs away. A lot of very generous people did a lot of good, but there were some who were not very suitable, and a few downright awful. And, of course, some of the kiddies should not have been sent, as they weren't capable of behaving themselves in a decent house. I rather hope we don't have to gear up for all that again.

Love,

Mum and Dad

July 12, 1944

Dear Mum and Dad,

Just a quick note to let you know I'm OK.

We've been very busy. I can't, of course, tell you much about it, but I think the CO will let through the news that we had a bit of a dust-up with some Gerry panzers. We could actually see them, and there were not too many army types between them and us, so it was a bit tense. However, everyone pulled together and the planes did take-off, shoot, circle and land. All of us pitched in to get them off again as soon as possible, even though a few shells were landing. Fortunately

only a few minor injuries, to us at least. We saw some very pranged tanks. One took a direct hit from an RP and had lost its turret. Blown 40 feet away. The hull of the tank was now V shaped. This was a Tiger too. We saw a couple of others that didn't seem damaged much. Maybe having seen one example of what the RP can do, the crews bailed out.

Look after yourselves too. Those pilotless bombs are nasty. Seems the name doodlebug is going to stick, though V-1 is easier to write.

Love,

Martin

July 13, 1944

Dear Penny,

Just a quick note to let you know that I'm keeping well and trying to put Mr. Hitler out of business. I can't say much about me at the moment except I'm 'somewhere in Europe'. However, I am OK. Very busy, as are all of us here.

Hope Desmond is thriving. Better there than here. We see some children, but it isn't a good place for them to be right now.

With luck, I'll get to Paris in the not too distant future.

Love,

Your brother Martin

Coming round in Belgium

September 7, 1944. West of Brussels, Belgium.

Martin spat out mud. He was lying more or less in a ditch. Yes. He'd been sitting in the back of the repaired Bedford lorry. They'd been left behind in Glisy to repair the truck and bring some expected wireless parts.

Jack and Jim had been in the front of the truck. Martin recalled the rain and wind. The truck had shifted to pass a woman walking along the road. Then – yes, now it came to him – there'd been an explosion.

He must have blacked out for a moment or two. He felt around and could move his arms and legs, so he pushed himself up and looked back over his shoulder. The lorry was on its right side half across the ditch. There were some flames coming from the gaping hole where the front left wheel had been, and a crater in the road. An anti-tank mine?

Martin heard a scream, “Annje!” It was the woman. She was on her knees further up the ditch away from the truck. Martin stumbled to his feet. He was stiff and clearly banged up, but he couldn't feel anything broken, though as he tried to brush off some mud, he found that his backside on the left had no mud but some blood. As he felt his left buttock, something stung. He felt and

pulled out a small shard of wood. Part of the seat he'd been sitting on. If that was all, he was lucky.

"Annje!" Another scream brought him back to the present. He staggered the 15 yards to the woman. She was pointing to the bundle of clothes, which was in a bush and about seven feet off the ground. Martin walked over and lifted the rain-soaked bundle, realizing it was a baby. The baby started howling. He handed it to the woman who somehow had the child out of the clothing in an instant. Then after touching the child all over started sobbing "Annje, Annje, Annje" as she put them back on, even though they were wet. The child stopped crying.

Martin realized he could hardly hear the woman. His ears were ringing still from the mine or whatever had destroyed the truck. Now his mind started to clear and he ran over to the truck. He needn't have bothered. Jack had been driving, and the British Bedford had a right-hand drive, so he'd been on the opposite side to the explosion. But he'd been thrown out of the driver's side window and the cab had fallen across him. His lifeless body had the cab roof across it.

Jim? What was left of Jim now occupied the driver's area as far as Martin could see through the windshield. There was still some oil or fuel burning, and Martin knew there were a couple of fire extinguishers in the back of the truck. Using his pocket knife he cut the

tarp and unclipped one and walked around the truck to the front corner. The extinguisher appeared to work, aided by the rain, and he got the fire out quickly, but there was a smell of petrol. While a fire might bring help, it might also bring the enemy.

He stood there for quite a long time, possibly a minute, looking at the truck and wondering what to do, lost in some mixture of shock and confusion. There had been no traffic along the road, but then Jack had said he'd been near here on holiday with his parents and had found this lane that ran parallel to the main road.

The woman came up to him. She pointed at his left thigh. "Je bent gewond."

Martin didn't understand, but knew from school there were Flemings who spoke a dialect of Dutch and Walloons who spoke French. He tried first in English.

"Do you speak English?"

"Nay. Geen engels."

"Parlez-vous français?"

"Un peu. Je suis flamande."

"Je comprends. Je suis Canadien." Even though he was in a British unit, and he'd lived in England since '38, he still felt Canadian.

"Ah. Kanadeze."

There was a silence for some seconds as they both looked at the truck.

With some hesitation, the woman said, "Vous devez

faire attention a cette blessure. Si vous m'accompagnez, je peut vous offrir de l'eau et des tissus propres."

"Merci. Mais premierement je dois trouver les fusils et marquer la route avant la noirceur. Est-ce qu'il y a des autres mines?"

"Je ne sais pas. Les allemandes ont passes dans la nuit, et nous sommes interdit de les regarder. Il y a une semaine, mon mari etais fusilé lorsque il a tenté aller aux vaches dans la grange. Et ils ont menacé mon bebe aussi."

"Mes condolences. C'est dur." It had to be said, but it was nowhere near adequate to the situation.

Martin went round the back of the truck and looked inside. There was wine oozing out of some of the crates that were tumbled onto the right side that was now horizontal. He stepped in onto the tarpaulen and found one that seemed to be not leaking and carried it out. There were some boxes with tins of Spam. He opened one and took a half dozen cans. The woman might as well have something. So might he. He found his rifle and his kit bag. He left the bags of Jack and Jim where they were. He put the Spam in the top of his duffel.

Then he found a couple of the worst-broken booze cases and put one in the middle of the road 25 yards back. Gingerly he walked ahead and put one 25 yards ahead. They were wood and would alert someone coming slowly. If someone came fast, too bad.

Then he decided he'd better get the gun Jack and Jim had in the front. He found a big rock and smashed the windscreen so he could get at the driver's area. Jim had had a Sten down by his feet, and it was now more or less on top of the mess that had been him. Martin took it gently. He looked back and saw a khaki ammunition pouch and used the barrel of the rifle to lift it out. It had a several small magazines for the rifle and three Sten magazines. Better not to leave these things around.

He used the barrel and the gunsight to hook Jim's identity disc, then cut it off with his knife. Jack's was more accessible, but it was hard to look at what he was doing.

He unloaded the Sten, but left the magazine on the rifle – he didn't like Stens, even though they were the standard RAF issue – and slung them both and the ammunition pouch across his body. Then he looked up to see that the woman had his duffel bag. She must be strong, with the baby in one arm and the bag under the other. Martin picked up the case of wine and said, “Allons y”.

The woman hesitated, then said “Ah, Oui. C'est difficile. Je ne parle pas français depuis l'école.” It was clear Martin's French was more fluid.

They did not have far to walk. Maybe two hundred yards. There was a stone wall, an opening, and a farmyard with a small house on one side and a small barn

on the other. The woman went to the door, put down the duffel bag and opened it wide for Martin to enter a largish kitchen. She put the baby in a bassinet that was there, then fetched the duffel bag.

In the kitchen, there was a large kettle on a stove, faintly steaming. She poured a small amount of water in a bowl and added what was likely salt.

“Je n’ai que de sel. Les pantalons – Pouvez vous ...?”

It was clear she didn’t quite know how to ask a strange man if he could take off his pants, but the dull ache in his left rear made it clear that Martin would be best to let her attend to him. He undid his belt and fly and gingerly lowered the pants over his bum. He could feel the cloth sticky as it came off his skin.

The woman said, “Ah, c’est passé aussi les culottes”.

This was getting a bit embarrassing. But she quickly handed him a small towel and said, “Maintenant, les culottes aussi, s’il vous plait.”

Martin turned his back on her, and carefully pulled the underpants down his thighs and held the towel over his privates, then turned so he was half way from sideways to facing away from the woman.

“Est-ce que je peux essayer laver la blessure?” she asked.

“Oui”, Martin responded.

She dipped a cloth in the water, slightly rung it out, then gently dabbed around the wound. She repeated

this several times over a couple of minutes. The salt stung a little, but less than he expected.

“Ce n’est pas sévère, heusement”, She said.

Then she took a clean cloth and dried around the wound. Martin could not see it.

“Avez vous un miroir?”

She moved over to a cabinet and opened a drawer and took out a small mirror, then handed it to Martin. He contorted himself and finally, in the late afternoon light, could see there was a small triangular hole about a quarter inch across, slightly oozing, but no longer bleeding profusely.

Martin realized that he needed to fully remove the pants and underpants, but had to get his boots off. He started to laugh at the awkwardness of the situation, then shuffled to a chair and half-sat on it on the good side of his rear-end, still holding the towel to maintain a sort of modesty. The woman understood right away, and undid his boots. He got the pants off and she was about to take them away, but he said, “Non. Il y a un pansement de combat dans une des poches.” She started looking in the pockets, and quickly found the field dressing.

“Dans mon sac, il y a des autres culottes et pantalons. S’il vous plait.”

She opened his duffel bag and rummaged, coming up in a few seconds with the required items. Martin

opened the dressing pouch. There were two dressings and a safety pin. He left one dressing in the pouch and handed the other to the woman. She placed it on the wound, and passed the bandage ties around Martin's waist. There was some fumbling as Martin strove to maintain his modesty. She tied the ends of the bandage, but this would still let the dressing shift. Martin pointed to the underpants, now resting on the kitchen table.

"Nous pouvons securer le pansement aux culottes avec l'épin," he said, holding out the safety pin.

"Oui."

Martin took the underpants, turned his back on the woman, and quickly put them on. He let the woman pin the top of the dressing to the underpants. Then he put on the fresh pants and transferred the belt and the pocket contents of the bloody ones. Good job they'd had a chance to do some laundry in Glisy.

"Je dois mettre ses choses en eau froid," said the woman. Martin handed her both soiled garments and she put them in a bucket and pumped some water at the sink.

"Je m'appelle Martin", he pronounced it in the French way, "Martin Tremblay".

"Clara, Clara Joos."

There was the noise of boots on cobbles and through the window a man appeared coming in the gate. Martin lunged and grabbed the rifle, but Clara yelled.

“Nay. Het is François. ... Mon voisin.”

They went to the door and let in a man who was obviously a rural worker. The rain was much eased, now down to a drizzle.

Clara let forth a torrent of Flemish. Martin made out “wagen”, “mine”, and “Kanadeze”, then “gewond”. When she stopped, he held out his hand to François and said “Martin Tremblay”.

“François Dehooge, Je parle français un peu. Also a very little English. The men – we must not leave them there or animals will”

“Oui” said Martin. “Peut-être vous pouvez m’aider?”

“Ja”, said François and immediately turned to the door. Martin, taking just the rifle but all the ammunition, followed. Clara said “Je suivre dans quelques minutes. Annje ...”

François stopped by an outer door, opened it and found a couple of spades. They would have to dig. Actually there were tools in the truck. Still, these would likely be better than the portable trenching type.

At the truck, François pointed to a spot about 5 feet from the road and started to make a small trench marking out a rectangle 6 feet by 3 feet with the long edge parallel to the road. Martin put the rifle just inside the back of the truck to keep it dry, then started to dig out the centre, which was clearly the intent.

“A quelle profondeur?” he asked.

“50 centimetres – ce n’est pas permanent, mais on ne veut pas que les animaux disinterrent les corps.”

After some minutes of digging, they were almost deep enough. The soil was heavy with clay, but fortunately not hard. The digging could have been worse.

“Ils sont des amis?” François asked.

“Plutôt camarades. Mais quand memes des bons compagnons”, Martin answered.

“Dommages!”

Without words they turned to the difficult task. François used his shovel and cleared the glass from the right – British driver’s – side of the windscreen. Jim’s body was there, lying across Jack’s legs, his own legs strangely pointing up to the left side of the truck. François took Jim under the shoulders and pulled. With effort, he slid him out of the windscreen hole and Martin grabbed the legs. This part was relatively easy, and they dropped him beside the grave.

“Avez vous ses effets?” asked François.

“Seulement ses disques d’identité.”

Quickly Martin went through the pockets. He put the field dressing in his own pocket, but wrapped everything else, including Jim’s wristwatch, in a handkerchief he found and tied the corners, then put that in one of his blouse pockets. They then put the body in the grave.

Turning back, they both stopped to look at Jack.

The truck cab had more or less bisected him at the waist. It was going to be awkward and unpleasant.

“We moeten graven onder hem,” said François. Martin didn’t get the words, but the meaning was more or less clear. Since the ground was relatively soft, they could excavate under the body and slide it out. Martin took the side toward the rear of the truck and gently removed soil under Jack’s thorax, moving as close as he could under the truck canopy. François did the same the other side. After five minutes, the body was clear of the canopy by about a centimeter. François said,

“Nu hebben we te trekken.”

Again, Martin “understood” without having the real meaning of the words. Jack’s body came out. Martin checked all but one of the pockets. That one was so mixed up with blood and unmentionable mess that he didn’t bother. However, he had the pay book and seemingly everything important. Let the war graves bods do the rest. He’d do his best to report the grave to them.

They put Jack next to Jim. Clara arrived, without the baby, just as they were filling in the grave. Martin was glad she didn’t see what the bodies looked like.

It was starting to get dark, but the rain seemed to be done for now.

“Prenez ceux que vous voulez des vins ou des nouritures du camion,” Martin said. That surely wasn’t in the regs, but Martin knew the C/O often gave the lo-

cals stuff in return for help. And this was definitely real help. “Et je veux aussi amener un peux plus à Clara.”

“C’est juste. Et Clara est plus proche,” said François.

They emptied the back of the truck. Martin put the wireless bits back – they were less likely to be of immediate interest to scavengers. They set the cases of wine and beer upright and carefully removed the broken bottles and glass and tossed them into the far end of the truck, then made up crates of good bottles. Surprisingly, about two-thirds of the bottles were intact. They consolidated boxes of Spam, biscuits, condensed milk, and – a big bonus – a few tins of fruit. Then they stripped out the fire extinguishers and first aid kit and tools from the truck, as well as the duffel bags of the dead men.

It took them 5 trips each to get the stuff to Clara’s, including the duffel bags of the dead men. Martin kept the rifle over his back – he didn’t want any surprises. Who knew which side people were on, and a rifle with bullets would fetch a good price in money or goods.

By now it was almost dark. They put some of the things in the kitchen, where the baby was fast asleep, and the rest in the shed with the spades, but Clara then locked that up. François said something, then Clara said, “Hartelijke groeten aan uw moeder en Maria.” François said, “Dank. Tot ziens Martin, Clara.” and was gone into the deepening fug of night and drizzle.

“Il reviens demain pour des choses,” Clara explained.

They got inside quickly, and Clara pulled the curtains, then lit a candle. It didn’t shed much light, but enough.

“Wil je eten? Pardon. Voulez-vous quelquechose a manger?”.

“Oui”, said Martin. “Il y a des choses du camion”.

Clara picked up a can of Spam. “Qu’est-ce que c’est?”

“Une sorte de viande. Un peu salé, mais c’est bon”.

“J’ai des pommes de terre et des wortels ... carottes”.

“Une grande bouffe,” said Martin. But Clara likely didn’t really understand the word.

“Où est la WC?” Martin asked. He actually wanted to wash his hands too.

Clara pointed to a door near the kitchen door but at right angles to it. She lit a candle stub in a holder and handed it to him. The door led into a sort of corridor with a curtained window. There was a sink on the inner wall with a pump like in the kitchen, and a toilet – a flush toilet – but Martin noted that there was a pump. The reservoir had to be filled! A pipe led to near the sink from the reservoir via this pump. Clever.

Gingerly he lowered his pants, and undid the safety pin. The dressing stayed put. He realized it had been hours since he had relieved himself. Looking round,

he was happy to see a few sheets of newspaper. He'd been too preoccupied to check. TP was a luxury long forgotten. He pulled the chain and it worked. Then he tried the pump and clearly it worked to fill the reservoir, and water would run into the toilet if it was full. He managed to get the safety pin reinstalled. The wound was not giving more than dull pain. He hoped it would not get infected. Better try to get to an MO as soon as possible.

After washing his hands – which were filthy from the work at the truck – he came back into the kitchen, blew out his candle and went over to the table where Clara had been peeling some potatoes. They were in a pot on the hottest part of the stove. She was scraping some carrots and added them to the potato pot. Martin opened the Spam.

“Met uijen?” said Clara, picking up an onion.

“Oui, ça marche” said Martin. They fried the Spam with onions, extracted the carrots from the pot and mashed the potatoes. It was not gourmet, but with one of the bottles of red wine, Martin could not recall tasting a better meal. And the tinned peaches after were a real treat.

The baby woke as they finished. Clara changed her, then without embarrassment opened her blouse and nursed the baby. Annje was probably about 4 or 5 months old. Seemingly a good-natured, unfussy baby. The room

was quiet, but there was a patter of rain on the tile roof. Martin took the opportunity to use the toilet.

When he returned he held his watch near the candle so he could see the time. It was still running! He hadn't bothered to notice until now. It said 8:30. Seemed later. Suddenly he was very tired.

"Où est-ce que je peut dormir?" he asked.

"Hier. Daar is maar één bed. Ik heb geen andere." She opened a door on the other side of the kitchen from the toilet and there was a bedroom. It held a double bed and a cupboard.

It was clearly that or the floor. Was she prepared to share it with him? Before he could ask, she went into the bedroom and took a nightgown off a hook, walked across the kitchen, relit the candle stub and disappeared into the 'bathroom'.

Martin went to his duffel bag, and dug out his pyjamas. He hadn't used them for a while. The RAF didn't issue them – there had even been a question in the House of Commons about it in 1943 – and they wouldn't launder them if you supplied them yourself. That also appeared in Hansard. In both cases the government line was that there was a shortage of supplies or labour or But they were useful to have if you got a spot of leave, and didn't take too much space. Also might help keep you warm as a form of long underwear if it were really cold!

He took off his boots and loosened the laces so he could step back into them. The tiled floor was not suitable for bare feet. He picked up the rifle, Sten and ammunition pouch. Then he went to the other side of the bed, putting the weapons in the corner where he could reach them quickly, but unloaded the rifle. Better to not have any accidents.

Remembering a dynamo torch in his kitbag, he went back and found it. But he did already have a lighter, even if he was one of the few non-smokers in the squadron. Must be getting woozy.

Half sitting on the bed, he took off his trousers. He decided to leave the underpants – the safety pin was too much work – and put on the pyjama pants. Then he took off the blouse, the shirt and singlet and put on the pyjama jacket.

He heard Clara behind him. She was bringing in the bassinet. Then she hung her clothes on hooks on the wall and got into bed, under the feather duvet and quilted coverlet. Martin was too tired to fuss and did the same, falling asleep almost immediately.

It must have been some hours later when he woke to the sound of aero engines – Merlins, multiple Merlins, quite low. They went over and then, in the distance, there was a muffled crump. Poor bastards if they hadn't managed to bail. Probably hit by Ack-Ack or attacked by a night-fighter somewhere to the east. Almost cer-

tainly a Lanc, as there weren't too many Halifaxes with Merlins, and Mosquitos flew mostly daytime ops and only had two engines.

Lying away from the door and on his left side, the splinter wound was aching a bit. He rolled onto his right side, gently bumping Clara who was lying the same way, but occupying the better half of the space. Somehow it worked nicely if he made sure he aligned himself with her. This was new territory – one didn't often sleep with women while fighting in the RAF.

Clara stirred, felt Martin there and eased back into him. Martin realized he had an erection. Hell, like most young men, he woke with one, but the present situation ensured it. He was gently pulling away when Clara giggled.

“Pas necessaire,” she said.

“Ce n'est pas ennuiant?” Well, what word should he use? They didn't teach this in school French, and he'd been a bit young when using street joul in Lowertown Ottawa.

“Quel age avez-vous Martin?”

“Vingt. Vous?”

“Eenentwintig. Vingt-et-un”

As much as they seemed different, they were two young people of similar age.

Clara shifted and rolled. She jostled a bit under the covers then pulled her nightgown over her head. Martin

couldn't see anything, but he could hear and feel what was happening. Then Clara took his right arm.

"Votre bras," she said, pulling his arm along the pillow so he rolled a bit onto his back and closer to her. She slipped into his arm and pressed herself against him. Naked!

Now she was undoing the buttons of his pyjamas. Her hands were cool but not cold. Martin didn't know what to do, but felt he should do something. He could feel her breathing, so he kissed her. Gently at first, but she responded so vigorously, that in no time they were gasping for breath.

"Etes-vous sur?"

"Daar is alleen nu. Alleen nu. Seulement le présent."

Given what he'd seen with Jack and Jim, "Only the present" seemed a good description of how he felt too. He kissed her again, noting his right arm round her let him rest his hand on her breast. It felt nice. As if his hand belonged there, and her breast belonged in his hand.

Clara was fumbling with his pyjama cord. He helped her, and the pyjama bottoms came off quickly. They took a brief break from their embrace to jettison the pyjama tops. But the underpants were a problem. The safety pin.

"L'épin!" gasped Martin, escaping a kiss.

"Ah oui."

Martin rolled to the side of the bed and found the dynamo torch and got some light. Clara easily undid the pin from the dressing, but closed it again on the underpants. Martin let the light die, but not before noting Clara's nakedness and the patch of dark hair between her legs. He'd never seen or been with a woman like this before.

Off came the underpants, but carefully. Clara felt for the dressing.

“Oui. Ce n'est pas dérangé”.

She came back in his arm. He cupped her breast again in his right hand, then stroked the other with his left hand. Her breath came a little faster. He felt her hand take hold of his penis. Then she lifted her head. “Kom”.

He rolled on top of her, and they were together easily and quickly. Unfortunately, he was too excited, and lasted only a few seconds.

“Sorry,” he said.

“C'est la première fois?”

“Oui.”

“Alors, nous devons essayer encore,” she laughed.

Indeed it took no time before Martin was eager to follow this advice, and this time with gentleness and patience they seemed to melt into each other.

Sleep came easily, and Annje woke them with the dawn. Martin looked at his watch – quarter to six.

Clara changed and fed Annje, pulling part of the duvet round her to keep warm. Then she suddenly jumped back under the covers, saying, “Encore une fois”.

In no time, she was straddling Martin and he was responding enthusiastically as they both laughed. In a few minutes they were lying in each other’s arms, warm and content.

“Nous devons se lever,” Martin said.

“Oui,” said Clara, sounding a bit disappointed.

They got out of bed, not bothering with clothing. Martin now saw that Clara had a fine figure and a strong frame, though she could clearly use more food than she had been getting. Clara went in the kitchen and poked up the fire. Martin followed, but went into the toilet. When he returned, Clara followed his example, but only after putting some water from the large, still-warm, water pot in a bowl which she set on the table with a cloth and towel for Martin. He gave himself as good a ‘bath’ as he could. Then Clara, having returned from the toilet, did the same. As she did, Martin found he was intently interested in watching her, but not as excited sexually as he would have expected beforehand. As she washed, and he watched, he put on his clothes and picked up the pyjamas.

She finished, and dried herself. Before she could dress, he embraced her and kissed her, then quietly said, “Merci infiniment”.

“Merci aussi de moi,” she said, and squirmed out of his embrace.

“Je veux raser,” said Martin. Clara threw the water in the sink and put a bit more in the bowl.

“Assez?” she asked.

“Oui. Ça suffit.”

He went to his kitbag and found his razor and brush and quickly got rid of the stubble. Warm water was a luxury!

“Nu – ontbijt. Petit déjeuner.” She handed him some bread and a knife and skipped away to dress. By the time she returned from the bedroom, he had a wedge of bread each on a plate and the kettle, which he had not noticed her put on, was steaming.

Martin had some instant coffee from rations the Squadron had ‘appropriated’ at some point in their journeys. He prepared two cups.

“Du sucre ou du creme en poudre?” he asked.

“Du sucre, oui. Mais qu’est-ce que c’est?” Clara pointed at the packet of creamer.

“Je ne sais pas. Mais c’est supposé comme du lait.”

“Il y a du lait!” Clara went to the pantry and came back with a jug.

They had sugar and milk in their somewhat chemical-tasting coffee, but it was hot and satisfying. Clara found some cheese and a small pot of honey.

“Je l’ai gardé pour une occasion”, she said. Martin

could tell it was, in a strange way, an occasion.

They ate in silence. When the food was gone, Martin asked,

“Est-ce que je peux vous écrire?” It seemed strange to use the "vous", but somehow that was the word that came out of his mouth.

“Oui, bien sûr”. She went to a drawer and took out a sheet of paper and a pencil and began to write.

“Ceci est l’adresse de ma tante à Ninove. La poste est plus sûr la bas.”

Martin took the paper, and in the space below Clara’s clear, bold script, he printed – his writing was always a scrawl – his RAF address and a ‘care of’ with his father’s High Commission address in Canada House.

“Qu’est-ce que c’est ‘High Commission’?” She could hardly pronounce it and it sounded very strange.

“L’ambassade du Canada à Londres. Le Roi du Canada ne peut pas avoir un ambassadeur à lui-même, le Roi de Grande Bretagne. Alors c’est une autre titre pour la même chose.”

“Votre père est diplomate?”

“Plutôt le chef administratif”, said Martin. “Mais l’address du RAF est meilleure aussi longtemps que la guerre continue.”

“Une autre tasse du café?”

He tore the paper in two, and put Clara’s address in the pocket of his blouse. Then they made two more

cups. Then Clara said, “Les vaches”.

Martin said, “Je veux ordonner les effets de mes compagnons qui sont mortes. Annje peux rester ici si tu veux.” He realized he had shifted to the ‘tu’. It seemed appropriate after last night.

Clara went out with a couple of buckets. Annje watched Martin as he went through the kit bags of Jim and Jack. He found a few odds and ends of personal things and put them with the identity tags and pay books. They each had their shaving kit and toothbrush in a sort of ditty bag, and Martin emptied these and put their effects in the bags, then put these in his own side pack. He put everything else back in the kit bags, none too tidily.

A few things bothered him. Both Jack and Jim had small tins that used to have pipe tobacco, but now had some jewellery in them. He had a small notepad and used a sheet to make “Jack” and “Jim” labels that he put in their respective bags and in the tins. But he put the tins in his own kitbag. He used their paybooks to make sure he had all their numbers and identity, and they each had a few letters from home. He took down the names and addresses – it took a couple of pages in the notebook, but he didn’t trust War Graves to get it all right.

Then he took out Clara’s address and copied it to the list below a solid line. He didn’t want to lose it.

He was just putting the pencil away – he always had a couple in his pocket to make notes – when Clara came back in.

“Tout va bien avec les bêtes?” he asked.

“Ja. Goed”.

She went over to Annje, who cooed a greeting.

Martin wanted to kiss her, but she was all business with the kitchen and the child.

There was the sound of an engine coming down the road from the Brussels direction. Martin jumped to the bedroom and grabbed the guns and ammo. He quickly loaded the rifle and then clipped a magazine in the sten. Then he said,

“Restez sur le plancher la bas à coté du lit.”

Martin eased himself out the door and slid along the wall until he reached the gateway. He was about to venture a peek up the road when he heard a loud call,

“If anyone is here, announce yourself or we’ll toss grenades.”

The accent was decidedly British, in fact Welsh, and though possibly a German trick, he figured not, so he called back:

“LAC Martin Tremblay, 247 Squadron, RAF.”

“We’re from No. 83 GSU. You’re in luck. Come on out.”

Martin gingerly stepped out the gate and could see a Bedford lorry near the smashed box he’d placed there.

There was a driver at the wheel, but a couple of other bods were carefully positioned with guns so they could jump for cover into the bushes. Martin walked steadily toward them, and as he did, told what had happened.

“We hit a mine, I think. Our driver and assistant were killed. I got a nasty splinter in my ass. There may be other mines in the road.”

By this time he was near the truck. He had the rifle slung on its webbing over his shoulder, and the sten pointed carefully to the ground. As he saw the faces, he realized he’d seen one before when there was a meeting at the Group Support Unit (GSU) to discuss procedures for repairing R/T equipment.

“You’re the 247 wireless wizard,” said the man. “I’m Sergeant Evan Thomas.”

“Yes, there’s some valves and stuff in the truck. The woman, Clara, who owns this farm and her neighbour helped me bury Jack and Jim over there for now. The neighbour, his name’s François, is a pretty good sort, but I’ll guess some of the truck contents grew legs during the night, even though I gave him and the lady here some bits and pieces. She’s a 21 year old widow. The Jerries shot her husband about a week ago for trying to go to milk the cows while they were planting a mine or two. I’ll let her know.”

He turned towards the farmhouse and yelled, “Clara. C’est bien. Vous pouvez sortir”.

Sergeant Thomas said, “You speak the lingo?”

“Actually not. They’re Flemish here. Even though I’ve a French name, I’m actually an English Canadian, but I picked up some French in the street.”

Clara came into the road, carrying Annje.

Thomas said, “They left an orphan too. Bastards.”

“Have you an R/T?” asked Martin.

“Fraid not,” said Thomas.

“There may be more mines in this road,” Martin said, looking at the road surface in the clear, cold morning. The wind was getting up too, and it moved some dust near where he’d placed the broken wine crate.

“Clara, avez vous un balai d’extérieure et une pelle?”

“Oui, je vais les chercher.” She set Annje down on a bank beside the wall of the farmyard.

“What did you ask her?” said Thomas.

“I’m noticing that just there”, and he pointed, “a hole has been filled in and it looks recent.”

“It’s where they’d put a mine to catch someone dodging the one that got your blokes,” admitted Thomas.

Clara came back with a broom of the witch’s sort.

“Ah, a bessom,” said Martin.

“Ja een bezem,” said Clara. Martin decided now was not the time for a lesson on the particulars of brooms versus bessoms.

“Clara. C’est possiblement dangereux ici. Nous pensons qu’il y a une autre mine toute près,” and he pointed

to the place he'd noted. Clara picked up Annje and walked down the road past the yard entrance until she was about 200 yards away. Martin unloaded the guns and put them in the GSU lorry, then took the broom and walked over to the 'repair'.

Thomas said, "Don't do anything silly now, boyo."

"I don't intend to," said Martin, "but I figure gently sweeping the dirt away from the edges won't set off an anti-tank mine."

"Right'o. Let's give it a try. Jones. Blackmore. Walk back up the road and look for any recent holes filled in. They may be mines."

Martin doubted that the two erks had missed the discussion about mines, but they headed off up the road. When they were over 100 yards away, Martin started gently brushing the sand and gravel from the hole that had been filled in. The soil was a bit damp from rain in the night, but it loosened easily under the light brushing of the twigs in the bessom. Martin went over to a bush and with his pocket knife cut a few small twigs that were both strong and springy. He stripped off leaves and bundled them together in his hand. Kneeling down he started wiping away soil towards the center of the hole, every so often stopping to scoop the loosened soil from the hole. Then at one pass of the twigs, they could see the metal spigot of a Teller mine.

"Found one!" yelled Thomas.

Jones and Blackmore walked back. “Did you see any signs of other mines?” asked Thomas.

“No Sarge. The tarmac is intact as far as we walked.”

“All right then, we can back the lorry up out of harms way. Then we’ll hook a rope to the mine and pull it out in case it’s booby trapped. These Tellers take 350 pounds on the spigot to set them off, but I don’t put it past the Jerries to have a second detonator.”

“Jones. You back up the lorry. Blackmore. Come here and use your fingers to gently clear the dirt from the mine and find its carrying loop. If you find anything odd, stop and we’ll discuss what to do.”

As it turned out, Blackmore was able to remove the soil easily, and the wire handle was on the Brussels side of the hole more or less. They attached a rope to it from the lorry, then Martin went over to Clara and took her into the farmyard. He asked her for her mirror and they stood in the lee of the stone wall watching the lorry and road in reflection. Thomas and Blackmore went over to the lorry and Thomas said, “Blackmore, lie down behind that bush. I’ll get down over there. Jones. When I give you the word, get your head below the line of the bonnet and reverse about 2 feet.”

This they did and the mine popped out of the hole. They waited a minute or so, then Thomas walked over to it. He undid the rope and carefully lifted the mine and walked it into the field away from the farmhouse.

Then he took the broken crate Martin had used and kicked it into its 18 inches by 3 inches component boards. From somewhere he found some red airplane dope. Yes! The stuff they'd used to plaster old Women's Weekly pages over the 20mm cannon shell ejectors on the Tiffies in Coulombs. A desperate measure to stop the dust sticking to the gun grease and jamming them after 3 rounds because spent casings could not drop away. The red dope was essentially the same stuff women used for their nails. Maybe they could bottle it and make a bundle on the black market.

Thomas painted MINE on four panels and stuck them in the ground on 4 sides of the Teller mine. They'd have to inform the proper authorities. Well, they'd need to do that for Jack and Jim too, and the truck.

They could not see any more potential mine placements in the road up to the farm gate, so the lorry came up, passed the toppled truck Martin was in yesterday, and did a 3 point turn in the farmyard entrance.

"Let me get my kit and those of the other two", said Martin. "There's also some wireless spares I should salvage from the pranged lorry."

"Jones!" said Thomas, "Find the wireless spares from the overturned lorry and stow them in ours. Blackmore. Keep your eyes open and one gun ready in case of trouble. I'll help LAC Tremblay get the kit bags."

They got the two kit bags of the deceased men first,

and Martin said, “No need to come back in. I’ll tell Clara goodbye.”

He went back in the farmhouse. Clara was standing by the table, a slightly lost expression on her face. There wasn’t much to say. There was everything to say. He kissed her, then said, “Bonne chance. Je vais écrire. Prennez garde de Annje”.

“Bonne chance toi. Et je veux écrire aussi.”

He turned and was gone as quickly as he could, or it would be more difficult for them both.

When he got outside, he found Thomas had loosened the tarp at the two front corners of his lorry.

“All right. I want Tremblay on the left, Blackmore on the right. I’ve put rags around the rail so you can both sit looking forward at the road for possible mines. And Jones and I will do the same. We’ll rotate every few miles so those in the back don’t get cramps. Tremblay, here are your weapons for the back in case we meet trouble.”

The road they were on met a main road in about 4 kilometers. They took a left and after a couple of kilometers towards Ninove they hit the Brusselsesteenweg and a British checkpoint. They were allowed to go on, now in a stream of traffic so they didn’t need to watch for mines, but possibly for hostile aircraft. It took about 4 hours to go about 50 km – 30 miles – because they had to go through Brussels. At one point, they smelled

a wonderful sweet bready smell and saw a small kiosk by the road.

Thomas ordered a stop.

“Let’s find out what the Belgies have there”, he said. But Thomas’ eyes had also noted the metal oval of a public urinal, which all of them were more than ready to use. “Blackmore. You go to the urinal first, then Jones, and then both of you guard the lorry. There’ll be plenty of quick fingers to lift stuff otherwise.”

Thomas stayed with the lorry while Martin was in the urinal. Then when both the erks were on guard, they investigated the kiosk. There was a small heater for waffles. Martin had waffles once with his grandfather in Washington, but they were made like pancakes, with a batter.

“They’re waffles, but not like I’ve seen before.” he told Thomas. He turned to the woman in the kiosk and asked in French. “C’est du gaufres, mais du pain?”

“Oui, c’est des gaufres de Lieges – Luiksewafels. Des soldats Canadiens nous a donnees du farine pour les preparer en échange pour du fruits frais.”

Martin had some Belgian Franc scrip the RAF issued to the men. Thomas had some too. They waved some of the funny notes, the woman looked at them and nodded. They got four for what was likely a high but not exorbitant price.

And they were very good. Jones and Blackmore had

scavenged some beer in the wrecked lorry, so they had a strange but satisfying lunch. By early afternoon they clattered into Melsbroek to make their reports. Martin, having unloaded the kit bags and wireless bits in the 'guardhouse' tent, was directed to a tent that 247 was using for its command post. Squadron Leader Stapleton, the C/O, greeted him warmly, a wide smile under his characteristic handlebar moustache.

"Glad our wireless wizard is back," he said.

"I'm sorry to report that McMichael and Taylor are dead sir. The lorry hit a mine. A local farmer helped me bury them beside it temporarily. The GSU lorry nearly bought it too, but we spotted a Teller mine just in front of it and got it out of the road and put it in a field where we marked it."

"All right Tremblay. I'll get my clerk to help you write up the reports so we can get everything sorted." Stapleton wasn't going to take chances that a fellow who'd nearly been blown up would forget something important.

Martin said, "I brought back their effects and kit bags. In fact I wasn't sure I'd be able to bring the kit bags, so I have their personal things in two ditty bags they'd used for a razor and such. Also, I brought back the wireless parts we wanted, but I hope you won't be angry that I let the locals who helped me scavenge the smashed up wine and beer."

Stapleton said, “No, good politics to tell them they can have it, especially when they might take it by bashing you on the head.”

Martin hadn’t quite looked at it that way, but it made sense. He did not, of course, mention Clara more specifically.

“See McNamara about the report. Dismissed.”

Martin felt very tired suddenly, but he mustered enough energy to complete the mandatory reports that McNamara would type up in however many carbons were needed. It only took a half hour, and McNamara told him where his tent would be over by the fence on the north side of the aerodrome.

“Do you think the MO can wait until morning to look at my ass-puncture?”

“If it’s not oozing pus and not hurting, sleep will do you more good. I’ll ask if the C/O’s driver can help you get to the tent. You look done in.”

He was. And with gratitude for McNamara’s solicitude, he accepted the ride in the jeep to the guard tent. He handed in the rifle and got a chit for it and the kit bags and effects of Jim and Jack, then took his Sten and kit bag out to the waiting jeep. They got over to the tents just after local boy scouts had helped to re-tie them and add big rocks after the wind had collapsed them. He dragged his kit into the tent, where just one of his tent mates was present.

“Hi there Martin,” said Colin Foster, one of the engine fitters. “We wondered where you’d got to”.

“Hello Colin,” said Martin. “Mine got us just south of Ninove. Jack and Jim bought it. I got skewered in the bum. Think the excitement’s got to me. I don’t think I’m up for dinner.”

It was about 4 in the afternoon, but it felt like midnight.

“Never fear. The cooks haven’t got set up properly, so I’ll bag you some grub and bring it back.”

Colin realized that it wasn’t physical exhaustion so much as the settling in of the knowledge that you were within fractions of a second, of an inch, of a chance, of being annihilated when others had been. Some never got over it, but most did with a good bit of sleep and a chance to gain perspective. And Colin was no great brain. Just a rough and tumble East Ender who liked motors and ended up here, working on some of the most powerful engines ever made. And the most finicky.

Martin asked him where the latrine was, and went off to use it. He came back, lay down on his cot, and was asleep in seconds. Colin moved his kit bag to a more secure location on some ammunition boxes where it wouldn’t get wet if the rain ran under the tent wall. He found a spare blanket. Spinner Jameson, one of the 1944 draft of new men, was part of the nearly 20 percent of the squadron who were ex-cons who didn’t have to go

back to prison if they served out the war. Spinner had asked if he were cold. Wasn't everyone who had to be in tents all the time? He and Colin, along with Harry and Les from the armourers had met by the ends of the row of tents two nights ago and happened to walk by one of the few undestroyed huts. It was locked but Spinner opened it in seconds and they liberated some blankets. Then Spinner locked up again! Harry had asked him, "How'd you do that?" and Spinner said, "I was doing five years for safe-cracking when this little opportunity came up." Well, it was a useful talent, and they'd given him half the proceeds each of them carried. Some people would be warmer, and Spinner a bit wealthier. Colin didn't object. He'd only missed being in prison himself for fraud because a German bomb got the prosecutor's office and messed up the papers.

Later, Colin made sure there were some biscuits and cheese and a full canteen in the ammo tin by Martin's cot. He put the Sten handy but unloaded with a clip beside it under the cot on a board, and, knowing where it would be, found the dynamo torch in the top of Martin's side pack and put it where Martin usually placed it beside his pillow. Martin slept on.

September 21, 1944, Thursday afternoon. Melsbroek, Belgium.

Martin had been busy since he had returned to the

squadron. The weather had improved, and for several days had been clear and warm. The squadron had been busy knocking the enemy's transport, armour and AA defenses. But now the weather had closed down, right in the middle of a big operation to try to capture bridges over the Rhine along a wide front including Arnhem and Nijmegen. They were likely to move base tomorrow, apparently to Eindhoven.

Once all the R/Ts had been checked, and double-checked on the Tiffies that were on the line should the weather improve, Martin went back to his tent. He had extracted the ditty bags for McMichael and Taylor from their kit bags and given them to McNamara for processing, but there was still the matter of the tobacco tins.

And letters. He found his notebook. McMichael had been married, but while there was an address for his wife, his paybook had specified his mother as nearest relative. Taylor listed his father. Martin wrote to both the parents, using the same wording.

Dear (name of parent),

I am sure by now that you will have been informed that your son died in Belgium. This happened when a mine exploded under the lorry we were travelling in. I was in the back of the lorry and slightly wounded. LAC McMichael and LAC

Taylor were in the cab, which took almost the full force of a Teller mine intended to disable a tank.

While we had only been together in the squadron for a few months, I had already come to regard them as friends. They will be missed.

Yours,

Martin Tremblay

The last paragraph was an exaggeration, but a benign one. He sealed the letters. When he went to eat, he would put them in the box – there was supposed to be a special one, but somewhere it had been damaged or misplaced, so now they used an old 20 mm ammo box. But for now, he wanted to check the tobacco tins.

Like Spinner Jameson, about 30 of the 130 men in 247 Squadron and its service echelon (6247) had been “guests” of His Majesty King George VI who had been invited to apply to join the Armed Forces for the duration of the war. Upon demobilization, they would be deemed to have served their full sentence. Martin and a number of others worried that nothing they possessed would be safe. This turned out to be an unnecessary fear. Unlike school or Oxford, no minor losses occurred. Indeed, it was uncanny how possessions of squadron members were safe even when left in the open.

The same could not, of course, be said of anything belonging to anyone else. Fortunately, it appeared none of the ex-cons were violent, though in 1944, this was a hollow adjective. What could be more violent than being on the receiving end of a salvo of 60lb RP or Rocket Projectiles? They were designed to go through several inches of steel. One of the ex-cons had commented that it was a pity the pilots couldn't aim a bit better, as there was this bank in Amiens he knew about

Martin opened Jim's tobacco tin. It was quite full. There were a couple of simple but elegant necklaces. They looked to be old, and the stones were quite large. There were also four rings, two with diamonds – at least they looked like diamonds – and two with rubies. Jack's tin had similar contents, but two brooches, one necklace and 3 rings. There was a large emerald in one of the brooches. Not RAF issue, for sure.

Martin had heard rumours that a couple of pilots had got a couple of erks to help them find a German motor convoy they'd pranged. Probably Jack and Jim were the erks. And it seemed that the Germans had some loot they'd taken, likely from folk shipped to concentration camps. The tins were perhaps a part of this.

What to do? Martin decided he'd wait until he was back in England and go to see the families and give them the contents of the tins. For now he'd keep the tins, but he'd have to be creative to get the stuff back

safely. There might be inspections. Apparently HM Customs were expected to police merchandise imported by returning servicemen.

Into Holland

October 5, 1944, Thursday Afternoon. Eindhoven, Netherlands.

This morning the squadron was released for maintenance. Fine for the pilots, but lots of work for the erks. Martin's team was, however, on top of the R/T and related equipment. The planes then made an uneventful patrol, and were now on a second trip, which from the radio traffic was pranging some tanks around Arnhem.

The Arnhem offensive had been a disaster, though 247 had done its bit OK. They'd moved up to Eindhoven with a number of other squadrons. A week ago, however, in aiding the 15th Scottish to clear out a pocket of Germans near Best – the suspected platoon or so turned out to be several hundred men – the tail had come off Bernie Lee's Typhoon. Some of the erks claimed to have seen it happen as Best was on the outskirts of Eindhoven. Martin figured they'd have to be at the top of the mythical Dutch hill. However, it was seen by a couple of the pilots.

Martin was thinking of Penny's David. He was buried

not 30 km away, and Uden and Oss had been liberated. However, things were still a mess, and finding transport would be a problem, let alone figuring out where David was buried. And there were, of course, ongoing hostilities.

This week the weather hadn't been too bad. The flat field at Eindhoven, shared with 5 other rocket-Typhoon squadrons and a bunch of assorted others became a mudbath when it rained heavily, and the drainage had clearly been damaged by the fighting and by heavy traffic.

One of the Canadian squadrons had news from RCAF 401 Squadron today that they'd bagged an Me 262 jet. This was a first. Good for 401. They used to be No. 1, but had been renamed to avoid confusion with RAF No. 1, which had started in 1878 on balloons. They were still Number 1 in Canadian eyes. Both RAF 1 and RCAF 401 were now on Spitfire IXs to confuse things. 401 was flying from a strip near de Rips, about 25 miles east of Eindhoven. Apparently the strip was OK, but not much nearby for entertainment.

While the planes were away, Martin sat on his cot and wrote to Clara.

October 5, 1944

Dear Clara,

I will have to write this in English so our

commanding officer (C/O) can read it to see there is no military information included.

My wound has healed. The Medical Officer said it was lucky I had it cleaned right away, and that the person who had done it - you - was to be thanked.

While I cannot tell you any details of what we are doing, you will no doubt have heard that we are pressing forward into Holland. I am even learning a little Dutch from the children who watch us. I think that it is the same language as Flemish apart from a few words. Rather like English and American.

I do hope you are keeping well. Also Annje.

Best wishes,

Martin

Winter in Eindhoven

January 4, 1945. Thursday afternoon. Eindhoven, Netherlands.

Martin was drawing up a roster to assign men to tasks. January 1 at 09:20, they'd been attacked by about 80 aircraft, led by four very peculiar ones with no propellers. Apparently Messerschmidt 262s, the first

the erks had seen. Silhouettes had been distributed in the Autumn, RCAF 401 had claimed a shootdown, and there had actually been some news reports about ‘jet propulsion’ from 1942 onwards.

The Allied news reported the offensive, but dutifully reported mostly how many German planes were lost. This might be true, but there were 8 squadrons of Typhoons at Eindhoven, and they’d lost 141 planes! Fortunately, only 4 pilots killed – a couple of those in process of taking off. Eight erks killed too. There were only three pilots wounded, but 104 groundcrew were now “hors de combat”, and the MO and his staff had been kept busy.

Martin hadn’t reported the bruises he’d got as he and two armourers all tried to get in the same slit trench at once. That didn’t count as a wound, but he was pretty black and blue in a few places.

The China Brits were less hard hit than other squadrons. And out of that Martin got a promotion. Sq. Ldr. Bryant found out that some of the other squadrons – four of them RAF, the others RCAF, so Martin’s accent was not so strange around here – had lost wireless mechanics. Without the R/T, the Tiffies weren’t much use to the footsloggers. So the C/O offered three of 247’s erks to other squadrons, but decided Martin was too ‘handy’ fixing things that were not always a military necessity. Martin was called in and told he was pro-

moted to Sergeant and would be responsible for assigning tasks to new men as they came in. In the meantime, he'd have to muddle through as the only technician for a couple of days.

Fortunately, apart from a couple of sorties, one of six then one of four aircraft, on the afternoon of the raid, the weather had kept the planes on the ground until this afternoon. Yesterday two new youngsters had arrived. They supposedly had training, and one of them probably was bright enough, but he'd have to watch their work. Was he ever that young?

He finished the roster and pinned it to the board they used, then decided that some laundry was in order. He and his tent-mates had cut a 44 gallon drum – the Yanks called it a 55 gallon drum because of their tiny gallons – in half to make a couple of wash tubs. They'd filed the edges, but you still had to be a bit careful. He got a couple of buckets of water from the tank on wheels, then poured some petrol from a gerry can onto a little hill of sand that was between a few stones. Lighting this, he quickly put the half-drum on the stones and poured in water. Then he shaved some soap from a bar he had into the water and added his shirts, collars, socks and underwear. There was a stick that served to agitate the clothes. He left the clothes in for a while after the flames died while he fetched fresh water. The two buckets served for two rinses, and in

sequence his clothes ended up on the tent ropes to dry. Hopefully it would not rain, but the cold and the low cloud that prevented flying was not too promising. He would probably end up having to hang the clothes inside the tent, where they gave off the musty smell that came from infrequent and perfunctory washing. And, of course, the wool trousers and battledress blouse were best not washed for fear of shrinking.

One of the armourers came by and said, "There's post come in."

Martin finished hanging the laundry and dumped the water. He ambled along to the mess tent where the Adjutant's clerk had sorted the letters by surname on one of the tables. Martin was handed two letters. One was from his parents – well, Miriam did most or all of the writing – and the other was in a hand he had not seen before. The letters were in a quite large, very round cursive. On the back leaf, the name at the top was Clara Joos.

He took his letters back to the tent. Strangely, the letter from his parents was in Robert's writing. He opened it quickly.

December 29, 1944

Dear Martin,

You'll be surprised that Mum hasn't done the writing, but don't get too alarmed. She is

OK, but her writing arm is in a cast and sling thanks to one of those awful V-2s. She was in town on Boxing Day for a minor party at the North London Polytechnic to celebrate the course she's been taking on how to cook using substitutes for usual ingredients. Walking back to the tube, there was a V-2 explosion in Mackenzie Street. A lot of people killed. Mum was quite a distance away from the blast, but some bricks fell from a building that was bombed out but had a wall that was propped up. One of these caught her on the arm - a few inches over and no-more-Miriam, so we are thankful for that. However, she'll be a few weeks in a cast, then some time to get the arm working again. Of course, it's been a bit of a fright for us both.

This happened Boxing Day as I mentioned, and she was in hospital for a couple of days to make sure nothing else was damaged. I've had to learn how to do the shopping and rations. In the process, I've gained a huge respect for your Mum's abilities to manage in this awkward time.

David (Mr Rosenthal) came to dinner. Mum would normally have done the cooking, so we wrote

to say that things really couldn't happen. However, by reply he said he would come and not to prepare anything except the drinks. He said he'd been saving some things for a long time and this seemed the right moment to have them. We'll choose to believe that, even if it's a white lie, as it really did raise Mum's spirits. Moreover, he asked if he could bring along a friend, who turned out to be a delightful lady with a thick East End accent. I think she is also Jewish, but they clearly are not kosher. Her husband, who was killed in the Blitz in the deadly raid of March 19, 1941, was a shopkeeper somewhere in the East End. The shop took a direct hit. They'd done well enough that they'd got a house in Hatfield, and Esther was there while her husband stayed to watch the business - incendiaries did more damage than explosions and you could put them out if you got to them quickly. But a nearby explosion and game over. Rosenthal became Esther's lodger, though from the warmth between them, perhaps not for much longer. It's good to see people resurrecting their lives amid all the destruction going on. Rosenthal seems to be doing well in the Murphy

Radio factory, too. He's in his element. Obviously could not tell me what he's doing, but was able to say it felt good to use his expertise. He took lodgings with Esther (I don't even recall her last name) so he could ride a bicycle, or use either bus or train to work. You'll remember Mum gave him a balaclava so he could keep warm while riding last Christmas.

I'm hoping that you are safe and well. If the news is correct, along with some of the things I hear at work, we may hope to see an end of things in Europe at least sometime soon, so look after yourself.

Love, Mum and Dad

Martin would have to reply soon – Robert could and would hear about Bodenplatte. Parents had a tough enough time, and he could at least give them some reassurance. But first he would read Clara's letter.

1944/12/23

Cher Martin,

Merci pour ta lettre (le 5 octobre). Ma réponse est peut-être perdu.

Excusez mon français. Tu sais que je ne l'employer pas souvent.

I am learning English. Alors, un peu. Mischien,
un très peu.

Nous habitons maintenant Ninove, avec ma tante.
François m'aide bij la ferme. Je vais chercher
un emploie comme adjoint administratif.

Annje va bien. Elle croix chaque mois, et
maintenant elle commence à marcher. Au moins
le tenter.

J'espère que tu vas m'écrire. J'aimerai beaucoup
corresponder, particulièrement en anglais.

Pour maintenant, ca doit servir.

Votre amie,

Clara

Martin folded it carefully and put it in a waterproof
ditty bag in his kitbag. He just had time to write an
airmail letter card – though it was flimsy paper – before
the evening meal. Was it “tea”, “dinner”, or “supper”?
Didn't make much difference, it was nearly always egg
and chips, with the egg largely made up from powder.
If they were lucky, baked beans and chips.

Jan 4, 1945

Dear Mum and Dad,

Very sorry to hear about Mum's arm. Do get
well quickly. I was glad to get news that

David Rosenthal is doing well. It is especially good to hear that he has a lady friend. After the way the Nazis treated him, and with the death of his wife from flu despite it being so long ago, I was afraid he might become somewhat frozen. People do. There will be all kinds of girls who get tied up with chaps who get killed, and some will never be able to find or give affection again.

Obviously I can't tell you much about what I've been doing, but no doubt some of what you read in the papers or hear on the news is not too far from where I am. Main thing to tell you is that I'm doing well, and have been promoted to Sergeant. My rather embarrassing wound is all healed.

No news or noise about when we'll get any home leave. Probably not until things wind down, and even then not immediately I suspect. However, one lives in hope, and carefully.

Love, your son,
Martin

It was after eating and several hours of duties that he wrote to Clara just before sleeping. In fact, he was under several blankets to try to keep warm as he tried

to write leaning on a book. It would have been easier with a pencil, but he used his fountain pen.

Jan 4, 1945

Dear Clara,

As you request, I will write in English. That will be easier for my commanding officer also, as all our letters must be read to ensure we include no information that may help the enemy. So I won't tell you where I am or what I am doing, only that I am well and my wound has healed. I think your prompt help in dressing the wound was important. I did say this in an earlier letter, but the post seems to be unreliable, and perhaps you did not get that one.

I was very pleased to get your letter. Do keep writing to me, as I enjoy hearing about you and Annje. I hope the farm does well this year. You can use some success after the sadness of 1944.

Possibly I will get some leave and be able to come to Ninove or at least Brussels. Unfortunately, transport is always a difficulty. Annje will be walking and possibly talking before I can get to see you. That is why I hope you will

write. Perhaps you can send a photograph.
I will try to find one for you if you would
like.

My mother was unfortunately hurt by a falling
brick before Christmas. Her right - and her
writing - arm was broken. Those are a couple
of words that are often confused when spoken.
And you could use that as a way to define your
new occupation as the "write arm" for a business
person.

My very best wishes. Do say hello to François,
and a little kiss for Annje.

Your friend,

Martin

Luneberg

**May 3, 1945. Thursday afternoon. Luneberg,
Germany.**

The Germans had announced Hitler was dead on
Tuesday night, but there is suspicion it may be a ruse.
Still, something is happening. In the midst of it, 247
had moved to Luneberg on May 2.

The buzz spreading from the briefing room was that
SS rats were deserting the Nazi ship. Or rather that
they were on ships trying to get to Norway, where they

had a significant stronghold. Reconnaissance photos showed SS on the decks of some ships trying to get out of Hamburg and Kiel. Though there was intermittent rain and not particularly good flying weather, the Tiffies had been armed and some roared away around 0715, with others going out at regular intervals.

Between 1300 and 1400, Friedlander had taken 9 Tiffies to attack ships. They'd put a salvo of RP into the starboard side of a destroyer, caused a big explosion in a 2000 tonner, hit and started fires on a 500 tonner, and hit a motor torpedo boat. However, they'd lost the baby-faced Brooks, hit by flak that blew away the whole rear of his plane.

They didn't get to attack the big ships, Deutschland and Cap Arcona of 21000 and 27000 tons. Those were hit by squadrons 198, 184 and 263, then dive-bombed by 197. Lots of bodies seen.

The next day, May 4, Flt Lt Key did some more ship bashing. Later Friedlander took some planes on their last op of the war. They didn't find the airfield they were looking for, so shot up a village. Martin wondered if it was worth the effort. However, there was a great deal of satisfaction at hitting back at the supposed Nazis.

Martin found it impossible not to get carried along with this euphoria. Clearly the war was coming to an end. He did his rounds, checking that the R/T sets on

the planes assigned to him were working properly, and also tallying and spot-checking the work of his subordinates. Then he checked in with the control "tower" that was on a jeep and looked at their set too. Beyond tightening a few power leads, there was nothing to be done, and he went back to his hut.

The main thing was to avoid getting killed or wounded in these last few days, and to get home in one piece. There was, of course, the likelihood of the squadron being sent East to fight the Japs. That mess was still going on. The Americans had landed on Okinawa, but the battle was apparently fierce, and there were suicide planes attacking ships. And Roosevelt had died. It would change the complexion of things. Truman was a bit of an unknown.

Lubeck

June 28, 1945, Thursday afternoon. Lubeck, Germany.

Nearly two months of 'peace'. There'd been some leave granted, but transport was an issue. Martin had thought to try to get back to see Clara, but had not had a reply to several letters. A wild goose chase did not seem a good idea. She may now regret their behaviour together. And there could sometimes be consequences.

AC Clarke had stayed in Gronau overnight – all the way back near Enschede in Holland. Apparently there'd been a knock at the door in the middle of the night, and two gunmen had put a lot of bullets in him. The murder would likely remain unsolved.

LAC Morgans, a Welshman, had acquired a revolver from somewhere. He was putting it inside his blouse when it went off. He was taken to the MO and it was believed not to be serious, but he died overnight of internal bleeding. Stupid.

On June 17, 247 sent some planes to Copenhagen. They were supposed to take part in a fly-past for Danish royalty. In the event, they only took part in the rehearsal, but some ground crew, including Martin, were sent along in a Dakota to make sure things were working properly. It was only his second official flight in an airplane, though he'd managed one or two others when equipment needed 'checking'.

Flying was now much curtailed, especially low level. The day before the Danish show, Sgt. Murrells had managed to fly into a tree. Another useless fatality.

Even the swimming at Timmendorfe Strand was now being discouraged. There was a former Luftwaffe R&R facility there on the Baltic coast. Even a bunch of kids who were very blonde and not at all ill-fed. Possibly they were Lebensborn children of SS men with Nordic women. But then bodies started to wash ashore.

Turned out they were the unwilling passengers on the ships sunk on May 3 by some of the Typhoon colleagues of the China Brits – concentration camp prisoners the SS were trying to keep out of the hands of the Allies. Bastards.

While some of the erks spent most of their time with cards and beer, Martin was able to explore some of the many different aircraft that were coming and going and learn about their electronics. There were some German ones too – a Focke-Wulf 190, a Junkers 88, and 4-engine FW 200 transport. He'd also managed earlier to pull the radio and something else – possibly radar – out of an He 219 that had crashed or been shot down near the Luneberg field. It was interesting that the German system had nothing like the magnetron used in Allied radar. Between all these and the Allied planes and their electronics, Martin had plenty to investigate and learn about and his time went quickly.

Still, it was time to get on with living. Martin had to reply to Robert's most recent letter.

June 28, 1945

Dear Mum and Dad,

Got your news that you will be returning to Canada at the end of the year if transport can be arranged. I guess there will be a lot of people wanting to get home.

I think I'd like to try to complete my degree before I come back. This will, of course, depend on lots of things, but I have written to Dr. Bleaney and have been trying to find out what might be available to me. It looks like governments are talking of some programme or other so people can finish their education. This depends, of course, on what happens in the Far East.

About 10 days ago, I got to go with some of the Squadron to Copenhagen. Some of our planes were to be part of a fly past for the Danish King. We took part in the rehearsal, and walked around the city a bit. Lots of food and other things available, not at all like we're hearing in Holland where we saw some of the hunger in Nijmegen and Enschede, but I think it was even worse elsewhere.

We're not sure what will happen to our Squadron. There are lots of rumours about Japan, but it won't be with our current equipment. Possibly we'll be re-equipped with Tempests, or maybe some jets. It will mean there'll be some work-up time, and maybe the fighting will be over, though the Japs sure seem fanatical.

So far there's no mention of home leave except

on compassionate grounds.

Hope Mum's arm is now fully healed.

Love,

Martin

Back to England

August 9, 1945. Thursday afternoon. English Channel.

The old ferry was rolling across the English Channel. Martin was part of the first contingent of ground crew on their way to set up the squadron at RAF Warmwell. It had been fine all week, if a bit cool, but now it was raining. On the crowded boat, finding shelter was the order of the day. Martin was under an overhang, and the support was a solid sheet of 1/4" steel. It was outside, but not wet nor in the wind. He sat on his kit bag and pressed his back into the corner.

Nearby under the overhang a tannoy was relaying the BBC. The news was on. The Americans had dropped a second atomic bomb, this time on Nagasaki. Martin, along with most others, didn't know what this really meant, but it seemed that the bomb was really special. The report said something about it being equal to

20,000 tons of TNT. A whole city erased from existence. It had come to this.

Surely the Japanese would surrender now. Or maybe there was nobody to surrender. Martin's thoughts wandered to the husband of Penny's friend/acquaintance in Montreal. Penny had run into her at McGill, a young married woman with a small child. Her husband was a medic with the Canadians bagged in Hong Kong. There was talk some of the prisoners were being shipped to Japan as slave labour. If he was in Hiroshima or Nagasaki, the child would now be an orphan, as the mother had given up hope after nearly 4 years of separation and swallowed a bottle of sleeping pills. Sad. Sad.

An aircraftman rushed out of the companionway and bent over the rail and vomitted. It was better to stay outside. Grey-faced, the man staggered back inside without a word.

Watching the grey-green sea, with ships and boats plying the busy channel waterways, Martin idled the time away. He thought of the letter that had come last week from Clara. Only the second letter he'd got. He'd sent her half a dozen, but no doubt the Belgian postal service was not all back to business until recently. Or perhaps the censors were overdoing things.

Amazingly, she'd written in English with some French and Flemish words.

July 23, 1945

Dear Martin,

I received 5 letters from you and have written back to each, but I think perhaps they are not getting to you. In case, I will put down a little of everything that has happened, even if you get the others.

A day after you left with the RAF men, some British soldiers came in a truck and dug up your comrades. They also cleared up the damaged truck. They had a Flemish translator. He had escaped to England in 1940. There were some questions about the contents of the truck. A bit rough in language, but no hitting, but I said that at night it is dangerous to go outside, and I said to them I needed to attend to your wound. In any case, there was nothing for them to find easily. François and I had a couple of "funerals" as soon as you had gone. Perhaps there will be a resurrection soon.

The farm is proving very difficile. I was not able to do much planting, so I shared some fields to François, and he was able to hire a worker by giving some of the harvest. We have done good, but I want to have more time for my Annje, and my aunt here in Ninove is

not always well. I have made arrangements to sell the farm to François, but he will pay money in pieces over time. The advocaat has drawn up the papers. This will let me pay the hypotheek and have a bit left over. This if all goes good, but Francois as you know is capable and I think it will be all right. I do not mind if he makes a lot of money as long as I get enough to help me be comfortable.

I am learning English and will start to learn typing so I can be business secretary for a company having trade with English speakers. I will try to improve my French too. If my aunt is capable to garde Annje during the day, then I should be able to live comfortably.

The letter I got from you was sent after the war ended, so I am hoping you are keeping well. There are still accidents with so many guns. I now see why you were so careful to keep the bullets out of them. Not many young militaires think so well.

I do hope you will continue to write. It will so help my English, but also my spirits. You came at a very dark time in my life and my heart is full of gratitude.

Your friend,

Clara

He would write back tomorrow, giving the Sutton address, even if it were only for a while, as well as the RAF one. He wondered how he could get back to see her again. She was in his thoughts a lot. He was often surprised that the thoughts were both erotic and not erotic at the same time. Lying together naked and touching each other would normally be hugely sexual in his pre-Clara fantasies, but now seemed surprisingly just comfortable and appropriate. He was becoming old and he was not yet 21.

Following leads

September 6, 1945, Thursday afternoon. On a train in southern England.

Martin was on a train from Waterloo to Poole. He had had a one-week leave, and managed to catch up a bit with his parents, who had not seen him since before D-Day. Over 18 months! A big chunk of his lifetime.

On Sunday, they'd gone to church. There had been a Thanksgiving Service because the Japanese had signed the surrender document on the USS Missouri at around 9 a.m. Tokyo time, though most of the more exuberant celebrations had taken place two weeks before. Even

after the second A-bomb, the Yanks had done a big conventional raid on Tokyo on the 13th.

After church, they'd had a belated birthday party for Martin, and David Rosenthal and his friend Esther had come too. They'd gone to the Strand Lyon's Corner House, mainly as a convenient place for them all to meet. It had been really nice to see them, and in a quiet moment Rosenthal had asked him to be his Best Man. They would marry whenever Martin next had leave. Neither of them went to synagogue and they were going to have a civil ceremony at the Registry Office.

Robert had mentioned to David and Esther that he and Miriam would be going back to Canada soon. David asked what Martin would do, and when he said that as soon as he could he wanted to finish his studies, Esther said "Well, you'll always 'ave a place to hang your hat with us. Even if you've been away in the RAF for all this time, you'll still need somewhere to feel that you're with family."

David, too, chimed in: "Absolutely. You mustn't spend your vacations in hostels or trying to camp with friends."

This ignored the fact that if Martin went to them, he would in a way be doing that, but it was clear that the Rosenthals would be – were already – a form of family.

He had also tried to pass on the jewellery he'd found in the kit-bags of his comrades Jack and Jim, though

largely unsuccessfully. Getting them back to Blighty had been fairly easy for him. As it turned out there had been no inspections of the early team, though the main body of the squadron had had a line-up in the customs hall when they landed at Folkestone and had to empty their kit-bags on the floor of the mess hall as soon as they'd arrived at Warmwell. A few bits and bobs were found and confiscated, though nobody seemed to know what happened to the loot. It was not beyond possibility that the officers or military police managed to 'lose' it.

Some of the armourers had arranged with their pilots to bring stuff back in the cannon magazines. The Tiffies didn't need full belts, but were supposed to be armed, though nobody knew why. A couple of layers of shells left a fair bit of space for loot from both pilot and armourer. Harry had a German pilot's compass from a FW 190 that had come in one foggy January morning at Eindhoven. The 'control tower' thought it was a Tiffie coming in with the wind and fired a red flare. When the 190 passed them, they realized it was definitely not RAF or RCAF and there was an almighty flap. However, the pilot wanted to surrender, and politely parked his machine at the end of the runway, right by the erks' tents. When the RAF Regiment boys got there, he was standing beside his plane in his shorts and singlet, minus anything of value, clearly including his trousers.

Not an allied serviceman to be seen or heard!

Harry also bagged a brand new Browning automatic from a German administrative officer who was desperate to surrender to the British or Americans. Never been fired. His pilot quickly grabbed the ditty bags of both his and Harry's loot and reported in. Les wasn't so lucky. His pilot was anxious to call a girlfriend. By the time he came back to the Typhoon, someone in the early team had enriched himself. One of the few times that this happened between 'honour among thieves' 247 men.

Martin didn't have much of his own that would be subject to confiscation. He had some bits of German and other radio equipment that was only of value in a very specialized market, but that was with the equipment. He had found a few bits of instrumentation and tools too, and as one of the few non-smokers among his peers he had a lot of available cigarettes which he had traded to get a very nice Leica 35 mm camera. However, it was clearly well-used, and unlikely to be confiscated as loot. Indeed he could claim he'd got it pre-war. The awkward things were the jewellery from Jack and Jim. Customs were asking for duty to be paid on things being brought back. He made a small packet for each and wrapped them in the waxed brown paper that was used for transformers. Then he wound a layer of wire around them, and mounted each on the underside of a radio

chassis, and moved one of the power supply wires onto the fake coil. He tagged these two sets 'For repair by Sgt. M Tremblay, 247 Sqdrn. Need power supply part X473'. There was no such part, but the radios were shipped back, in fact on the boat with the early team, and he had no trouble at all 'repairing' them, complete with a docket to that effect.

On the Monday morning following the 'birthday' party, Martin decided to try to find the families of McMichael and Taylor. McMichael's mother and wife both had addresses in the East End, while Taylor's father was supposedly in New Eltham. Neither were that far from Sutton, but Martin knew he'd better allow the whole day. He went in to town with Robert, getting to Charing Cross around 8:30 in the morning. He changed to the District Line and got out at West Ham. The address for Jack's wife was in a nondescript street. It was now about 9:15, what with finding the right way to the street. He knocked at the door. There were noises inside, and after a long time, a large, blowsy woman in a pink floral housecoat opened the door.

"Wha'd you want?" she asked accusingly.

"Are you Mrs. McMichael?"

"What's it to you?" came the reply.

From the upstairs came a call, "What is it Flo? Come on back here and keep me warm."

Martin said, "I was with Jack when our lorry hit a

mine.”

“Well, best thing that could have happened to ’im. Rotten bastard. Sent ’is pay to ’is Ma, and not to me.”

“I’m afraid I only knew him as a fellow serviceman,” Martin extemporized.

“Well. ’E chose that. I didn’t. Then ’e’s got ’is nose out of joint ’cos I’m trying to get some fun out of life.”

“FLO! FLO! Come on back up ’ere.”

“All right. All right. Got to go.” And she slammed the door in Martin’s face.

After that, he couldn’t see giving Flo the jewels. There were pretty strong feelings in the Forces when a chap’s wife took up with another man. Sometimes a group of fellow servicemen would just happen to go to the wife’s lodgings and arrange that their fists ran into the other man’s face multiple times. Probably unfair and none of their business, but it was part of the esprit de corps of most units that they hung together. The chap’s own misdemeanours with whores and willing amateurs were overlooked as a necessary release from the stresses of war.

Strange how old Flo McMichael looked. Jack couldn’t have been more than 25 or 26, tops, so would now be at most 28. Hell, Les was ‘the old man’ of the squadron and he was – what? – not yet 29. And Flo could not have been a lot more. But she looked 10 years more. Probably drink, smoking, and other bad habits.

Martin took his notebook and read the next address. He'd already looked it up on Robert's street guide. It was only 3 streets away. When he got to the number, there was the familiar but still always-surprising gap-toothed space of bombed-out houses. He was standing there looking at the space when an older man came up to him.

"V-1. Mid-September 1944. Nancy McMichael had just got the telegram about her son being killed in Belgium and then the doodlebug dropped. She was sitting with the telegram still in 'er hand when they pulled 'er body out of the cellar where she ended up. Very sad."

"Are there any other relatives?" said Martin. "I was with her son in Belgium when we hit a mine."

"Oh. Good of you to try to see 'er. But there's just 'is bint of a wife. Never bothers to put 'er knickers on, that one, because they'll be awf again in two minutes. Jack was an only child, and I never 'eard tell of any relatives. Must 'ave been, of course. But I drank a pint with Nancy and Joe every week – that was 'fore Joe died of pneumonia in '32 – and neither ever talked of anyone."

"Thank you for the information," said Martin.

"Thank you, young man. We wouldn't 'ave beaten old Gerry without the likes of you."

Martin decided to do nothing for the moment about Jack's jewels – they probably were not really his anyway.

Best for now to just hang onto them. He'd ask David and Esther what they thought he should do. They may have ideas of how to find the rightful owners, or at least an honourable disposition.

He went back to the tube station and bought a ticket for London Bridge, even though it meant messing about underground at Monument for the one-stop run on the Northern Line. At London Bridge, he was able to get a Southern Region local to Eltham - Well Hall. He remembered an old dance called Well Hall. Elegant, but the music sounded timeless, even modern. Now the big house was gone and just the outline and moat along with what were likely the stables remained opposite the train station. He asked the ticket collector for directions to Taylor's father's address. It wasn't far, just a few streets away down the Well Hall Road.

Martin knocked at the door of a simple terraced house. Very quickly it was opened by a small, birdlike woman.

"Yes?" she said.

"I'm looking for a Mr. Taylor," Martin answered.

"What's it about?" the woman asked suspiciously.

"I was with his son in the RAF," Martin answered. He wasn't going to say anything about the jewels until he knew where they'd be going. Jack's situation had made him cautious.

"e's at work just now. 'elps out in the tobacconist

round the corner. But 'e'll be back for 'is dinner in 10 minutes. Always 'ere at 'alf past twelve. I'm sure 'e'll want to talk to you. Hit 'im hard it did, losing Jim like that. I'm Alf's sister Mary, Jim's aunt, Mary Brown. We try to look after each other now. Lost my 'usband during he war; 'eart attack in '43."

"I'm sorry," said Martin, more out of reflex than true sympathy. The war had, he realized, made him insensitive to the death of any but those closest to him.

"Come in, come in," said the woman. "I'll put on a kettle."

"Thank you," said Martin. "Perhaps I might use your toilet. I've been on the go since early morning trying to locate family of the other man killed in the same explosion as Jim."

"Of course. Through 'ere and out the back." She gestured down a dark corridor to a kitchen. He went through the kitchen. There was door on one side which opened to a tiny yard, and a few feet down the wall a similar door turned out to be a toilet. Martin used it. There was no sink to wash his hands, but that was not new to him after months of war in Europe. Still, one must try to return to more hygienic behaviour. He returned to the kitchen.

"There's soap there and that red towel on the rack for 'ands," said the woman.

"I was just thinking how we had to pay a bit more

attention to cleanliness after all our roughing it on the Continent,” said Martin.

“Were you with Jim when he died?” asked Mary.

“Yes Mrs Brown. I was in the back of the lorry, but Jim and Jack were in the front which took the brunt of the mine blast. I just got an embarrassing splinter of wood in my backside. And I was shaken up by being thrown in the ditch.”

“Then you were the one who wrote that letter we got a while after the telegram. Meant a lot to Alf, that did. Someone thought enough to write personal, like, and not out of duty.”

“I simply thought how my own parents might feel with just the official words. It’s too cold,” said Martin.

There was a noise at the front door.

“That’ll be Alf”, said Mary. “’ome for ’is dinner. I’d offer you some, but with the rations I only made enough for Alf and a half portion for me. But there’s always some tea as long as you’re not big on the sugar.”

“Rations make hospitality very difficult,” said Martin
“And I only take a splash of milk if you can spare it.”

“Alf, Alf! Come meet – I don’t know your name.”

But before Martin could reply, a male version of the birdlike woman entered, cap still on.

“Hello Mr. Taylor. I’m Martin Tremblay. Jim was in my unit.”

“Glad I am to meet you Mr. Tremblay. I got your

letter, and I'm much obliged to you. Thought you might be a Frenchman or a Belgian."

"A common mistake because of the name. Actually I'm Canadian, and an English Canadian, though I do speak some French. My family moved here to work in the High Commission in 1938 and the war sort of kept us here."

"Here's your tea, Mr. Tremblay. I'll put it on the table and serve Alf 'is dinner so 'e can get back on time. I'll have mine later."

Martin came to the small table covered with an oil-cloth cover. There were three chairs, and the one he was obviously to take was clearly rarely used.

"Have your's now while it's hot, Mrs. Brown. I can tell you why I've come and try to answer any questions I can."

"Thank you very much Mr. Tremblay. A real gent," said Mrs Brown.

Martin continued.

"I came to see you because when the mine blew us up, we were on our own – that is separated from the Squadron – because the lorry had needed repairs and we were left behind to catch up when we could. Also to bring some wireless parts that were coming in by 'plane. We were a few miles south of the town of Ninove, about 15 miles west of Brussels. We weren't sure who was about, whether they were friends or enemies, though

we were told the Germans had scarpered. The mine we hit knocked the lorry over. It ended up lying on our other comrade, Jack McMichael. A local farm woman helped me gather their identity tags and kit, then her neighbour helped me bury them temporarily in case of dogs or other animals. The Germans had only recently vacated, in the process they'd shot the farm woman's husband, I think because they thought he was watching where they mined the road. She had a baby under a year old. In fact I had to lift it out of a tree where the blast tossed it. Fortunately unhurt. And the woman was flat in the ditch. Even so, she had the presence of mind to help me and tend my wound."

"Blimey. She must be a tough one," said Alf.

"I think she was numbed by everything. But she writes to me occasionally and I write back. I think she is starting to get her life together."

"Anyway I went through the kit bags from Jack and Jim and put the personal effects in small ditty bags. I'm hoping that they were returned to you."

"We got a few things. Not much to remember a man by," said Alf, a tinge of emotion in his voice.

"There was a tobacco tin in Jim's kitbag that I didn't put in the personal effects," said Martin. "I didn't think they'd be forwarded safely."

He took the tin out of his left pocket which he knew was Jim's. He had put the jewels back in the tins after

recovering them from the radios. Now he lifted the lid.

“My word!” said Mary Brown, “Where’d ’e get those?”

“There were rumours that several of the squadron went to see the damage done by our planes near Amiens in the breakout from Normandy. Some of the Germans had rather a lot of expensive stuff that we figure had been stolen from the French, especially anyone sent to concentration camps. It seems that could be one explanation. But there was lots of destruction and things lying around. I have no certain knowledge of where they came from.”

“Don’t seem right to take this stuff,” said Alf. “Almost feels like it might be tainted.”

“It is difficult to know what exactly to do with such things,” Martin agreed. “But I thought it might be helpful to you either as a memento or perhaps financially.”

“Ard for someone like Alf to flog stuff like this,” said Mary. “When ’e was younger, just after the last war, ’e ’ad a bit of bother with the Old Bill for shoplifting. It’s been twen’y five years, but they ’ave a long memory.”

“Mary’s right,” said Alf. “Only give me grief. But say we take one of them rings each for a memento like Mr. Tremblay says, and let ’im deal with the rest.”

That was how it was settled. Alf took the ring with the smaller ruby, which was of a style that might be worn by a man or woman, with a heavier mounting and surround. Mary liked a very modest diamond solitaire,

and said she could wear it as if it had been the engagement ring she'd never had.

"Diamonds is a bit cold," said Alf, "But it will look all right with your wedding ring, Mary." Which indeed it did, even to the extent of fitting her fingers, which were not as spindly as the rest of her.

Perhaps they would indeed have trouble selling the jewels. Not that Martin knew how you disposed of such things, though there must be lots of stuff at this time that people had from deceased family or looted from bombed out buildings. There'd be a market somewhere, there always was.

Martin finished his tea. They chatted a bit, with a few questions about what it was like around where Jim died. Martin found he was not troubled to simply describe the road and fields. He did so gently, unemotionally, describing the landscape and colours, and this seemed to be comforting to the two older people. Jim was to be reburied in a War Graves cemetery, but these were still being properly organized, and Alf said they had got a letter that there would be a stone and did he want an special inscription. He didn't know, and it wasn't quite clear if there was a charge for that.

Soon it was time for Alf to return to work, and Martin took this as his cue to leave. He wrote down his RAF address and told them that they could write to him there for the next couple of months, and after that,

care of his father Robert at the High Commission. He knew that might not be good either, but mail would be forwarded with some assurance he thought. And also, he knew privately, they would not write unless it were something very important and new. Probability zero.

That evening, Martin wanted to talk to Robert about the jewels. He didn't feel comfortable talking to Miriam about them. Before dinner, which would be the big meal of the day as in Canada, he asked her:

"Mum. Do you think Dad would like it if I took him down the pub for a pint? We've not had much chance to do anything like that."

It was the perfect ruse. Miriam knew that Robert felt Martin's absence acutely during the time he'd been across the Channel. So after dinner they strolled down to the main road and along toward the centre of Sutton to the Robin Hood. For some reason, in 1938 Miriam must have chosen a house that was the furthest from a pub in greater London, as it was almost a mile and a half.

Martin said: "I'm buying Dad. What'll you have?"

Robert knew Martin was wanting to be generous. "As it is a bit special, having you back safe, I'd really like a scotch." Sometimes it was best to let people splurge when they wanted to, and he really did like it.

Martin ordered, "Two whiskeys please. The best

you've got."

The publican grinned. "Good to be back 'eh?" and Martin noted that he added a bit to the measure. It was nice to be appreciated. Martin paid, and they moved to a less-noisy part of the bar.

"Dad. I've something I'd like your advice about."

"I'll be glad to help if I can," Robert answered.

Martin related the whole story, from finding the tobacco tins to today's exploits.

"So now I have these things, and I'm not sure what I should do with them," Martin finished.

"Well, first of all, don't take them out here," said Robert. This was good advice, and Martin had been about to take out the tins, but realized how foolish it would be with many people about. In Sutton it wasn't very likely that you'd be robbed, but there were plenty of dangerous and desperate people about.

"I'll show you when we get home," said Martin. "I wasn't sure how much I should tell Mum."

"While I think your mother is very level-headed, I think it might be best to keep the full story of this to yourself for now," Robert replied. "It looks like the Taylor's are not going to say anything, and what you told them apart from the fact they were in his kitbag is all perfectly probable."

"In any case, I think you should, from now on, say you found the jewels in a bombed out building some-

where during your travels. That's what we'll tell Mum and anyone else. In the unlikely event that the Taylors talk and there's any trouble, you made up the story about Jim's kitbag to try to give help to a bereaved family. Otherwise there's the possibility you could be accused of theft from McMichael or Taylor, or else of receiving stolen property from them. Finding them in a bombed out building, the worse you're up for is failing to pay customs duty. But I doubt anything will happen unless you broadcast the story.

Now let's go home and show your mother and I these treasures."

Miriam was wide-eyed and speechless when they unwrapped the packets. She then looked at each piece, then went and got a magnifying glass.

"There may be hallmarks or other identification," she said.

Martin had not looked carefully – if it had been a radio, he would have. There were some marks on a couple of the pieces, and one may have had one filed off then refinished, it was hard to tell.

Miriam said, "These are mostly quite old pieces, probably middle of the last century at least. And pretty good quality. They need to be put somewhere safe until you decide what to do with them."

Robert commented: "Unless they can be identified

and the true owners found – they might be dead for all we know, given the horrors of Auschwitz and Buchenwald – I think that you should probably take one or two small pieces for yourself and sell the rest. You may even want to reserve the money for projects that you think will do some good for people, depending on how you feel about using it for yourself.”

Robert knew his son. Martin did feel uneasy about taking the proceeds of accidental possession and spending it on himself. But perhaps he could turn it into a fund for what would be generally termed ‘good works’.

Martin said, “Do you think David or Esther might know someone who can tell us what they are worth?”

Robert replied, “Esther was in business of some sort, and may have contacts through that, or even through family. And if the jewels come from Jewish families – though they don’t seem to be of any particular style – she may know someone who can help us. And I think we can rely on their discretion. However, you have to remember that there is a very heavy purchase tax here. I’m not sure you might not do better in Canada.”

“I think I’d like to see if the 3 necklaces and 2 brooches belong or belonged to anyone. Perhaps you could ask Esther and if she knows someone, have them looked at discreetly. It’s unfortunate I don’t have more time this leave.”

“If any of the pieces have no known owners, then

perhaps Mum and Penny could have a piece each – if you like call it for safekeeping in case someone turns up with a valid claim. The rest can be put away safely and we'll decide what to do later. And I'll take one of the diamond rings. At some point I might meet a nice girl."

Then he added hastily, "But I've no one in mind at the moment."

"Weren't you writing yesterday to some Belgian girl," said Miriam.

"Yes. I keep in touch with Clara, the woman who nearly got blown up with the mine. I admire how she's picking up the pieces after the Germans killed her husband and left the country a mess, not that we didn't contribute to that. And she has a small daughter to care for as well. But I was there for less than a day, and I haven't been able to get back. I'd like to see her again, but we're nowhere near engaged, Mum."

"I hope you'll be more considerate than Penny," Miriam responded with a tinge of lingering annoyance.

They talked some more about how to proceed with the jewels. Martin would write that night to David and Esther asking if they knew someone who could give advice on old jewellery. Robert and Miriam would take charge of the jewels for now and arrange to follow up with David and Esther if it seemed they could help. If not, or there were no leads, Miriam and Robert would take the jewels back to Canada. It would not

be likely that, as long term diplomatic staff in Britain, they would have to pay duty on incoming materials, or even that their baggage would be searched by customs. They decided to put the jewels with Miriams own jewels, which were a modest and pleasant but not particularly valuable collection.

They would likely return to Canada as soon as there was a berth for them. At the moment, all the ships had been converted to troopships. There were a few civilian flights via Portugal, using Pan-Am's Yankee Clipper, but those were generally for the high-ups or some other priority. That's how Leslie Howard had been killed, 1 June 1943. Apparently the US Civil Aeronautics Board had, just two months ago, granted permission for three airlines to operate services across the Atlantic, but none had started yet. Maybe soon.

After Christmas 1945

December 27, 1945, Thursday afternoon. Waterloo station.

Martin was walking across Waterloo station towards the gate for the platform that had the train to Poole or Bournemouth, from which he'd change to get a local to Moreton and then walk to the airfield. As he got to the queue before the gate he realized that Harry was in front of him.

“Hi, Harry.”

“Oh, hello Martin. Didn’t see you come up behind me. Have a good leave?”

“Yes. Pretty good considering. How about you?”

“Had to serve as best man to a friend marrying my girlfriend’s sister.”

“Had to? Or did you know him before?”

“Oh. We’d all known each other since we were kids. Don used to be a firer – fellow who kept the fires going right – in the brickworks where my Dad was foreman. His girl had it all arranged and he hadn’t planned ahead, that’s all. His new wife Betty, and her sister Peggy who I’m going with, are the daughters of a local publican. Canadian actually – both girls born in Gleichen, Alberta, wherever that is. You know?”

“I’m from the East, Ottawa, though there’s still about a thousand miles to the east coast. Alberta is 2000 miles away. Canada has a lot of distance between places. But I think that Gleichen is about 60 miles east of Calgary, where they have the famous Stampede. I remember hearing about it. It has the Blackfoot reservation beside the town.”

“Yes, George talks about the Stampede and the indians. I think he’d have liked to have stayed out there, but his wife got ill after 4 kids and I think that it was pretty hard living out there.”

“It’s only been settled since about 1885 when the

CPR trains came through. So about one lifetime. Pretty new country, so I think a lot of work, especially for women with small kiddies. And the winter on the prairie can be bleak.”

They were now at the gate and showed their travel warrants, then walked through and looked for a part of the train that was not too crowded. They managed to find a corridor compartment where there was a place with two seats. There were a couple of other RAF types, but not from 247, and two civilian women. People shifted and they ended up having a seat each in the middle facing backwards. Martin preferred facing forward, but having a seat was a minor luxury in present times.

“So how was your leave?” Harry asked.

“I was Best Man too.”

“One or our RAF types?”

“No an older friend – Jewish refugee from Germany who came here in the late 30s who we got to know. Helped me learn a lot of radio – wireless – stuff. He married his landlady who was a widow from the Blitz.”

“I’m thinking of getting married myself as soon as we can get sorted out.”

“Sorted? You mean a job?” Martin asked.

“I suppose I could try to go back to the bank, but my parents had a shop in Pembury. I’d like to give it a go. My sister’s been trying with the help of some people in

the village, but she was just a teenager when first Mum died in '42, then Dad in '44. I think I'll get released early on compassionate grounds, 'cause Desly wants to get married soon, then I think she'll go to Birmingham with her fellow George."

"So you've got a place but no folks and I've got folks and no place." Martin quipped. "How was Christmas in that situation?"

"Well, as I said, Peggy's parents have this pub, the Blue Boys. And Desly has been living with some people called Hayward who have a girl her age. She doesn't like living alone above the Stores. The Haywards have helped with the shop, and they had me over for Christmas, but I had more fun with Peggy's family at the Blue Boys other times. George and Ella really know how to make you welcome, and George gave me some good business advice."

"Sounds like a regular Dad."

"Yes. A really good man. Four daughters and a son, and the place overrun with Canadians – he had brothers and sisters in Canada and their sons came over for the war. Seem to have brought their wives too. And one of Peggy's cousins was in the French army and his wife got all the way from the Belgian border – place called Roubaix, we may have gone near it with 247 – to Spain then got arrested for false papers. The Free French got her out and she said she was chauffeur for de Gaulle."

“Maybe she said she was a driver with the Free French – ‘un chauffeur avec de Gaulle’”

“Maybe. She was supposed to be in England for four years, but she never learned any English. Scandalized George by coming to breakfast in a negligee, and she had lots in front if you get my drift.

But how was your Christmas?”

“Not bad. A decent Christmas given the shortages – the High Commission supplied a bit of extra from some special supplies. But somewhat unsettling as my folks are being sent home to Ottawa when there’s a way to get there. My Dad counts as a diplomat, but he’s more administrative than diplomatic, so I don’t think there’ll be a panic to get them home. But they’ve been here at least twice the length of a normal overseas assignment because of the war. Not sure what my situation is going to be.”

“Think you’ll get demobbed on special circumstances?”

“Doubt it will be on special circumstances. I was thirteen when I came to England, but I was 18 when I joined up as a volunteer. I was at Oxford, and could have stayed on to study, but I felt rather uncomfortable not doing anything. Especially after my brother-in-law went missing – he was on Halifaxes. However, I did put in to resume my studies at Oxford. I’m hoping they’ll settle it really quickly so I can get back there for the coming term. But I imagine it may be slow.”

For once, the bureaucratic machinery went quickly. It seemed that the universities wanted to return to regular operations soon, even though many students would be out of phase with the normal cycle. Apparently – there was even some mention in Hansard – this had been foreseen, and students with scholarships or exhibitions, of which Martin was one, could get a release. It wasn't quite clear if this was a demob or not, but in the eventuality, it worked out as such, and the paperwork eventually got sorted out.

One other thing that got sorted out was a new 'home' for Martin. David and Esther set aside a room for him, and they agreed a rent of 5 pounds per year. He now had a British address. Robert had shown them the jewels. Esther knew someone she thought would be able to both value them and possibly determine their provenance.

A quiet meeting in a small shop had, in fact, suggested a maker of a couple of the necklaces and the emerald brooch. The jeweller made some notes, and told Robert he appreciated his son's wish to find the proper owners, but he doubted that the search would be successful. Robert said he became quite effusive when told that Martin planned to hang onto the items within the family in case anyone came forward with proper reasons for their return. It seemed that there were many people simply eager for money, which might further victimize the scant few survivors of the Nazi camps.

Moving on

Ottawa, March 1, 1946

Dear Martin,

Just a quick note to say we are more or less settled in Ottawa. With great good fortune, when we arrived home last week, we discovered that one of Dad's colleagues who is taking over from him in London was planning to sell their house. The wife is English and they may well retire over there. I don't know.

It's more comfortable here to my mind. Anyway, they had not yet put it on the market and it is only a few blocks from Grandpa and Grandma.

It's a pity we sold our house in 1938, as prices have shot up. The mortgage is going to be a bit of a burden. But it would have been very hard to manage tenants all the way from England, and especially the repairs and maintenance. Grandpa offered, but it would have been another load for him. Penny and Desmond were more than enough, even though they clearly are a joy to both him and Grandma.

The address is below. Do write soon and tell us what you are doing.

Love,

Mum and Dad

PS. We decided the things you sent back with us should stay together until you come home. It will give more time in case there is more information forthcoming.

March 7, 1946. Thursday Afternoon. Oxford.

Martin was back in Oxford. He'd not had enough points to be demobbed regularly in time to restart at the beginning of 1946, but as he'd had a minor scholarship for his Oxford studies, and got letters to the effect that he'd be very welcome to come back and finish his degree, he was released early – and in rather a rush – on condition he did so.

So here he was, in an upstairs room of a Victorian house in North Oxford with Jenny Richmond. Actually, the Honourable Jennifer Richmond, daughter of a minor peer. Her parents owned the house, now cut up into student rooms. First year students were in college, and normally many others too. In women's colleges men were normally not allowed in the rooms. But Jenny's parents were in Rhodesia, running a large farm. An old – and very deaf – family nanny was the nominal caretaker of the house. So as long as Jenny was reasonably careful, she could do what she liked.

Right now, what she liked was to have Martin fixing

her gramophone. She had an electric one, but it had got jostled on the journey from the London apartment after Christmas. In the Lamb and Flag, warm, smoky and noisy, her brother George had introduced Martin to her as ‘a whiz with stuff electrical and electronic’. And of course he was. After some resetting of the valves and a bit of tightening of some screws, the turntable was spinning and the speaker was softly rendering some of Vera Lynn’s evocative tunes from the time of the Blitz.

“Tea and crumpets?” she asked.

“Wizard”, Martin replied.

They toasted the crumpets by putting them on a fork and ‘waving’ them in front of the gas ‘fire’. You had to keep them close, but avoid burning. Too timid, and you had flabby crumpets, too close, charcoal. With a little practice, they eventually had them nicely toasted. Miraculously, Jenny had butter. And there was a gas ring beside the fire to heat the tea water.

“How?” Martin asked.

“How what?” said Jenny.

“Butter. It’s never available like this. Tiny rations.”

“Carefully arranged supplies,” said Jenny. “My parents can send parcels from Rhodesia. Costs a bundle to send, but I get to enjoy.”

There was blackberry and apple jam too. Nice. He enjoyed the tea and the crumpet.

Martin watched Jenny as she sorted the gramophone

records. A very tidy-looking girl. Blonde, a bit taller than average. A tad on the skinny side – who wasn't after 6 years of war? Very self-possessed and seemingly sure of herself. Now 20 and in her second year of reading English.

She fidgeted with the records. Then, quite suddenly, she looked him in the eye and said: "Martin. Do you want to, er, ..., fuck?"

Martin wasn't sure how he should respond. Girls like Jenny could be volatile. They could blow hot and cold, and were prone to tease. He liked being with her, but they had not yet found real common ground. He decided to play along. It could be fun, and he might learn something from a girl who was used to sex.

"I'd be called a queer if I didn't want to with a girl as pretty as you."

"Flattery! Flattery!" she said, but Martin knew she was totally aware she was pretty.

"What about precautions?" Martin asked. He hadn't with Clara, when life was so tenuous. But getting this upper-crust girl preggers wasn't going to do him any good unless everything was properly arranged.

"I've a couple of rubbers", Jenny said. A bit too casually perhaps.

"Better lock the door then", said Martin.

Jenny went and turned the key softly. Then she came back to Martin and he lifted her chin slightly – she was

almost as tall as his 5' 8' – and kissed her gently. She was tense and her skin felt cold. That was odd.

“We’d better get in bed or we’ll get cold with our clothes off”, said Jenny.

“Last one undressed is still naked”, said Martin, trying to get her to relax.

She turned her back to him and started to undress. Martin stayed watching her after taking off his shoes as he undid his belt and trousers, undid his tie and shirt, and then took off his singlet and underpants. Given the temperature of the floor, he kept his socks on.

By now Jenny was down to her bra and knickers. The bra looked like it was built to deflect the 20mm cannon shells of the Tiffies. Martin had noticed the pointy cones under Jenny’s sweater and blouse. The knickers were lacy shorts with frills on the leggings and made of a creamy silk material.

“Do you want me to unhook you?” Martin asked.

“No! ... Well all right then”, she said.

Martin stepped forwards. Her back was still facing him. He hadn’t much experience with this, but remembered that the easy way was to put thumb on the bottom side of the overlap and use fingers to pull the top over and away. He found this worked just fine and let the ends loose. But Jenny had her arms tight by her side.

“It’s free”, said Martin. “Will you doff your own

knickers or shall I help?”

Jenny turned, the bra still covering her breasts. Her eyes widened as she saw his hardness.

“Oh, it’s bigger than I expected”.

Martin was surprised. He’d not a lot of experience with women, and not seen many men naked and aroused, but there had been a bit of a ‘bash’ in Lubeck where some of the pilots had brought in some prostitutes and there’d been what would have been an orgy if the couples hadn’t gone to separate rooms. However, there’d been a bit of romping around, with some of the men naked and chasing the hookers, also naked. Martin had stayed out of the fray – the MO had read the riot act following the ‘Incident of the Brussels Bridesmaid’ when all the pilots but the groom got the clap from one very industrious lady who was not a professional, but seemed to distribute her favours at least as widely. But he had noticed there was a size distribution among the men, and he knew he was somewhere in the middle. Perhaps Jenny was not as experienced as she seemed.

“Too big for you?” Martin tendered.

“Of course not!” she countered, the upper-crust reflexive superiority taking hold. To underline this she threw off the brassiere which, not surprisingly, clattered as it hit the chair. Her breasts were pretty, but the bra was definitely intended to deceive.

“You can pull down my knickers, but don’t you dare

tear them.” The accent and manner were back.

Martin knelt down and gently eased off the silky garment. She had a well-rounded bum, which he had to work the elastic over, and as the waistband cleared her crotch, he noticed that there was just a carpet of light brown pubic hair. No curls at all.

“You trim your hair down there?” Martin asked.

“Long hairs seem to catch when I’m riding my bike.”

She skipped over to the bed, pulled back the covers and jumped in. It was a single bed, and Martin found it crowded when they were both in.

He tried kissing her again. She responded better this time, but seemed to be forcing herself to do so. He continued, his hand on her hip. Then he moved his hand gradually up her side. As he moved onto her breast she stiffened.

“Your breast is very sensitive?” he asked.

“I suppose so”.

He caressed her gently, and she relaxed a bit. Her breasts were small but firm, and the nipple hardened under the stimulation.

“Smaller than you’re used to,” she asserted.

“I’m not ‘used to’ any really”, he responded truthfully.

“I thought all the RAF men had lots of girls.”

“Some did, some didn’t. There was a lot less opportunity for the regular men than the pilots. And I didn’t

want complications”.

“What sort of complications?”

“VD for one. There was an uproar we called the ‘Incident of the Brussels Bridesmaid’. One of our pilots married a Belgian girl. At the wedding one of the bridesmaids went to bed – well, I don’t suppose they got as far as a bed, just fucked – all the other pilots. They all came down with gonorrhoea. The MO was livid.”

“Wow. I hope you don’t have anything.”

“I don’t think so.”

“So you haven’t had any girls.”

“Oh, a couple of fumbling attempts. Just one real experience. It was very special.”

“And you broke up?”

“Circumstances. We still write, and I regard her as a really special friend. I’ll tell you some time, but this doesn’t seem the occasion, when I’m with a pretty girl who is stark naked and my pecker is like a broomstick.”

“Really. Is it that hard?”

“Feel it. Gently please – it won’t bite, but if I get too excited I’ll go off too soon.”

“Ooh. It’s quite firm, but the end is soft. Oh dear, it’s wet already. You went off.”

“No. That’s not my semen, just the liquid that comes when I get excited. It helps to make things slip. You should be wet too.”

She turned her face away and was very quiet. Martin

realized she was crying.

“What’s the matter?”

She turned back, her face a mixture of tears and anger.

“I’m already twenty, and all my friends talk about sex and how terrific their lovers are. Until last Autumn, I lived with Mother, or was in College, and just never had the chance.”

“And now you want to try?” Martin asked.

“Well, yes. But it’s not like I thought it would be. It seems all sort of ... messy. And I don’t know how you can expect to ...well ... put a thing as big as that in me. And there’s all sorts of things girls say about it hurting the first time. Though I don’t think that will be the case for me.”

“Why?” asked Martin.

“Oh, we had horses on the farm in Dorset, and one time I was riding a bit hard and had this sort of tearing pain and there was a little blood. Mother wouldn’t say much, but said it wasn’t necessary to go to the doctor. She never talked about things like how babies were made. My parents always had separate bedrooms. I think Daddy used to have girls in London.”

“Do you feel uncomfortable that he might, or perhaps blame him?”

“No. He and Mother were so much a family-business team, but I never saw them kiss. In Dorset I have a

friend Pamela whose parents own the next farm. Her parents aren't fashionable at all. Her father is a real rural Englishman and her mother is one of those solidly built middle-aged women you see everywhere. But every time her Dad comes into the house he gives his wife a big hug and a kiss and usually squeezes her bum and says something like 'Good that it's still all there'. Mother would have fifty fits if Father did that, and it used to embarrass me. Now I think that it's rather nice."

"They still obviously enjoy each other, as long as it's genuine and not an act."

"No, it's not an act. One time in the Spring of 1942 Pamela and I were going to ride to church on Sunday, but planned to leave around 7:30 so we could take a long way and see the bluebells and a crashed German bomber. I met Pamela at the stable, but we had to pass the house as we were walking the horses out to the road, and there were noises coming from the upstairs bedroom window. Giggling and sort of moans. Pamela said 'Don't mind them. That's their special time each week.' But it left me a bit speechless. After all, they were middle aged!"

"How absolutely terrible!" Martin said with clearly mock umbrage. Jenny punched him in the shoulder. "You're laughing at me!"

"No, I'm thinking how much better the world would

be if more people had a chance to be like that.”

In a tiny voice, Jenny said, “Yes. It would.”

Martin heard a church clock chime the half hour. 4:30. He would like to be back in college before it got dark around six – his bike lamp needed a new battery and the bobbies always liked to stop students who were not showing the right lights. But he rather wanted sex with Jenny, though it would be awful to have things be unpleasant for her. He didn’t know her that well yet. Even if she was a ‘bit of crumpet’ as some of the RAF types would say, and he would certainly associate this afternoon with crumpets in future, it would be better to have a happy fling rather than an awkward one.

“Jenny, do you really want to make love? Or even just find out what it’s like?”

“I suppose it’s the latter. And yes, I do want to find out. I’m glad I chose you, Martin. I think other boys would just, you know, have their way with me, even if it wasn’t very nice for me.”

“But you made sure you have some rubber Johnnies?”

“George left his top drawer open and there was a packet there. I asked him if he was keeping busy with the girls, and he said ‘Got to keep Dick well-dressed for any occasion.’ So I took two and said that I’d better follow the Boy Scout motto too.”

“I only see him around College”, said Martin, “I’ve

never seen him with a girl.”

“Since he got shrapnel in his leg in the Tank Corps – that’s why he has a stick – I think he’s been a bit shy. His girl dumped him while he was in hospital, the bitch. Still, better to find out before he got tied up with her. And now I suspect George goes to women who take money for it. I think he was more hurt by Sheila than the 88 that blew up his tank and killed all his crew.”

“I saw the stick, but never knew how it happened.”

“He had a premonition and didn’t shut the hatch. When the shell hit, and the Sherman was on fire, he jumped clear and ran 150 yards to a ditch. The medics couldn’t figure out how he did that, as there were bones broken and a dozen or more bits of metal in his lower leg. For a while they talked of amputating, but now he seems more or less normal except for the stick.”

Martin’s erection was now gone. And Jenny was curling up in his arm.

“So what should we do about you?” Martin asked.

“I was rather hoping you’d know the drill”, Jenny replied.

Martin got out of bed and walked over to the sink that was there. He plugged the basin, and put in a bit of water from the single cold tap, then poured in what remained of the tea water from the kettle. He took a flannel, soaked it and wrung it out. At home a flannel would be a face-cloth. ‘At home!’ Strange that he still

thought of Canada as home. Then he grabbed the towel from the bar and walked back to the bed.

He pulled back the covers before Jenny had time to react, and said,

“Lift your bum and we’ll put a towel under so we don’t mess the sheets.”

She glared at him for a second, then her look softened and she dutifully arched her back so he could slide the towel under. The movement lifted her pelvis and he had his first good look at her crotch. He felt his penis stir.

“Pretty”, he said.

“So you’ve seen lots”, she countered.

“No, yours is the first I’ve had a good look at. And I propose to examine it verrryy carefully”, he intoned with exaggerated pomp.

He took the flannel and gently washed her privates, making sure to move the lips and get in the folds. Then he went back to the sink and washed himself. Jenny watched him attentively.

“It really does look quite odd when it’s up. It must be awkward to walk.”

“Never thought about that, but it would be hard to run with it like this. By the way, where are the rubbers. We don’t want any accidents and it tends to come out in a hurry.”

“You mean it squirts?”

“Yes. Sometimes quite a distance. And it’s sort of

sticky. I'm more concerned with leaving a mess your housekeeper might ask about if I go off before we get to the main act."

"Does that happen often?"

"I don't really know – not that much experience. But sometimes the semen builds up and you get a wet dream. I even went to talk to the MO at my first RAF station, and he said to ignore all the nonsense about 'abusing yourself' and make it happen before you wake up with messy pyjamas."

"Oh. Almost as bad as the monthlies. Anyway, the rubbers are here in this little box beside the bed."

She sat up and lifted the lid of what looked like a small cigarette box and took out one of the square paper packets.

"How does it work?" she asked.

Martin hadn't ever done it, but there'd been the MO's 'films' showing it done on broomstick handles. Along, of course, with all kinds of horror pictures of what happened to those who didn't.

"You take it out of the packet carefully, then find which way it unrolls, avoiding poking holes in it with your fingernails."

Jenny was obviously curious, and did so.

"Then you put it on the tip of my penis and roll it down as far as it will go."

Martin was standing quite close to the bed, and

Jenny's head was at his waist level, so she could easily do this. Half way down they both realized that they'd better push some hairs out the way and laughed together. Once the sheath was installed, Martin put his hands on Jenny's shoulders and pushed her back onto the bed. She tried to get into the bed, but he took her leg and pulled her round so she was across the bed.

"I'd better take a good look. Otherwise it's unfair. You got to see all I have, but your bits are hidden in the valleys."

"My tits aren't".

"No they're not, and nice tits they are too." He was glad she used 'tits'. 'Breasts' was far too formal for the occasion. "I'll pay them more attention in a while."

"What are you going to do?" she sounded a bit apprehensive.

"Well, I've not actually tried this before, but a fellow in our tent was quite a ladies man. Not at all handsome. A kind of short fellow – said he was supposed to be 6 feet, but somewhere along the line got pushed down to five-foot-six. One time someone asked how he always seemed to have a nice girlfriend, and he said you had to make them laugh, had to treat them as real friends and not just instruments of pleasure, and you also had to know how to give them pleasure. So we asked him what that last bit meant, and he said that a joke said it best."

“Some sort of dirty joke, no doubt.”

“Well, I don’t know. I’ll tell it to you and you can decide if it’s dirty.

There’s two musicians in the orchestra, one plays trumpet and the other is a percussionist. The trumpet player grumbles to the percussionist that his wife never wants any sex. The percussionist replies ‘Why, you’ve great lips and a talented tongue to play as well as you do.’ The trumpet player asks ‘What has that to do with it?’”

Martin hesitated for a couple of seconds. Jenny sensed something amiss.

“What’s wrong”.

“I need to know what to call this”, he said, gesturing towards her crotch.

“Mother always said ‘front passage’. George tries to embarrass me by using ‘cunt’. When he’s going out to see a woman – probably a prostitute – he says ‘Time for my cunt hunt.’ But as I indicated, I think most of it is bravado. And, of course, trying to embarrass little sister.”

“Do you mind ‘cunt’? It’s unfortunate people use it as a bad word rather than just for a body part.”

“No, between us, we’ll use cunt. What about yours?”

“Cock, pecker. I don’t like ‘dick’ as some of my friends are Richards.”

“All right. Continue.”

“So the trumpet player asks ‘What has my playing music got to do with it?’. And the percussionist says ‘Well choose a bit of music with lots of notes and try to play it on your wife’s cunt, paying special attention to where the lips come together at the front’. And the trumpet player goes home and just after his wife has taken a bath he asks her if she’ll help him rehearse Flight of the Bumble Bee. She agrees and before she can change her mind he pushes her on the bed and is well into the performance. The wife starts to sigh and moan and then to say ‘Good. Good. Yes. Yes.’ But then the trumpet player gets to a part in the music where there is a break for the trumpet when other instruments play. His wife yells ‘Don’t stop. Don’t stop!’ but the trumpet player says ‘But there’s a ten bar rest’. And the wife cries ‘Then play the flute cues’.”

Jenny giggled. Martin asked.

“Was it a dirty joke?”

“I suppose most people would say so, but it didn’t seem dirty. It’s not nasty to anyone, and it doesn’t make the sex seem bad or sinful, just fun and amusing.”

“Isn’t it?” Martin said as he lowered his mouth to her lower lips. She gasped as his tongue explored them and grazed the clitoral area. But very quickly she was moving to cooperate with his attentions, and her breathing was becoming ragged. She raised her legs but kept them wide apart, and he could move his arms round them

and take hold of her breasts. He stroked them gently, but she put her hands over his and said “Firmer”, so he started to squeeze them progressively harder, stopping when he thought he was approaching the point of pain to ask “Is that OK?”

“Yes”, she gasped.

He returned to her crotch, which was now oozing wetness. He took one hand off her breast and as he licked her clitoris, he inserted a finger into the wetness. It slid in easily, and he moved it back and forth as he licked. The grunts and sighs she was making might be interpreted as discomfort, but he sensed otherwise.

He inserted two fingers at once. That would ensure she was big enough. But he was licking too, and as the fingers went inside her she tensed up with a big groan. He stopped licking and was about to withdraw his fingers, but she desperately said “No don’t stop now”, and he reapplied his tongue, but she was now bucking and moaning, and even though she had her hands behind his head, they eventually broke the link.

“I didn’t think it would be like that,” Jenny sighed.

“Nor me,” Martin replied.

“You’d better fuck me now”, Jenny smiled, with special emphasis on the ‘fuck.’

“Maybe WE’d better fuck”, said Martin. “It really takes two to do it right.”

“Yes, I suppose it does.”

“Do you want to be on top so you can make sure we don’t hurt you?”

“All right.”

She scooted to the bottom of the bed and Martin lay down on his back on the towel, which had a small wet spot – Jenny was very wet.

“You made a wet spot”, Martin pointed out.

“Too bad!” she replied, obviously no longer discomfited by the idea.

She straddled him. Then she pushed her crotch against his erection.

“That feels nice for me. Nice for you?” Martin said.

“Yes. I wanted to feel your cock before I tried putting it in.”

Then she reached down and positioned the end of his cock at her opening and started to sit back. Martin could feel the warmth and wetness even through the condom.

“I don’t know if it will fit”, Jenny said.

“I managed to put in two fingers, so it will fit. But there are muscles at the entrance that can be pretty strong. Apparently they can be involuntary.”

“Really? I’ve never heard that.”

“Sir William Osler actually wrote a fake medical case about it under the name Egerton Yorrick Davis in the Philadelphia Medical News that I’ve seen in the Radcliffe library. It’s about two servants on an estate are

caught in flagrante and the panic causes them to get stuck together.”

“Can that really happen?”

“I suppose – you see it with dogs. But I think it is pretty rare, or we’d hear more about it.”

The conversation had distracted her. And Martin, realizing this, gave a quick jerk of his hips enough to push inside about 3/4 of an inch.

“There, the head’s in”, he said.

“You’re naughty! But it is in”, and she pushed down a further inch.

“I think you need to move up and down a bit to get the wetness on the rubber. Skin is a bit more slippery.”

She pulled up, then moved down. Then repeated this, and then slid herself all the way down, giving a little gasp as she bottomed out and her clitoris grazed his pubic hair.

“Does that feel all right”, Martin asked.

“Very nice. Not as extreme as when you were licking me, but I feel wonderfully full and stimulated. But I’ve a bit of cramp in my leg.” This was actually not true, but she wanted to try the usual position.

She popped off, Martin moved aside and Jenny laid down in his place. He moved between her legs and she raised them to open herself to him. This time he slipped in easily. Their movements almost instantly became involuntary, and Martin knew it would only be a few

seconds until he came. When he did, he knew that the condom would be very full. He wanted to lie inside Jenny, as he remembered doing with Clara, but the MO's film had said it was important to withdraw holding the condom.

Martin did this, saying, "Sheaths unfortunately mean I have to pull out right away and keep good hold on the rubber." He got up, carefully removed the condom from his softening penis, and found a piece of paper to wrap it in, along with its package.

"I'll throw this away elsewhere so you don't have to explain anything." he said.

Then he washed off at the sink and came back to the bed where Jenny had been watching him.

"It's different soft", she said, putting one hand on it and grabbing his balls with the other. "And there's these things too!"

"You're a wonderful slut, Jenny Richmond", Martin said affectionately and kissed her as he slid into the bed and pulled up the covers.

"I'm glad," she said. "It wasn't how I thought it would be."

"How did you think it would be?"

"Don't know. Just not like that. But that was probably better."

"Very nice for me too. But I can only stay a little while longer. I don't have a battery for my bike lights".

Ten minutes later, they kissed again and got up and dressed. Martin could not help noticing that the pointy brassiere made her look artificial. The real tits were so much nicer.

“I think you’ve taken Mr Churchill’s ‘Iron Curtain’ too much to heart with that brassiere”, he said.

“It’s the fashion now”, she replied. “And it’s not quite what he was talking about in America”.

“I suppose not. Just your own shape is so much nicer than the pointy bits.”

“Thanks for saying that. I’ll see what I can do.”

Martin had his jacket on now. He put his scarf round his neck, put the paper with the used condom in his satchel, and secured his pant cuffs with his bicycle clips. Then he kissed Jenny and said, “Pictures Saturday?”.

“Yes!”

“I’ll send you a note”, Martin said as he left her room.

By the time Hilary Term ended a couple of weeks later, they had shared a couple of pub meals, each time following an afternoon in bed in Jenny’s room. They’d also met for coffee in the common room at each other’s college (Jenny was at Sommerville). And they’d been to the pictures. Jenny wanted to see Hitchcock’s ‘Spell-bound’. Martin found it contrived, but kept his opinion to himself, as Jenny seemed to like it a lot. After they

had a drink and a sandwich in the Lamb and Flag, where they'd been introduced by her brother George.

"What are you doing during the break?" Martin enquired.

"I'll go to the farm for a day or so, but it's been rented so I'll stay with Pamela. George is annoyed that he cannot use the farm, but I think Daddy needs the money. So I think he's going to our uncle who lives in London. What about you?"

"The college is letting me keep my rooms, and one of the researchers in the Clarendon has asked me to help him set up some equipment. My RAF experience seems to be useful on a very practical level when they need to swap bits and pieces. I seem to be able to guess what will work, even if the pieces are not what is supposed to be used. It's sometimes hard to get the parts, at least get them without a lot of waiting about. But I'll take a bit of time to go to see my friends David and Esther in Hatfield."

"Was David with you in the RAF? I think you mentioned that you were his Best Man."

"Actually David is about the same age as my father. He was a sort of lecturer at a German university, but being Jewish he was thrown out, then had to get out of the country. He was working in Foyles as a book clerk in 1938 when I wanted to get a book on electronic circuits. We got to know each other, and became good friends.

He got to know my parents too, and he and Esther are more or less my English family – though they aren't very typical."

"So he married late? And chose you as Best Man?"

"They got married last year. Esther was widowed in the Blitz. David's first wife and child died of illness before he left Germany. Esther's also Jewish, though she doesn't go to synagogue, and she and her husband had a shop in the East End, but they'd done well enough to get a house in Hatfield. David was interned at the start of the war – and they mixed the Jews in with the Nazis which wasn't too nice, in fact pretty stupid. Anyway, they soon figured out that he and most of the rest were no danger, and had skills and motivation to help the war effort. He found a job at Murphys building radio equipment, and Esther was his landlady. They are a good fit and it's really nice to see people building new lives like that. They are thinking of opening a shop near where they live to do wireless stuff. David thinks television will come back soon. He's heard that it will start up in June, but there's a huge shortage of materials to build them, so he doesn't expect many to be available for a while. In the meantime, I think they plan to seek a good location and try to gather some old equipment and David will fix it in the evenings and weekends, but for the moment stay where he is. Esther does some work for other shopkeepers she knows so they

are becoming part of the community and can probably share some ideas and help each other out when people want a holiday. So they seem to be fitting in.”

“I’m not sure I’d know how to talk to them,” Jenny said, but the way she said it touched Martin as a bit snobbish. He let it pass. He’d learn over the next few months whether they’d make a couple themselves. Strangely, though he didn’t think so, he was happy enough to let things take their own course. After all, ‘tea and crumpet’ had certain attractions, and he smiled at the naughtiness of this expression.

Martin walked Jenny back to her room before trudging back to college in the drizzle that had started falling. He wondered whether Oxford were safe for a young woman alone at night. You certainly saw a number of them about. At least there were now some feeble street lamps, some of them the old gas variety, but they seemed to have automatic igniters. At least Martin never saw anyone lighting them or extinguishing them.

July 4, 1946. Thursday. Charing Cross to Tunbridge Wells.

The break between terms was about 6 weeks. Jenny wrote twice, Clara 5 times, and there were three each from his parents and David and Esther. Even Penny wrote twice. Clara was now getting more comfortable

with English, and included bits and pieces of description of things she saw or was doing. Martin responded in kind. For some reason, he didn't include a mention of Jenny.

When term restarted, Martin found that he and Jenny were soon regarded as a pair to Jenny's circle and even his own. They didn't see each other every day. Martin was determined to do well with his degree, and Jenny knew that despite any outward facade, her parents financial situation was less than assured. They had property, but the income from it was below par. She wanted to make sure she got her degree so she could either try journalism or teach in a girls' public school, even though she hoped that a good marriage along the way could relieve her of these mundane concerns.

Still, they managed at least one date a week, and usually a meeting for tea or coffee as well. The afternoon sessions in Jenny's room were not frequent, and they only managed three during the term. It was clear that Jenny enjoyed them, but he did not get the feeling it was very important to her. While he felt it was important, he was also wondering whether Jenny wanted him or just the experience, or the status of 'having a lover'. Somehow, he did not find himself too upset by this. There was no anxiety to build the perfect relationship. He decided to let things happen as they would and concentrate on getting his studies advanced.

Martin still danced with the English country dance group. Jenny disdained this. However, Martin enjoyed the exercise and the companionship, and found it enjoyable to re-engage with Jane Strong. They often went on walks of a Sunday morning – neither was church-going. One Thursday Cecilia showed up. She was, as planned, studying medicine. It was a good meeting, with genuine warmth. Martin commented on the small ring she was wearing.

“Yes. I’m engaged to one of my fellow students. But it’ll be a long time before we can march down the aisle. Still, we get along famously and plan to set up a country practice together when we’re qualified. If, of course, we can find a place that needs a pair of docs.”

Martin wished her well. If she could find her country practice, she’d make a fine country doctor.

Jenny was going to an aunt in Ireland for the summer where she would work with horses on a stud farm. She made some noise about how terrible it would be to go without sex for three months, but Martin did not believe that her feelings were as strong as her words. She had already expressed surprise that Martin had never ridden a horse, the sort of surprise at being introduced to someone with two heads. Oh well, time would tell.

The summer break started by early July. Martin thought of asking to have a room in College, though it would mean moving to a room that was likely much

less comfortable than he had. The College was used for conferences and other such events to make revenue. He decided to look for digs. He toyed with the idea of asking Jenny about the house she lived in, but that was all-women. And the proximity would be disturbing, even if there was such a possibility. In the end he found a room just north of the Parks. It had a gas fire and a ring, operated of course with a coin-slot meter which turned out to charge a ferocious rate. By judicious shopping during a 'Sale' at Debenhams and taking his backpack and plenty of coins to the weekly market, he equipped himself to be able to cook at least simple meals like beans on toast and to make tea or coffee. He also acquired a pillow – the object supplied by his landlady was more a sack of concrete – and a couple of blankets and some second-hand sheets, which he sent to the laundry before using. His room had a sink, but only cold water. Well, one could not have everything. The toilet was fortunately not right outside his room – he would not get too much 'traffic noise'.

Of course the room was lit by a 25 W bulb and very dim. He had already in College acquired a reading lamp, and made sure this had a long cord for which he even made a crude cord winder so it did not get tangled. He made himself a bedside table for the lamp out of an old packing crate he found at the lab and quietly appropriated before it was turned into firewood. Finally, he

managed through Esther to get a very nice, if slightly repaired, eiderdown. This would, he realized, allow him to study in bed on cold nights. He didn't want to leave the gas fire on while sleeping.

The room had a small table, more or less a card table, a chair for this table, and one armchair to sit by the fire. He positioned this armchair so he could put the lamp on the table and use the chair for study. There was a bookcase and a wardrobe. That completed the room. There was no chest of drawers, but the wardrobe had shelves on one side. Martin realized there was nowhere to lock anything. His room key would not stop anyone with any skills.

He solved this problem by buying – it was relatively expensive – a metal deed box that had a key lock. In a junk shop he also managed to find some aircraft metal cable. He was well-known by now in the laboratory workshop, and was able to make loops on the end of the cable and render them difficult to undo. He crimped the loop with metal, then brazed over this. Then he got a good padlock and was able to loop the cable through one of its ends around the gas pipe, and put the other end around the box through both its handles and then lock it with the padlock. It fitted nicely under the wardrobe. Some shoes in front made it essentially invisible.

Martin did not actually think that there was a lot of risk, but he did not want anyone snooping in his private

things. Indeed, he mostly had letters and photographs in his box, though he did put his Leica camera there. It was less a matter of things that would be saleable so much as personal treasures he would be upset to lose.

He was careful with banking. His father had mentioned back in 1942 when he came up to Oxford that he should make sure he had an External Account as a ‘foreigner’ into which he put some money converted from Canadian dollars his parents supplied. But he could not deposit pounds in this, or it would not qualify for unrestricted conversion to other currencies. So he’d also established a Post Office Savings Bank account. This had turned out to be useful for his RAF pay, of which he’d drawn none between D-Day and his release back to University. He also could put his Clarendon pay there, but this was paid weekly in cash in an envelope with his name on it – after tax, a dismally small amount.

He rarely put much of his Clarendon pay in the GPO. Generally, in fact, he kept more cash handy than most of his peers. Indeed, a tobacco tin, its contents now safely in Canada except for a single solitaire diamond ring that was in the deed box, was useful for a modest stash of money which he kept on hand for whatever eventuality may arise. During the war, having money or cigarettes – even as a non-smoker – had proved valuable when opportunities arose. He’d got the Leica camera this way from a German civilian in Lubeck who

accepted a large number of cigarettes in exchange, but nowhere near the value of the camera. Martin had managed to purchase an extra carton of cigarettes through some special scheme. As he recalled, this had been organized by the NAAFI or some similar setup. And he'd been lucky. Many of the men who'd ordered fags hadn't received them. Either the plane was shot down or, more likely, someone had stolen them. But he and Harry had been lucky. Spike had been mad – his didn't show up.

Back in Canada, his parents had set up an account for his education when he was young with the Bank of Montreal. Until recently, he'd not appreciated the usefulness of this, especially for his future if he returned to Canada. Martin also realized that his 'Exhibition', essentially a scholarship, was not only good financially in that it paid his fees, but also because it had been the lever to secure his RAF release.

Martin was 'moved in' to his digs within a few days of the end of Trinity Term. News was a bit bleak in Britain – bread rationing was announced June 27 and would start at the end of July. There was widespread uproar about this. The Conservatives under Winston Churchill said it was unnecessary and would be ineffective. Moreover, it wasn't imposed during the war, so why now during the peace. Since Martin was now out of College, he had his ration book. More rationing was a nuisance, but no doubt he'd survive it. It was

certainly likely to be harder on the Continent. From letters, Clara was able to get some food from the farm, and likely needed it.

He decided that he'd better take a bit of a holiday to see some parts of Britain he hadn't yet seen. There were plenty of these, and Kent was one of them. He'd written to Harry, remembering the conversation on the way back to Warmwell, and Harry said if he didn't mind roughing it a bit at the Stores he was welcome to doss there, though Harry was busy getting the business going again and would only be able to spare an hour or so.

So here it was, July 4, 1946 – American Independence Day – and Martin had taken the London train fairly early in the morning. A number of other students were on it, as were some of the dons and sundry of the professors. It was, after all, vacation, and members of the University were 'going down'. Most had suitcases, though those on day trips to the capital had briefcases. Martin had his trusty rucksack, tobacco tins and all. He'd managed to make some sandwiches using Shippam's Salmon and Shrimp paste. Probably the bits of fish and crustacean he wouldn't normally want, but it tasted not too bad, though more jar than paste. A bottle of lemonade he carried was for thirst quenching.

It was a nuisance to have to get a tube ticket in London, then another train at Charing Cross to Tunbridge Wells. He could have gone to Tonbridge and saved some

distance, but there was no bus from there to Pembury.

The train station at Tunbridge Wells was in a deep cutting, in fact between two tunnels. He climbed up to the street level and came out, realizing as he did, that he didn't know where to catch the bus. A woman was behind him coming out of the station, so he asked her,

"Excuse me, but do you know where I can catch a bus to Pembury?"

"Fraid not, I'm from London," was the reply. However, a man behind her had overheard, and said, "Top of the hill, past the War Memorial, then turn right in Crescent Road. They go from there."

"Thanks. I'm much obliged", said Martin.

He climbed the steep hill. There was a big cinema on the corner. From here the War Memorial – a typical First War statue and flower garden in front of what seemed to be municipal offices – was on the diagonally opposite corner of a big intersection. Martin crossed, walked by a row of bus stops for buses going back toward the station, then crossed Crescent Road – the street name was there, many signs were recently restored since the war – and found a couple of bus stops. There were several people waiting at one of them.

"Can you tell me when the next bus goes to Pembury?" he asked.

"Should be here in about 10 minutes," said a middle-aged lady. "I'm going there, so get on the bus I get

on.”

“Thank you”, Martin said.

It was now afternoon. The travel time had almost been doubled by the time taken to buy train tickets and then to wait for their departure. Martin noticed he was more or less in front of a toy shop. A sign of the beginning of a return to normality, he thought. White’s Bazaar was the name of the store. It had a traditional busy display in the window. Martin wondered if all the items were really for sale. Further down the street was a jewellers’. Martin wondered how they had survived the war. Watches and clocks may have kept them going, and now the rash of weddings would give them sales of rings, possibly also engagement rings.

Across the road he noted Public Baths. Worth knowing about. He might need to use one in a few days, depending on what accommodation he found. As he was contemplating this, a bus turned into Crescent Road with Pembury listed on its front. Martin followed the people waiting in the queue and boarded the bus, which then pulled away.

“Pembury please”, Martin asked the conductor when his turn came.

“Thru’pence, please”, said the conductor.

Martin paid and was given a ticket. The bus ground its way through the town, out past an intersection with five roads leading out of it, one of which the bus took

past a high rhododendron hedge that obscured a big house.

“Air Marshal Dowding lives there,” said the woman who had told him she was going to Pembury. “Saved our bacon, ’e did, in 1940, but Mr Churchill didn’t seem to like ’im and they treated ’im shabby after ’e stopped the Jerries from invading.”

“I was in the RAF, but not until long after he’d been retired,” said Martin. “It’s unfortunate they didn’t recognize his contribution.”

As they came into Pembury a few minutes later, he asked the woman to point out the Hastings Road, which she did with alacrity.

“Where you goin’ luv?” she asked.

“The Stores. It’s supposed to be right on Hastings Road.”

“Yes. Just past the King William pub. But them Stores went right down when Lou died and Henry seemed to go to pieces and died at the end of August ’44. The daughter was left to try to manage. I ’eard it was going again.”

“My friend Harry was demobbed early on compassionate grounds so he could try to get it running again.”

“Ooh. It’ll be good if he can. But the rationing’s a proper menace for the poor shopkeepers. All those fiddly bits of paper.”

Martin thanked her for her help and loped off down

the road. He passed the Post Office and spotted the sign for the King William. The Stores were next to it, looking a bit run down but clearly someone had been working to clean up, and it was obviously in business. There were barrows out front with some vegetables. He went in the door into the small shop. There was a selection of packaged goods – some tins and bottles and odds and ends, as well as a few large, 1 foot cube tins of biscuits which were offered for bulk sale – with points of course. A very wizened old man, less than 5' tall, greeted him with a gummy welcome.

“Yes, Sir. What may I 'elp you with?”

“I came to see Harry. My name's Martin Tremblay.”

“Ah yes, Mister Tremblay. Mister Nash said you'd be 'ere sometime. 'e's out in the warehouse. Easiest way is out the door and down the side of the building. But call out when you get there. 'e's 'aving another go at the vermin.”

Martin followed the directions. The 'warehouse' was essentially a small garage at the end of a narrow, very narrow, driveway. This path actually opened onto a small yard behind the building. There was part of the building on the left of the yard, probably the kitchen, with the "warehouse" at the back right, and a concreted downward slope to a lean-to at the back of the addition and a shed, then a small garden.

“Hello! Hello!” Martin called.

“Hi, Martin”, Harry said, coming out of the door and then shutting it. “I’m putting down poison for the mice. And I’ve left the cats in there to have a go at the rats if there are any left. How was your trip?”

“A bit slow, but fine”, Martin replied.

“Come in the kitchen and we’ll have a cup of tea. I may have to pop into the shop from time to time if there are customers.”

Harry led the way into the door in the building extension. There was a fairly large kitchen with red clay tiles. Harry put a kettle on a gas stove and lit it with a match.

“You’ll be in the room upstairs at the back. I’ll let you find it yourself. If you need the loo, it’s the door on the right up the steps out of the kitchen. Sink’s here in the kitchen. I’ll go get some biscuits.”

He was back quickly with some broken biscuits.

“There’s always some breakage! Seems to match how many I need, so I don’t need coupons.”

They had their cups of tea. Harry got up once to attend to a customer that the old man – who Martin discovered was called Mr. Eldridge – could not deal with. On his way back, he let the cats out of the warehouse.

Harry said he’d be open till 6, then have to tally the till. Martin offered to prepare a meal and could contribute some coupons if needed. The coupons were

declined, since the Stores could cover enough 'breakage' on rationed items to feed them. There were some new potatoes and field mushrooms and a tin of stew. Not fancy, but they'd be OK. And there was a Cross & Blackwell blackberry and apple pie in a tin. This did normally need points, but Harry said there were enough. But he did allow Martin to do the little work there was to prepare the meal.

It was after 7 by the time they were finished eating.

"Want to go up the Blue Boys and meet Peggy?" Harry asked.

"Please," Martin said. Harry had also mentioned Peggy's father George who had grown up in Canada.

"It's about a mile up the road."

They locked up and headed east along the Hastings Road in the evening light. The Blue Boys was busy, but not full.

"Evening Dolly", Harry said to a thin, small young woman with startling eyes. "I brought in a friend from 247 Squadron. Martin, meet Dolly, my girlfriend's sister. Martin's a Canadian."

"Hello Martin. I was born in Canada too. What can I get you?"

"I'll have a half of cider, please."

"Pint of bitter, please, Dolly. Maybe George will let Martin have some of the house cider." Harry added.

"I'll ask him. I'm sure he'd like to say hello. Dad!"

She went through a passage. There were several bars with a central island forming a hub for the walls that separated them. A greying, small and serious looking man came through.

“Hello. Harry. Dolly said you’d brought a Canadian friend to meet us.”

“Martin Tremblay. Pleased to meet you, sir.”

“What part of Canada are you from?”

“From Ottawa. My father was with the High Commission in London. But we came in 1938 and he ended up staying for the duration.”

“Afraid I never really got to Ottawa, except for short train stops on the journey from Montreal or Halifax. Though in the 1917 election I was ordered to vote in Valleyfield, Quebec. Never thought that was right to try to fix the outcome. And I’d never lived in the East.”

“No sir. Nasty business. And we had some of the same troubles this time with the Conscription Debate. I hope we can put it behind us.”

“But you were in the RAF with Harry, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Yes. It was too awkward to join up with the RCAF, though I think some chaps were able to get transfers.”

“Ah. Here’s Dolly with some of my own cider. You’re limited to a pint. Otherwise we’ll find you sitting in the ditch.”

“I don’t think you need to worry sir. I like a drink,

but I don't like being drunk."

Another thin young woman was coming into the bar. Martin noticed some scars near her left eye. This must be Peggy – she'd been cut by flying glass in a V-1 explosion not 100 yards away. Dolly, too, had apparently suffered some cuts, Harry had told him.

Harry introduced them and then got Peggy a drink. The chat covered the essential biographical details, and moved on to current activities. Peggy worked in a bank in Tunbridge Wells, and had for much of the war. She and Harry would marry in August, and she was going to stop working at the bank soon. After they returned from honeymoon, they'd share the work in the Stores.

They said their goodbyes around 9. The morning would come too soon for both Harry and Peggy, and Martin knew his sightseeing would be tiring.

In fact he spent only another night in Pembury. It was not that he didn't enjoy the company, but after a day playing tourist in Tunbridge Wells, which was a delightful English town with plenty of Georgian and Victorian buildings, he wanted to move on, and Pembury wasn't well-located for a man on foot. So he moved on to Canterbury and found bed and breakfast there, then found short-range transport as he needed it to bumble along the south coast as far as Winchester. Lots of bomb damage in Portsmouth. Brighton and Eastbourne were not so bad. He spent a night in Winchester,

looked about the town the next day, then decided he'd had enough of touring round and wanted clean clothes, so he simply took the train back to Oxford.

July 6, 1946

Dear Martin,

It is now more than a year that the war is over. When I hear an airplane (or do you say aeroplane?) I no longer need to run for the ditch. Food is still difficult. The farm helps a lot, and we have a garden for vegetables.

I have a job! The wage is, unfortunately, very small. However, a group of local business people contributed some money and also they got some money from the local towns and made a Stichting - I think a foundation - to promote our Belgian products for export. I am to be the administrator. In fact I am to be everything. I expect mostly to be writing letters, so this is good practice.

Your letter said a lot of things I did not completely understand about your studies. What means Trinity Term? I think Trinity is a religious word for the three people in God. Yes?

It is a pity that the ferries are only just starting to work again, at least for normal travellers. I too would like to see you again, but I think that this summer will not be possible for you. And I do not think it a good idea in the winter, as you will find it more trouble to walk or cycle, and as well you will need heavier clothing. Your suggestion to come next summer I am putting on the calendar. Is that the right expression?

Annje is now talking. Some days we would like her to listen too. Of course, when we want her to talk to someone, she becomes shy. It is, naturally, not easy to be mother without husband, but I am glad I have her. With both parents gone, then Luc killed by the Duitsers, I sometimes feel very alone. My aunt is very helpful. Sometimes I am not as good to her as I should be, especially when I am tired or Annje is a little sick.

Do you find that you miss your parents now that they have returned to Canada? I do not have any idea about Canada. In school it was just the big pink area on the map. We sometimes were told about America - I think perhaps I should say United States of America since Canada

is also part of the continent. But I don't remember anything about Canada. My imagination says that it must be very cold there.

I enclose a photo of myself and Annje taken by a local photographer. It is supposed to be just me for the Stichting, but he added this one for me. I hope you like it. I got the photo of you from the wedding of your friends David and Esther. You look very smart. I don't think that is the uniform you wore at the farm.

Your friend,

Clara

July 16, 1946

Dear Clara,

Thank you for the letter and especially the photo. You aren't wearing the same uniform either! And nor is Annje. It is a very attractive photo. I will have to send you a new photo. I decided to try growing a beard now I am out of the Services. It is much easier to simply wash the beard, and I don't get the rash from the razor that I used to get.

Congratulations on the job. I sincerely hope the foundation is a success and you with it.

Trinity Term: The three terms in Oxford are Michaelmas, Hilary and Trinity. Each term is 8 weeks during which students are in residence and following their studies. The names are those of religious feasts that occur during those terms. Until a century ago, all students (at the time only men) were supposed to be studying theology along with other subjects in order to become Anglican priests as well as any other occupation.

I too will put next summer on the calendar, though the exact dates will be subject to the availability of transport as well as other events. My best forecast is for a year from now. Your picture makes me more anxious to see you again.

Yes. I miss my parents. Even though I have been away from home, that is Canada, for several years, I appreciated my parents advice and support. David and Esther have been very good to me. I have a room there and I am using it as my official UK address (it is at the bottom of this letter so you have it).

Canada is much more than the pink area. It

would be interesting to see how different it is from what you imagine it to be. First, there are much greater distances. Brussels to Paris is 300 km., but Ottawa (where I used to live) to Toronto is 450 km, and that is only a small fraction of the total width of Ontario, and Ontario is just a province of Canada. I say there is a lot of 'between' in Canada. Actually Montreal is closer to Ottawa than Toronto, even though it is in Quebec province. There is also Quebec city. Ottawa to Montreal is 120 miles or 200 km.

In the winter it can be very cold. Ottawa is sometimes colder than -35 Centigrade in winter at night, though that is unusual. Generally it is around -10. In summer it is common that the maximum for the day is more than 30 Celsius, and I have known more than 35. Actually the humidity in summer makes it feel worse. In winter, of course, it is very dry, though there can be lots of snow. At the moment we use the Fahrenheit scale for everyday temperatures, but I know the Centigrade ones from scientific work.

Our houses and buildings have very good heating. A few even have cooling for the summer, but

those are mainly places like cinemas. So Canada is quite comfortable despite the climate. Perhaps I will some day be able to show you some of my favourite places, but, of course, I have been away the better part of a decade.

Keep well,

Martin

August 29, 1946. Hatfield, Hertfordshire.

Martin was spending a few days with David and Esther. He'd taken another few days to ensure that he had seen parts of the UK before going back to Canada. He'd been to Edinburgh and Stirling and Perth, even grimy Glasgow. He enjoyed his own company, but found that he spent quite a bit of his time writing letters. Letters to his parents. To Penny. To Jenny. And of course to Clara.

He and Esther were having a cup of tea in the late afternoon. David would be home from the factory in an hour or so.

"Is the tea too strong?" Esther asked.

"Not at all. I got used to anything warm and wet in the RAF. This is fantastic by comparison."

"David likes it weaker than that, and I do if I catch it in time", Esther said, then paused,

“It’s been a bit of getting used to David. When ’e was my lodger, I just served up what I normally would for Abe. But since we’ve been married, I started asking ’im what ’e likes, and ’e really has different tastes. And I generally find I like what ’e likes ... it’s good ... but we’re not youngsters. I never expected to be learning about someone else and, to be truthful, discovering myself too.”

“Do you think David feels the same way?”

“Yes. We talk about it. Laugh about it too. Still sometimes feel a bit at sixes and sevens.

I’m a bit worried about these Nuremberg trials reminding ’im of his time there, even though ’e managed to avoid the worst of what them Nazis did. But the trials are coming to an end. Just today on the radio there was a report of some Dutch Nazi being ’anged.”

“Yes. Fellow called Feenstra. Worked in an area close to where I was in ’44 and ’45. I think he treated a number of people pretty badly. But David’s never said anything to me about particular people. Though of course, he was in Nuremberg, but I’ve never heard him talk about things upsetting him.”

As it turned out, David was not upset by the news of the Nuremberg trials, but he was glad to see them over. He told Martin he wanted to see evil punished, but saw that it was time for rebuilding.

After dinner that night they talked about Martin’s

studies and some of the work he was doing at the Clarendon lab. David was able to follow and comment on Martin's description of what he was doing, something even other students in electrical engineering were usually not able to do. Martin felt at home with this unlikely couple.

August 15, 1946

Dear Martin,

Just a note to let you know I'm still on the planet. That is, if Ireland IS on planet earth. It feels so very different from Oxford. And I've been so busy, I've only got to Dublin once since I've been here. Uncle George is trying to build up his capability to board and breed the top racehorses, and we have to work around the builders who are not the sort of people to be allowed near horses, especially thoroughbreds.

I can't tell you the names - trade secret for the moment - but I helped bring a stallion and mare together this week. Exciting. Made me quite wet. And no one to take advantage of that!

Your tour of the southern counties took in

several places I know well. It's hard to think
that you never have been there. But then,
I've not been to Ottawa. But as Alfred Noyes
wrote

There are no ghosts, you say,
To haunt her blaze of light;
No shadows in her day,
No phantoms in her night.

And probably no thoroughbred horses. You'll
have to tell me what you do there for excitement.
Oh. I know - but you can't put that in a letter.
I'll wait and you can tell me yourself.

Love,

Jenny

Martin's studies would yield him a degree before the
end of the next Trinity Term. The pattern of degrees
was not quite re-established since the upset of the war.
Brasenose was still trying to get the military to pay for
the damage - called dilapidations - done by their take-
over of the College for different purposes. Wadham had
escaped much of that. Indeed, though he had offered
to help in any capacity, the Warden's war work was

limited to the Home Guard and, if rumour was correct, to hosting an Austrian countess who had been helping the secret service and who, again if rumour was to be believed, had a prodigious sexual appetite.

Term started, and Martin got down to work right away. He sent a note to Jenny via the College message system – it made 3 or 4 deliveries per day between the colleges – welcoming her back and suggesting a drink at the Lamb and Flag on Friday night. He included his address and mentioned she could drop a note in the letterbox. After all, her rooms were only a hundred yards away.

However, he had no note by the end of the first week of term, but he went to the Lamb and Flag anyway. It turned out George was there and they took their drinks to a quiet corner.

“Good summer?” Martin asked.

“Not bad. In fact pretty good,” George replied. “Didn’t Jenny tell you? I ran into her friend Pamela in Victoria station on my way down to Dorset. The family chateau is rented out, but there’s an old cottage that was almost uninhabitable and I thought I’d spend the summer making it liveable. Pam seemed interested and we kind of hit it off.”

“Good for you. And Pam. But to answer the question there, Jenny hasn’t been in touch. I’d invited her for a drink tonight.”

“I think she got back only on Tuesday. If you sent a note to Somerville, she may only have got it today. I think some of her tutorials are at other colleges.”

“Tell me about the cottage and/or Pam.”

“Well. She seemed interested that I was rebuilding. Said good for me, and so on. So I told her that she should come round and tell me what she thought I should do with it. The woman’s a wonder. She pointed out that the really first thing I needed was a comfortable bedroom and a working toilet and bath, so I could really live there and not be distracted from work by being inconvenienced. Don’t know if she realized how useful a comfortable bedroom can be when a pretty woman is around.”

“George, I’m sure you did your best to find out.”

“Not sure if I did or she did. Probably both. Anyway we’re engaged. I think Jenny is a bit steamed. Thinks Pam is a bit down-market and so forth, even if she’s good enough to be Jenny’s best friend from Dorset.”

“What are you saying about me, George Richmond?” came the annoyed voice of the person in question. Martin stood up and kissed her on the cheek, which she apparently didn’t notice. She continued.

“Martin. This idiot has got himself engaged to our farmer-neighbour’s daughter. He’s the lord. He’s supposed to find a nice titled girl, preferably with pots of money.”

“I think the new government’s taxes are meant to ensure that the pots no longer have any money”, Martin contributed, rather knowing this was not particularly consoling. “And from what you and George have told me about Pamela, I’d hazard she’s a rather nice young woman who will make a good match to George and help him hang onto both money and happiness.”

Jenny glared at him, then suddenly smiled.

“Martin, You can be so annoying when you sum things up like that. I DO like Pam, and she will be good for George. It’s just that it was never in the cards for them to get together except for ... well it was never in the cards.”

Martin laughed.

“I think the war’s put paid to a lot of that.”

He was also wondering how she felt about her own involvement with him. It wasn’t going to work, but hopefully he could keep the friendships.

Martin got her a drink and then he walked her home. They agreed to meet ‘early’ at her place for tea and go to the pictures on the Saturday afternoon. Even if it wasn’t going to last, the time being could be enjoyed by both of them.

Sept 21, 1946

Dear Martin,

Thought I'd better write and bring you up to date on things sisterly.

Though Mum and Dad were going to have me live with them, I decided to stay with Grandma and Grandpa Tremblay. I'm comfortable here, we get along well and help each other out without much fuss, and young Desmond Richard is used to being here. Also Mum and Dad are only about a half-mile away to the south. I walk over there quite a lot and spend time with them when I can.

I'm working now as an administrative officer to help settle War Brides and others. I don't know why, but I'm in the Ministry of Reconstruction and Supply under 'Minister for Everything' C D Howe. Of course, he won't know I exist, but he's the big boss man. Mostly, of course, I do paper shuffling in multiple carbons. This is mainly so I can help organize the paid staff and volunteers who greet the ships and trains and sometimes planes. It's nice to have my own income, but of course I don't make as much as a man doing supposedly the same job. Things would be a bit tight without the pension for David.

On that topic, I have heard that he will be

formally laid to rest sometime in the next year. The War Graves people sent a letter that said the plan is to inter him in a place called Uden where he was apparently buried in the local priest's garden. I looked it up in the Library. It seems you must have been nearby there in 1944, according to Dad. When there is a gravestone, I really would like to go and see the area, but it is a long way away. Perhaps you will be able to go sometime and take a picture before you come back to Canada.

Don't tell Mum and Dad, but I also wanted to stay with Grandma and Grandpa because they seem more understanding when I want to go out. Mostly it's with other girls like myself, but I've had a couple of dates. Nothing serious. In fact, they were one time wonders. I fear that every man sees Desmond Richard and runs away. Given the war casualties, the numbers are against me, but I don't want to just give up. I hope you won't think me awful. I haven't stopped loving David, but at some point he has to be a memory and not a presence in my life. Sometimes I feel guilty, but I know I'm basically a good person.

Thanks for letting me get that off my chest.
And do keep writing just to me. I really appreciate
it.

Your sister,

Penny

October 3, 1946

Dear Penny,

Here's another letter just to you. Don't worry
- I'll make sure I keep writing to you separately
from Mum and Dad, though I may put in a note
for Grandma and Grandpa - there's one enclosed
with this.

I can understand that living with Mum and Dad
could be awkward. I'm not sure I'd like to
live at home now. I've been on my own, if
you can call the RAF that, for 4 years. Dates
would be particularly difficult, even for me.
Not, however, that I've much to report on that
score, though I pal around with a quite nice
English girl here called Jenny. I am still
trying to work out whether or not we are well-suited
to each other. Our backgrounds are very different.
She is the daughter of a minor peer, in fact
she has the title Honourable. Rides horses,

etc. Not very interested in radios, except to play music. We'll see.

On your side, I do hope you are able to find some form of social life. Given the war, I'm surprised how people seem determined to force life into families of Mum and Dad and 2 kids. Oops, that's us. But I think you know what I mean.

My friend Clara in Belgium is, I think, facing the same situation. She doesn't write much about that, but she is still learning English and may not yet have the vocabulary. I'm planning to go to see her next summer. If David's gravestone is in place, I'll be more than happy to go to Uden. It should be pretty accessible from Den Bosch, which is a major town. As far as I can determine, Uden is a pretty small place.

Love to Desmond Richard and to you,

Martin

November 14, 1946. Thursday afternoon. Oxford.

Martin's umbrella was open on the floor of Jenny's room. His coat was over a chair near the gas fire to try to dry it too. There had been a lot of rain, forcing a

cancellation of a walk in the Parks.

“Martin, Can you take your degree at the end of this term?”

“I think I could if I can get someone to provide some examinations. As things stand, I expect it will be easier to wait until Trinity term and take them then. But Bleaney in the Clarendon says he thinks there is more work for me, even though the pay is pretty modest. So I’ll just make sure I keep up my knowledge, and the practical work is pretty good for that.”

“What about after that?” Jenny asked. This was the touchy question recently.

“Well, you know I’ve been essentially offered a place to do a doctorate in Toronto. They’ve some interesting work in microwave communications which are needed in Canada. And elsewhere, of course.”

“You don’t think you’d like to come out to Rhodesia with me? You could do wireless out there. They need it too. You could set up a broadcasting station, and there’d be opportunities to work with Father in various businesses. Out there we could have servants, not like here. And there’d be a chance to ride, and go on safari, and be part of the society.”

“I’m not sure it’s where I belong, Jenny. We get along here because Oxford puts the gowns on us and our class is camouflaged. In Canada, class is determined more by what you do than who your parents are. Also

somewhat by language – I’m often taken from my name to be a ‘pure laine’ Quebecker, when I’m actually an anglo. But here in England there’s a lot that relates to ancestry and parentage. I’m like a foreign fish in the trout stream.”

“But you could learn to fit in!” Jenny was becoming angry.

“I could say the same about you. And also that it’s the wife’s job to follow the husband.” Martin didn’t believe this, but he too was getting angry.

“Oh. You’re impossible! And so colonial.”

“Maybe it’s our situation that is impossible”, Martin said quietly.

“But you can’t really want to go back to Canada where it’s cold and snow and ice. Voltaire’s ‘quelques arpents de neige’. It’s not fair! I thought we’d look so terribly good together.”

“Is that how you see us, Jenny?” Martin asked gently.

“Of course I do. We’re an ‘it’ couple together, especially if you take the trouble to dress properly and don’t talk about electricity all the time.

With an Oxford degree you could easily get a good job in the City or become a diplomat – your family is into that, after all.” It was clear that Jenny considered that one should remain true to the family business.

“You haven’t thought what I might want? That I actually like all the wires and parts and making them

work. That it gives me a huge sense of accomplishment to understand what is going on and do something that is better, different, and will eventually be used by people.”

“But it’s not what society people do. You must realize it’s all very boring to the people who count.” Jenny responded.

“Sorry, Jenny. I think – to use an analogy from wireless – that we are on totally different wavelengths. If that’s the case, we should go our own ways, hopefully as friends.”

“Well, get out then. Go back to snow and ice,” she said hotly.

She turned her back, and was clearly crying but not wanting Martin to see. He put on his coat and picked up his umbrella and opened the door.

“Goodbye Jenny. I hope you find what you are looking for, and I hope we will both remember the good times we had together.”

Jenny said nothing, so he went out, shutting her door, descended the stairs and exited into the rainy murk.

December 19, 1946, Thursday. London.

Martin was sitting in the restaurant of the Savoy, having ‘tea’ with his grandfather Allen Ryan.

“So you’re doing OK here, Martin?”

“I really enjoy my studies, but things here are pretty Spartan generally, though this is very nice.” Martin was tucking into the sandwiches.

“Yes. The Savoy hasn’t lost its touch. But you seem to look pretty fit.”

“The RAF was good for that. I was lucky to avoid any serious damage.”

“As I understand it, you had a pretty embarrassing injury.”

“Could have been worse. I’ve not told anyone else, but the Belgian woman who was blown over when the mine went up took me into her house and practically ordered me to take my pants off so she could clean the wound.”

“Was she pretty?”

“Actually, very good looking. I’m not sure I’d say pretty because I tend to think of pretty girls as sort of fragile or superficial. But she was then in a bad way otherwise. The Nazis had shot her husband the week before, for tending the cows outside curfew – probably he saw them planting the mine. And her baby daughter was blown into a tree when the mine went up, but the baby was not otherwise hurt. And I think Clara was just knocked over by the blast.”

“It’ll be tough for her.”

“We write. She’s learning English and working for some sort of agency to promote Belgian products. But

I think you're right, it's a hard road to hoe."

"Any girls in your life?"

"Not right now. Broke up with a girl I was going with in Oxford. Or she with me. She wanted me to join the minor aristocracy and do the horsey stuff. Figured I could work in the civil service or the City. Or go out to Rhodesia where her folks have a farm. Doesn't understand I'm a committed engineer and scientist and I love tinkering in the lab."

"It's important that you do something that makes you want to go to work each day. I've loved my work with the State Department. Now I'm just getting the odd assignment and am mostly retired, like your other grandpa. So don't let some bit of skirt distract you from what you enjoy doing."

"I don't intend to. In fact, I'm hoping to do a doctorate so I can pursue a research career."

"Good for you! And to help you along, I'll give you this envelope. Don't open it here, and don't put it in any British Bank or they'll not let you get it out again. Consider it an investment in your future, and spend it well, but not necessarily too wisely."

The envelope turned out to have \$400 US in it. A lot of cash, and in a range of denominations. It would make it easy to spend.

"Mind you. A good woman will help you become the best you can. And you her. I sure miss your grandma."

“Do you find that you are lonely?”

“Not so much. I have my friends, and I enjoy assignments like I’m on now, but I’ll be going back to the States by plane on Saturday. It would have been nice to spend more time and maybe see a bit of the country, but Marshall wants a report before Christmas Day.”

“I’ve a wedding Saturday. My friends Joe and Julia.”

“Your Mom told me about Julia. Thinks Joe stole her from you.”

Martin noticed his grandfather used the American "Mom", rather than the English and usually Canadian form "Mum".

“Mum can sometimes be quite proprietary. Julia is someone I like and care about, but we wouldn’t make a good team.”

“That’s good that you see that. Sometimes we men get led along by our you-know-whats, and make some bad partnerships.”

Spring 1947

March 20, 1947

Dear Clara,

I hope that you are surviving this winter which officially has just 1 day left. Here in Oxford it has been very cold, and with the shortage

of coal at the power stations, we have had some periods with no lights. Now the thaw has come, and there has been some flooding. The Thames overran its banks in London last week, but here we are all right in Oxford as far as I can tell. The Thames is, for some reason, called the Isis here.

Thank you for your letter of March 2. I find that when there has not been a letter from you for a while I get quite 'hungry' for one, but now I have been the culprit in not writing back sooner. I wanted to check on a few details about travel.

It is very good that you have your passport, which almost certainly is needed to go outside Belgium. It may be interesting to see some places in Holland or France, for example.

After I come to see you, I am planning to go to Paris for a week, as I have never been there. It seems probable that later this year I will finally return to Canada. I have been offered a place at the University of Toronto to do a doctorate, but there has to be some arrangement made for a research assistantship - that is, money to allow me to live. Though I have some savings, in fact, more than most men my age,

I would prefer to have the money I've put aside for establishing myself once I complete my studies.

Talking of money, I want you to know that my visit will not be a cost to you in financial terms. Of course, I hope you will have time so that I can share your company. The British government has put in place rather strict travel controls of only 75 pounds. However, my family insisted some time ago that I set up what is called an External Account. I can only put in money (deposit) from outside Britain, but can then withdraw and convert that money as I wish. I keep a separate account in the Post Office for just pounds (called Sterling).

I enclose a new photo. In part from the cold winter and in part because I don't like shaving, I have grown my beard. During early 1945 we had to share shaving water, and a number of us got an infection called impetigo. It was very unpleasant and itchy and looked very bad. I hope you will not dislike me with a beard.

Kisses for Annje.

Martin.

April 11, 1947

Dear Martin,

Yes, we have survived the winter. Fortunately, we saved some trees that were knocked over during the fighting in 1944 and the wood had been stored. I had almost forgotten it, but François reminded me just before Christmas. This has been very good for my Aunt, who suffers from what I think is called rheumatism in English. We have a kachel - I think you say stove, but the dictionary shows some meanings for stove that are not what I want to say. It is a sort of barrel that you burn fuel inside and it warms the room.

The hardest part was getting out so Annje could run and play. The cold was so hard that I was afraid she would get the freezing of the skin. However, we are all right, and did not even get the usual winter grippe, I think because we were not meeting many people so did not get infected.

My work with the Stichting has been going well, but we need to have some products to offer. We have had an exchange of letters with the New York company Macy's. This is quite interesting, but I think they may be simply looking. I

found in a book an expression 'window shopping'.
Is that a good expression for this?

The beard makes you look older, but I think
it suits you. I knew you only a short time
and in such circumstances that I think that
we will both find our remembering not so correct.
However, I feel the people in the letters are
the real ones.

Does one end a letter with "Affectionately"?
If so, that is what I would like to use.

Clara

April 24, 1947

Dear Clara,

We still don't seem to escape Winter-like weather.
There was a hurricane yesterday. In fact,
last night a ship ran onto rocks in South Wales
and a lot of crew were lost. Worse, the Mumbles
lifeboat was also lost trying to rescue the
ship's crew.

I've looked into how I can come to Ninove.
It appears the most direct way is Dover to
Ostende by ferry then by train to Ninove, though
I have to change trains.

I think that the 3rd week of July is the best time for my arrival. Does that fit with your schedule? I would plan to spend a few days with you in the Ninove/Brussels area.

May I also ask if you would do me a favour and come with me to Uden in Holland? My Dutch is very rudimentary, and Penny - my sister - has asked me to visit the grave of her late husband David, who was shot down in 1943. It would be a great help to me to have someone to translate if I need to hire a taxi or buy special tickets. I think we will need to stay overnight somewhere, for which I will pay, as well as for your travel.

My studies are essentially complete now. There are some examinations in June, but Dr. Bleaney says he thinks I will do very well with those, and has given me a list of some readings to make sure I am well-prepared.

I am still dancing the English historical dances. I enjoy the companionship of the group. One of the girls who first made me welcome is now studying medicine and engaged to another of the medical students. An older lady, Jane, has become a good friend. We go on walks together most Sundays if the weather allows. Her husband

was killed in the First War. I find it strange that she has not ever remarried, as even as she approaches her sixties she is a vital and attractive woman, and very easy to talk to.

Indeed, 'affectionately' is a good way to end a letter, as long as you really mean it. Given how much your letters mean to me, I will end,

Affectionately,

Martin

May 4, 1947

Dear Martin,

Of course I will be happy to accompany you to Uden. I have never been there, but looking at the map, I agree that we will probably need to stay overnight if we are not to have to struggle with transport. If you had a car, then it would be easier, but it is expensive to rent, and I don't think they let you cross the border.

François and Maria have said they will take Annje for that time. She loves the farm, especially the cows. And the cows seem to know her.

We can also stay with my sister in Gent for a few days and see Gent and Brugge before or

after you go to Paris. Let me know if you would like that. I would like to show you around, and it will be a holiday for me too, as well as a good opportunity to practice my English. I think I can write better than I speak, because my work is all about letters. I am now looking forward to your visit.

Affectionately,

Clara

May 8, 1947. Thursday afternoon. Oxford.

Martin had just received Clara's latest letter. He found himself thinking a lot about how he and Clara would find each other. Their last encounter had been at a very strange and stressful time. Clara had been a widow for about a week. They had both just about been blown up, along with Annje. They were almost different people. But the letters seemed to say they still found a connection.

Later in the afternoon he had arranged to walk with Jane across Port Meadow to the Trout in Wolvercote where they were going to have a meal together. Port Meadow was one of the largest remaining common grazing grounds in England. Not bad walking, but you needed to watch for cow pads. As they walked, Mar-

tin told Jane about his plans for visiting Belgium and Holland.

“Do you think it will have changed much?” Jane asked.

“Physically not too much, though I expect any of the bomb damage will be starting to be cleaned up, just like here. There’ll still be bombed out houses, but not the rubble in the streets and smashed equipment.

I think what I’m most wondering about is how people will seem. I got to know Clara when we were practically blown up together, then I spent the night in her house. Actually in her bed.” Martin hadn’t revealed this before.

“So she is pretty special?” Jane’s intuition was on target as usual.

“Yes. I think the shock of the mine, Jim and Jack being killed and in a messy way. There was a big splinter in my bum. Clara had been widowed only about a week – the Germans shot her husband for trying to take care of the cows. Annje – the baby – I had to lift out of a tree where the blast threw her. Clara and I were in the ditch, eating mud as I recall.

I remember Clara saying, in Flemish and in French, that there was ‘only now’. Probably a reaction to everything.”

“Yes, I was pretty cut up after Geoffrey was killed.

Actually, I went off the rails. Slept with about two

dozen men. Didn't seem to matter who, as long as they were reasonably nice to me, and why shouldn't they be? I was cheaper than a whore and a lot better in conversation, though generally a few years older than them – just boys mostly. Still, lucky I didn't get pregnant or some awful disease, but I already knew that I was unlikely to conceive. I don't think I cared.

A lot of those boys got killed, of course, and that only made it worse. Around the time of the Armistice I realized I couldn't ... well, fuck my way out of the matter, and decided I'd better do something more positive about life."

"I always wondered why you hadn't remarried. You've always struck me as someone very companionable and vital."

"I'd a bit of a reputation by the end of the war, and by the time that, well, wore off you might say, I didn't really get much opportunity, at least, opportunity I felt like taking. There's always people who want to take and take, but for a marriage to work there has to be lots of giving. Sort of both giving 60 percent and taking 40. I know it's impossible, but that's the kind of effort I think it takes for things to work well."

"Good advice. And thank you for telling me about yourself. I'll keep that confidence, but what you've said helps me to understand what happened or at least come to terms with it."

“But what do you want now for yourself from Clara?”
Jane asked.

“I’m not sure. I’ve come to treasure the memory of Clara, which may be a big mistake, since it was such an extreme time in our lives, and if not so awful as well as so wonderful, an essentially artificial episode. Also I really appreciate her letters and the way we communicate. I wonder if we’ll be able to do that face to face. Some people write wonderful letters and are impossible company. However, I don’t think Clara will be like that.”

“Do you expect her to want to go to bed with you?”

“I don’t know if I ‘expect’ her to. It would be flattering to have her want to, and I’m sure it would be enjoyable. But she has a small child, an ageing aunt, and other family. She is now the main person in a foundation to market local products internationally, so has a place in her community. I’d be a cad to mess that up.”

“Yes. And if I know you at all, Martin, you will want to do right by her. However, if you even think you may end up in a bed together, I suggest you make sure you are prepared.”

“Jane. You are probably the only woman your age in England who would give me that advice. But it is good advice, and I will heed it and visit the barber before I travel.”

They both laughed, and were in a good mood as they came off Port Meadow, along the Godstow Road and into the pub. Friendship of this type was hard to find.

Belgium and France

July 20, 1947, Sunday.

As the Dover - Ostend ferry churned its way across the Channel, Martin found himself again thinking a lot about how he and Clara would find each other. This was not a new set of thoughts – it had occupied him a lot this past few months. The last encounter in September '44 with the mine, Clara a new widow. They'd been different people. But the letters seemed to say they still found a connection.

He really knew very little about her, even with all the letters. He had never had the courage to ask about her husband. She wrote that she had a couple of much older sisters, one in Luik (which everyone in Britain called Lieges), and another living in Ghent (or Gent as she wrote it), which was closer to Ninove. It seemed Clara was the baby of the family, and her parents had died when she was still a teenager, and then she had married Luc quite young. Martin got off the ferry, went

through customs, and walked to the port train station where he bought a ticket to Ninove, asking for it in French. He already had some Belgian francs, so didn't have to mess about with the money exchange. For emergencies he had some of his stock of American dollars he had carefully accumulated thanks to some 247 Squadron unofficial activities as well as his Grandpa Ryan. These were carefully secreted in a pouch under his clothing.

The journey to Ninove took a couple of hours with changes at Gent and Denderleeuw. As the train pulled in, Martin was at the door and had the window open.

There was Clara! How different she looked from the farm-wife of 1944. She had on a tidy belted dress. Annje was beside her, holding her hand. She hadn't seen him yet, but as he opened the door she called, "Martin!"

"Hello, Clara. How good to finally see you again. How well you look. And of course, I don't really know this young woman."

A tiny, hesitant voice said. "Hello, Uncle Martin."

"Hello Annje. Your mother taught you how to greet me. How wonderful."

The child smiled. So did her mother.

"I hope your journey was good," Clara said.

"Yes. A little tiring with the changes, but everything went to plan."

Martin put on his rucksack – he preferred it to a suitcase and followed Clara as she led them to the exit,

saying, “We are about 500 metres from the station. I hope you don’t mind the walk.”

“Not at all. It’s a nice evening.” Indeed it was. As they walked, Martin said, “I had all sorts of things to say to you, and now I find I don’t know how to start.”

Clara laughed.

“For me also. Perhaps we need some time to learn the other.”

“That makes sense. But we should talk too. Letters only give a two-dimensional picture.”

“What says ‘two dimensional’?”

“Like a flat picture rather than a sculpture.”

“Ah, of course, two rather than three directions to measure. Yes. Letters are like that. They do not give what you call, I think, ‘perspective’.”

“Precisely”, said Martin. He noticed Annje looked confused.

“Does Annje understand any English?”

“I don’t think very much, though she has heard a little as I have practiced with my teacher and other students. And not French, either. Alleen Vlaams, mijn schone dochter.” At this Annje smiled.

“If I’m right, that was ‘Only Flemish, my beautiful daughter,’” said Martin.

“Oh. We’ll have to be careful – you will catch us saying bad things behind your back,” Clara laughed.

They were now in front of a largish house.

“This is my Aunt Grietje’s house. Annje has her own room, but she is borrowing it to you, and she will sleep with me.”

They went inside and Martin was introduced to a lady of perhaps 70 who was clearly troubled with aches and pains in her bones. She spoke no English, but her French was competent if a bit stilted, and she soon warmed to Martin, and he was able to relate a capsule biography of his life. Madame De Burgh was the sister of Clara’s mother, and had been the wife of a local businessman who died sometime in the early 30’s, leaving her moderately well-off until the Germans invaded. Martin knew this from one of Clara’s letters. Also that she had income from rents on a couple of other houses, and from rooms rented in the house they were in, though one of these was now occupied by a young woman who did housekeeping duties in exchange for rent, but also worked as a shop assistant locally.

Their resources were adequate, but there was little cushion if there were any setbacks.

It was getting late-ish. The ferry had left in the early afternoon and now it was getting dark, despite the long summer evening. While Martin was talking to Grietje, Clara had expertly spirited Annje up to bed. She returned and asked if Martin would like something to eat or drink.

“I knew when I’d arrive, so I ate on the ferry and

also packed some sandwiches for the train, especially as it was Sunday, although there were cafés open. But a cup of coffee and perhaps some bread would be nice. Oh, and I have some things in my bag. Oh. Where is it?”

“It’s already in Annje’s room. I’ll show you, and also the WC and bathroom so you know where it is.”

This Clara did, which Martin appreciated. Though he had used the train facilities, he always felt incompletely relieved on a moving train. And he wanted to wash his hands. Before descending to the room where he’d been chatting to Grietje, he took out the presents he had brought.

“Here we are. I understand that coffee is appreciated here.” He gave one packet to Grietje and one to Clara, a pound in each.

“Ah, een pond koffie!” Said Grietje.

“Een Engelse pond,” said Martin – he’d learned that much among the Dutch. “Het is vier ... honderd ... vier ... en ... vijftig gram.” His numbers were fine, but he had to think when he said them.

“Hartelijke dank uw”, said Grietje.

“Yes Martin, Sincere thanks. Coffee is always welcome,” echoed Clara.

“And for Annje a doll. I saw it in a toy shop. I hope it is appropriate.”

“She will love it. Another child nearby has a doll and

I have not been able to afford one for her. Thank you Martin.”

Martin realized how intensely Clara appreciated the gift to Annje. For a few moments he was at a loss of what to do or say. Clara saved him by saying,

“Do you take milk in coffee?” Surely she remembered? Indeed, she was already moving the jug to the cup nearest him and he just had time to say, “Yes”, before Griet would have noticed.

“There is some Roggebrot and some Dutch Edam cheese for you, too.”

This was, for his present state, perfect. He thanked Clara and used the coffee and bread and cheese to avoid conversation for a few minutes.

“Peut-être nous pouvons attendre le matin avant de considérer ce que nous pouvons faire demain”, Martin suggested. He was tired and really should sleep.

“Of course. If you would like a bath before going to bed, I can put on the water heater.”

“That would be perfect – I always find travel makes me feel a bit grimy.”

“‘Grimy’ must mean dirty. It is the soot in the trains. Is ‘soot’ the right word?” Clara said. She was certainly right about some trains anyway.

And so Martin took a quick bath – careful not to use too much hot water – then very gratefully climbed into the narrow cot that had been made up in Annje’s room.

* * *

The next morning they were going to see the farm and to take Annje to stay with François and Maria. It was about 3 km. and they used bicycles.

“I hope that a woman’s bicycle is all right”, Clara said.

“If we can raise the seat a bit it will be fine,” Martin replied. Like all good cyclists, Clara had some tools. They were a bit unusual to Martin’s eyes, but worked fine.

“We call that a *moersleutel*”, Clara said.

“I think in England ‘Adjustable spanner’ but the Americans would find it closest to a ‘Crescent wrench’.”

“But isn’t a crescent like a *croissant*, like the moon?”

“Yes, but in this case it is the name of the company that made them in the USA starting in the early part of this century.”

Clara’s bike had a seat for Annje on the back and a big basket at the front. Martin had a carrier at the back and that was where they tied a small suitcase for Annje. He put his rucksack on his back. Mostly empty, but he had remembered to bring some more coffee. It was an easy way out of the job of choosing a gift. He’d packed 4 more packets just in case he needed presents anywhere. Probably had been guilty of smuggling, if he had taken the trouble to check the rules, though

possibly it was Germany that had a thing about coffee. The day was mild but somewhat overcast, and their ride was pleasant. Annje was singing some sort of song and Clara joined in. The journey took only a short while, though was slightly uphill. They first went to the farm where the lorry had hit the mine.

“I have tenants here in the house now,” Clara said. “We say hello in case they see me because otherwise it would be impolite, but I won’t ask to come in because I did not tell them we are coming and they will be shy if things are not all tidy.”

Before they got to the farmhouse, they had to pass where the mine had been. Clara stopped and pointed to a large flat field stone in the bank where they had buried Jack and Jim.

“François put that there. You remember I wrote to ask their names.”

Martin looked. He noted that there was an inscription, obviously done carefully, but not by a professional.

J McMichael & J Taylor, RAF
L Joos, Vlaamse boer
gedood door de duiters
Sept 1944

“I must thank him”, said Martin. “It is very eloquent in its simplicity.”

“What is ‘eloquent’?” Clara asked.

“Expressed very well. Carrying meaning.”

“‘Welsprekend’, I think we say. Yes. I agree.”

Clara had put her bicycle on its stand and lifted Annje out of the seat. The little girl ran along beside them as they walked the bicycles into the farmyard. It was now all prim and bright compared to what Martin remembered. Martin saw it was still the same place he remembered, but now so much more alive.

Clara called out.

“Allo! Allo! Is er iemand t’huis?”

A large, cheery woman seemed to burst forth from the kitchen door.

“Dag, Mevrouw Joos. Hoe gaat het er mee?”

“Goed. Goed. Ik breng Annje naar de familie De-hooge voor een paar dagen.”

From his time in Belgium and Holland in ’44 and ’45 Martin could understand that much. There followed a short conversation where he heard his name mentioned, then there were the “Tot ziens”, all round and they were off on the bicycles up the road to the next farm, about 600 metres away.

François was already outside to greet them and a small but strongly built woman came to join him as they arrived.

“Hello François,” said Martin. “C’est bon de vous revoir, et dans des temps plus heureux. Et celle-ci doit

être votre femme Maria.”

“Oui, bonjour Martin” they said together, and there were greetings all around in Flemish and French and a bit of English, with Annje joining in heartily. They eventually went inside to a large kitchen where the kettle was steaming.

“Koffee of thé?” asked Maria.

“Koffie, alst uw blijft. Is het mogelijk een koffie verkeerd?” said Martin.

“Ja, daar is melk en een pot. Maar ik heb geen Italiaans koffiezetapparaat. En je spreekt Vlaams?” said Maria.

“Alleen een beetje. Ik war hier in Holland voor fier en fiertig en vijf en fiertig.”

Martin took out the packet of coffee and presented it to the couple. It was clearly welcome. Coffee was either rationed, expensive or both.

Maria had a big fruit tart to go with the coffee, apparently made from berries grown on the farm and preserved for such purposes. It was very good. As was the coffee which was simply half hot milk and half strong coffee. Annje had ‘koffie’ too, and there was fussing that she had hers like Uncle Martin, except, of course, with a much higher proportion of milk.

“Merci beaucoup, François, pour la mémorial de pierre. C’est bien fait.”

“J’ai pensé qu’il nous faut. On doit avoir quelque-

chose.”

“Oui. Et il y a beaucoup d’évenements qui ne sont pas dans les grands histoires, mais qui sont tous importants en somme.” Martin noticed Clara’s eyes were brimming with tears. He wished he’d talked to François privately.

There was talk about where Annje would sleep, and they dutifully went to see, then Annje wanted to show Martin the cows and the dairy. She was a serious but not sombre child, and he had wanted the tour anyway, and she made a fine guide, and he found he could comprehend the bulk of what she said.

It was now about 10, and Clara wanted to take Martin into Brussels. He wanted to take Clara there too, but mainly so they had some time to get to know each other. Clara said it was time to go and that she would be back to get Annje in two days when they had been to Den Bosch in Holland to see David’s grave. It was clear the situation had already been explained, and Martin did not have to go through the story.

They rode back to Ninove and locked up the bicycles outside the station. With Clara’s help, Martin bought day excursion tickets and they would be in the centre of Brussels before noon.

As they stood on the platform, Clara put her arm through Martin’s. Martin realized that somehow he expected her to, it just seemed to fit.

“I’m really happy to be with you again,” he said.

“Me too. I don’t get much – do you say ‘male company’.”

Martin laughed. “Yes, but it could be misinterpreted.”

“Misinterpreted? It means ...?”

“The expression is correct, but some people use it to refer to more than just company.”

Now Clara laughed, and with a mischievous grin said, “Perhaps that too!”

The ice was now broken, but at that moment the train arrived and in the carriage there were other people, so their conversation was more general. Martin asked about Clara’s work, which was with an agricultural and food marketing association trying to find buyers for local products that had added value. Clara said she was enjoying the job, but that it meant a lot of writing – and typing – letters, and she was fortunate that she had learned to type as she learned English and tried to improve her French. The main trouble with the typewriter was that she had arranged a QWERTY keyboard for English, so she had to approximate the French accents by backspacing and overtyping a character that was not quite correct.

There had been some positive replies to letters sent to some American interests, as well as some of the big London shops. Now the association – and Clara was the only full-time employee – were wondering whether

to spend money to send someone on a marketing trip. It would be a big gamble. The alternative was to prepare some attractive sample parcels, and Clara felt that they should try that with a few prospective clients and ask directly which products were of interest. They also still had to learn which products would pass customs and agricultural regulations, as it would be bad for business to have some things removed and also to expect clients to pay duty.

They changed trains in Denderleeuw, and on the second train were more or less alone.

Clara asked, “What would you like to see today?”

“My first goal is to have a wafel. The Luiksewafel type, even though we’re in Brussels!”

Clara laughed. “That should not be too difficult. But what else?”

“I think we could just play tourists and explore the city. And I’d like to take you for a meal. Would that be possible?”

“It should be possible – especially if the rain stays away. I don’t know anywhere particular, so we will have to find something. Perhaps we will have a very unhealthy lunch of Vlaamse frites and a Luiksewafel, then explore the city – I brought a map – making notes of possible restaurants.”

“I think we have a plan, Mevrouw Joos.”

“Do you think of me that way?” Clara seemed almost

hurt.

“What way?” Martin was at a loss for a moment.

“As Mrs. Joos?”

“I think of you as Clara,” he said quietly “Clara who I met when a mine went off and who writes to me of a life starting over.”

“I wasn’t married long to Luc. Did you know my family name was Martens, almost like Martin?”

“No. You never put that in your letters. I guess there’s lots we left out.”

“All your girlfriends?”

“That would be a short letter!”

“But an interesting one.”

“Possibly too interesting, like Lady Chatterly.”

“What is that?”

“A book by a British writer named D H Lawrence. It came out in 1928, but in Florence in Italy, and has been banned as pornographic in England, though some copies are passed around, but I’ve never seen one.”

“Ah ‘pornographic’ almost as in French.”

“What about your boyfriends?”

“Another short letter! Who wants a woman with a three year-old daughter?”

“She’s a lovely little girl.”

“Yes, but not THEIR little girl. I had a man who seemed very interested. His wife died of pneumonia during the war and they had two children, a boy and

a girl, now 7 and 9. He was very nice to me for a while, and I thought I could grow to love him, but when we started to discuss marriage, he wanted me to stop work and it became clear that he wanted me to be a huisvrouw. I don't mind doing that, but I want to be able to look after myself and Annje. I lost Luc and I learned to be on my own. I do not want to be having to learn to make a life myself again."

"You loved Luc a lot?"

"Yes. But perhaps not as the French say 'une grande passionne'. He was 35 when he died, and you know I was just 21. He came to the farm – it was my parents' farm – when he was about 20 in 1929, just at the time of the crash of the bourse. You know I was a late child. My sisters were already 14 and 16 when I was born. My mother got cancer of the breast in 1936 and died in 1937. My father had a heart attack in 1940 right after the Germans came. Luc kept the farm going and he made me feel safe. Then the Germans shot him for trying to milk the cows. You came a week later, so you know the rest."

"Only the skeleton. Just as you know only the outline of what I am and what I do. But we both seem to want to learn more."

Clara was silent for a moment, then said: "Yes. We do seem to want to discover each other. We were pushed together by the bomb – sorry, I think you say mine."

“Yes, we sort of jumped the gun.”

“‘Jumped the gun’?”

“When the runners in a race start before the starter’s pistol has gone off.”

“Ah yes”, she blushed, “We did ‘jump the gun’, but I’m glad we did. It has meant a lot to me to have your letters and your friendship these last couple of years, Martin. Perhaps that we were not together, we would not have written.”

The train was coming into the station. The journey had not been long and they tumbled out along with the rest of the passengers in the Midi Station.

“I think we should go into the center of the city first and find you a wafel”, said Clara, pronouncing it with a long A. They exited the station, turned towards the center of the city and almost immediately, Martin could smell the bready sweetness of wafels cooking.

“I can smell wafels. Now if only we could tell where the smell was coming from.”

Clara approached an older woman who was running a newspaper stand. “Mevrouwe. War kunnen wij een luiakse wafel vinden?”

The woman responded with a torrent of Flemish that mostly escaped Martin, though he did note ‘recht door’ and then ‘rechts’, which meant ahead and then to the right. Indeed, Clara took his hand and said, “This way.” Sure enough, a block or so up the street and then to the

right they found a wafel kiosk and ordered two.

They stood near the kiosk and munched their wafels.

“I’ve been wanting one of these ever since the last time I saw you. We came through Brussels that day and I had one then. So Clara goes together with wafels.”

Clara laughed, glad of the warm association. She said, “If we go further up this street we’ll come to the Manneken Pis, the statue of the little boy ... making water.”

“Oh. Pissing. Though that is considered a rude word in English. A lot of the old Anglo-Saxon words have come to be like that, while the ones that derived from the Norman French are considered ‘proper’. In this case, the boy would be ‘urinating’.”

“I have yet a lot to learn about the right words.”

“Your English is a lot better than my Flemish/Dutch.”

They went to the statue, where there were other tourists. Martin took a couple of pictures, mainly of the tourists looking at the statue. Then they wandered toward the Grote Markte – the great marketplace or Grande Place in French. There Martin took a few more photos and got Clara to pose in them. And he got her to take some with him.

They found a frites stall and decided to share a large paper cone of them – the true Flemish frites with mayonaise. After the wafels, they really didn’t need much for lunch. Clara suggested they find a café, however.

“Are you hungry?” Martin asked.

“No. But a little thirsty. And a café will have a WC.”
She said this in the European fashion “vay say”.

“Yes. Very sensible.”

Despite the possibility of beer, Martin chose tea, as did Clara.

“I’m enjoying today”, said Martin. “It’s really nice to just be able to do simple things and enjoy the sights and people.”

“Yes. But do you want to see a museum or one of the palaces?”

“I’d be happy to, if you are particularly interested. But I’ve not been here except for that day in 1944, and we really could not see too much then – we were on our way to Melsbroek to report. As long as the weather holds, I’m happy to explore and enjoy. Also I have not read about the museums or the palaces, so I do not know the history. But do tell me if you want to do something special. Otherwise, let’s use our time to find out about Brussels – and also about each other.”

“That would please me too.”

They walked toward the north, and found the Galleries St. Hubert.

“Shall we go and look?” Martin asked.

“Certainly. But I cannot afford anything, and you must not buy me or Annje anything or I will feel uncomfortable.”

Martin liked her forthrightness. And much as he wanted to spoil her, he could understand that she would feel either cheapened or obligated if he bought her things.

“But you will allow me to buy you dinner?”

“That we can think of as exchange for bed and breakfast,” she laughed. Indeed, there was a logic to that. He would not have wanted to stay in a hotel in Ninove.

They browsed the shops. There was fancy lace, and Clara clearly appreciated it. Martin could understand the intricacy, but he had no feeling for why one would want to use such expensive cloth in situations where it might get dirty. Perhaps he was ‘just a man’.

They found a chocolatier, and despite their promises, he bought them each a bonbon.

“We can call it an early hors d’oeuvre”, he explained.

“All right. Or we can say chocolate does not count!” They both clearly liked chocolate.

They moved on to the Cathedral of Saint Michael and Saint Gudula. Martin took off his cloth cap – he had found he liked the English working class type – and they quietly enjoyed the magnificent building. Martin sat down in the nave and Clara joined him. Neither said anything, and they had a quiet few minutes. Martin put some money in one of the collection boxes.

As they came outside, he asked, “Do you go to church, Clara?”, realizing as he said it how important the answer might be.

“I was brought up a Catholic, but after the war and all the evil that came, I could not find much that made sense in church. I feel there is God, but I cannot find that he has interest in any one man or woman. Do you go to church, Martin?”

“Not much. I like churches. I like the music and singing, and I find the language in the King James version of the Bible is very moving. But I don’t go to church regularly on Sunday. When I was a kid in Canada, we used to go to the United Church fairly frequently, and in England we went to the Church of England a few times, and I liked Evensong in the College Chapel in Oxford.”

“Evensong?”

“It’s a prayer service on Sunday evenings. Very English – not much done in Canada. My college – Wadham – had no electric light in the chapel, and it had a very special atmosphere. The chapel had seats at the side as in the altar part of the Cathedral. There was a scholarship for a student who could play the organ, and he was called the Organ Scholar. We had a Chaplain too, who led the service, and then we would have a chapel supper after, which was quite nice. I think a lot of the students who went to the evensong were not regular church goers. Some were not even Christian, I suspect.”

“It must be that the chapel was welcoming.”

“Yes, it was – is. I don’t find religion attractive when

it is all about what you are allowed to do, or especially what you are not allowed to do. I would rather it help people find a good way to live, but I seem to be in a minority.”

“Minority?”

“The fraction of people who agree with me is small.”

“I like that ‘help people find a good way to live’. A dominee – priest, or perhaps it is preacher – who could do that would be worth a hard chair on Sunday.”

Martin laughed. “We seem to both be quite wicked.”

“Wicked?”

“Bad, naughty. But the word comes from an old word for knowledge, and the same root as for witch and wisdom. I meant that some church people would say we are very sinful for wanting ... well, kindness, more than rules and commandments.”

“Ah, *de tien geboden* – and how one set of people tells another to live them.”

It was now 5:30. Their perambulations had used up the afternoon. Martin noticed a small tavern-restaurant and suggested they see what it had to offer.

“Ah. They have *mosselen* – mussels. Do you like mussels, Martin?”

“I’ll eat them, but they are not my favourite seafood. I like scallops better.”

“Scallops?”

“The French say *coquille St. Jaques*.”

“Ah. I like them too!”

They went into the little restaurant. A fullsome woman greeted them in French.

“Bienvenue, madame, monsieur. Voulez-vous manger ici ou sur notre terrasse à l’arrière? Il y a une couverture en cas de pluie, mais c’est supposé rester très bien.”

They decided on the terrace, given this message of no rain and shelter. The late July temperature was higher than normal, but it was not uncomfortable.

Martin decided to try the Waterzooi, a stew with chicken, but Clara decided to have the mussels – moules et frites.

“Do you want beer or wine?” Martin asked.

“Wine please. Unless you would prefer beer.”

“No. I’m not a great drinker of beer, though I do drink it sometimes.”

The woman who had greeted them was their waitress, in fact, she was the only person serving, possibly the owner. They could hear someone in the kitchen too. Martin asked her if she had a good white wine. She offered them a French table wine that Martin did not recognize or a Moselle. Martin chose the latter.

They ordered, and also chose to have a salad first. Their hostess brought the wine and some bread.

“To us!” Martin raised his glass.

“Yes. To us.” Clara replied with her eyes bright.

“It’s been a very nice day. Very relaxed. I wasn’t sure

if we would be comfortable with each other”, Martin commented.

“I also thought we might be ... is awkward the word.”

“The exact word!”

He continued a more soberly.

“I hope we will continue to find our company so comfortable.”

“Me too. But do you have a worry?”

“Well, I want to keep our friendship, and, well, we came to meet and know each other under very strange circumstances.”

“I know. And I too want the friendship very much.”

“Clara, can I be very direct? Do you want some of what we had in '44 too?”

Clara blushed.

“It is best perhaps to be direct. But I fear you may not like my answer. I know that I liked what we did, but if I became ... expecting ... it would be very bad for me. Robert – the man I told you about with the two children – was anxious to sleep with me, but I realized that one of his reasons that if I became ... ah, I remember the word is pregnant ... I would have to become the housewife he wanted.”

“Yes. I was worried in 1944 that there may be consequences.”

“At the time I did not give thought to anything. I was not right in my head. Perhaps nobody was, but

we had also the mine and I had Luc's death. And your wound. But of course I was still giving Annje my milk, and that reduces the chance. When I had Annje, I also had some infection, and the doctors said I might have difficulty to have more children. But they are often wrong about such things."

"I should tell you about my plans", Martin said with some decisiveness. "I said that my 'letter' about girlfriends would be short. Part of that is that I hope to go back to Canada later this year – I know I wrote to you about that – and a girl I was going out with was quite unhappy and we broke up."

"You wrote that you were trying to get a – I forget the word for money for your studies."

"An assistantship – a job that pays me to do research work for a thesis, a book about a special subject."

"Ah yes, a thèse in French. And then do you say a defense?"

"Yes. Especially if I try for the doctorate."

"You should do the best you can, Martin." Clara's tone was decisive as if to brook no contradiction.

Martin was deeply proud of Clara, but he realized that his plans meant that she might not want to 'jump the gun' again with him.

"It rather means that we really should behave very properly", he said, somewhat glumly.

"There are supposed to be ways to avoid a baby, but

here in Catholic Belgium, I do not know where to find such things.”

“They are fairly easily available in England, from the barber.”

“From the barber!”

“And from a chemist’s – a pharmacy. But there you have to ask for them, possibly from a woman. Very embarrassing. But the barbers often ask you if you want ‘Something for the weekend.’”

“But that is in England. I do not know here.”

Martin was silent for a moment, then said, “I hope you will not be offended, but I did not want to be in a situation where we both might want to be ... together ... and have to worry. So I have some sheaths with me. I think you call them ‘kapotjes’.” He was almost whispering and they were leaning in as they shared this conversation.

“Martin, I am not offended. I am glad you thought before. But perhaps you will allow me to think for a while about this. I would like much to be ... together ... but I must think how bad I may feel when you have gone.”

“Yes. I would like my visit to be a cause of happiness, not to leave sadness afterwards. I will not try to persuade you either way. But I can say that I would like very much to experience again what we had at the farmhouse.”

“But surely your other ladies...”, Clara probed. But their server was back with the salads, and Martin simply said, “I’ll tell you later if you want. There is not a lot to say, though.”

Clara thanked the serving lady and they began their salads.

“What sort of work will you do when you finish your studies, Martin?”

“After a master’s degree or doctorate – I could do just the first of these if I was only willing to spend a year or so rather than three or four – I could work as a research scientist or an engineer with industry or government in communications or radar. That’s the area I like.”

“I will ask later what those words really mean. But that is a long time before you get work.” Clara seemed worried.

“Well, the assistantship should not be so bad. Not a lot of money, but sometimes if the work is of interest to someone in industry, there is sometimes some extra so the total is about as much money as an ordinary job. At least as much as a bus driver or a store assistant manager earns as far as I can tell. It is not quite like being an ordinary student any more. In fact, when I go back to England, I will have a few months of work with one of the lecturers doing some radio experiments.”

“So, are any students like this married?”

“Some, I think. With the war, things may have

changed. The universities are just getting back to some sort of normalcy. I do know one graduate student at Oxford who is married.”

Clara picked up the thread of education.

“Oxford is a very important university. You are very fortunate, Martin.”

“I think I wrote that I was there before I went into the RAF. So I’ve now just finished my bachelor’s degree. I suppose that Oxford is important, as much as an idea as a university.”

“It must be a big university.”

“I think perhaps by Belgian standards, where your institutions have at most a couple of thousand students. But it is not so big as other schools.”

“Sometimes you talk of the University, and other times about the College, and sometimes even Schools. Are they not the same?”

“You had better not ask that in Oxford or Cambridge! Both universities are federations of colleges. The colleges are really places where students and some of the dons – the teachers – live and where students have individual teaching. The university is governed by a sort of parliament with representatives from colleges and some other institutions, and it provides lectures and laboratories and the overall organization that grants degrees and sets the rules. They even have their own police force under the authority of the Proctors.

Oxford University even has two Members of Parliament who are elected by graduates of the University.”

“Wherever the people are, all over the world?”

“I think so. But maybe only graduates who are British, and maybe only living in Britain. I don’t really know all the details. There are a few other university constituencies, but as they all tend to elect people who oppose the government or are independents – the two sitting now for Oxford are both independent of any political party – there is talk of abolishing them.”

“And their own police force. How does that work with people who are not in the University?”

“I’m not really sure. The bulldogs – that’s what the University police are called unofficially – have authority within 4 miles (that’s 6 km) of any University building. I think that some of the locals who are not part of the University resent their powers as constables, since they are not totally under the regular law but the University rules, which sometimes are older than the public laws.”

“It’s all very strange”, said Clara.

“I agree. Fortunately, I’ve had no reason to run afoul of them.”

“‘run afoul’?”

“Do something that get’s me into trouble with them.”

Their main courses arrived. Martin found the waterzooi delicious and satisfying. It really was a winter dish, he supposed, but this one was delicate enough to

work on a summer day. Clara had a large saucepan of mussels, a plate of frites, and a bowl for the shells. She was rapidly moving the shells from the saucepan to the bowl.

Martin snuck his hand to the plate of frites and took one.

“Heh. Niet genoeg voor jou?” Clara protested, but with mock opprobrium.

“They always taste better from someone else’s plate!”

“Would you like to try a mussel? I’d like a taste of the waterzooi.”

“Do you want to trade when we get down a bit further?” Martin asked, then realized Clara looked puzzled, so he added “Change plates when we have eaten a bit more?”

“Yes, good. I will save a half dozen mussels and some frites, and you leave me some waterzooi – but make sure there is some chicken and plenty of nice vegetables.”

It was clear Clara liked her food. She had the strong structure that was the base of Ruben’s chubby nymphs, but did not carry any fat. This meal was not only meant as a treat, but clearly was.

Martin stopped eating the stew when there was plenty left – the serving was generous, even for a reasonably hungry man. Clara had left a half-dozen mussels.

“Oh. Have I left you enough?”

“I’m sure you have. I’ll enjoy that many mussels, but

more would be too much for me.”

The saucepan and deep plate were exchanged. Martin found the mussels tasty, but the number left for him was just right. And he could not resist the frites even though they had shared some earlier, but they did not completely finish the present plate because there were so many.

The serving lady returned. “Ah. Vous avez partagé les mets. Une vrai couple!”

Clara blushed. Martin simply said, “Les deux mets sont tellement bons. On doit les essayer, tous les deux.”

“Peut-être du dessert ou café?”

“Qu’est-ce que vous avez pour dessert, madame?”

“Je peux vous montrer.”

She returned with a platter. There was a sort of chocolate cake, a quite thick apple tart or pudding, and a colourful fruit torte with chocolate drizzled on it.

“Clara?”

Clara pointed to the last item. “But I am quite full. Avec deux cuillères, s’il vous plaît.”

“Et pour moi un café au lait, s’il vous plaît,” said Martin.

“Pour moi aussi,” added Clara.

There was a pause as the lady walked off to the kitchen, then they both spoke at once, “Une vrai couple!” and laughed.

The lady returned with their dessert – a large piece

– and two spoons, along with two large cups – bowls essentially – with the steaming milky coffee. There were no other people in the café just now. Too late for an afternoon drink, and too early for most Belgian diners. It was only about 6:30 in the evening.

She asked, “Monsieur. Je ne peux pas placer votre accent. Vous n’êtes pas Flamande ni Français? Et vous parlez anglais ensemble, mais vous n’avez pas l’aire d’un anglais ni d’un américain.”

“Non. Je suis Canadien, mais j’ai vécu en Angleterre depuis 1938.”

“Un canadien français?”

“Par nom, oui, mais je suis un Canadien anglais. Quand même, lorsque je suis enfant, j’ai des amis qui parle français, mais un argot un peu colonial.”

The woman laughed. “Et madame. Vous venez aussi du Canada?”

Clara, taken by surprise, paused, then said, “Non. Je viens de Ninove.”

“Sorry. Ik ben ook Vlaams, maar in het café hier spreken wij Frans. I can also manage a bit of English, thanks to the soldiers.”

“I was one of them. Well, in the RAF,” said Martin.

“And you’ve brought your wife back for a holiday?”

Martin and Clara both blushed.

“No. We haven’t seen each other since 1944 when a German mine blew up a lorry I was in and both Clara

and I ended up in a ditch. Her daughter was blown into a tree. Fortunately, they were not hurt and I only had a splinter in my rear end. Clara helped me clean up, and the next day some airmen came and I was able to rejoin my squadron. But we've kept in touch."

"Oh. I'm very sorry. I have ... do you say 'put my foot in it'? I saw madame's ring and"

Martin had seen the ring on Clara's right hand, but only now paid attention to it. It was her wedding ring.

"Ik ben een weduwe. Martin kwam een week nadat de Duitsers schoot mijn man. He helped me too. There was food in the lorry. And I moved the wedding ring to my right hand."

"I've noticed some women have it on the right and some on the left", Martin said.

The serving woman said, "Most Catholics use the left, and some Protestants too. But some Protestants the right."

"I just wanted to remember Luc," Clara said. "But the memories are not painful now. And a meal and a day like today shows that there is hope and new ... how do you say things coming new?"

"Renewal", Martin suggested.

"Yes. Renewal."

The serving woman said, "That is worth a toast! And I have something, as you say, new."

She was back in an instant with a bottle and three

small glasses.

“There is a new Distillerie de Biercée and they make this liqueur.”

She poured each of them a small measure of a dark brown, almost black liquid.

“To renewal”, she said.

“To renewal!”

“Oh. Het is chocolade!” Clara exclaimed. Indeed it was. And very nice.

“Thank you for this,” Martin said. “And may I now ask for the bill. De rekening!”

Clara got up and went through a small archway. Martin noticed it was marked WC. Martin settled the bill. When Clara returned he asked

“Is the Men’s there too?”

“Oh. I Oh, you mean the toilet for men. There is just one small WC.”

“I’ll go too. Back in a minute.”

When he returned, Clara was already by the door, chatting quietly with their hostess. After warm farewells, they headed back to the Midi station in the soft evening light.

“Thank you, Martin. That was the best meal I can remember. I haven’t had much chance to eat in restaurants. Nor to have a day – I think you say ‘day out’ – like this.”

“I’ve not had THAT much experience of them either.

But I admit that was very good. I made sure I got the card. Moules Mahieu. Mme Mahieu was the proprietor. I will certainly tell others about the place. It was really nice. And on top of a very nice day.”

For a while they walked on in silence, Clara’s arm through Martin’s. When they got to the station, they looked up the platform and saw they fortunately had only a few minutes to wait.

The train to Denderleeuw had plenty of passengers but was not crowded. They found some seats more or less on their own where they could chat privately.

“I’m glad we ate early,” said Martin. “I think tomorrow will be a long day and probably not nearly so much fun.”

A war grave in Holland

They were going to the graveyard at Uden to find and photograph David’s grave. In 1944, Martin had been nearby in Eindhoven, then Helmond, and then Nijmegen, but at that time they didn’t know exactly where David had been buried. In fact it was within this year that his remains had been put in the Uden war cemetery. Martin was glad Clara would come along to help him communicate if he needed to find where to go, to buy tickets or instruct a taxi driver. He had some Dutch, but having a translator would help.

“Yes, we will need to sleep well tonight,” Clara noted. “And perhaps we should pack tonight and make sure we have what we need. You have walking shoes, and these of mine are not bad, but if it is muddy they will not be good. Should we take some klompen?”

“I believe the Commonwealth War Graves Commission does a good job of looking after the cemeteries. But this one will be fairly new. David was buried by the Germans somewhere nearby. Penny learned that they only moved his remains recently. Apparently there were about 100 graves in a parish priest’s garden. With the good weather, I think we can take a chance that it will not be muddy. And clogs will be heavy.”

“Yes. We may have to walk a bit.”

“I plan to hire a taxi from Oss. But it will take us the better part of the day to get there. Should we perhaps get tickets to Oss going, then see about finding a hotel in Den Bosch after going to the graveyard? I don’t think we will spend a lot of time actually at the cemetery. And I suspect we have a better chance of a hotel in Den Bosch.”

He hesitated, then continued, “I thought of booking a hotel, but I wasn’t sure whether to book one room or two.”

“Do you call it a dilemma in English?”

“Yes”, he laughed.

“Well, since the restaurant lady misunderstood my

ring, I think we perhaps can share a room. Let us see what is available. But I will have more time to decide if we do ... more. Martin, I am still at that time of the month for a day or two more.”

“Then maybe you will have to come with me to Paris so that you are free to make a decision.”

“Do you mean that?” she almost jumped.

“Yes. It would make it much more enjoyable to share it with you. Do you want to bring Annje too?” Martin actually hoped not, at least this time. But he knew that Clara would feel more comfortable knowing he had asked.

“My sister Wil in Gent said I should ask you if I could come along. She already offered to take Annje and to give me some money for a cheap hotel room. But I feel we will want to share that too, unless we have some bad quarrel.”

“Yes. A bad quarrel would not be nice. But I think you and I will argue honestly. My parents were – are – good that way. They are both strong and they have been sometimes quite angry, but they never let it get nasty or damage their friendship.”

“It is interesting you talk of friendship between your parents. But I think I understand.”

“And I will be disappointed, but will understand, if you decide that our circumstances mean we cannot do more than share the room.”

As he said this, Martin was fairly certain that Clara had already made up her mind.

* * *

The weather, which had been changeable in the early part of the month, was now turning hotter. Martin slept that night under just a sheet. In the morning, they rose in time to breakfast with Tante Griet before taking a train shortly after 8. Once again the change in Denderleeuw, then another in Brussel-Midi, and another at Rosendaal before a quite long journey to Oss, where they were deposited in the middle of the day.

Clara had made sandwiches, and they had eaten these on the train with a bottle of lemonade.

“Let’s have a coffee so we can use the loo before we try for the cemetery.” Martin suggested.

“‘Loo?’ – oh, the WC. Yes. A good idea. And I could use a coffee.”

There was a restaurant/bar opposite the station and they ordered a ‘koffie verkeerd’ which was the Dutch form of café au lait and a piece of apple tart, which they shared. In Flemish/Dutch, Clara asked the proprietor if she knew a taxi or car-hire that would take them to the Uden War Cemetery. Martin understood ‘Kanadese vliegenier’ and the response was warm and immediate.

There was some negotiation of when they should leave, and Martin, through Clara, said he wanted some flowers. These would be available, they learned, close at hand.

A phone call was made, and it was arranged that they would be picked up in 40 minutes, and a price was quoted much less than Martin feared. Eventually, it turned out that they had to hurry to drink their hot drink, use the WC, and pay, then go a couple of hundred meters up the road to the shop that sold flowers, but they were ready as the car arrived.

“Dit is Jan, uw chauffeur,” said the restaurant proprietor.

“I can a bit English speak,” said Jan.

They said their goodbyes to the restaurateur and piled into the car. As they went along, the driver asked about the dead airman. Martin was able to use his limited Dutch to say, “Mijn zwager, de man van mijn zus,” but had to use English to say that David had been killed in 1943 in a Halifax bomber.

“There were many that near here down came,” the driver volunteered. “But we were luckier than many in Holland, because we were liberated before the end of ’44.”

“I know, I was in Eindhoven and Helmond with the RAF,” Martin volunteered.

“With the British, not the Canadians?”

“I was living in England when the war began. It was easier to join them. Many Canadians were in the RAF, and there were some transfers to the RCAF, but I didn’t, and then the war was over.”

“You were pilot too?”

“No, a wireless technician. Radios.”

“Perhaps safer,” said the driver.

Clara was silent during the roughly 10 km journey along the Eindhoven road. Martin wondered what she was thinking. He would have to ask her later. The driver clearly knew where the cemetery was, even though it was quite new.

“Shall I come back in a half hour for you?” solicited the driver.

“That would be very kind. It will allow us enough time.” Martin also realized they would not feel that their visit was rushed, and guessed the driver knew that would be the case.

Penny had sent Martin the index number of David’s grave and it turned out to be quite easy to find. The stone, nearly brand new, gave his name and rank and date of death, and there was an inscription too ‘Nearer my God to Thee’ Penny or David’s family must have arranged that. Clara hung back slightly, but held the flowers. Martin took a few pictures of the gravestone.

“Do you not want to put the flowers there first, Martin?” Clara was carrying the flowers, since Martin was

busy with the camera.

“I’d forgotten. But yes.”

He put them down, but Clara realized they would look better arranged with the blooms upward and quickly and deftly re-set them. Martin took another picture, then realized he would have to change film. He found a shady spot and did so, then returned to take some more pictures.

“That I ran out of film then was lucky, because I have now put in a colour film,” he said.

“Colour? I don’t think I’ve seen any colour photographs by ordinary people.”

“This will make transparencies, but I can have a photography shop make a nice picture for Penny of one or two of the best.”

He took a couple more of the grave, then several of views of the cemetery. Surreptitiously, he got a nice candid shot of Clara reading David’s gravestone with the flowers in the frame too. It would not be a picture for general viewing, but the gentleness of her expression seemed to be just right.

They found the register box and Martin signed and dated their visit, with a short message of appreciation for the upkeep of the cemetery. As they were putting the register back in its box, Jan was returning. They went to the entrance of the small cemetery and got in the car again.

“Back to Oss? Or will you go another place?”

“We plan to find a hotel in Den Bosch. Perhaps we can pay you extra and you can leave us there?”

This indeed would be acceptable. Jan could then go to visit his sister who had a package for their mother. And if they paid him a few extra guilders, he would not be out of pocket for petrol. The weather was pleasant, and the drive took them through several attractive villages into Den Bosch. On the way, Martin asked if Jan knew of a decent hotel, preferably not too far from the station, but not right beside it. Indeed, he did, and was kind enough to wait while Clara enquired if there were rooms.

When she came out, Martin paid Jan, including a healthy tip for his good service, and they parted with an enthusiastic ‘Tot ziens’. As they went in, Clara whispered

“I asked for just one room. You will have to be my husband today.”

There was no time to query or argue with this, as the desk was right there in a tiny lobby. The clerk asked, in Dutch, if they wanted an ordinary room, or the suite with its own shower and toilet. Martin’s Dutch was up to understanding this and to asking, “Hoeveel kost het kamer met bad?” (he forgot momentarily that the clerk had said ‘douche’) and the reply was a price that was high, but within his budget, so he said, “Ja. We willen

dat kamer nemen.”

There was the usual equivalent of registering, and they had to produce identity documents, for which they used their passports. If the clerk had suspicions, he kept quiet about them. Possibly taking the expensive room was a good idea in that regard. Though Martin had a Canadian-issued passport, it was likely the clerk took it for a regular British one. When filling in the registration, Martin put down their separate names. Possibly it was now fairly common with marriages from the war period. And European women often kept their names.

They received the key and went up some steep stairs and easily found their room. It was a pleasant room with sun shining in. On one wall there was a door leading to an elegant bathroom with toilet, sink and shower.

“Oh, this is so nice!” Clara said.

“You decided to share?”

“Yes. But as I told you. It is the time of the month for me. I hope that will not make you angry.”

“No. Why would I be angry? Just the opposite. I want to be with you and feel you close. When and if you want to share more, we will.”

“Good. That is how I feel too.”

It was now late afternoon, and a warm day. Martin felt sweaty and rather tired.

“I wouldn’t mind a shower and a nap before we go to try to find some dinner.”

“Yes. A good idea. But I feel thirsty. Shall I go for some mineral water? I’m sure that they will have some for sale at the desk.”

“Good. Take the key – here it is – and here are some guilders. I’ll be in the shower. So lock the door.”

Martin was in the shower when she came back. He had left the door to the bathroom open. It opened into the main room anyway, and he had moved it so it was fully back against the wall so they would not be bumping into it. He had used the opportunity to wash his hair, though mostly just with water and felt a lot fresher.

“Do you want some mineral water, Martin?”

“In a minute. I realize I’m a long way from the towels. Can you pass me one?”

Clara laughed and came and handed him one. “How terrible. A naked man!”

“So you are going to shower fully clothed.”

“No. I cannot afford to ruin perfectly good clothes,” she said as she unbuttoned the dress and let it drop to the floor, then tossed it on the bedrail. She popped off her slip in a moment, similarly her bra, then walked over near the toilet and pulled down her panties. She unhooked a pad from a menstrual belt and sat down. As she peed, she put the pad in a paper bag in a waste-bin clearly meant for the purpose. He noted the pad was soiled, but only slightly.

Martin was taken aback for a moment by this. He had never seen a woman use a toilet or deal with what he realized was a necessary monthly task. At home Miriam and Penny would whisper about some things, but of course he was only thirteen when Penny stopped being part of the household. But he was grateful Clara was so matter-of-fact about it. It made it easier to just dry his hair and not try for any modesty.

“Ah. You did a shampooing. What a good idea.”

“Actually, I was in here before I remembered to get out shampoo. I have a small bottle if you wish.”

“Yes please. That will be nice. I did remember my comb, but not a brush.”

Martin found his toilet bag and brought the shampoo. By now Clara was in the shower and trying to turn on the water.

“Aaaah koud,” she squealed. Martin quickly reached in and turned off the cold tap.

“Better come out and I will adjust it for you.”

Clara, dripping cold water, stepped out onto the bathmat. Martin reached in and turned on the hot very slightly, then the cold and gradually adjusted each until the stream was a good temperature, all the time keeping the shower curtain as closed as possible.

“There you go, wicked!” he said, slapping her bum.

Martin drank some of the mineral water. Indeed, he was thirsty too. Then he spread his towel on the

bed, put a hand towel on the pillow and lay down. He was sleepy, but suddenly got up and pulled his alarm clock out of his rucksack. He set it for 7 – actually it was already set for the time, though normally it would be 7 a.m., so he just had to slide the alarm control to the ‘on’ position. Then he lay down again. He closed his eyes again and was somewhere between sleep and wakefulness when Clara lay down beside him. He raised his arm and she curled in beside him. She had put on a pair of panties.

“Why bother with the panties?” he teased.

“I do not like just the belt. I’m still bleeding a bit.”

He held her a bit tighter. They said nothing more for a while. Martin didn’t think he slept, but suddenly the alarm was ringing. He struggled free of Clara and turned it off. Clara too was still only half awake.

“What time is it?”

“Just after 7. I’m glad I set the alarm or we’d not get supper. Are you hungry?”

“I’m not really awake.”

Martin kissed her. “Wake up, Sleeping Beauty.”

“Is that the story of the princess who is put to sleep by the evil stepmother?”

“Yes. Though there are many variations, I’m sure.”

“I want to get up, but it is nice here.”

“Me too. But we’ll not be happy if we are hungry in the middle of the night.”

They got up and dressed. It was a little cooler now, but still comfortable in light clothes. They descended the steep stairs – Martin wondered how many Dutch died from falling down stairs – and handed in their key. Stepping outside, they headed for the town center, the Markt. They had to cross a canal, then wind through some narrow streets and came upon the open area where the market was held. There were a couple of restaurants and they looked at the menus displayed outside, choosing one that suited them.

Martin chose to have fish – called zeetong, some sort of plaice or sole – while Clara had some form of beans called Capuciners due to their colour being that of the habits of Capucin monks. They traded a few tastes and agreed both had chosen well. Though there were a couple of interesting desserts, they both decided to stop at the single course, but each had a beer. They were also both quiet over dinner. Towards the end, Martin asked.

“Did we run out of things to say?”

“No. I think we are both a little ... how do you say ... too much?”

“Overwhelmed?”

“Yes. I think that is the word. We have been suddenly together after a long time. For me, a long time with nobody special. And today there is much emotion I think, even for me who did not know David. It is good

just to think quietly. I also did not know if you were close to David.”

“I did not know David well, though I liked him from the time we did meet.

Yes. All you say is true about emotion and talking. And I thank you for being so aware of that. Many people are uncomfortable with silence. They take it for disapproval or unhappiness, which it can be, but I know that is not how we are. We were very at ease with each other at the hotel, or we would not have slept so comfortably.”

“Yes,” then she whispered, “Who would believe I lay close to a naked man and fell asleep?”

Martin laughed. “My men friends would never believe I slept under such conditions.”

Their dinner finished, they explored the town a little, but neither had much enthusiasm, and they returned to the hotel, deciding that a walk before breakfast if it was fine would be more sensible. When in their room, they quickly got ready for bed, this time both in their night attire, and once more Clara came into Martin’s arms.

“After Luc’s death, I found it very hard to do without this,” Clara said.

“It is important, isn’t it?” Martin agreed.

“What about your girlfriend?”

“We haven’t had much chance to sleep together, that is, actually sleep together. In fact, not even once. As

they say in English, we ‘made love’, but that was in the afternoon in her rooms or mine in College. It was always rather on a timetable, like the trains.”

“The 16:10 for sex is now leaving on bed 2,” Clara announced.

Martin laughed. “You are so wicked. But I like it. And you are very close to the truth.”

“Were you – Are you – in love with her? I don’t want to make fun if I cause you hurt.”

“No. I had – have – a deep affection for Jenny. But she comes from the British aristocracy.”

“Like the nobles – the princes and counts?”

“Yes. Her father is a baron, and she is The Honourable Jennifer Richmond. I don’t know why she chose me.”

“Chose you?”

Martin related the outline of how he and Jenny had become sexual partners. Then he continued, “While I enjoy Jenny’s company, and I must say I enjoyed the sex greatly, I don’t think I fit in her social circle. I’m not an aristocrat, I’m an engineer and a scientist. My work bores Jenny, except when it is useful to get her wireless working. And when I talked about doing a doctorate, she wanted to change the subject. Finally when I said I was trying to get a position in Toronto organized, she blew her top.”

“What is ‘blew her top’?”

“Was very angry. Told me I had to stop such silly ideas and get a job in the City or the Civil Service – that is the City of London, meaning some sort of financial institution – or else the Civil Service, but that would be the British Civil Service. Truthfully, that is not where I think I want to spend my life.”

“Perhaps she feels that you must do what she says because of her position.”

“Perhaps. But for the long term, I think I might have broken off the relationship myself. I would always have felt that I was disappointing her, and eventually that I was disappointing myself. That can be very destructive.”

“Yes. I would have felt that way with Robert – the man who wanted me to marry him and look after his children. I already was starting to.”

Martin kissed her gently, and she responded equally gently. She was lying in his arm. He realized that his hand had been on her breast for some time. It seemed to just fit there.

“Shall we reset the alarm?”

“Yes. It would be good to walk in the morning.”

They untangled and Martin moved the alarm lever to the on-position again. They moved together back to back, just slightly touching. It had been another good day, and even the cemetery visit had been comforting and comfortable. Martin drifted off, but not before re-

alizing Clara was already asleep.

Martin woke just before the alarm. He was lying with Clara spooned in front of him. He rolled back and turned off the alarm, then rolled back so she was again curled against him.

“Ready to get up?” he asked.

“A few minutes. It is nice here.”

“Lift your head and I’ll put my arm round you.”

Martin was now able to cross his arms across her chest. He thought for a moment then cupped her breasts and gently hugged her.

“Not fair!” she protested.

He removed his hands and eased out of the hug.

“I didn’t say no. Just not fair,” she complained.

Martin laughed and resumed the embrace.

“Hmm. A few minutes like this will make a good day.”

Martin could not disagree. In fact they lay this way quietly for a good ten minutes, each with their own thoughts and partly dozing.

“Shall we get up for our walk?” he asked when the arm under her started to go to sleep.

“Yes. But a quick douche first – that is such a luxury.”

“All right, madam, I will adjust the shower after I’ve been to the toilet. You can wait here.”

He tossed off his pyjamas, took his time on the toilet, then started the shower and got in.

“Whenever you are ready,” he called.

Clara got up and also used the toilet. Martin was able to wash and thought of turning off the shower when Clara said, “Do you want me to come in with you?”

“I’ll hold the curtain so we don’t get the floor too wet.”

It was a fairly tight fit. Martin took the soap and by embracing Clara was able to wash her back. She turned round and he soaped her breasts, which she clearly enjoyed. He took a flannel and rinsed away the soap, then on a whim reached down between her legs and washed there.

“Good. That gets a bit ... messy ... during this time.”

She carefully turned back round in the confined space, and the water splashed around.

“Oh dear. That makes it hard to turn around,” she joked, pointing to his erection.

“What can you expect when a sensual naked woman invades your shower?”

Suddenly she was serious. “Martin, do you need me to do anything so you are ... comfortable?”

“No, I think we know that in a day or so, we will do what is necessary, and we will make sure we both enjoy it.”

“Yes. I think now we do know that.”

Martin turned off the water and reached for towels that he had placed close at hand. They dried off, combed their hair, rather wet from the splashes, and dressed in fresh clothes. They went downstairs and enquired when breakfast ended. It was now nearly 8. Though they had intended to walk before breakfast, they decided to eat then walk, as they could keep the room until 11.

The breakfast was quite good. During the war, there was much less available, but he had managed once to try ontbijtkoek, the gingerbread cake that the Dutch liked for breakfast. The hotel actually had Deventerkoek – many towns had their own special version, and Deventer was well known for its offering. And there was cheese and some cold cuts. Martin chose tea to drink and noted Clara did too, though she seemed surprised that he put some milk in it from the big jug that was there in case people wanted milk for breakfast.

“An English habit, I’m afraid.”

“Yes. We don’t usually put milk in tea.”

“Clara, Can we telephone from the post office in Ninove?”

“Yes. They have booths. Why?”

“I need to book a hotel in Paris. I actually didn’t bother for myself, as I figured that on my own I could find some sort of room or hostel. With two of us, we may

have difficulty. But a friend – actually Jenny’s brother – gave me a recommendation. I fortunately wrote it down, including the telephone number, and we should make arrangements.”

“You must not spend too much money, Martin.”

“I am fortunate that I have a little from my Grandpa Ryan who is an American diplomat. He gave me a small bundle of American dollars last year and told me to use them to gain knowledge of the world. A good man, Grandpa Ryan. He even said to spend the money well but not too wisely, and told me not to put it in the bank in England.”

“Yes, I think you wrote that England does not allow much money for travelling. and there was some concern from the tourist industry in Belgium about it in the newspaper.”

“75 pounds. That’s actually quite a lot relative to wages in England. However, I think we’ll be all right.”

They finished their breakfast, and went to the hotel desk to let the clerk know they were going for a walk but would be leaving before 11. Martin offered to settle the bill immediately, and this offer was accepted with alacrity.

They walked again towards the center, and visited the Sint Jan’s cathedral.

Clara seemed uncertain of how the Dutch telephones worked, which meant they would need to be back in Ni-

nove before the Post Office closed. Accordingly, they decided not to extend their walk. Fortunately, the Markt was on the way back to the hotel and the station was near the hotel, so they were able to buy something to eat on the train.

“Let’s see how much money we have left. I don’t want to take any guilders back to Belgium.”

Last night’s restaurant and the hotel today had left them with a number of coins, which were awkward to exchange.

“Make sure you keep a few coins for the toilet lady,” said Clara. A good warning. The stern guardians of public toilets required their toll.

“Here’s two kwartjes. Will that be enough?”

“It should be enough for two, I think. Oh. You want me to have them?”

“Yes. Men can often pee for free.”

“Yes. Another ‘not fair’. Women always have it more hard.”

“I’m afraid the complaint will have to go upstairs,” Martin said.

“‘upstairs’?”

“To heaven. God. I did not do the design work on female anatomy.”

Clara laughed. “No. But it is still unfair! Oh. Look, een visboer. We can try a herring.”

They walked to the stall which had Dutch flags.

“Will you have one, Martin, or shall we share?”

“Share, I think.”

Clara ordered. There was some discussion, and Martin heard the word ‘gesneden’ and the man cut up the fish and removed the tail. He had heard that the Dutch held the fish by the tail and ‘down the hatch’, but clearly there were alternatives. What was handed over was a small rectangular plate with mouth sized pieces of fish and some onions, along with a toothpick.

“Here, try one.” Clara offered a piece on the toothpick.

It was soft and fishy and quite salty. A bit too salty for Martin.

“That’s all right. But a bit salty for me.”

Clara had already devoured three of the pieces, and there were now just a couple left. “Another?” she offered.

“No. You finish it. You seem to really like it.”

“Hmm. Lekker. Yes I do like it.”

“With those onions, you’d better not expect a kiss soon.”

“That’s why you should have some too!”

They laughed.

They had enough coin left, with a bit of choosing, to get some cheese, a couple of rolls – pistole – and two apple turnovers. Appelflapjes – the Dutch always seemed to apply a diminutive, but these were huge and

clearly full of something, hopefully truly apple. They also bought a bottle of mineral water. Miraculously, Clara pulled a canvas bag from her purse.

“For the shopping,” she said. It certainly helped, but Martin was given the turnovers, which were in a paper bag and might get crushed.

They returned to the hotel and retrieved their things from the room, packing some of the food and the water in Martin’s rucksack, then returned the key and walked to the station.

The return journey was uneventful. There was the usual passport inspection as they re-entered Belgium, but this was done on the train. By this time, they had eaten their turnovers and shared one of the rolls and part of the cheese. And they had chatted about their childhoods and many things that came up as they passed different scenery. Finally, they were in Brussels.

“A lot of changes in how we travel since 1944?” said Martin as they stepped down in Brussels.

“Yes. But your lorry got blown up, remember.”

“If it hadn’t, I wouldn’t be here now, or at least not with you,” Martin rejoined.

“That’s true. Still I think I like better the train.”

They got to Ninove towards the end of the afternoon.

Martin got Clara to help him buy tickets from Ninove to Gent for the morning, and to Paris from there later in the day. Then they walked toward the center of town to

the post office. Martin had already got out the notebook with the address and phone number of the hotel. As they walked he asked,

“Will your sister be all right with us just showing up with Annje?”

“Yes. I had planned to visit, and I was going to stay a few days there if I didn’t go with you to Paris. So it was all planned. And I want you to see Gent, and perhaps Brugge, when we come back from Paris.”

“Then let us plan to be 5 nights rather than a week in Paris. As I am alone, I can take a chance that there will be space for me on the ferry anyway. But I should go to see David and Esther fairly soon.

But will there be room for me in Gent? I can stay in a hotel.”

“I will talk to Wil when we are there tomorrow. Or, she has a telephone, as her husband is a doctor. So we can phone after we book the hotel.”

At the post office, Clara arranged the phone call to Paris. There was a short delay while the call was put through, then Martin was able to ask about a room. He managed to get a room with bath and toilet – it seemed the last one available for the nights that they wanted. In fact they had been cool and slow in suggesting what rooms were available until he mentioned that the hotel, called Hotel des Capucines, was recommended by the Hon. George Richmond. Then suddenly there appeared

to be a room available, and of the type he wanted.

Clara also called her sister to let her know they would be coming.

Martin paid the calls – expensive but necessary. Then they walked quickly to Tante Griet’s, dropped their luggage and got on the bikes to fetch Annje.

“François left a message that we are to stay for supper,” Clara said.

“How nice. Then we had better get a bottle of wine or something. Is there a shop nearby?”

“Yes. Follow me. And this I pay – they have looked after Annje.”

In fact she bought two bottles, one of white and one of red. This made the dinner an animated if mostly incomprehensible collection of conversations in three languages. Fortunately, the long summer evening meant they could get back to Tante Griet’s before dark, though Annje’s bedtime ensured they were well in advance of sunset.

Paris

July 24, 1947. Paris, France.

The next morning, everyone was up early. They wanted to get a direct train to Gent, and there were only a couple each day. And this time there was more luggage, but with the rucksack, Martin was able to carry

both Annje's bag and Clara's case, leaving Clara to look after Annje.

They were in Gent before 9, and Wil was there to meet them. She was almost 40, but looked older, Martin thought, than his mother who was now closer to 50. The war had been hard for many here. After a torrent of Flemish greetings, Clara introduced Martin. "Mijn vriend Martin Tremblay. Mijn zus Wil Vandervliet."

"Bienvenue, Martin. Preferez-vous français?"

They continued in French. Wil had her husband's car, though the house was not far away. At the house, Wil introduced her 14 year old daughter and 10 year old son, Evelyn, called Eef, and Thomas who was, of course, Tom. They had tea. Eef seemed immediately captivated by Annje and kept her amused. Apparently, they had not seen each other since Christmas. Travel was easier now, but the winter had been hard here too, and Joop, Wil's doctor husband, had been kept busy, and even his own family had suffered some bad bronchitis.

As they drank coffee, Wil asked: "Est-ce que vous revient ici, Martin, après Paris?"

"Certainment. Je veut voir Gand et aussi Bruges – Brugge – avant que je retourne en Angleterre. Mais peut-être vous pouvez recommander un hotel?"

"Pas necessaire. Thomas veut visiter ses cousins à Evergem – les fils du frère de Joop. Vous pouvez avoir

sa chambre. Et Clara et Annje vont partager la chambre d'hôtes. Mais lorsque vous êtes à Paris, Annje partage avec Eef, je pense.”

“C’est très généreux. Merci beaucoup, Wil.” Martin was not sure he should address Clara’s sister as Wil, but he thought that it was warmer than Madame Vandervliet.

Clara got up and there was the usual moving of baggage and sharing important information. Martin could follow much of the Flemish in a general way, but not specifics, but when he saw that Clara wanted to give Wil the hotel address and telephone, he pulled out the piece of paper he had already prepared.

“Oh Martin. That was very good to think ahead,” Clara said. Wil smiled too. “And I will think ahead in case the train has no WC.” she added and disappeared. While she was away, Wil quietly said to Martin: “Monsieur Tremblay – Martin – je suis un peu craintive en ce qui concerne Clara. Elle a eu une histoire difficile.”

“Je comprends très bien. Je ne veut que le meilleure pour elle. Et je veut aussi garder chaleureuse notre amitié. Sans divulger aucune chose privée, je peux vous confier que nous avons parler sérieusement au sujet de garder notre futur et notre bonheur comme des amies. Je suis aussi vraiment conscient que dans quelques mois je vais à Toronto.”

“Merci. Il y avait tellement filles qui sont laissées

enceintes dans les années récentes, et les hommes – garçons actuellement – disparus ou mortes.”

“Je le sais. Y compris Clara – je suis arrivé à la ferme pratiquement au moment que les allemandes ont tué Luc.”

“Oui. C’est difficile de vous placer là-bas dans mes pensées. Ces temps là semblent tellement loins de maintenant.”

Clara was back. Martin quickly followed her example – here the toilet was even accompanied by a tiny wash basin. Then they said goodbye to Annje, got into the car – a big pre-war Peugeot – and were off to the station. Martin caught the word ‘uitwuiwen’, meaning to wave goodbye, a tradition in the low countries of seeing people off. However, Clara was telling Wil not to bother with this, but simply to let them out at the station. This she did, and they quickly went to find the platform for their train. Though they had plenty of time, both were anxious to avoid any mishap.

The geography and railway network was such that they could go via Kortrijk or Brussels. Their particular train this day went to Kortrijk, and they crossed the border at Roubaix, past the coal pits near Lille. They were on the right hand side of the train, and Martin realized they were near Vimy.

“If we watch we may see the Vimy monument,” he said.

“It’s sad – that is from the Great War? Yes.”

“Yes it is. And the land is now part of Canada.”

“Really!”

“Yes. Given to Canada by the French. And for a few days after the big battle, the British claimed the victory. The Canadian Prime Minister was so upset he insisted the newspapers correct the error or he would pull the Canadians from the line.”

“I had no idea. We think the Canadians are like English, but you seem to be a truly separate country.”

“Actually on January 1 this year, we had a new Canadian Citizenship Act, but I’ve still got one of the older British-style passports. So I can see how you get confused. Hmm. I think the monument should be over there, but with the trees and distance, I don’t see it.”

They lapsed into silence and watched the scenery pass. Even when Clara took out the sandwiches Tante Griet had made with some thinly sliced Ardense Ham, Martin simply said “Thanks” and took one. But when they had finished he took Clara’s hand, and she squeezed his and they smiled. Sometimes one did not need conversation.

It was mid-afternoon when they got to the Gare du Nord.

“Taxi or Métro?” asked Martin.

“Let’s take the Métro. I’ve never done something like that. In the last few days, I have taken more trains than

in the whole rest of my life.”

This made Martin realize how different their lives had been. Strange how they got along so well together.

They found out how to buy Métro tickets and looked up how to get to the Madeleine station. There was a ‘correspondance’ at Strasbourg-St Denis. Martin had managed to find a small guidebook in Blackwells in Oxford that included a map, and he quickly found the hotel. They registered as in Den Bosch, with no inconvenient questions. There was an ancient porter who insisted on carrying Clara’s small case. Martin knew this was to get a tip, and he gave him a few coins. It was fortunate the Metro had given him some as change from the notes he had received at the Bank in England.

Suddenly, they were alone together in the room. It was quite spacious, with a high double bed. Clara went to the door at the side of the room. It opened onto a bathroom that had its own window, suitably of frosted glass. There was a toilet at the end farthest from the window, a sink on the wall by the door, with a bidet by the window and the bath on the far wall. The door was between the sink and the toilet. As in Den Bosch, it opened into the main room.

“Don’t be too much in a hurry when you leave the bathroom,” Martin said.

“I don’t understand.”

“If anyone comes out of the bathroom quickly, they

could hit someone in the room.”

“Oh yes.”

“I’ll unpack my rucksack. I want to get the creases out of my clothes.”

“Me too, but I need the toilet.”

Martin unpacked his rucksack, putting the shirts and one pair of spare pants on hangers. He also had his raincoat in the sack, and hung that. There was a big wardrobe for this. It had shelves for small clothes, and he put his underwear and socks and sweater there. He realized he was still wearing his blazer, and put it on a hanger too.

“Clara, shall I hang up your clothes too?”

“Oh. Thank you, yes.”

The two dresses and the suit were easy, as was a pair of slacks. Her skirt he was not sure about, then realized it had loops. The hanger he had used for his blazer had some hooks, so he moved the blazer to a simple hanger and got the skirt and a blouse on the one with hooks. Another blouse he put on a separate hanger. Then there were smalls, as the English called them. Martin wasn’t used to them. They felt nice. A spare bra and several pairs of panties, some stockings and a garter belt. Also some socks and a spare pair of shoes. He put the shoes on the bottom of the wardrobe with his own spares, then arrayed the other items on one of the shelves, except for a nightdress that he put

on one of the pillows.

The toilet flushed and Clara came back into the room.

“You are right about the door. Shall we put it as we did in Den Bosch?”

“Yes. Sure.”

Martin pushed it back. He realized apart from a washbag, Clara’s suitcase was empty. He emptied his rucksack of his own washbag and some small items, leaving a couple of exposed films.

“Can I put my rucksack in your suitcase and we’ll use it to hold the door of the bathroom open?”

“That is a good idea. Otherwise if it moves, we may run into it at night.”

“I have a torch – in fact it is still the one I had at the farm in 1944. The type you squeeze to make a light. But it is a bit noisy. However, I think we will get some light from the street unless we close the inner curtains.”

Indeed, there were net curtains and more substantial inner ones. Probably did duty for a blackout during the war. At this moment, the inner curtains were open and the window was very slightly open. The windows were full height, and there was a tiny balcony, if it could be called that. Martin took a look to see if it was likely someone could climb in. Possibly, if they were agile. He would arrange something to ensure the window could not be just opened further without making a racket in the night.

“Do you want to go out and explore?” he asked.

“Hmm. Yeeesss. But I also feel I want to stay in and explore.”

“That’s a nice idea. How shall we proceed?”

“First we take your tie off.” She moved and started to undo it, but he surprised her by cupping his hands under her breasts.

“Oh. Naughty.”

“You said ‘explore’, that’s all I was doing,” he said.

“You had better undo the tie. I never learned how men do it. Luc only wore one to church when we got married, and when we baptized Annje. I suppose he wore one some other times, but those are the only times I remember.

But I should not talk of Luc. It is not polite when I am with you.”

“I think you should say what you are feeling. Luc was and still is part of your life. He is Annje’s father. Perhaps if you try too hard not to talk about him, it will be more uncomfortable.”

“Yes. It is all some confusing.”

Martin removed the tie quickly. The mood needed to be lifted.

“Last one undressed is still naked,” he said.

He lost this race. Clara had not bothered to put her panties on after going to the toilet, and her dress was one that didn’t need a slip, so she only had to undo her

bra once the dress was undone.

“What now?” he asked.

“Do you have the ... kapotjes?”

“Yes,” he realized they were still in the rucksack.

“They’re in here. I forgot. Good job you asked!”

“Really. Martin!”

“Don’t worry. I would have remembered. I thought you would want to go out first. I didn’t want to rush you, but I really do want to make love with you.”

“That’s very clear,” she said, nodding to the obvious evidence. “But it might be nice to take a bath first. I am finished the bleeding, but it would be nice to feel fresh.”

Martin had no objection to this, but realized that he had a minor problem.

“Damn. I should have used the loo.”

Clara laughed. “I cannot help you with that.”

“Then fill the tub, but remember two have to fit in there. We don’t want ‘een overstroming’.”

“Ah. You know the exact word.”

By dint of waiting, Martin managed to lose his erection enough to pee. By this time, Clara was in the tub.

“Move up,” Martin said.

“No. I want to see. You sit the other way.”

Interestingly, the taps were on the side of the tub. It was very long – about a foot longer than most Canadian tubs and probably 6 inches longer than a British one,

but Canadian ones were wider. And the drain end had a steeper back than the end Clara had appropriated.

He climbed in and tried to sit down. She pulled up her knees to let him do so. They were now each seated, but had to keep their knees up and together.

“I think we need to put our legs to either side,” said Martin.

Clara laughed. “Yes. I can’t see much yet!”

“You are terribly wicked, Clara Joos. I will have to find a suitable punishment for such wickedness.”

“I am terribly afraid,” she mocked back.

Martin put his left leg past her right side, and lifted her right leg, which was below his leg, by his left side. Then he did the same with the other legs. He was now between her legs, and she would not be able to close them. But neither would he. And they were close enough to touch each other. Suddenly she sat forward and put her arms round his neck and kissed him.

They kissed for some time, perhaps it was a minute, perhaps it was five.

“That was nice,” he said.

“Yes. But it makes me excited.”

“Really. I don’t think I’m affected at all,” he spoofed.

“Not what your ‘richtingaanwijzer’ says,” she responded.

“‘Richtingaanwijzer’?”

“The thing that says a car is going to turn. It is like

a yellow flag with a light that comes out the side of the car beside the door.”

Martin laughed. It was the perfect witty response.

“Martin. Give me that flannel so I can wash. And the soap please.”

She washed her face and her shoulders, breasts and arms. Martin took another flannel and did much the same, but he cupped water to rinse his beard. Then he washed her feet and legs, which she lifted for him. She did the same for him, then quite suddenly grabbed his penis at the base and gently poured water over its length by cupping her other hand.

“You’d better be careful. It might be like the mine and go off,” he said.

“Are you that close to ... ejaculeren ... ejaculating?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve never spent this much time just being with a naked woman and not, well, you know, putting it inside.”

“Me too. But I quite like going slowly, I think. But if you really need to come inside, we can get out and do so.”

“Let’s try slowly. If I do go off, it is not a disaster, just a bit messy.”

“True, but now I’m starting to want you inside soon, too.”

“Let me wash you too then. But I think perhaps just water. I know I don’t like soap in the little hole. It

stings.”

“Yes. Water alone is safer below. But you can put some soap on my tummy.”

He gently soaped her stomach and pubic hair. It was soft and springy. Then he rinsed her. The stomach was not fat, but had a nice roundness. In the fairly strong light, he could see some small lighter markings. These would be stretch marks from Annje, but you had to look carefully to see them. Then with his fingers, he carefully washed between her legs, moving the folds and ensuring the water he rinsed her with reached the inner spaces. She was very slippery, especially at the opening as he explored it with his fingers.

“Oh, dat is goed,” she sighed. He slipped a finger inside. “Now who is naughty,” she said.

“I think we should get out,” Martin suggested.

“Yes. We both do not wait much longer, I think.”

They helped each other up and out of the bath, which was high-sided. They made only a perfunctory effort to dry off, but Clara took a towel and laid it on the bed after opening it.

“It is possible I still bleed a little, and better to have it on a serviette.”

While she was doing this, Martin found the condoms.

“Do you want to put it on for me?” he asked.

“How am I going to wear it?” she teased. “Actually, you will have to show me. I’ve never seen one before.”

Martin sat her on the bed and stood in front of her. He took a condom out of the packet.

“You just need to make sure you get it so it unrolls properly and not to tear it with your fingernail,” he said, pointing to the edge. Then he placed it on the tip of his now very hard erection and gently started to unroll it. “Do you want to do the rest?”

Clara gently moved it all the way down.

Martin bent over and kissed her, pushing her forward. She instinctively opened her legs, and he could feel his penis against the heat of her crotch. But he didn’t want to finish quite yet. So he kissed down her neck, across her breasts, spending time on each nipple until it was hard and clearly sensitized. Then he kissed down to her belly button. This was getting too serious, so he took a deep breath and turned her belly button into a sort of trombone, making a wonderfully rude noise.

“That’s for being so, so, terribly naughty,” he said. She was laughing so much her breasts shook. Martin reached around her legs and grabbed them and gently squeezed. His head was between her legs and he licked her gently where he knew she would be sensitive. She took in a breath with a gasp. He continued and she was soon sighing noisily. After a bit, he stopped.

“Naughty girls get a good tongue lashing as punishment.”

“Come inside now, Martin. I want you now,” she said with some urgency.

He obliged, and while he did not lose the battle with pleasure immediately, it was still quicker than he would like. He carefully withdrew, holding the base of the condom.

“Wait. Wait,” Clara said.

“The condom can leak out the bottom if we don’t pull out,” He said.

“Oh. I didn’t know. And we cannot afford that I become zwanger – pregnant. It is a pity.”

“Yes. I’d like to lie together afterwards, like we did at the farm.”

He got up, found some toilet paper and removed the condom, wrapping it the paper and disposing of it in the sanitary napkin bin. He used his flannel and wiped himself, then picked up Clara’s, wet it with warm water and wrung it out.

“Would you like a cloth?”

“Yes. I am quite wet. I will use the bidet in a minute, but would better not drip on the bed or the floor. Where did it all come from?”

“You. You were very excited.”

“Yes. It was very nice. With the tongue – you called it a ‘tongue lashing’?”

“That is an expression that means someone in authority tells you how bad you have been. However, I

used it in a very different way.”

“Yes. What you did was very pleasant.”

When he wiped her, he noted a little pinkness on the flannel. “I hope I didn’t hurt you. It looks like a little blood. I was quite rough in pushing in and out.”

“I think it is just the end of the monthly time. I felt no pain at all. Quite the opposite.”

“Shall we get up?”

“A few minutes together. Then we get up.”

Paris in the evening

They found that they had renewed energy, and walked for nearly an hour and a half before hunger drove them to seek a restaurant. They had noted one across the street from the hotel, and decided that they would try it so they could come back to their room more easily if they drank more wine than they should.

Le Crocodil had simple tables in rows. They had to sit alongside other people. The chef was in the corner. Every so often, someone would come in to get some food to take away. ‘Someone’ was always female and quite young and attractive. The chef always had to hug and kiss them.

The menu offered two prix fixe for either 3 or 4 courses, including coffee or tea. They could choose from

several selections under the appetizer, entree, main and dessert. Martin suggested that sweetbreads were not so interesting. It turned out that Clara knew what they were once he explained where they came from, and also knew she did not like them, and they each chose more common items.

They drank a litre of wine – the vin de maison – between them. By the time they had finished sharing creme caramel and some profiteroles, they were glad the hotel was just across the road. After settling the bill, they crossed the street and climbed to their room.

Martin used some of the electrical wire he always had in his rucksack for emergencies and fashioned a tie to keep the window from being opened more than a crack. By the time he had finished, Clara was in her nightdress and in bed. He had heard her brushing her teeth. Winding the wire had taken a few minutes.

“Is the word I say ‘slowpoke’? I saw it in a story we read in my English class. A story about cowboys.”

“You could use that word. It is not an impolite word, but colloquial. But I won’t be long,” and he wasn’t, but made sure he brushed his teeth too.

“Martin! Make sure there is one of the sheaths near. We may need it in the night.”

“Now perhaps?”

“I’m too full with dinner and wine.”

“Me too.”

Martin killed the light. It was not late, perhaps around 10. They curled up together.

“Do you want to sleep?” he asked.

“Not really. But I would like that if I sleep it is all right.”

“Yes. That we can sleep if we want, and if not, lie here together and recall a wonderful day.”

“It was wonderful. Thank you. And I liked our walk where we saw many of the famous places. But not, I think, the palais where Louis Quatorze had his court.”

“That is at Versailles, some distance away. We will go there tomorrow or the next day if you like. I’m too tired tonight, but I suggest that over breakfast we plan the days we are here so we don’t miss anything either of us really wishes to see.”

“I hope that won’t be like your Jenny, so that the pleasure is on schedule too.”

“No, my wicked one, we’ll make sure we have plenty of time for that unless you decide you are going to repent and become a nun.”

“Een non? A bit late I think. I like the sex too much.”

“Yes, I think we both do.”

They kissed, but it was not a kiss that was a prelude to more sex.

“It may be a good idea to try to get up and out early in the day, and then come back in the late afternoon

for a rest and ... well, some fun, then go out again for a walk and dinner like we did tonight.”

“That is good also for me. I like a small sleep in the afternoon, even though we did not have one today.”

“Like Annje, we’ll take a nap.”

“Is ‘nap’ a small sleep?”

“Yes. A snooze, lie-down.”

“Een dutje.”

That seemed to put both of them to sleep. Martin woke as there was a faint glow in the small gap he’d left in the thick curtains. It must be before 6 in the morning. He got up and used the toilet, but didn’t flush to avoid waking Clara. But as he was washing his hands, she was at the toilet. She flushed it, then washed her hands. Martin was ready for her in bed, but she pulled her nightdress over her head before slipping under the covers.

They hadn’t said a word, but Martin took off his pyjamas, installed the condom and rolled on top of her. They kissed for a while, then he slipped inside her without any foreplay other than the kissing. This time he lasted quite a time, until her obvious excitement pushed him over the edge too.

This time Clara reached down and helped hold the condom in place.

“I am learning, yes?”

“Yes. And I appreciate that. I would find it very

difficult to pull out if you said that you wanted me to stay. It's really nice to lie together at the end of it. One day I hope that we will be able to do that without fear of upsetting our hopes for the future."

"I think a child now would end my hope for the export business," Clara said.

"But the markets are slow to develop."

"Terribly slow. We have only a few orders so far, and those only for small quantities. I think they are just sampling to see what customers think."

"Maybe you need someone in the places you want to sell. Pull is easier than push."

"Yes. Pull and push. I am now push I think."

"I wonder if pull would be easier?" Martin mused.

"But we have nobody in Canada or America or England or wherever."

"Right now England is in a mess. They allowed pounds to be converted a week or so ago and there's been a lot of people buying dollars. I think there may even be a small crisis."

"So the English have no money to buy our Belgian things?"

"Yes. That is so. They can only trade easily with people in the Sterling zone. Mostly the Commonwealth, but not Canada. We're more or less with the Yanks – the Americans – and work in dollars. You'd be better off in North America."

“Hmmf. What is it you say about hell and ice?”

“When hell freezes over?”

“Yes. I will get there when hell freezes over.”

“Unless ..., ” Martin hesitated. This was perhaps not the time.

“Unless what?”

Sometimes things were fated.

“Unless you came with me to Toronto.”

“How could I do that? I have a daughter, almost no money. Where would I live? A nice dream. But dreams can make many people very unhappy.”

“What did the lady in the restaurant in Brussels call us?”

“Ah.... Une vraie couple. Martin. Are you saying we should ... stay together, marry even?”

The enormity of the discussion started to loom.

“Well, it is a big step. But I think we should at least talk about it. We seem to be so ... easy together. And though we are so different in our backgrounds we seem to share many things we like.

But we should be careful to find out what each of us expects and wants. Maybe we should each make a list of what we must have in a marriage, that is, the absolutely necessary. And then a list of what we expect to have – what we think we can likely find together. Then finally what we want to have if there is a fairy godmother. Then we can compare and see if we are

going to want to stay together.”

“‘fairy godmother’? Fairy is, I think, *fee* in Flemish. Godmother is *peettante*. What does this mean?”

“Someone who magically can give you everything you want, as in the stories by the Brothers Grimm.”

“All right. I see what you are saying.”

“Do you want to consider the possibility, Clara? I don’t want to make promises, or even hint at promises, if they are going to make you sad later.”

“No. We seem so much as the lady said. It has come as a shock to me that I feel this life in me again. I would like very much to at least talk of what might be, but only if we talk of things that are possible. I must not dream of things that need the fairy godmother.”

“That makes a lot of sense for me as well. But sometimes it is useful to share the dreams, so one learns about the other person. Jenny never asked me even what I expected, and she never told me her dreams. But I think you will.”

Martin kissed her and she responded, curling in against him.

“Martin. Are you able to accept Annje?”

“I think so, but I will not pretend to know children at all. I’m sure she can be very difficult at times, especially if she gets sick or overtired. That frightens me, the possibility that I might get angry or unkind. But we must work out how Annje will come with us if we are

going to share life in Canada. I know that we will not be happy unless she can be part of our happiness.”

“And you are not just wanting a plaything for the pleasure?”

“I’m sure I do want the pleasure and I find you a wonderful plaything. How can we share the fun we have had in the last day and then not want it?”

“You had Jenny. There would be another.”

“But one has to find that other person. I don’t think Jenny was in your league anyway.”

“In my league?”

“It comes from sports. In England there are several football divisions or leagues. We say someone is ‘out of my league’ if they come from a better division or league.”

“Am I that good?” Clara seemed genuinely surprised.

“The physical things we do don’t feel very different to me. But you don’t try to control things and have them precisely your own way. You share your joy and tell me when you like things. I don’t feel I have to think about doing something. Even more, I’m not afraid that things might not be perfect. I could go off too soon or not at all and we’ll just try again later. You make it so much more comfortable.”

“Hmm. I can remember it with Luc now only as in a fog. It was nice, but it was under the covers. We never sat in a bath or took a shower together. Sometimes I

would help him wash in the tub, or he me, but it was too small for two, and then we had to clean up the kitchen after. No time to”

“Canoodle?”

“What is that? I think in English you have an impolite word ‘fuck’. We say ‘neuken’. Is that what canoodle means?”

“No. More kiss and hug. But of course it leads to the same result!”

They both laughed.

“Let’s sleep a bit more,” Martin suggested.

But though both pretended, neither slept. Both were busy with the lists of musts, expects and hopes.

Versailles

At breakfast they decided to go to Versailles, as the weather seemed reasonably fair. The hotel had provided some stationery in the room, so they each took a couple of sheets of paper. Martin had a couple of small pencils in a side pocket of his rucksack and his notebook. Clara also had pencils in her purse. “For Annje to ... tekenen ... ”

“Draw?” suggested Martin.

“Yes. And always I keep a bit of paper. But the hotel paper is nicer.”

They would be able to make their lists, but for now they left them in purse or pocket.

They were at the Chateau almost as it opened for the day. Martin paid their entry and they spent a couple of hours exploring the palace. Then came outside. It was not hot, but warm enough.

“There are still the grounds and ‘les Trianons’,” Martin said.

“But I am becoming hungry and my feet a little sore.”

“We can leave and find a café. I think there may be a kiosk for something small.”

“Something to drink at least,” Clara replied.

They saw a sign that indicated a cup and followed it to find a kiosk where they got some lemonade and a brioche. Despite the Paris reputation, it was rather mediocre, but they found a seat and were happy enough to have some refreshment.

Clara took out paper and pencil and started to write. Martin decided he would do the same. After a bit, Clara put her paper in her handbag.

“Want to compare notes?” Martin asked.

“I think not yet, but perhaps some questions are to be asked?”

“OK. Ask away.”

“And perhaps you too will have questions. I think to the lists we must add a set of questions.”

“Like?”

“Like where will we get married?”

“Yes. My mother was furious with Penny because she could not be at the wedding.”

“I think you mentioned that, and it – how do you say – stayed in my head?”

“‘Stuck in my mind’ is probably the expression. Yes. Mum will be very miffed if we don’t have her to the wedding. But I guess so would Wil and François and others in Ninove.

I suppose we could have a civil wedding in Belgium and then a church wedding in Canada.”

“Why not the other way round?”

“It would be easier to travel as a married couple, I think. Besides, on my list of things that I expect, I wrote that I think it would be good for you to see some of Britain, especially Oxford and London, so that when I talk about them you have some idea of the places and people. That would be much easier if we are married.”

“Yes. I should see the places you talk about and meet some of the people. But not Jenny!”

“Why not Jenny?”

“Because it would be too hard to not think ‘The 16:10 from bed 2’ and I would make silly of myself.”

Martin laughed. Yes, it would now be hard to avoid thinking of Jenny that way.

“Shall we walk on?” he asked.

“For a quick look at one of Les Trianons. But then I

think I want to go back to the hotel for a nap – and I think this time I mean nap.”

As it turned out, they did not go back to the hotel. After some time in one of the buildings, they found a bench under some trees and sat close. Clara rested her head on Martin’s shoulder and indeed did snooze. Martin himself dozed. Then they took the train back toward town, but decided to get off at St Michel and look at that area before walking back to the hotel.

It was now about 5 – too early for Parisians to dine – but soon they saw a sign ‘Restaurant Vietnamiennne’ with several people inside, mostly orientals.

“I think orientals eat at less regular times than Europeans,” Martin volunteered.

“But what type of food?” Clara asked.

“I don’t know. Perhaps since we didn’t have much lunch, we could eat now and find out.”

They went into the restaurant and with some difficulty – the waiter’s accent was quite pronounced and their French was clearly different from his – decided on a few dishes. First came some delightful fried rolls, which translated as Spring Rolls. They had trouble with the polished chopsticks and their waiter brought forks without asking. Then there was a soup that seemed to be based on beans. It was very tasty. They ordered mineral water to drink, and were glad they did, as the next courses were a chicken curry and shrimps with mixed

vegetables that were very spicy.

“Are you all right with this spicy food?” Martin asked, perspiring.

“It is not like food I know, and I could not eat it every day, but as an experience, I can manage.”

Fortunately, there was plenty of rice.

Over dinner, they mostly talked about food.

“Do you have any Vietnamese restaurants in Canada, Martin?”

“I was really a bit young to go out to restaurants, and Ottawa did not have a big community of orientals. I heard a fellow from Alberta say that the Chinese offered good food for very good prices, and he liked their rice and noodles. But I don’t remember one in Ottawa. There was an Italian cook from the Chateau Laurier – the biggest hotel – he opened up his own place out near the Experimental Farm. The Prescott. But it was known for selling beer, and I never went there. I never even heard of Vietnam there.”

“Why do they have them here?”

“Vietnam is part of French Indochina. In fact I think they treat it as a Département, a province of France. The Japanese took it over, but now the French are back. But with all the upset of the war, I expect colonies will be under pressure.”

“Yes. We still have Congo, but I don’t know of any Congo restaurants.”

“Perhaps there is more tradition of eating some types of colonial food. There are some Indian restaurants in London and a few other places. Many British have been to India and like the food. Probably the same sort of thing here with Vietnam. But I don’t know of any African restaurants in England, and the British certainly have colonies there.”

After finishing their meal, they walked slowly toward the hotel.

“We could take a rest, then go out later.” Martin suggested.

“Let’s wait and see. But let’s also buy some water and perhaps wine and something small to eat. Maybe pastry.”

“That hot food has made me feel very full.”

“Me too. But I think it is mostly the spice making air.”

“Like that.” Martin pointed to a building across the street. “That building. It has a notice for the firemen – les pompiers – do you see it. ‘Gaz a tous les étages’”

“Yes!” Clara laughed. “That is perfectly the way to say the feeling.”

They found a small grocery and bought mineral water and a bottle of wine as well as some plain biscuits and some chocolate, the last item from under the counter at a very high price. They made their way to the hotel, noting some of the women who had come in

for food in the Crocodil were now loitering.

“Oh dear. I think we may be in a district that is used for ... well, prostitution,” Martin said.

“There seem to be many other people too,” Clara responded.

That was indeed the case, and a couple of the girls even greeted them with “Bonsoir, Madame, Monsieur” to which they responded “Bonsoir”.

“I suppose they need to make a living too,” Martin said.

“Life can be hard in these times,” Clara replied.

They entered the hotel and climbed the stairs to their room, glad to be where they could rest.

“Do you want the toilet first, Clara?”

“Yes. I think maybe I am not used to the hot spice.”

Martin took off his tie and jacket and slumped in the upholstered chair. Then he took off his shoes and wiggled his toes. He was physically tired, but mentally alert. They had walked a lot.

The toilet flushed and Clara was washing her hands, then she came into the room and took off her dress and shoes, then lay on the bed.

“Ah. That is good.”

Martin realized he was feeling very gassy too. Indeed, the hot food was a bit of a shock to the old system. He sat for quite a while on the porcelain throne, lost in various thoughts, then got up and flushed and

washed his hands. He undressed to his underpants and joined Clara on the bed.

“Do you want to cuddle?” he asked.

“Cuddle?”

“Lie close together. Embrace.”

“Do you say ‘in principle’? I feel still hot and a bit full.”

“Me too.”

It was about 7 pm. Gradually the light changed and Martin realized he had been asleep. He got up and pulled the curtains shut. Clara appeared asleep. He wondered if he should wake her, but decided to just wait. As if knowing his thoughts, she reached out her arm and took his hand.

“I was asleep. You also?”

“Yes. I just got up and closed the curtains so we do not scandalize others.”

“Does ‘scandalize’ mean make them upset because they cannot have what we have and so try to say it is wrong?”

“That is a good description.”

“What time is it?”

“I didn’t take off my watch. It says 8:30. Do you want to go out?”

“No. I think stay close and talk and cuddle. Perhaps we compare lists?”

“Have you finished yours? I didn’t do all mine.”

“Perhaps it is better that we make a list together.”

“That is very true. But right now I still feel sweaty from walking about, and my feet still hurt a bit too. Shall we sit in the tub and talk?”

“Ja. Yes. Do you say ‘surely’ or ‘sure’?”

“In England ‘surely’. But Americans say ‘sure’. And in New Hampshire it is pronounced ‘shewer’ with two syllables.”

Clara jumped up and had her bra and panties off in a trice.

“Slowpoke!” she said, starting the water into the tub.

“Shall I open the wine?”

“Oh. Please.”

There were two water glasses, and the hotel had thoughtfully put a carafon of drinking water in the room. Not all hotels would have done so. There was a hard chair in the room, so Martin moved it into the bathroom so they would have a table for their glasses. Martin was glad he had remembered a corkscrew. The cork came out of the bottle with a satisfying pop. He poured two tumblers of the wine, a simple red table wine, and pushed the cork back in partly.

“Bring your notes, Martin, and get mine from my handbag.”

He did this, remembering to get a pencil – one that was sharp enough to write – from his jacket pocket. He also put a towel on the chair. Paper and water were a

poor combination. Clara was already in the tub, but this time moved forward so he could climb in behind her.

“Not interested in my richtingaanwijzer any more?” Martin teased.

“I’ll be able to feel it in my back, and later if it has been naughty by being uncomfortable to lean against, I will have to do ... what do you say ... tongue lash it.”

“I’ll have to be very careful.”

“Oh, I hope not too careful!”

Martin was now in the tub and eased his legs around her, having to raise his knees because her hips occupied a good part of the width of the tub. He passed her a glass and picked up his.

“To us!”

“Yes. To us.”

They each drank a little, then put their glasses down.

“What do your notes say, Martin.”

Martin picked them up.

“Must have:

Friendship

Sharing

Respect for what other person does, even if this is not something of great interest.

What are your ‘must have’ items, Clara?”

“I wrote in Flemish, so I will translate, but the first two are the same as yours.”

The importance of this was not lost on either of them.

“Two out of three. Pretty good.”

“But I have five. I hope I am not too greedy.”

“What are they?”

“Well, one you already said this morning. That Anje must be part of our happiness if there is to be a happiness.”

“Yes. I had meant to put that down, but at Versailles I got distracted.”

“And what you said about respect. I was wanting to say something like that, but what is written is more like permission to enjoy different things.”

“And the last ‘must have’ item?”

“Comfort. Not money or house or things, but like we are now. Being easy together. If we don’t have that, it will be hard to give love.”

“Yes. That is very wise. And I wish I had added those points to my list of bare necessities.”

“‘Bare necessities.’ That is in English how you say the things you must have?”

“It is one way. Actually a very good way. But what about the things you expect? I already told you about seeing Oxford and London, but that was so far the only thing I put down.”

“I haven’t started that list.”

“But let us do it now, together. For me, I suppose I

expect love. And sex too, but if we practice for a few years we should get that to work.”

“Awful man!” Clara said, and used her elbow in his ribs.

“And you don’t want love. Just lots of sex!”

“No, I want love,” she said, suddenly quite serious. “Martin. I just realized that I already love you, and it makes me a bit frightened.”

Martin could feel her almost cold. He put his arms round her, with one hand turning on the hot water and warming the tub. After turning it off, he said,

“I think I just realized the same thing.”

She turned her head and they kissed awkwardly and urgently.

“We seem to have made a decision of what we want. Now we have to sort out how to do it,” Martin said.

“You really mean that. It’s not just to get sex from me?” Clara seemed suddenly less sure of herself.

“Clara, I absolutely adore sex with you, but part of that is because you don’t make it a trade. The girls we passed in the street trade money for sex. With any of them, I could never know they were enjoying the sex. You clearly find it delightful with me, with no suggestion that I am buying it.”

“But you have been so generous. That is not the same thing?”

“You have made my holiday so, so special. Mostly be-

cause you show how much you enjoy our time together. The girls in the street would, I would guess, cost much more for much less fun, and I would have nobody to write to or talk to or ... marry.”

She kissed him again, then squirmed forward and stood up in the tub, and began to dry herself, stepping out of the tub.

“Is something wrong?” Martin asked, concerned.

“Yes, you are getting hard and we must do something about it.”

Martin laughed and followed her lead. She skipped off into the bedroom. She turned on the bedside lamp. He saw her get a condom out of the package in the bedside table, then empty the package into the drawer and count the number.

“You are planning to use them all?” he asked.

“And why not?” she asked with fake archness. “My ... what do I call it Martin?” she pointed at her crotch.

“Pussy. Cunt. A lot of people unfortunately use cunt as an insult rather than just a part of a woman’s body. Perhaps pussy is better.”

“Like a cat?”

“Yes.”

“Well, why should I not want to please my pussy after three years of no pleasure?”

The logic was hard to escape. Martin came over to the bed, but Clara remained standing. He lay down and

she knelt on the bed and kissed him, then worked down his torso.

“It is a sort of ice cream cone, but warm,” she said.

“I’m not sure it tastes that way, especially if I go off.”

“Maybe we wait to try that. Tell me if you feel that you are going to – do you say ‘come’?. If it were not for the rubber, I would do it after to make you hard again.”

“Well, we are planning to have time to do that, are we not, when we are settled?”

“I find I am not able to think that yet. That I am with you now is so new.”

“Well, we will have to talk about those things.”

“Hmm. But not now. My ice cream is melting.”

Suddenly her mouth was around him, the sensation taking his breath away.

“Careful. That gives a very strong feeling.”

“But you did it to me!”

She continued until he told her he was about to come. Then she waited for a while, then put the condom on his erection.

“Anyone watching might be ... did you say ‘scandalized’?”

“Yes.”

“Then I make it disappear.”

Suddenly she was straddling him, and he was inside her.

“Where did it go?” she teased.

“Somewhere nice,” he countered.

She started to move up and down on him. He reached up and took one breast in each hand and squeezed gently. She started to breath heavily, and on a whim he stopped pushing up into her so she did not get a strong contact with him.

“No, no. Push. I need you,” she cried.

“Tired. On strike,” he replied.

“Pleaaase!”

He pushed up firmly and wiggled. Her relief was palpable. Then he just let the pleasure take over until they both climaxed more or less together. She reached down and eased him out of her and passed him some toilet paper, which he had not seen her put on the bedside table. He removed the sheath and got up and threw it away, put on his pyjamas and got into bed. Clara had put on her nightdress. Then they curled up together.

“Thank you for today,” she said.

“Thank you too.”

Museums and Folies

In the morning they both felt a little uncomfortable. The hot food was a little too much for their digestive systems. Over breakfast they decided to explore close to the hotel. This turned out to be fairly straightforward,

as they were quite near le Jardin des Tuileries and the Louvre and the newly opened Jeu de Paume museum. Museums had toilets! By mid-day their discomfort had abated. They spent the morning in the Louvre, bought a crepe each from a street vendor for lunch and then an hour or so with the impressionists in the Jeu de Paume.

“Martin. I have not been in museums like this before,” Clara said as they started the Jeu de Paume.

“I have to make myself remember that you grew up on a farm and lived a rural life. And I never had to look after cows and chickens. Milk came from the milkman, meat from the butcher’s shop.

It’s interesting that the French say ‘Musée’ and then add ‘de beaux arts’, but in English we’d say ‘Art Gallery’. Being in London, I’ve been to the National Gallery and the Tate and some other museums where there is art as well as other things. ”

“Yes. We have very different growing ups. It is good to learn about each other.”

They found that if one of them liked a painting, so did the other. And the ones they found unattractive were mostly, but not always, the same.

“I don’t know much about any of the art we have seen today, except that I have read or heard the names,” Clara admitted.

“I’ve not much knowledge of art. It is useful to see some of the paintings and sculptures and recognize how

skilled they were, though I find many of the religious and classical subjects difficult to understand.”

“Classical?”

“Greek and Roman mythology.”

“Yes. I know little about that. My schooling was ordinary. Reading and writing and some numbers. But at home, lots of cows and chickens! I enjoyed some of the paintings with farm scenes. You could tell which artists knew animals.”

“Clara. Do you want to try a concert or show tonight?”

“Show?”

“Cabaret perhaps. Or Les Folies Bergère.”

“Is that not ... I don’t know the word?”

“Risqué?”

“I think that is it. With no clothes.”

“Almost, no clothes is naked or nude; risqué can simply mean likely to offend. Will you be offended?”

“No. Let us try that.”

They returned to the hotel, and Martin asked the concierge how to get tickets. This could be arranged for a small commission, and they left it in the hands of the concierge to get tickets. In the room, they had a second lunch of wine and biscuits and chocolate.

“Do you want a nap?” Martin asked.

“To lie down at least. But it is a good time to talk too. And like before, if I sleep or not, it is OK. Is ‘OK’ not the way to say ‘all right’?”

“The Americans used it a lot, and now we seem to use it too. It’s OK with me, but you should know that it is slang and not for use when you write letters.”

They laughed. Martin took off his tie and lay down. Clara lay down too, and automatically Martin offered his arm and she slipped easily beside him.

“Martin. How do you see us getting to Canada? I have little idea of how it works.”

“Well, we’ll need to find a ship that takes passengers. Or we could possible take an aeroplane, but I think that is rather new and expensive. That reminds me, we need to ensure you have proper travel documents, including Annje.”

“I have my passport, and Wil told me to make sure Annje was on it. She said even if I was only going to France or Holland for a day, I may want to take Annje.”

“That is good. I think you can travel on that, even if we get married. I will have to find out what you need to come to England and then to Canada. I don’t think there will be much trouble.”

“When would we do all this? It is such a change in life.”

“I think we should arrange to marry in Belgium soon, but make sure your family and friends can be there. And I would like to have a friend or two, especially David and Esther. I’ll even find money so they can come if they need it. Do you think we could be ready

by early September?”

“That is a month. I think that can work with the laws. But there must be an ... announcement ...”

“Banns in English. B A N N S. We say ‘Call the banns’.”

“Yes. We have an ondertrouw, and when it is arranged, you must marry in a period after some weeks but before too many months. And there is the announcing, called huwelijksafkondiging.”

“The first word would be the license. Ondertrouw – under trust literally. Yes that makes sense. We could start that when we return to Belgium on Tuesday.”

“So quick?”

“Cold feet?”

“Why? My feet are not cold now. It is warm.”

“It is an expression. It means you are reconsidering.”

“No. It just seems strange. But I want to.”

“Will you be able to be ready to leave Belgium in a month? There are certain to be things to do. The farm. Tante Grietje. There may be health checks.”

“If there are, perhaps Joop will be able to help. He arranged all the ... I think you say inoculations ... for Annje.”

“That may need to be transferred to some sort of documentation. I know we needed to provide proof of smallpox vaccination. Variole in French.”

“That one is not so nice. It leaves a mark.”

“Yes, I saw. I have one too.”

“If we can marry in September, I would like to have a few weeks in England to show you some of the places I like or you would like to see. That will depend on having a place for us to all live and when we can travel to Canada. But I want you to know the places like Oxford and London that I talk about. We have so many things that we have NOT shared in our lives.”

“Yes, but some important ones that we have. When we both came close to losing all, for example. And this time together. How many couples have that?”

“True.”

Martin took a sheet of paper and made notes of some of the things to be done. As he was about to note that he must write David and Esther he stopped, realizing that he would be writing to them before his parents. He would get an airmail form on Monday and send it to Robert and Miriam then.

As they left the hotel, Martin asked the concierge if letters could be stamped and posted. This was possible, and even at a bit of a commission, he could send the news of Clara and himself without waiting to go to the Post Office. Of course, he would be seeing David and Esther in a week, but it would be good to let them know what he and Clara were planning.

The Folies was only three Metro stops away, so they walked, finding a simple bistro where they had a croque

monsieur each and shared a *salade nicoise*. After the vietnamese food, they wanted something plain. They had a little time before the performance and climbed up the steps to *Sacre Coeur* to get the view. The clouds had broken up and there was the beginning of a nice evening. Martin took some pictures, making sure Clara was in them.

The lavish performance was very well done, with much music and dance and very fancy costumes, which, of course, covered less than they might of the girls on stage. As they were walking back, Clara seemed quiet.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Martin said.

“I don’t understand.”

“It means I am asking what you are thinking. That I will pay you one penny to tell me.”

“Oh. Just thinking.”

“About”

“How pretty those girls are. Their breasts and their figures are magnificent.”

“Well, they are chosen to provide the spectacle.”

“But perhaps you see me in less good light afterwards.”

“You feel you are not pretty?”

“Not compared to them, and I am too thick in the figure and my breasts too small on my body.”

“They are wearing high heels and fancy costumes that make them look good. Did you not notice that

some of the costumes hold their breasts in and up? You are fine. You are real. And I don't get to play with their breasts, do I?"

"No, but perhaps you would prefer to."

"I don't know them, and I don't love them, Clara. You have a strong, nice-looking body, and I like and love you as you are."

"I love you too, Martin," and she turned and kissed him. Two American soldiers who were nearby on the sidewalk whistled.

"Don't worry. This is Paris," Martin said.

Clara was blushing, but smiling too.

Not quite tourists

On Sunday morning, over breakfast, Martin asked,

"Clara, Do you think we have made our decision?"

"You mean, to make our lives together? To marry?"

"Yes. That's what I mean. If so, I should send the letter to David and Esther so they have as much time as possible to plan if we want them to be at our wedding. And I should send a letter to my parents to let them know."

Clara was silent for a moment, but looking at him.

"Martin. In the last few days, it seems like you have always been part of my life. I am a bit worried that I

will wake up and it will all be a dream. But I want to. However, I will say also that I am frightened of what I do not know. I am sure Canada is very nice, but I worry that Annje or I might not fit in, even if we want to.”

“Yes. It is a long way. A big jump. But many are doing it – the war brides. In a sense you will be one, just a bit later than the rest of them, but the war did bring us together. I can also assure you it is a very beautiful country, and a very big one. And also a young country, with many resources. I think you will fit in well, though I am sure the first couple of years will require hard work helping Annje learn the language and get settled – she will be starting school in a year or so – and both of us finding the best way for us to live.”

“Do you think that these marriages are working?”

“It’s difficult to know. I’m sure some will work very well and others will fail. Perhaps some will work because they were formed in difficulty, as it makes some people strong. And others fail because people are unable to work together to find ways to overcome the difficulties. Some couples have to build from very little. We will be better off than most.”

“I want to try Martin. I hope I don’t sound that I am not wanting it, but it is a big step.”

“It is a big step. But I can think of nobody I want to take that big step with me other than you.”

"Then you must send the letters."

Sunday, July 27, 1947

Dear Mum and Dad,

Please share this also with Grandpa and Grandma Tremblay, Gradpa Ryan and Penny and Desmond.

As you know, in 1944 I was pretty near blown up by a mine that killed two of my buddies. I was helped by a Belgian woman, Clara Joos, who herself was knocked into the ditch by the blast and her daughter - born in April 1944 - I had to lift out of a tree. Just the week before that, the Germans shot her husband because he was outside tending to the cows after curfew. We have been writing to each other since, and this year I finally came to visit. Clara helped me to get to Uden to visit David's grave. I have to get the photos developed, but they should be good, and span two films for good measure.

My big news is that Clara and I find we really get on together well, and we want to get married. Our plan, which we hope you will help us carry out, is to have two ceremonies, a civil one in Belgium and a church one in Ottawa. This will let both families participate, and it

should make it easier to complete all the travel formalities for Clara and Annje. You will be getting an instant granddaughter.

Our hope is to marry in Ninove in early September, spend a little while in England so Clara can learn where I have lived and we can then talk about places and people without them being strangers. Hopefully we can get a passage to arrive before Christmas. As you know, I am hoping to take up doctoral studies in Toronto early in the new year.

Clearly these are all just paper plans for now. I will keep you informed as soon as possible when we can make them more certain.

In my next letter I'll try to include photos and more other news, but for now I wanted to make sure you were part of the planning.

Love, your son,

Martin

Sunday, apart from letter writing, they mostly spent doing various tourist things. They managed to go up the Eiffel Tower, walk down the Champs Elysées, and take in an concert at a church on the Sunday night.

On Monday morning they went to the Canadian Embassy to find out what papers would be needed for Clara

and Annje to come to Canada. They had to wait a while for the appropriate person, a rather severe looking middle-aged woman.

“Oui. Qu’est-ce que vous voulez?”

“Est-ce que c’est possible de parler anglais?” Martin asked.

“Yes. But I saw Tremblay as the name on the chit.

Wait. You have a beard now, but I remember in London the son of one of the High Commission staff. They toasted you, for”

“Fixing Mike Pearson’s radio.”

“Yes. That was it. He’d been in a bad mood for a couple of days with not having the news. Well, what can I do for you and”

“Clara Joos. We hope to be able to get married and return to Canada in the autumn, and we need to find out what papers and arrangements need to be made.”

In the course of less than half an hour, the whole story came out, but also they got a list of the things they would need to do. The immigration officer was able to also give them the name of a contact in London in case there were any problems. The office in Brussels was smaller, but she would see that they were informed that the file would be coming.

After some pleasantries about Robert and Miriam, they were out on the street and ready for more sight-seeing. They decided to take the train to Chartres to

see the cathedral, and had a nice lunch in the town before their visit. As they were walking back to the train in the afternoon, they passed a bakery which had some marzipan animals in the window.

“How about that pink pig for Annje?” Martin asked.

“Yes. But will she ever eat it?”

They bought it and a couple of plain squares for themselves to eat now.

As they walked and looked about, the picture of their plan, or at least the things they wanted to make happen, began to get drawn in more detail. They would need to get at least a couple of steamer trunks or crates for their belongings. Neither had a lot of things, but what they had needed to be taken along. As Clara had already arranged to sell the farm, the main issue was dealing with the money.

“Do you think the money from the farm could be left safely in Belgium?”

“Yes. It is possible. But do you think we will fail to build our partnership?” She reddened. “I don’t want a marriage with someone who is already afraid it may not work.”

“Not at all. I’m sure we will be a great success. We are already. I’m thinking only that there is likely a premium to convert the money to dollars.”

“What is ‘premium’?”

“An extra cost. If you have a need to exchange money

that the government says is necessary, like to buy flour for Belgian bakers, then you can use the official exchange rate, which I think I read somewhere is fixed to the American dollar. But other transactions, like people moving their personal money, pay extra. And the premium will vary with how many people want to exchange francs for dollars. I would not be surprised that there is a special rate labelled ‘Clara’,” he teased.

“I have come across some documents like that in my work with the Stichting. But as we are selling rather than buying, they were not so important for us.”

“If you hope to continue with work to sell Belgian products, or even might do so later, it would be useful to be able to pay in local currency and avoid any conversions. Or you could simply wait to decide later, though there might in future be an even worse rate of exchange. That is a risk too. However, my own feeling is that things will get better for the franc.”

Gent

They took an early train back to Gent on the Tuesday, arriving in the middle of the day. They walked to Wil and Joop’s house. On the way Clara said:

“I don’t know how I shall tell Annje, nor Wil.”

“Perhaps I should tell Wil that I have asked you to marry me, while you go and talk to Annje. Do you

think Annje will understand?”

“I can tell her that it is like moving from the farm to the town, but a much bigger move. Martin, did you say that there was skating in Ottawa?”

“Yes. There will be a number of rinks open by Christmas I should think, and our hope is to be there by then. Why?”

“Annje is fascinated by skating. There are stories about the Dutch doing it, but here not much. But you are sure it is not just one or two people?”

“No. If my skates still fit me, they’ll be in the basement at Grandma and Grandpa Tremblay’s.”

“Yes. You have live grandparents. I know it, but it is still not real to me.”

They got to the house and there was a general hubbub of welcome. Clara, possibly procrastinating, asked if it was possible to do some laundry and asked Martin for his dirty clothes, indeed, everything except what he was wearing. There were lines in the kitchen where things could be dried, and if she washed right away, his pyjamas would be dry by the time he needed them.

When Clara was working on the wash, ‘helped’ by Annje, Martin asked Wil if he might have a private minute with her. He told her, in French, that he had asked Clara to marry him, and while it was normal to ask the father for permission, he felt that Wil would be the logical representative. Wil asked whether he was

willing to take on the big task of raising Annje. He told her how they had both made lists and compared them, and that this was a key and mandatory item. Wil then said:

“Ça ne me surprends pas. Au moment d’arrivé, Clara présente une visage que je n’ai pas vue depuis elle s’est mariée à Luc. Je vous tous souhaite le bonheur.”

With that, she ran out to embrace Clara and begin, no doubt, the planning. Martin felt quite left out until Joop came in from his surgery and asked what was going on. In a mixture of English, French and Flemish, there was much planning and congratulating, with Eef totally moonstruck. Tom was away, probably to his great relief.

The evening meal became one of celebration and planning. In the morning Martin and Clara would go to the Town Hall and see what arrangements could be made and what documentation was needed. It would make sense to get married in Gent, being a bigger town than Ninove and easier for hotels and other arrangements. And Wil and Joop, after a conversation in the kitchen away from everyone, offered their house for the reception if the number of guests were not too large. This set off a flurry of counting. There would be the happy couple, 4 Vandervliets, 4 in the family of Joke, Clara’s other sister, Tante Grietje, François and Maria and their children, two of Clara’s friends, of whom only one was married but without children, and David and

Esther, and possibly Jane Strong. The house would be busy, but could handle that many for the reception, especially if the weather were fine and the children could be allowed into the garden.

The next morning at breakfast, Clara gave Martin a letter and asked him if it was 'all right'.

Gent, Wednesday July 30, 1947

Dear Family Mother and Father Tremblay,

I hope that I address you properly, as I think Martin has told you we plan to marry. For that reason, I wanted to write to you to tell you about myself, so that you would know I am very serious to make Martin a good wife.

My parents were farmers near Ninove in the Flemish part of Belgium. We had a fairly large farm for Belgium, but very small for Canada I think. That farm I am now selling and hope it will contribute to the success I wish with Martin. My parents had me very late in their lives, so I have two sisters who are 14 and 16 years older, Joke and Wil. Joke lives in Luik, which I think you know as Liege, with her husband and two children. Wil lives in Gent with her husband who is a doctor, and their daughter and son.

As my parents needed help, they hired Luc when I was still a little girl. He was then about 20. When my mother died of cancer of the breast in 1936, then my father of a heart attack after the Duitsers came in 1940, Luc kept the farm going with me. We were married in 1942 and had baby Annje in April 1944. When the Allies were pushing back the Germans (I apologize for using Duitsers above - it is fixed in my head), they told us to stay inside. Luc went to milk the cows, but the Germans saw him as he came back and shot him dead. I think now he saw them plant the mine that blew up Martin's truck, with me to the ditch and Annje to the tree.

Martin has told you most of what happened after. I helped him clean his wound, and he and my neighbour François buried the two RAF men who were killed. Afterwards, Martin and I wrote to each other. I can say that without those letters, I am not sure I would have wanted to continue sometimes. However, my neighbour helped me to rent the farm, and now he is buying it from me over time, and my elderly aunt who runs a boarding house in Ninove looked after Annje while I learned English and typing. I

have had a job with a foundation that is trying to sell Belgian products abroad. In fact, I hope to continue in that field in Canada, but as an agent.

In the last week, I have been with Martin to Uden to see the grave of David. Martin has taken pictures, which we will send soon. I am sorry for Penny and her son, and believe as a widow to know some of her feelings.

From what Martin has told me of his family, I look forward very much to meet you and become a good daughter, granddaughter, sister, and aunt.

Clara (Martens-Joos)

“Clara, I don’t know when your birthday is. Nor Annje’s.”

“No. And I do not know yours. We only shared the age, which made me the old lady.”

“Well, now I’m going to have you as my old lady.”

“What!”

“It’s slang. ‘My old lady’ means ‘my wife’.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that. But Annje is an April fish, born on the first.”

“We’d better use the French ‘poisson d’avril’. In English it is April Fool.”

“Niet goed. But me, I’m August 21.”

“That would be 1923. I’m August 22, 1924. We’ll have a long birthday party each year.”

They both laughed.

“You know, we could have looked at each other’s passports. We weren’t very curious were we?” Martin commented.

“Perhaps it is not so important, except for the douaniers. Martin, let us wish each other a good anniversary now, and save our celebration for when we are married.”

“All right. Nothing this year except I’ll say Happy Birthday now.”

“Yes. Happy Birthday a bit early.”

Later in the morning they went to the town hall and found out what they needed to do to get married there in September. They would each need to produce an acceptable form of their birth certificates. Martin had his in Oxford, which was a nuisance, but he could bring it before the ceremony, though they would need a sworn translation. Clara could get a certificate of domicile, but England did not usually offer this. The official was, however, inclined to believe a letter from his college would probably be accepted. A sworn affidavit that he was not already married would also be needed. All documents had to be in Flemish or French, or sworn translations would be needed, so Martin would need to

come back to Belgium in time. They got a list of some translators in Gent who were acceptable. Things were a bit easier than they might be because there was a 1928 agreement about certain documents between the UK and Belgium, and that appeared to cover Canada. It was all a bit awkward.

“It’s more work than I thought,” Martin said as they sat having a coffee after.

“So now you don’t want to marry me?” Clara teased.

“Just have to kidnap you and carry you off to Canada,” he replied.

“‘Kidnap’?”

“Bring you with me against your will.”

“But it would not be against my will.”

“Details. Details.”

“But is it not the details that are giving us the head pain?”

“Yes. You are right. And nothing is insurmountable.”

“That is a big word. Say it again.”

“Insurmountable.”

“Ah. Not possible to get over. In French I know ‘surmonter’.”

“Yes. We will get over these details.”

“It was not said, but the ambtenaar is a patient of Joop. When his wife was very sick, Joop managed to get some drug that was not easily found. I think we will

be all right.”

They went back to the house and got Annje to go sightseeing. Annje got tired walking, so Martin carried her piggy-back, which she found delightful. They walked past the building in the Veldstraat where the Treaty of Ghent was negotiated in 1814.

“What is that?” Clara asked.

“It ended the War of 1812 between Britain – essentially Canada – and the United States.”

“But that was in the time of Napoleon.”

“Yes. It was not very much noticed by anyone else. Even the British possibly did not think that the situation was important enough to send more than a few hundred men to defend Canada. And the Americans expected us to simply welcome them. In fact, the Treaty meant there would eventually be a nation called Canada.”

“And without it Annje and I would have nowhere to go!”

“And they concluded the Treaty on Christmas Eve.”

“Oh yes. That must have been celebrated in Canada.”

“They didn’t know for several weeks. No telegrams. So one of the biggest battles took place in New Orleans before the news arrived. And even then, the US Congress still had to ratify – to confirm they would accept – the treaty.”

“But now Canada and the Americans are good friends.”

“Yes. The longest undefended border in the world.”

Brugge and Antwerp

They decided to spend Thursday visiting Brugge or Bruges in the English usage. Annje wanted to stay with Eef. They were going to walk to a farm where Eef had a school friend. There were cows. Cows were much more interesting to Annje than anything Brugge had to offer.

They brought back some wine and some treats for the evening meal, and spent a happy, very family evening. Martin felt the warmth of the household, but also felt a chill of concern that he was taking Clara and Annje out of this blanket of caring and love.

* * *

Wil had suggested she and Eef would look after Annje so Clara and Martin could see Antwerp. It was still a bit smashed up from the war, but reconstruction was under way. They took the train, and enjoyed the day. Over lunch near the Grote Markt, where Martin was able to enjoy another waterzooi, Clara asked about where they would stay in England.

“Well. I could keep my Oxford room and do some more work for Bleaney, and you and Annje could stay in my room with David and Esther.”

Clara coloured and replied hotly, “You want us to be apart?”

Martin was taken aback. He argued about cost and availability of space, and managing. Clara pointed out that he wanted her to see the places he had been and worked, and how would they share if she were on her own, albeit with his good friends.

The quarrel continued into the afternoon. They were both grumpy. There was even a bank of grey clouds as they walked along the Scheldt embankment. They turned toward the town, and after few hundred metres, the sun came out, and on a bench by the Groenplaats a couple were kissing. At this moment, Martin smelled wafels.

“Let us have a wafel and give each other a kiss,” he offered.

“Maybe I don’t feel like kissing you.”

“Even if I change my mind and say that we should find a way to stay together in England?”

She had her arms round his neck in a moment and was kissing him furiously.

“I hate to argue. Especially with you, Martin. But you must buy me a wafel to apologize.”

“Only one. We must share!”

“Ja. Verdeelen – I won’t be able to use that word much more.”

That night, Martin wrote to Jane Strong, inviting her to the wedding if she could come, and offering some money to help – he knew her situation was not desper-

ate, but but that there was little to spare in her budget. He also asked her if she knew of a place he, Clara and Annje would be able to stay. Jane knew lots of people, and might be able to help out.

* * *

Saturday. Their last full day together, and they were not able to have much chance to enjoy themselves privately. It was probable that Wil would not object if they managed to slip into each other's beds, but in Paris they had got used to being easy with each other.

"Avez-vous des plans pour aujourd'hui?" Wil asked.

"Je pense c'est une journée de détente, et pour arranger les choses possiblement inattendues," Martin replied.

"What did you say?" Clara inquired, "My French is not good enough."

"I said I'd like to just relax and try to sort out anything we can think about that we have not done."

"We can walk by the water if it is fine, and make sure you are all packed for tomorrow. And try not to forget anything that needs to be done. We must bring our lists."

"Des listes?" Wil clearly understood some English.

"Oui, nous avons fait, chacun, les lists sous titre Imperatif, Important, et 'Si on peut realiser des reves'.

C'est lorsque nous avons comparé ces listes que nous sommes convainçus que nous voulons partager nos vies."

"Vous êtes tous les deux trop rationales! Mais aux moins ça vous donne une base pour le mariage."

Later, they walked with Annje to the Astridpark.

There, they took out their lists again, this time mostly of the things to be done, guests to invite, arrangements to be made. The main things were the legal ones. Martin would need to ensure he had the right documents when he returned.

"Martin, I have another thing to add to my list of things I expect. Perhaps even must have."

"What is that?"

Clara took a moment to see that Annje was close by. The little girl was happily skipping around a nearby tree.

"I think that a large bathroom with a big tub is good."

"Me too. Let us add that to our lists. I really miss sitting in the tub with you."

"You just want the afterwards."

"And you don't?"

"Oh no. That would be immoral."

"Then I must add to my list that I expect you to be terribly immoral."

After a moment to check Annje was still nearby, he kissed Clara. Annje came over and said, "Martin kusjes

mama.”

“Yes. I do kiss Mama. I love Mama.”

“En Mama heeft Martin lief,” Clara added.

Martin picked up Annje and kissed her cheek. She hugged his neck.

They put away their lists and took Annje between them and walked through the park.

Late in the afternoon, they were going through Martin’s things and packing his rucksack. Martin said,

“I’ve been meaning to ask you something. It is customary for the man to give the woman he will marry an engagement ring. I have a diamond ring that I would like you to have, but it is in Oxford.”

“You bought one to give to Jenny?” Clara gasped.

“No. It was with some jewels that I found in the kitbags of Jim and Jack. I tried to give them to the families. Jack’s wife was with another man and told me to go away before I could say anything. His parents were dead. Jim’s father said he wanted just a ring for himself and one for his aunt. So my parents took everything else back to Canada in case the original owners were found. I suspect the jewels were from people sent to concentration camps, then our forces killed the Germans and Jim and Jack found the loot. But I kept one ring that I liked – maybe I had a premonition that I would need it.”

“Premonition?”

“A feeling. A dream about the future.”

“It would be nice to have an engagement ring. Luc and I could not afford it. Do you think it bad luck to wear the ring of another?”

“No. I think it may even show that life goes on. Though if someone could prove it were theirs, I’d give it to them and buy you another. But I think that that is very unlikely. The ring I have is not so different from many others.”

“Yes, I would not want something that I could not feel is mine.”

“Then I will give it to you as soon as I come back. But I will need the size. Can you find me some cardboard? Carton in French. From a box perhaps.”

“Ah. Karton. I have some for Annje.” She disappeared for a minute or so, then was back. Martin found his scissors and with the edge of one pencil, drew a line with another, then cut a wedge shape of cardboard.

“Take off your ring and slip it on here.” he said.

When it was on the cardboard, he marked its location, then gave her back the ring.

“That reminds me. Do you want a new wedding ring?”

“I’d like to keep this, but perhaps you do not want me to wear it.”

“Could we move it back to the left hand, and add the engagement ring?”

“I would like that, but is it not ... strange?”

“Luc was important to you and he was Annje’s father. Let us use the ring. There is no need to say anything. When I give you the diamond ring, you will give me the gold band. Then I will give it back to you a week later.”

They lapsed into silence again. This time Clara broke it.

“Martin. Will we have a ... huwelijksreis. I’m not sure of the word?”

“Oh. Is it ‘honeymoon’? A holiday after the wedding?”

“Yes”.

“Well, I thought we would be using the time as we travel to Canada for that.”

“But Annje will be with us. We have to learn how to live together as a family, but perhaps a little fun first would be nice.”

“I love how you are naughty like this. Yes. We should have a couple of days together. Where?”

“Perhaps in Brussels for two nights. We could go back to the restaurant and show we are a true couple.”

“Yes. And we could see what the airfield at Melsbroek looks like now. I think it has become an airport. There is also Leuven.”

“I thought it was a ... honeymoon!”

“We will find time for that too. But should I see the

barber?”

“So we do not have a baby too soon? Yes. I would prefer to wait until we have a house.”

“That might be a while. But do you mean ‘house’ in the sense of a place to live? I think ‘huis’ in Flemish can mean apartment. In English we mean a building for one family.”

“Yes. I mean where we are settled and not living from the suitcase.”

“I will remember to bring some more of the necessary items. Here. Have the rest of these, then I can bring just a few more.”

“Only a few?”

“Wicked!”

He grabbed her and kissed her, slipping his hand under the light sweater she was wearing. She was not wearing a bra, and he was able to caress her.

“Martin. Please stop. I like it too much. And I feel uncomfortable doing it here.”

“Me too,” But he gently let her go.

“I’m sorry,” She was almost crying, but, he suspected, with frustration.

“No need to be sorry. We both want each other, but this isn’t really the time or place.

Can you arrange Brussels for us?”

“How much can we afford?”

“For two nights, let’s say at most 50 percent more

than in Paris, but better if less. But we want our own bathroom, I think.”

“Yes. I want my bath. Our bath.”

“Here, have all my Belgian money, except for a coin or two for the toilet.” He knew he would need some more when he returned, but did not want her to be short, nor to borrow from her family.

Wil called to them to come to dinner. Martin yelled: “On arrive,” but pulled Clara to himself once more, kissed her and again caressed her, but this time outside the sweater. They savoured almost half a minute before going down to eat.

Tot ziens

August 3, 1947, Sunday.

The next morning they both found very difficult. Realizing Martin’s departure would be emotional for her, Clara asked Will if Annje could stay at the house, while she and Martin walked to the station by themselves. All Martin’s clothes had been laundered and ironed beautifully. He had enough sandwiches and such to feed him, seemingly for a week. With his backpack, he was able to hold hands with Clara as they walked. Both were silent for a long time.

“I want to say so much, and can’t find words,” he said.

“Yes. Me too.”

“I didn’t realize how much I love you.”

“Realizing that is a joy, but it is a joy with pain too.”

“Yes, that expresses it well. But it does not make it easier. Yet I am happy to love you, Clara. I’ve found someone to share everything with.”

“Same for me. It will seem too long that we are apart, even that it is only 3 weeks. And then another week and we are married.”

They lapsed into silence again. Only when they were on the platform did Clara say:

“Look after yourself Martin. I don’t want to lose a second husband.”

“Nor I you. And Annje will, I think, need us both.”

“Thank you for thinking so much of her.” The tears were flowing down her cheeks now. Martin kissed them away and held her tight. They stayed like this for several minutes, until the train was coming into the station.

“I’ll write every day,” Martin said.

“Me too.”

“Kiss me, then go. It will be easier,” But he did not say for whom it would be easier.

She kissed him firmly on the lips. He held her very tight. Then he let her go, she turned and walked briskly away, not looking back. He knew she was crying, and could feel his own tears welling in his eyes. He turned and found a door to the train and boarded it. For the

next half hour, he felt more lost than he ever had in his life.

Preparations in England

Late that Sunday night, he let himself into David and Esther's house in Hatfield. They were in their back room, normally a dining room, listening to music on the gramophone.

"Esther. There he is! Welcome back. Put the kettle on. Or maybe we should have something to toast Martin's future."

"I think I'd prefer tea," Martin said. "It's been a long day. Let me put my things upstairs and use the lav, then I'll be right down."

When he returned, Esther had the tea ready, with some chocolate biscuits on the side.

"I 'ope you and Clara find as much 'appiness as David and I," she said.

"And will it be possible for you to come to the wedding? We're planning the 6th of September, assuming I can do all the documents."

"Of course. Of course," they both said at once.

"You know, we never had our own honeymoon." said David. "So this is an opportunity. I've already talked to Murphys and we'll travel on the Friday, then after

the wedding, we'll see Ghent and Bruges and Brussels and have our own belated honeymoon."

"I've never been abroad," Esther said. "I'll 'ave to figure out what people are saying."

"I probably shouldn't tell you, but Clara and I are planning a couple of nights in Brussels. It was a lady in a restaurant who actually started us thinking of getting married. She mistook us for a married couple, and we realized that was how we behaved with each other."

"Oooh, I 'ope not like some of 'em down the East End," Esther opined.

"No. She used the French term, 'une vraie couple'. A true couple. And when we realized how we got on, we started to figure out how we could make it work."

"And Clara has a little girl?" David commented rather than asked.

"Yes. A very pleasant child. It will take some getting used to. I've got to sort out passage for us to Canada, and also where to stay in the meantime."

"You've your room 'ere. We'll muddle through for a bit."

"Thank you. That will help. I've also got to try to find somewhere in Oxford for a couple of weeks or more. Clara and I have such different backgrounds. I'd like if she can at least have a bit of familiarity with places I've been."

"That's a good idea. It's a pity for Esther and I that

the Germany I grew up in is long gone, as well as most of the people.”

“Too true. And I think many of the places are still pretty smashed up. Paris is one of the places that was relatively unscathed. We had a nice time there.”

“’ope you didn’t subject ’er to separate rooms, Martin,” said Esther.

Martin blushed, then realized that his friends, although of a different generation, believed in living in the present.

“We shared a very nice room with private bath. But please don’t say anything to Clara’s family. I think they guess the situation, but they have some status in their own community.”

“Mum’s the word. But I’m glad you’re not goin’ into this without making sure you get on together. And I ’ope you ’aven’t got ’er up the spout,” Esther could be very blunt.

“We took some precautions,” Martin answered.

“I figured you would. No sense ’avin’ to pay too much for a bit o’ fun.”

“So you’ll be able to take up your doctoral studies in the new year?” David changed the subject. He liked his wife’s directness, but sometimes found himself embarrassed by it.

Indeed their own real relationship was due to her directness. At the time, he’d been her lodger for about

a year, and they enjoyed shared meals and walks and listening to the wireless. Then one night it had been quite cold, and when they went up to bed, Esther had said:

“David. I’m not going to beat about the bush. If you like me as a woman, come an’ keep me warm. If not, I think I’d better find another lodger.”

Since that time, he’d shared her bed, and also discovered that life that way was much easier for him.

Monday, August 5, 1947

Dearest Clara,

It was very hard to say goodbye. For you also, I know.

It is the Bank Holiday Monday, so I am staying in Hatfield until early tomorrow morning. I plan to take an easy day, but write to many people and get my ‘to do’ list in order. I will write to Penny, and to each of my grandparents, but I’ll wait until I have a photo to write my parents.

David and Esther want to come to the wedding. They were not able to take a honeymoon in 1945/46, so will extend their time in Belgium and enjoy Brugge, Gent and Brussels. Can you send some

information about hotels for them to read?
I think we (meaning I) should pay for their
hotel in Gent. If it is their honeymoon, they
should have their own room, don't you think?

Unfortunately, we are now rather nervous because
there have been anti-Jewish riots. This is
an insane reaction by some very ignorant people
to the murder of two British servicemen in
Palestine. After all the killings in the war,
we do not need more of this hatred. There
has been damage to synagogues and to Jewish-owned
shops, but to my knowledge no houses. 88 people
were arrested in Liverpool.

The worst of this is that Jewish groups in
Britain have universally condemned the violence
by their co-religionists in Palestine.

Enough of this. We must look to provide an
example that friendship and love can do more
than violence.

I hope tomorrow to have more news.

With deepest love, and a kiss for Annje,
Martin

Martin needed to get back to Oxford to arrange doc-
uments and see if he could book a passage. He left

Hatfield the next morning and got to Oxford in the afternoon. He went immediately to the Thomas Cooke office and found that there was a cargo-liner that arrived in Halifax November 20. This would suit. It had both first class and tourist class. The First Class cabins had their own shower. Not quite the tub Clara liked, but worth the extra money. And they could put in a cot for Annje. Martin paid a 5 pound deposit and would bring more money within two weeks.

Then he went to Boots and put in his films. They weren't necessarily the best photographic chemists, but he wanted the pictures quickly, and they were reliable. He also picked up some stamps at the small post office in North Parade as he walked to his room in North Oxford.

Once in his room, he locked the door, then checked his deed box for the birth certificate and the ring – both were there. Tomorrow he would see the College about a letter attesting to his residency in Oxford. They had his Hatfield address as his 'home'. Then he wrote to Clara.

Tuesday, August 6, 1947

Dearest Clara,

I have more news on several subjects.

I found there is a ship, the SS Nova Scotia, leaving Liverpool in early November and arriving

Halifax via St. John's Newfoundland on November 20. That will let us get to Ottawa well before Christmas. We can have a church wedding, perhaps a week to 10 days before Christmas, and possibly even go to Toronto to arrange for an apartment and learn about the city, then spend Christmas in Ottawa - I'll try to see if we can find skates for Annje.

I hope you will not think I am too extravagant, but I booked First Class. This is quite expensive, but it gives us our own room with a shower and toilet. Sorry. No bathtub. They will arrange a cot for Annje for a small fee. I have paid a deposit, and will pay the rest as soon as I have your approval. I don't want to start making decisions that we do not share.

Now I must go and post this to catch the evening collection at 5:30. I also want to see Jane about a room for us here in Oxford. Near London we can stay with David and Esther - they won't take 'no' for an answer.

With much love.

Martin

Martin popped the letter in the pillar box as the postal van was arriving. Just in time. Then he walked

round to Jane's house and rang the bell.

"Come in, come in. And hearty congratulations," Jane threw her arms round him and hugged him.

"I came round right away to see if you'd be able to come to the wedding. And also to ask your advice about accommodation for my expanding family."

"I figured you would, and I made a hot pot for supper, guessing you'd be here tonight. Blew my rations, but it'll be worth it."

"I've not used my points for the last two weeks. I'll bring some round tomorrow. Can I go get some bottles of cider at the off-license?"

"Do that. Here's a key. I'll serve up while you're gone, so don't be long."

Martin came back five minutes later, and there were two bowls of a stew on the dining room table with some bread. He went and washed his hands and came back to find the cider poured.

"Do eat. And tell me all about it."

"Well, as you may guess, we got along like a house on fire. I feel very fortunate, but it will be a lot of work to sort everything out."

"So what arrangements have you made?"

Martin related what he'd arranged, including the wedding and the passage. He told Jane that David and Esther had offered accommodation in Hatfield, but that he wanted to have some time with Clara in Oxford so

she would get to know his life there.

“Well, Martin. I’m planning to come to your wedding, as I’ve not had a good holiday for a while. And I won’t take any money from you, but if you can help me find a nice guest house, that will help me a lot.”

“I’ll let Clara know that in my letter tomorrow.”

“I’ve also been talking to some people I know who have friends going to America for Michaelmas Term on some sort of special mission for the government related to something called the Marshall Plan. They want someone living in their flat, but they are worried that if they let English people stay, they won’t leave when my friends return at Christmas. Also they didn’t want to leave it unoccupied for fear of someone moving in and squatting. The flat is in a converted house just round the corner. If you think this might work, I’ll arrange for you to meet them.”

“That would be useful. Do you know if the rent will be affordable?”

“Not really. I thought first you should see if there was any chance it would work for timing and conditions. Given the housing situation, there’s lots of variables.”

“That’s true.”

“Was your decision sudden, Martin?”

“Not really. The realization that we might want to stay together came quite quickly, but we took some time to solidify our decision.”

Martin went on to tell Jane how they'd made and compared lists.

"It's good that you spent time working out what you each wanted. It's quite a responsibility you're taking on."

"Yes. Sometimes I'm a bit taken aback."

"Cold feet?"

"Not really. Just awareness of what has to be done – the course I must follow to make things work. On the other hand, I don't think that I'll find someone easily who I can just – well – share life with. I don't mean there's not other women out there. But bird in hand. And Clara has shared a near miss with me and shown her mettle."

They chatted about other things, and Martin told her what they'd seen and done during his visit with Clara. He said he'd return with photos, which should be ready Thursday by 11 o'clock.

Thursday, August 7, 1947

Dearest Clara,

As promised, a letter a day.

The College is writing a letter about my attendance and where I lived in College and in 'digs' (rented accommodation).

I met with some people who are going to America for the Autumn Term - we call it Michaelmas Term as I think I wrote to you before. They leave September 14 and come back November 19, so this suits us well. They want 20 pounds for the whole period plus the electricity and gas rates. This is about as much as regular rent here, but I think we shall not find better arrangements without a lot of work. There is a main bedroom plus a smaller room with a single bed. Shall I go ahead? I told them I would have an answer on or before August 18, as I wanted to keep to my plan of having you part of all our decisions as a family, even though I believe I already know your answer.

So far no letter from you, but there was the Bank Holiday. I am hoping that actions against the Jewish population will die down. There have certainly been some more troubles, but the police are dealing firmly with disorder.

Let us hope nothing disrupts our plans.

Much love and affection, and a hug for Annje,
Martin

PS Jane is planning to come to the wedding too. She says she will not accept any money help, but would like to find a nice guest house

(a pension). Do you or a friend know one in Gent?

Thursday, August 7, 1947

Dear Mum and Dad,

Finally I have some photos for you, so this letter will cost me some postage, but I think you will agree that the expense is justified.

I am including one of David's grave for you, but am sending a clearer one to Penny, and have arranged an enlargement of a colour slide for her too.

The photo of Clara and Annje was taken in Gent. As I hope you will see, Clara is a fine-looking young woman, and Annje is a pretty little girl. Clara speaks good English, but I must ask her to start teaching Annje. My concern is that without an ability to communicate, Clara will need to be with her at all times. That will hinder Clara's chance to join the larger community, and it will also slow Annje's building of friendships, for example with Desmond, as well as making it difficult to have her spend time with you or Grandma and Grandpa Tremblay.

I have put a deposit on a passage on the SS

Nova Scotia that arrives Halifax November 20.
As a matter of developing a strong partnership,
I have asked Clara to confirm this before I
pay the balance. So many men assume the wife
will 'go along' with their decisions. I'm
sure Clara trusts my judgement, but based on
my observations of how you treat each other,
I feel better sharing all our major decisions.
The date of arrival makes possible, I believe,
a church wedding on the 13, 20 or 27 of December,
assuming Saturday is a good choice. Truly
I've no idea of what to do to arrange this.
I don't think we need to do anything on the
civil side, since that will happen in Belgium.
Can I prevail on you to ask around and see
what might be possible? Clara is technically
a Catholic, but neither of us is particularly
religious. If Grandpa Ryan would want to come
for Christmas, perhaps a date around the 27th
is best.

I'm hoping to get to Toronto with Clara before
Christmas to arrange an apartment. Let me
know if you think our ideas make sense. It
has been a long time since I left Canada, and
my perceptions are no doubt out of date.

Your son,

Martin

Friday, August 8, 1947

Dearest Clara,

Your first letter, in fact your first two letters arrived today.

I'm glad you have found a hotel. The price sounds very good. Do reserve it please. Do you need money?

Yes, being apart is now very difficult. We must keep busy.

Enclosed is a photo of us that we got one of the staff to take of us at Versailles. I have not yet got back enlargements of the colour slides from Uden and some of the other pictures I took in colour. They should be ready next Tuesday.

Also I took the ring to be sized. It will be ready next Wednesday.

I realise that in our happiness I missed the anniversary of the first A-bomb. Two years ago tomorrow was Nagasaki's turn. Let us hope no more are ever used. Unfortunately, we now see conflict everywhere, especially with the Soviets.

I wrote to my parents, and have asked them to find out when we can have a church wedding in Canada. We did not talk a lot about that. Is it important that the ceremony be Catholic? I am content with an Anglican or even a Unitarian wedding. However, this is another decision we must make together.

Of course, I think I can promise you that the female members of my family, that is, Penny, my mother Miriam, and my Grandma Tremblay, will want to all have a lot to say. It may be best to put down a list of conditions that we - you and I - consider to be mandatory (must have) and let them enjoy doing the organizing. Will Annje want to be a bridesmaid? In any event, I think we have some time to discuss this, as in the worst case we could wait until next summer. We will be married already.

Much love and many kisses,

Martin

PS. Do you think you will be able to teach Annje some English? I am worried that if she is unable to talk to people it will isolate her from forming friendships. In addition, it will be difficult to leave her in the care of Penny or my parents if we need to do something

where she cannot come along. A third reason is if, heaven forbid, she were to get separated from us, she should be able to tell people who she is and if she is hungry or in pain.

Saturday, August 8, 1947

Dearest Martin,

You have been very good in writing to me each day. And so much news.

It is sad about the anti-Jewish troubles. I too am worried it will cause David and Esther not to come. I found out about a nice small hotel - the information is at the end of this letter with the prices. I have written to David and Esther directly, but suggested to them that they should have the room with bath and breakfast for Friday and Saturday night at our expense. Since you suggested this, and I agree, I hope that is all right.

The SS Nova Scotia fits our plans well. So does the flat (or do you say apartment?). I hope there is enough linen and kitchen tools. But I say YES to both. First Class - little Clara Joos. Where did the farm girl go?

My big love,

Clara

Monday, August 11, 1947

Dearest Martin,

The photo is good. Yes, une vraie couple. I have booked the hotel in Brussels for the 6, 7 and 8 September. Also I have been in touch with the restaurant lady to find out when they are open. It turns out they are open on Mondays, but not Sundays. Many restaurants are not. I did not tell her about getting married, as I want to surprise her. Is that naughty?

I have also been in touch with the Canadian official in Brussels. We already got the forms in Paris, so I sent them in. I am waiting for an appointment for Annje and I to see a doctor for the medical forms.

About a church wedding. As my parents are no longer living, I am not so worried about it being Catholic. Perhaps that is bad, but I think - as the church teaches - that the sacrament is made by the man and the woman and only witnessed by the priest.

My mandatory (what a good word!) list would

be that the wedding be just family and very close friends. I will have nobody from my family except Annje, so a party of many people will be perhaps overwhelming (another good word). Also I think I do want Annje to be part of it, and many people will frighten her. For myself I would like a nice dress, but I would like one I can wear later for other occasions. However, I will try to bring some Belgian lace.

On that topic, I am building a list of producers of lace and other Belgian products. Your idea that I sell for them in Canada and perhaps America is a good one. But at the moment, because I do not know what will be good to sell, I will make lists of people that make things and try to have a few samples sent to me.

I have already started to teach Annje some English. We listen to the BBC now each night. She is not very good yet, but is starting to know some words. There are a lot of Flemish words mixed in when she tries to speak English, but children learn very fast.

How quickly things are going. Let us hope the bad things in the world do not make dirty our happiness. I read and hear so much evil

in India.

Love and many kisses,

Clara

PS. Tell Jane we can certainly find her a nice room with breakfast. One friend of Wil runs a guest house and wants some Twining's English Breakfast Tea and some Frank Cooper's Oxford Marmalade. She will offer 4 nights for two jars of marmalade and two packets of tea. But perhaps these are with the ration card in England.

Martin had been to the Clarendon to see Bleaney on the morning after he had returned. They had a long talk. Bleaney suggested they revise their arrangements and that Martin would work an average of 20 hours per week until the end of October, which would let him fit in all the arrangements and sightseeing. This was extremely generous, but Bleaney pointed out that they paid him rather little, and the work Martin did was mostly finding ways to get things done with parts other people felt were unusable. It was a situation of mutual benefit, as Martin did not want to eat too much into his savings.

The colour enlargements came back. He had ordered 5 by 7 prints. There was a very nice one of David's headstone with flowers, but the shot he had taken of Clara

looking at the stone was breathtaking. Clara's expression was extremely moving, and she looked serious but beautiful. He ordered two more copies right away, but decided to risk sending both enlargements to Penny. He packed them with cardboard and enclosed a note.

Tuesday, August 12, 1947

Dear Penny,

As promised I am sending a photo of David's grave. Also, but not as promised, I enclose another I took of Clara looking at the headstone and adjusting the flowers. I hope you will not be offended, but I think you will agree that the photo is remarkable. Perhaps you can understand my feelings for this very special woman.

Mum will have told you we plan to have a civil marriage ceremony in Gent (sometimes spelled Ghent in English) and a church wedding in Ottawa so the family can participate. Clara is worried that it not be too big, as she wants Annje to be part of the ceremony, who will be her only family present. We will send a list of our 'musts', of which there are very few. Mainly we want it to be intimate and friendly. Neither

of us is particularly religious. Clara wants to be able to use her wedding dress later, but plans to bring some Belgian lace. As a man, I am not very up on these things. However, I told her to expect that Mum, Grandma and you would all want to take over. I hope the three of you won't fight!

Love, your brother,

Martin

Thursday, August 14, 1947.

Pakistan's independence was declared. India would become independent tomorrow. It would bring a huge change in Britain's self-image, with the jewel in the crown gone.

August 5, 1947

Dear Martin,

We received a really wonderful letter from Clara soon after your letter. Both our children seem to get married before we've had a chance to say 'boo'. However, you have suggested a good compromise in making sure both families get a celebration. Dad has let the London people know about your plans in case that helps

to smooth the process, and he wrote to Victor Doré in Brussels as they have been acquainted some years. Knowing our people, they won't violate the rules, but I would be surprised if they don't watch for the file and make sure it gets processed without delay.

We'll be looking out for the photos, and for news of when you will arrive so we can ensure we arrange a memorable wedding here.

Love,

Mum and Dad

Friday, August 15, 1947

Dearest Martin,

Today Annje and I went to Brussels to a doctor for our medical check. I had with me the documents from Joop about our vaccination, and the doctor knew Joop. At first it was a very business feeling, but once the doctor asked if Dr. Vandervliet was my own doctor and I told him the situation, he said he had studied with Joop and all became more friendly.

The doctor said he usually just filled in the forms and the Canadian immigration officials send the answer, but he told me we were both

fine, so now I hope to get the papers. The doctor also mentioned that the Canadian government is trying to find Dutch farmers to come to Canada, and said it was a pity I was not still on the farm and that it were over the border. We laughed about that idea.

However, I also learned that if we had married last year, we would not really need so much paper. I would have become 'British' on marrying you. But I did not learn about if Annje would be included. Now I do not become British, but both of us can become a Canadian after we live some time in Canada. Or I can stay Belgian as a Landed Immigrant. How odd, as I am selling my land and will have none in Canada.

Martin, I almost cannot wait for you to come back. And then we will have to wait some days more to be truly together. Another 'Not fair!'. I did not ever think I would feel this way a few short weeks ago. Take care of yourself. I - we - need you as our husband and father.

With much love,

Clara

August 20, 1947

Dear Martin,

I just got the colour photos. Thank you so much. I expected just a simple snapshot.

The picture of David's grave gives me a sense of relief and peace. I was afraid he would be buried in an unknown, unmarked place, and left unnoticed by the world. The War Graves Commission has done a wonderful job.

The picture of Clara looking at the grave is truly special. It took my breath away for a moment. I plan to frame both photos, but will keep the second in a private place unless Clara is OK with it being seen. There is so much emotion in her eyes. It amplifies my sense of relief that David is not forgotten.

The photos came at a strange time for me. I have been spending some time with a man I met through work. Joe was a United Church minister. He no longer preaches but works on projects to combat poverty. I met him through my work on immigration where there was some overlap with the social services groups.

Joe is about 15 years older than I, and he

is a widower. His wife and child died in a house fire a decade ago. He suffered burns trying to get them out, which kept him out of the war, but he left preaching at that time. I am not sure if we have a future together, but I find our time together now very comfortable. However, his work does not give him much of an income, and I don't want to have him feel he should change what he does - a job that I really admire and value - because he needs to support me and Desmond and any other children that come along.

Please say nothing to anyone, even Clara, about this. I'm afraid I'm using you as a listener while I try to work out my feelings.

Love, your sister,

Penny

P.S. Happy Birthday. Belated, of course, by the time this arrives.

Een bruiloft

August 28, 1947. Thursday afternoon. Gent, Belgium.

A warm day – Martin’s raincoat and sweater were rolled up in a canvas bag and tied to the rucksack. He’d managed to roll his blazer and get it in the rucksack top – just. But he had a small suitcase too for the suit he was going to wear to get married in. It was, unfortunately, his only suit and the one he had been given on his release from the RAF, decent enough, but of a style and fit that shouted ‘demob’. He had the engagement ring in a small leather pouch the jeweller provided. However, he had used an awl and made two holes and threaded a safety pin through it in his pocket.

He had also purchased a leather folder for his passport and documents and put this on a long shoelace so he could wear it under his shirt or sweater. In the warm weather, he didn’t want to have anything like that where pickpockets could get at it. He could and would get out the passport before he needed it and keep that in his front pants’ pocket. When he’d got on the train at Gent a few weeks ago and entered a compartment, a man had woken and started yelling about his passport being gone. The way he’d looked at Martin suggested he felt Martin were the thief. When the train agent came, a lady who had got on also at Gent made it clear that

she and Martin had simply woken the man by coming in. Still, it would be a big mess to lose the documents now. Hot weather meant fewer pockets, but he would manage.

He was now on the train from Ostend to Gent, having risen very early at Jane's. He'd moved out of his room and she had put him up for a couple of nights. When they came back, they would arrange to arrive sometime in the week of the 15th and move right into the flat. His things in Hatfield he would pick up either before that when they would spend a few days there, or afterwards to avoid moving them twice. Rations would be a bit of a problem for a few days. They'd just have to eat out, though Martin had been away enough that he had some points saved, and Jane had used the rationed items not on points. They could do a bit of swapping for those.

He had also not yet bought a steamer trunk, as that also would need to be stored, so Jane had a few boxes and bags, including his deed box. He was glad he'd kept his old kit bag and managed to acquire a second. They were awkward when they had books and electronics in them, but at least kept his things together. He supposed he would have to dispose of some stuff, but the lab would likely appreciate his collection of valves, and they would not travel well. All in all, a lot to think about. Almost enough to help not think about Clara and the hotel in Brussels. Better focus on the things to do, or

he'd be uncomfortable.

The train from Ostende to Gent via Brugge seemed to take an eternity, even though it was on its efficient schedule. Finally it pulled into Gent Sint Pieters. Martin was by the door, but he was in the forward part of the train and went by where Clara and Annje were waiting near the Brugge end of the platform. They both had to walk almost half the platform with the crowd of descending passengers. Finally they found each other and were kissing.

"Me too. Want kiss," said Annje.

"Yes my little Annje," Martin said and lifted her to kiss her cheek.

"Let us get out of the station and the crowd, Martin. Then we can talk more easily."

This they did. Clara carried Martin's small case. He recalled how she had easily managed his kit bag almost three years ago. It suddenly hit him that they would be on honeymoon on the anniversary of the mine, and that today or one of its neighbours would likely be the anniversary of Luc's death at the hands of the Germans. It wasn't something to ask except in a private moment.

"Are you all right to walk, or shall we take a taxi?"

"We can walk. I've only fairly large notes in Belgian francs anyway."

"Oooh. More for me to spend!"

"But I know Mevrouw Joos can make francs stretch

so they count double. And I expect Mevrouw Tremblay will make dollars stretch so thin you can see through them.”

They both laughed.

“If I can save here, I can spend elsewhere,” Clara said, speaking the plain truth that underlay Mr. Micawber’s income and expenditure dictum about happiness and misery.

They soon arrived at the house of Wil and Joop, where Clara had arrived with Annje only that morning, having gone back to Ninove for the previous week to pack up. After their hellos, they installed Martin in Thomas’ room. This time Thomas would stay with a friend down the street, but the price was Thomas wanted Martin to take him to Melsbroek so he could see some airplanes and also practice his English. Martin was happy to agree to this, as long as it was after they had all the formalities for the wedding arranged.

Martin unpacked his suit and hung it up. He used the WC and then went in the bathroom and had a wash – the warm weather made him feel sticky and grimy – then changed into a fresh shirt, but omitted the tie. He wasn’t sure what to do about the documents and money, but decided given the traffic in the house, which included a surgery for Joop though with a separate door, to keep them on his person. He put the folder in the small of his back and tied the lace in front before putting

on the fresh shirt.

As he came out of Thomas' room, he saw Clara in the guest room looking in a big steamer trunk.

"Look at the trunk I bought. It holds everything for Annje and I that we do not put in the suitcases. I kept a several of my best pots, which would be enough to make simple meals. The others were old and black from the fire."

"Do I see sheets and tablecloths?"

"Of course. I do not throw good things away. They are of the best quality, and we must have good things when we have our own house."

"I think we should use something like my canvas kit bag for your coats and winter things. We will be on the ship in November, and arrive in Canada almost in December. On a day like today, a coat is a big nuisance, but not then. I have two in England. Also maybe a rucksack for you so your arms are free."

"Yes. You are right. There are places that sell old military things. We will ask Wil and Joop, or perhaps Thomas knows better."

"Yes. We'll make him earn his trip to Melsbroek."

They laughed, and Martin put his arms round her and kissed her. She took one of his hands and placed it on her breast. No bra again.

"I thought I was not supposed to do that until next week," he said, breaking the kiss.

“Well no, yes. Oh. I don’t know! I want it but it will make me feel like I cannot sit down.”

“Me too. Not fair! To steal your expression.”

“Yes. It really is not fair.”

“Maybe this will help?” Martin said, pulling out the small leather pouch, which he had unpinned a few minutes before. “Close your eyes and don’t peek.”

He took out the ring, and put it on her finger. It went on easily, but was not loose.

“OK. Open your eyes.”

“It’s so beautiful. And such a big stone.”

“Not that big, about half a carat.”

“Nobody I know has one like this. It’s very special. Thank you, Martin.”

She kissed him again, and this time he did give her breast a squeeze, which started an attack of the giggles which broke the seriousness of the moment.

They went downstairs for some tea. Martin thought Clara would announce that he had given her an engagement ring, but she behaved as though everything was as before. He soon realized she was waiting to see how quickly it was noticed. However, she had to offer him sugar for his tea – fully knowing he did not take sugar – in order that the ring was spotted. There was, of course, plenty of oohing and aahing.

On Friday morning they went first to the office of an official translator. Martin had already sent a copy

of the wording of his birth certificate and a carbon of the letter from the College about his residency. He had arranged for Miriam to get another copy of his birth certificate and send it by air mail in case the authorities needed an original. The translator was able to check that the documents had the same wording and certify the translations. They then went to an advocaat and Martin swore an affidavit that he was single. They then went to the Stadhuis and submitted the documents to the appropriate office and confirmed their 10 o'clock ceremony time for the next Saturday. For some reason, afternoon was not possible, but in any event, earlier was seeming more and more attractive to them both.

The next week was, for both Clara and Martin, physically easy and psychologically difficult. On Saturday, they went with Thomas to Melsbroek, but the reconstruction was such that Martin could hardly recognize the airfield where he had served three years before. Thomas did not seem to mind, as there were many airplanes of different types either on the ground or taking off and landing. Lunch was found in a small café which offered the Dutch uitsmijters – essentially egg and bacon, but bread instead of toast.

They came home via a suburb of Antwerp where Thomas knew of a shop that sold military surplus. There

they found a variety of different types of bags and sacks. They noticed some that were much lower in price but rather dirty. They spent some time discussing the merits of washing them versus buying clean new ones, eventually deciding on the new ones. They bought several small canvas bags so they could keep some items separate from others within the kitbags or trunks.

“Wet shoes or boots can be wrapped in newspaper and put in the smaller bags until we have a chance to dry them out,” Martin explained.

Thomas spotted some modest sized backpacks.

“Would you like one?” Martin asked him.

“It would be very good for the walks of one day,” Thomas explained.

“Yes. Good as day packs. And I’ll get one for Clara and one for me too.”

“For me? And do you not already have one?” Clara asked.

“Yes. I must make sure you carry your share. And maybe we will go hiking together.”

“Hiking is what?”

“Long walks in the woods or countryside. There are some big parks in Canada.”

“Parks. We walked in the park with Annje a few weeks ago.”

“But Jasper National Park is about 1/3 the size of Belgium. You need to take a big lunch.”

They laughed, but Clara clearly had not really grasped the dimensions of Canada.

Martin had a second reason for buying the day packs. First, they could hold the other bags. And second, he thought that it might be helpful to convert one to carry Annje. Even with leg holes and some reinforcing, it could still be used to hold things inside the small sacks they had purchased.

“If we cut a hole here and here and sew some webbing like they have over there on that counter around the outside and underneath for strength, I think Annje could sit on my back when she gets tired.”

“What a good idea, Martin.”

“Slim ... clever,” said Thomas.

They found their way back to Gent, which took a bus and two trains. But the whole was an easy day, and Thomas managed to improve his English. Clara found the questions he asked about words were helpful to her as well. Besides, Thomas was tolerant of her leaning close against Martin, who put his arm round her in a way that seemed so totally comfortable.

On Sunday, they went to church with the Vandervliet family. When Wil mentioned to Thomas that Mass was at 9 o'clock, Martin looked knowingly at Clara. Clara asked in Flemish if she and Martin could come along,

and Martin found he understood this question without thinking about it or translating the words. When Wil and Joop indicated they would be most welcome to come to Mass, Clara said:

“Martin, Will you join us at Mass in the morning?”

Martin had not been to a Catholic church since Ottawa, when he had gone a few times with some friends. However, the service, being in Latin, was not unfamiliar, but the Vlaamse announcements and sermon of course gave him difficulty. He remembered to make sure he had some money for the collection, and had the good sense to ask Thomas discretely what would be a suitable amount. He was glad he did, as Thomas said that there may be two collections, one for the greater church, and one for the local parish, that is, for the parish priest and his church.

The service, with its liturgical rituals, gave Martin a time to contemplate. The three years since the mine explosion and meeting Clara mixed terror, pleasure, joy, frustration, friendship, and love. Now he and Clara were a team, a partnership.

The Credo - ‘Credo in unum deum’ and so forth – was a word poem rather than an instrument of belief. Faith, to Martin, was not a force in his life. Why, he wondered, was religion so often a matter of faith, of dogma, rather than of the search and struggle for good, for peace, and for prosperity. His own meaning of prosperity was not

of traditional richness, but of a sufficiency of material and intellectual income. Moreover, he regarded it as a deficiency of prosperity if some had too much while others too little. Did that make him a socialist? That word was bandied about, as was 'communist'. But he knew he valued enterprise, the application of ideas to build and to generate new resources and wealth. Martin's concept of enterprise advanced the condition of many. It did not render some rich by taking from or diminishing others. Was this idealism? Or was it simply a long-term necessity for humanity.

"Benedicat vos omnipotens Deus,
Pater, et Filius,
et Spiritus Sanctus."

Martin realized this was the final blessing. His reverie had carried him through the better part of an hour. He was with a woman he loved, a child who was becoming a part of his being. The blessing had, in whatever manner goodness was shared and transmitted, been granted to him.

September 4, 1947, Thursday. Gent.

The Vandervliets were all out on various errands. Clara was upstairs with Annje doing some ironing and tidying. Martin was reading yesterday's *Times* that he had been able to find at a newsagent. Yesterday he had

worked on the heavier parts of modifying the backpack to carry Annje. Clara had found some old towel to line it and they used the canvas webbing bought at the surplus store to do the reinforcing, not only around the new holes but also also near the carrying straps and around the top, which was normally strengthened by the top cover. There was no frame, so it could be folded quite flat and carried inside the other pack or elsewhere.

Suddenly there was a huge commotion upstairs. There was a slap, and crying.

“Slecht, ondeugend meisje!”

Martin bounded up the stairs. Annje was on the floor, among some brown paper that had been salvaged from parcels. Her crayons were scattered, but she had been trying to draw with Martin’s fountain pen, a pen that had fascinated her when she saw Martin writing letters. It had been in his blazer pocket, and the blazer was on a hanger on the handle of a wardrobe. Clara had obviously been planning to iron it.

This would not be a problem, but the ink was on Annje’s hands, on her nose, and – the reason for Clara’s upset when she had returned from the bathroom where she was dampening a cloth – on Annje’s blouse and skirt which Clara had just ironed and was having Annje try on. They were meant for the marriage ceremony.

Clara, having slapped Annje in shock, was now sitting on one of the beds crying. Annje was sitting on the

floor crying. The pen, fortunately, was on the paper.

Martin picked up the pen carefully in some of the paper and put it out of harm's way on the dresser. He picked up Annje and carried her into the bathroom.

"Let's get you cleaned up, Annje," he said softly.

First he found a rag under the sink that could be used to wipe up the permanent blue-black ink. He made this wet – there was hot water so he could make the cloth lukewarm and not give Annje more discomfort. Then he wiped off her hands and face as best he could. The next step was to take off the skirt and then the blouse. The skirt had a bib front which was where the ink was. The blouse just had it on the cuffs.

Martin ran water into the tub and rinsed off the ink from the clothing. He knew this would not really get it out, but with some caution it would stop it from going on other parts of the garments. Annje watched, and Martin's calmness stilled her crying as she became absorbed in what he was doing.

"Ik was tekenen met de pen. Mama huilt. Het spijt me."

"I know you are sorry, pet, but Mama was so proud of your skirt. She said she made it for you. Let's see if we can get that ink off you."

He found some soap and carefully used the cloth. Most of the ink was coming off, but there was still a stain on her fingers and on splotch on her nose. There

was a nail brush, and he put soap on it and showed Annje what to do. She was working away at the stains on her fingers when Martin realized Clara was in the doorway.

“What are we going to do, Martin? Clothes are so hard to find now.”

Martin squeezed out the water from the parts of the clothing he had rinsed.

“I don’t think we can get the stains out, but I think we may be able to rescue something. If you cut away the bib, possibly keeping just straps to hold the skirt up, and then use a bit of the material to highlight the cuffs of the blouse, or else some coloured ribbon to cover the ink

Clara brightened,

“Yes, that may work. But what about Annje? Her nose!”

“A real Bluenose! She’ll fit right in when we get to Halifax.”

“I don’t understand. And this is no time for jokes.”

“We’d better laugh or else it will all be ... do you call it a ‘huil bui’?”

“I suppose so. What did you mean by ‘bluenose’?”

“It is a slang word for a Nova Scotian, but it was the name of a famous racing schooner, and now the picture is on the back of our ten cent piece that we call a ‘dime’ as do the Americans.”

“I’ve heard of ‘Five and dime’, but you said ten cent piece.”

“A Five and Dime is a store that sells cheap things. But we’d better see about getting the ink off our own Bluenose here.”

Annje was diligently scrubbing her hands, and had got the stains down to a dull mark, in the process reddening the skin.

“I think that will be enough for the hands, Annje,” Martin said, taking the brush gently. He dried her hands on a towel. Clara meanwhile had found some cold cream. They tried this on Annje’s nose. It made a small difference, but there was still a blue mark. They found some alcohol. Similarly.

“Do you have any face powder?” Martin asked.

“I hardly use it – I didn’t even take it with me to Paris. But yes. I’ll get it.”

This allowed them to cover the ink.

“Do you need help with the skirt?” Martin asked.

“You. Naaïen ... sew?”

“Had to in the RAF. Nothing major, but I can undo a seam and do buttons. You saw me work on the back pack.”

There was a noise downstairs as Wil and Eef came in. The story of the ink was related. A couple more possible solutions were tried on ‘Bluenose’ as Annje was now being called affectionately. They put her into her

pyjamas for the time being.

Martin cleaned up his pen and took out the ink for good measure. He carried a bottle inside a tin container lined with cardboard. Perhaps it was time to switch to the new Biros, even though he liked to write with a real pen. Surprisingly, the nib was still good. Annje must have grabbed it there which spread the ink around.

Then he found a pair of small scissors in his rucksack and went downstairs with the skirt. Everyone was having tea in the living room. Martin found a chair at the table, and put down a towel he had brought with him to protect the table.

“Shall I?” he asked looking at Clara.

“Yes. We’d better see if it can be fixed.”

Wil was surprised to see Martin do this, but made approving noises when she came over to see his progress. Then she disappeared and returned with a sewing machine. With few words, they made new strap pieces. Eef came in with some embroidered floral badges and placed them where the join of the straps would have to go.

“Perfect,” said Martin.

“Goed!” said Wil.

So the skirt was quickly resurrected. Some suitably coloured ribbon was found to edge the blouse and that was also sewn on with little delay. Annje was made to try it on, then the garments were taken upstairs and

ironed and put in a safe place for Saturday.

In the evening, after Annje was in bed, Clara suggested she and Martin go for a walk. The weather was still quite nice, and even though it was getting dark, they could walk to the town center.

“I’m sorry I lost my temper today,” Clara said.

“You’ve learned that expression. Well done.”

“I would better to not need it.”

“It was the shock of seeing what you had made all stained.”

“And I hit Annje. She wasn’t really being bad. In fact she was trying to do a nice drawing for me.”

“She told me she was sorry.”

“Yes, I told her I was sorry too. But you handled things much better than I.”

“It wasn’t a skirt I had made. And I could have got angry about my pen. In fact I was for a moment, but realized being angry and especially making a fuss would only create a lot more howling.”

Under a lamp-post he stopped and turned her to face him. There were tears on her cheeks. He kissed them away, then kissed her lips and held her close. When they broke apart, he said,

“Got to be a team. A family.”

“We are already.”

* * *

Martin found that Friday evolved almost exactly as he would have predicted. It was pleasant, busy, social, and – to the extent that there were so many people coming and going – tiring.

Saturday morning was a bustle, mainly of getting dressed in formal clothes. Over Martin's objections, a horse and carriage had been ordered, and it came at 9:30 in good time to get them to Stadhuis. They climbed in, Martin in his best and only suit, Annje in the modified skirt and blouse, and Clara wearing a grey silk suit of skirt and jacket, with a similar hat trimmed with lace. She wanted an outfit she could use later, rather than a dress that would use up scarce resources. In the event, it looked extremely smart. The others in the party either rode in Joop's car, or else made their way on foot to Stadhuis and, afterwards, back.

Wil and Joop had engaged a photographer, but Martin had passed his Leica to Thomas. Later it would be discovered that Thomas had more talent or luck than the supposed professional. Moreover, Martin had decided again on a colour slide film, so they would end up with some colour pictures. The only awkward side of this was that Thomas was missing from most of the photos.

They all were back at the house for the reception by

11, and Martin had the marriage certificate as well as a signed translation – into English and French – that had been made beforehand and stamped today. The house was full and noisy. Martin had managed last night to have a sort of conversation with Joke, Clara's other sister, and her husband Georges – he could not for the life of him remember the names of their children. They lived in the French-speaking part of Belgium, but with all the noise and their accents, he might have been better to try his Vlaams. In some ways, David Rosenthal did better with his German, which he had been loath to use. Esther, despite apparently only having her very accented English, seemed to fit in and was managing a grand conversation with all and sundry, accompanied by Jane. They seemed to have formed a formidable social partnership and laughter was frequent. Martin even saw them talking with Annje and teaching her some English. Later on, Martin saw Esther and David were talking to Georges, and realized that Esther knew Yiddish which somehow allowed a rather clumsy but effective communication with Georges' fractured German. Amazing!

Clara and Martin had decided to leave around one o'clock, but the party would continue through the afternoon. They cut their cake shortly after noon – it looked large but only one layer was real – and toasts were made to the bride, the groom, and the families. Both Clara and Martin decided to change to avoid damage to their

best clothes with the potential dirt of the train. Their clothes were already out and their small cases packed – it was only two nights in Brussels, as they had decided to shorten their time there in order to avoid too long alone for Annje – but they laughed as they went into different rooms to change, realizing that there was no longer a need for keeping apart.

After dressing they called for Annje to come up, and Clara explained that they would be back after two sleeps and then they would get ready to go on the long trip to England and then Canada. They both kissed her and all three went down together.

They had arranged that Joop would drive them to the station, while the party at the house would continue. Both of them were relieved when the waving and cheers were receding. Joop commented in Flemish that it had gone well. Martin thanked him in French and English. Clara thanked him in Flemish. Then they were at the station. Joop said he would simply drop them off – they needed their own time for a while, and he didn't hold with all the uitwuiwing.

Indeed it was a relief to go to the platform, just the two of them, and realize that they were, to the other people waiting, simply another couple.

“It's good to be just the two of us,” Martin said.

“Yes, I am still watching to see if there is a photographer.”

“There is! I remembered to get my camera back from Thomas.”

“Good. He has his own anyway, but it is not a special one like yours.”

They found a seat together on the train and Martin put his arm round Clara. To his surprise, she dozed off. Well, all the excitement. He hoped that she would revive later.

Actually he need not have worried. They registered at the hotel – this time as M and C Tremblay, since they had the documentary proof – and went to their room.

“Shall we sit in the tub.”

“In a while. After.”

“After what?” he asked, but she was down to her panties and they were coming off. She helped him out of his clothes.

“I need you to ... neuken ... fuck me.”

“That desperate, are we?” he asked.

“Yes. Ever since Paris, I feel it is needed.”

Before he could even embrace her, she had a condom on him and was laying on the bed.

“Now. Quickly.”

“Sure. Are you ready?”

“Yes. Yes. Now.”

He entered her, and she sighed with relief.

“Better?”

“Yes. Now it feels real. And you cannot – I looked

up the word – annul the wedding.”

“When I am like this with you, I don’t want to annul it. Why would I?”

“I know, but I think I just needed – verzekering.”

“Insurance?”

“Yes. I suppose so. Sometimes I am not so strong as I try to appear.”

“I know. But you are strong, and your admission of fear is also a sign of strength of a different sort.”

He kissed her, and his own urgency overcame his wish to last.

“That was too quick,” he noted.

“The tub and – other things – will remake that.”

Indeed it would. They had both noted that a good tub was going to be in the mandatory category from now on in any house or apartment they had together. After they soaked for a while, and both were getting aroused again, Clara said:

“Can you come inside without the condom for a while so we can feel each other?”

“What if I go off?”

“I have read that the second time in a short while has less seeds, and I only finished my period – I looked up the word – yesterday. That was perhaps one thing that was worrying me on Thursday. But I prefer if we are together for a while then you put on the condom before the ejaculation.”

Martin loved her, and he loved her directness. They lay for a while together, then he kissed her all over, and she him, leading to several climaxes for her and some near misses for him, then they finished with a vigorous bouncing on the rather springy bed.

After some time in each other's arms, Clara said, "Dinner?"

"At the little bistro?"

"Of course."

They washed and dressed and walked the few hundred meters to the bistro. This time it was quite crowded, but Mme Mahieu told them there would be a table in 10 minutes if they waited or took a short walk. They did the latter, visiting the Manneken Pis as a small homage to their last visit. When they were seated, and had their menus, Mme Mahieu came to take their orders.

"So. You liked our café so much you came back."

"Absolutely. And I'm going to try your blanquette de veau tonight. And a bottle of the Moselle if you have it. With a salad first please."

"Certainly. And madame?"

"Paling in t'groen, alst uw blieft? And a fork to share Martin's salad."

They handed their menus to Mme Mahieu who gasped.

"Quelle diamant! And the gold ring is on the left...."

"This morning," Martin explained.

"Then I will make sure the chef is at his best. Con-

gratulations!” she said as she disappeared into the kitchen.

Because the restaurant was busy, they did not get much chance to chat with Mme Mahieu, but did manage to have the chocolate liqueur again with coffee, and as the restaurant was beginning to clear a little, to get a picture taken of them both with Mme Mahieu, taken by another customer who was a regular at the bistro. They found the brightest part of the restaurant, and Martin set the camera on a table so that he could use a slow shutter. Fortunately, he’d changed back to the faster black and white film. There was, unfortunately, no flash for his Leica camera model, though more recent models had the adapter.

The next morning they slept late, or rather woke early, enjoyed each other, and then slept again. As they woke the second time, Martin said,

“Happy anniversary”

“No it is not a verjaardag. What do you mean?”

“Three years ago, we met at the farm.”

“Oh yes. I was forgetting – both the good and the bad. The explosion, the men killed, but also us, that we found each other.”

“We’d better focus on the last bit. And we’d better make sure never to lose each other again.”

Near London

September 11, 1947 Thursday. Hatfield, Hertfordshire.

The weather was still quite good for their journey to England. They were up very early so that they would get to Hatfield before dark. David and Esther would still be away another week. They had taken the lead from Clara and Martin and after some explorations in Belgium – Martin thought he had seen them in Brussels on Monday as they were heading to the station to go to Leuven – they were going to Paris before coming home.

In Gent, the incident of the pen had given Annje the nickname Bluenose, as the face powder had worn off before the ceremony had finished, and Thomas and Eef thought it very funny. Annje had enthusiastically adopted it. “Ik heeft Bluenose”. Over the years, it would – for better or worse – stick to her. For now, her face was pink in the sea breeze.

“It is my first time on a ship,” Clara said.

“Maybe stay on the deck to avoid seasickness,” Martin advised.

“We won’t be able to do that on the ship to Canada.”

“No. Hopefully you’ll get your sea legs quickly.”

“Sea legs?”

“It means that you get used to the movement of the ship. I remember when we came to England feeling sick

for about a day, then I was all right. But going back to England in 1945, it was quite rough and I stayed on deck while lots of the men were throwing up.”

“Throwing up?”

“Vomiting. Being sick.”

“How awful.”

“Yes. Let’s hope you and Annje are OK.”

On this short journey of around three hours they were fine.

For their arrival, they had all their documentation, including a letter showing Martin’s ‘home’ residence in Hatfield and university one in Oxford, as well as the SS Nova Scotia ticket. In the eventuality, the British immigration and customs seemed very uninterested except in the ink on Annje’s nose, which was an amusement to them.

The English trains and the big stations were a novelty to Annje and she enjoyed it. As they had Clara’s trunk, they took a taxi from Victoria to King’s Cross, and put the trunk in Left Luggage there.

“Left Luggage is a strange word,” Clara noticed

“Consigne in French.”

“Bagagedepot in Vlaams I think.”

They also took a taxi from Hatfield Garden City station to the Rosenthal house.

“4 and 3, guv,” said the driver.

Martin paid him 5 shillings, and they went in the

house.

“Martin, did the man say ‘4 and 3’?”

“Yes, it means 4 shillings and three pence, but we say ‘thruppence’.”

“So what must you give him?”

“I actually gave him two half crowns.”

“Mijn God. What does that mean?”

“Oh dear! English money. It is not easy. Let us have a cup of tea and I’ll see if I can find all the coins and notes and try to explain. Better find something for Annje to do.”

“I’ll take her to the toilet while you make the tea.”

Esther had very cleverly arranged that there were two pints of milk delivered. And the milkman had put them in the shade, so they were still all right. There was no refridgerator, but there was a pantry that was cool.

As they drank their tea – Annje had milk, then lay on the sofa and was soon asleep – Martin took out the coins and notes and a piece of paper.

“4 farthings to a penny,” he had a farthing and a penny.

“2 ha’pennies to a penny.”

“Ah, a half penny.”

“Yes, the pronunciation is shortened. And this is a three penny piece or thrupp’ny bit or thruppence.”

“I will need to listen carefully.”

“This is a sixpence. That one is easy, but in the street they call it a tanner.

Twelve pennies to the shilling, also referred to as a bob. This is a two shilling piece, also called a florin. And this one is a half-crown or 2 and 6, that is two shillings and sixpence. But in London the pronunciation is bad, sort of 'arf crown.”

“What about a crown?”

“I’ve only seen ceremonial ones. 5 shillings.”

“And then all else is paper?”

“Mostly. Here’s a ten shilling note. And here is a pound note. The 5 pound note is big. It used to be 20 centimeters by 11. Two years ago they made it 21 by 13 and added metal thread in the paper. And only printed on one side. There’s a nonsense poem ‘The Owl and the Pussy Cat’ by Edward Lear.”

“Poem?” Clara asked.

“The Owl and the Pussy Cat went to sea, In a beautiful pea green boat, They took some honey and plenty of money, Wrapped up in a 5 pound note.”

“But that is silly.”

“Yes. It is a nonsense poem. But I should tell you there are one-pound gold coins called sovereigns. I think there are half-sovereigns too. I’ve only once seen a sovereign.”

“But I saw a price in that copy of the *Times* you had in Guineas. What are they?”

“Posh shops give prices in Guineas. It used to be for auction houses. When you bid on something and the highest bid wins.”

“Ah, a veiling.”

“They used to – maybe still do – charge 5 percent commission for running the auction. That makes one shilling per pound or 21 shillings. A Guinea is 21 shillings, but there is no coin or note for that any more. They stopped making them – minting them – in 1815. However, the shops still use them for prices, I think as a way to pump up the prices.”

“So much to learn.”

“And then you go to Canada where we use dollars. I’d better kiss you before you get too mixed up.”

They cleared away the tea things. Martin gave most of the money to Clara.

“You should always have some money. And we’d better make a label with this address and later the one in Oxford to tie to Annje in case she ever gets separated from us. I’m not planning to be careless, but things do happen. ”

They did this, Clara having bought some sturdy labels for her luggage and with foresight getting some extra ones, and they found a suitable length of string so it could be put loosely around one of Annje’s shoulders

and rest discreetly under an arm.

If they had just arrived in a regular house, they would have to seek out somewhere to eat. Despite rationing, Esther had left a note saying there was a tinned steak and kidney pie, tinned peas and some potatoes, as well as a piece of Dundee cake in the larder. Martin's ration book for the items with specified amounts was in Oxford, but he had some points for things that required them. You could choose how to spend the points – money was still needed too – on those items. Eating out didn't need either points or ration book, but it was not easy in Hatfield to find a decent meal at a reasonable price.

The note from Esther pointed out there was also Weetabix for breakfast, and that they should go to a particular grocer and use David and Esther's rations, which they would not be needing for a few days. Martin had already been introduced to the grocer, so they would not go hungry. Of course, the products were quite different from those in Belgium.

They passed a quiet evening. The steak and kidney pie was a novelty for Clara and Annje. It was simple fare, but they enjoyed their first meal as a family. Esther also said that Martin and Clara should use the master bedroom and put Annje in Martin's room. This

they did, but Martin realized that if they didn't want to lock the door to keep Annje in, they would need to barricade the stairs so she could not fall down them. They did, however, secure all the doors except the two bedrooms. Clara did not want Annje getting into anything she shouldn't.

As it turned out, the journey had tired the little girl and she woke at a more or less normal hour, and Martin and Clara did too. Annje called out, "Mama", and Martin replied, "In here," and Annje heard and came running, despite his using English. Annje climbed on the bed and they let her slide in between them.

"What shall we do today?"

"Can we sightsee in London?"

"Let's do our grocery shopping, then get a day-return to town. We'll come back when Annje gets tired, but in any case not late."

"Annje tired," said Annje.

"After all that sleep?" Martin asked.

Clara translated, and Annje said, "Not tired." She was learning.

They rose, washed using water heated in the kettle on the stove, dressed and breakfasted. It was still fairly early, but they went out to the grocery, arriving soon after opening. The grocer remembered Martin and they picked up the rationed items, some non-rationed items and a few on the points Martin had. They bought, as

far as possible, things that would be portable to Oxford or which would keep until David and Esther came home, plus things for picnic lunches. Martin was glad he had withdrawn plenty of money, but he would look for a post office to get some more for the weekend.

After they put away the food, they cut some sandwiches and packed Clara's day pack with necessities for the day, including some bottles of drink, then made their way to the station. On the way Martin found a post office and got out some more money, which he passed to Clara. "For me?"

"Yes, partner. You should always have some money for emergencies."

"Yes. When I was on my own, I always did. But you were starting to spoil me."

"Why don't you try to buy the tickets. I'll stand behind you to help," Martin suggested.

"Oh, I am not sure ... All right. I have to learn."

At the wicket, she said to the agent,

"Two adults and one child day return please?"

"Where to, luv?"

"Oh. To ... London."

"Kings Cross," Martin interceded.

The agent quoted a price and Clara was able to respond saying the number of shillings and pence, and to put forward enough money to cover the fares. However, she looked very carefully at the change, adding

it up carefully. Martin could see it was correct, and explained,

“My wife is Flemish and only been here a day. English money is a challenge.”

“Almost as bad as me tryin’ to speak Eyetalian in ’43.”

When they arrived at Kings Cross, Martin bought a rover ticket for the bus and had looked up some of the routes. They went upstairs on the double-decker buses and saw many sights without wearing out Annje’s legs. The only downside was the smoke. Sometimes the air upstairs was grey, and they got off rather than suffer. The day included many of the tourist attractions. They didn’t go in any of these or any museums or churches – Annje would get bored too quickly. Both Clara and Annje seemed morbidly fascinated by the bombed out buildings, though Clara had seen much of the destruction in Antwerp. Indeed, reconstruction everywhere was taking time. The weather was dry, and they were able to eat their lunch in Green Park, where the ducks did well from Annje giving them half her sandwich before Clara could intervene.

In Swan and Edgar they found a cup of tea and toilets. St. Paul’s offered a time to sit quietly – Annje had a nap and Martin and Clara just enjoyed the peacefulness of the great nave. Along the embankment there was a small band playing. Rather wearily they went

to the Strand Corner House and had their ‘tea’. Martin ordered Welsh Rarebit for Annje, which she loved, but said ‘rabbit’ and then ‘konijn’. Oh well. It would become part of their private vocabulary.

Annje was asleep by the time they got off the train at Hatfield. Clara wore her day pack, and Martin carried Annje in the specially-modified one which they had brought ‘just in case’. They put her to bed as soon as they got in.

On the floor of the hall were several letters. Besides regular correspondence for David and Esther, there was a letter for Martin.

“It’s from Joe and Julia. We’re invited to Sutton on Sunday. That will let me show you where I lived for several years.”

“Tell me about them.”

Martin related the story. Joe had been demobbed late, at the end of 1946, while Julia was out in the Spring. They’d got married right away on a Special License, even though Joe didn’t have a job. He was now working in communications at the new London airport at Heathrow, and they’d found a place to live not too far away, but not under the flight path. Julia quit her clerical job in Sutton and found another in Slough. They didn’t yet have enough holiday leave, nor money, to come to Martin and Clara’s wedding. Martin had been to their wedding last December, which they had

arranged very quickly. It had been a small, registry office wedding with only Martin and the couple's immediate family present. The reception was in a room at a Sutton pub, and with the rationing, not a big spread. But the couple were happy, and despite the day, they'd had a good send-off to a 3-day honeymoon in Brighton.

They listened to the 9 o'clock news, then went to bed, tired with the travels of the day. Martin again protected the stairs, though Clara pointed out that Annje did not wander in Gent. Martin pointed out that either Eef or Clara had been sleeping in the same room, and this house was still strange. The extra caution could do no harm.

"On Sunday we must travel far, Martin?"

"A couple of hours by train and Tube each way."

"Tube?"

"The Underground. I wonder what Annje will think of that. At least it's only one change. We'll have to leave pretty early and get back late. I'm glad we made the backpack for her so I can carry her and she can go to sleep."

"I sometimes worry that you will feel not free to do things because of Annje."

"It does change what we can do, but so far I have not found it a chore. If I do, I'll try to be honest and tell you."

"Yes. You must tell me and we will work out what

we shall do. Me too, I must when I feel such to tell you. We both must tell each other if we have such feelings.”

“For tomorrow, we can have an easy day, then follow the Canadian tradition of Saturday being bath night.”

“Is not fuel rationed here?”

“Yes. But the bath here uses a gas heater called a geyser. That’s why there’s only a cold tap on the sinks. In the kitchen they use a kettle, though I know David is talking about getting a gas heater called an Ascot. I think there’ll be enough gas if we share after we put Annje to bed. She can be bathed first, and we could bathe her in the kitchen sink. We could still heat water in the geyser.”

“Yes, the kitchen sink is big enough and would use less water than the tub. And you and I share!”

“But I can’t wait until tomorrow night.” Martin said, slipping his hand under her night-dress. “Ooh. No knickers.”

“Are knickers the same as panties?”

“In England. But it is perhaps lower class.”

“But if I do not wear any, then I do not need to say one or the other!”

Etymological discussion gave way to less intellectual pursuits, after which they both slept until Annje climbed into the bed at 7:30 the next morning.

Clara cut some apple into their Weetabix. She had been adamant that they should have some fruit, and apples would keep best. Martin hadn't thought of fruit in Weetabix, but it meant it did not need sugar, which was rationed.

They decided to go to St Albans for a window-shopping expedition, then to look at some of the historical sights. They both wanted Clara to learn about different English shops and what they sold, and get used to the prices and points. They made sandwiches so they would not be dependent on finding a café.

"It's a pity we cannot go into a pub, as they are fairly good for food and drink and toilets," Martin noted.

"Because of the drink?"

"Yes. Even though it is easy to get things that are not alcoholic. But children are not allowed unless there is a garden. And mostly those are only open in summer. Perhaps we can arrange for someone to look after Annje in Oxford for a while so I can take you to a pub. They are an interesting English tradition."

"I'd like to see one or two. I've read and heard about them."

They found the bus to St. Albans. As they rode, Annje on Martin's knee, he warned,

"Look after your purse carefully. There is a street market on Saturdays in St. Peter's Street."

"I have the strap from one shoulder to the other side,

and I keep my hand on it.”

“In the market, I think Annje should ride in the backpack. She will see more and we will know where she is.”

“Yes, that will be best. We don’t want to lose her where she cannot tell people where she lives, even though she has the address around her shoulder.”

It was warm, in fact one of the warmest Septembers on record, so they didn’t need jackets. Clara’s day pack – brought in case they bought anything – was pressed into service carrying sweaters and Martin’s blazer before they started their walk.

Clara found the calls of the market vendors difficult to understand. First, they were using unfamiliar words. Second they had strong accents.

“Martin. Why does he talk of oranges when he is selling apples?”

“The Cox’s Orange Pippin is an apple the English think especially good. I find them a bit soft and too sweet, but they have an orange colour to the skin sometimes. Look at the Bramley apples there.”

“Those huge green ones with horrible brown spots?”

“Yes. My mother refused at first to buy them. But they are fantastic for cooking. The apple pieces don’t become mush.”

“Perhaps when we are in Canada I try them.”

“I don’t think we have them there. Perhaps try them in Oxford. Jane may be willing to show you how they

are used.”

Annje suddenly pointed from her vantage point,
“Banane!”

“Yes. It is bananas. I haven’t had one since the start of the war,” Martin said.

“We’ve never had one, either of us. We didn’t buy much fruit because we grew our own. But we saw a magazine two weeks ago with pictures of them, and Annje liked the yellow colour.”

Martin bought two. They were expensive, and he hoped they were neither too ripe nor too hard. They found a bench and took Annje down from the backpack. Martin opened one of the bananas.

“They can be messy and sticky, so I’ll hold it and you can show Annje how to take a bite.”

He peeled the skin back, noted it was firm but ripe, and not bruised, and held it so Clara could take a bite, then offered to Annje, but kept hold himself of the banana.

There was silence while mother and daughter appraised the new sensation. Martin took a small bite too. It was good. As good as he remembered.

“Nice. Very nice,” said Clara.

“Lekker. Meer, alst uw bleeft, Martin,” said Annje

He gave some more to Annje and to Clara, and in turn they finished it.

“Shall I open the other?”

“Will it keep until tomorrow?”

“If we don’t bruise it, yes.”

“Then I will put it on the top of the other things and we will have it for breakfast. Voor ontbijt, ja?”

“Banane met Weetabix,” was the cross-language decree from Annje.

Before they went back to the house, they looked at the Roman amphitheatre and the Cathedral, and poked noses in shops. They ate their sandwiches on a bench by a bus stop.

“Martin, I think we’d better make sure Annje visits a WC.” Clara still pronounced it ‘vay say’. “Will there be one in that restaurant across there?”

“Probably just for customers, but a cup of tea would go well just now.”

They went in the rather busy but modest establishment, and had to accept a table for two. Martin ordered a pot of tea for two and a glass of milk for Annje, who he sat on his knee.

“Martin. Shall we take something for tomorrow? With the rationing, it seems we should.”

“Yes. And I have some points if we need them. You take Annje to spend a penny and I’ll pay the bill.”

“Spend a penny? Oh, does that mean go to the WC?”

“Sorry, another slang expression. Used only here in Britain.”

To take to Sutton they settled on some tinned peaches.

In an off-license Martin bought three bottles of cider.

“One for us tonight and two for tomorrow. And we’ll take that pack of Rich Tea biscuits, then get another on Monday or Tuesday in Oxford.”

By the time they’d sorted out their purchases and waited for the bus, Annje was falling asleep. It was near to 5 p.m. They had had a good day. When they got to Hatfield, however, Martin sniffed the air.

“Would you like fish and chips for supper?” he asked.

“Is that fish and frites?”

“Yes. They won’t be as good as Belgian chips. And the fish is in a batter.”

“Batter?”

“A sort of bread coating.”

“We can try it. At least this one time.”

They bought their fish and chips and walked quickly home – with Annje in the pack, they were not slowed by her pace. The smell of the fish and chips woke her up. Clara quickly unpacked the meal and put it on plates, and Martin poured them some cider and Annje some lemonade that they had bought earlier from the grocer.

“There’s no mayonnaise for the chips, but I found the ketchup. The English often say ‘Tomato sauce’,” Martin explained.

“When we have our own house, I will make mayonnaise for the frites.”

Conversation stopped and there was little noise as

the meal was consumed quickly.

“I do not think I would want that every day, but it is good as a meal I do not have to cook.”

“Yes. I always like it, but it is pretty greasy. And the English always wrap it in newspaper, so your hands can get quite dirty.”

“Vis en chips. Lekker.” said Annje.

“And the cider too. Also ‘lekker’. I had not tried such a drink before.”

“I don’t think it is available in Canada, except perhaps from some farms in Quebec. We may have to make our own. In fact, drinking anything with alcohol is very restricted in Ontario – in Canada. There was a strong temperance – no alcohol – movement, and we had prohibition for a while. I hope you won’t find it too difficult.”

“We don’t drink very much, and I expect we will not find we miss it as much as – well, other things. But some wine from time to time, or this cider, is rather nice.”

“I’m afraid Canada still has a lot of things that are quite restricted compared to here. We’ll find it more difficult to get condoms. They are, I think, illegal to sell for preventing babies, but you can pretend you want to avoid disease and buy them for that. There was a woman in Ottawa, Dorothea Palmer, who got arrested in 1936 for distributing them to poor people, but the court said her efforts were for the greater good. Still,

they may not be easily obtained. But I think sometimes you can get them by mail.”

“Not so different from Belgium. But once we are with a flat or house, and not travelling, I think we don’t use them. I like better without, as you know.”

“Me too. I’ll make sure we have some before we sail, and hope that the customs people do not check too closely.”

They got up quite early on the Sunday, which was not difficult with Annje to wake them. The journey to Sutton took them about two and a half hours, and then they needed to walk from Morden or wait a long time for a bus. Martin anticipated this and brought the pack to carry Annje.

The weather was still holding mostly dry, and they were able to walk across the park, one of the best open spaces in the area. They found Joe’s parents’ house and were greeted warmly. However, Julia was the latecomer to the welcoming group, and the reason was obvious.

“Julia. It’s clear what you and Joe have been up to,” Martin teased.

“The doctor thinks twins in late November,” Julia explained. “And they seem to be fighting already.”

“Well. At least they’ll be company for each other,” said Joe’s mother.

A big fuss was made of Annje. And there was lots of conversation, much of which Clara found difficult to understand with accents and words that were strange. Martin, noticing this, used Annje as the excuse to keep the visit to a moderate length.

Joe walked with them back to Morden.

“It was good to see you again, Martin. And I really am glad we got to meet, Clara. My work is all about communicating with people, but it really helps to know what they look like.”

“You do not know the people you talk to?” Clara asked.

“Not always talk. Sometimes it’s Morse code.”

“Yes. Martin said you were good at it. He said you could sometimes tell who was sending to you by the way they tapped.”

“I still can’t say too much about that. But yes, I could sometimes recognize the hand. I think the most difficult times were when I realized it wasn’t the person I should be hearing – knowing there was a substitution.”

“You mean a soldier or airman who had been killed or wounded and his replacement was now on the key?”

“Something like that. Except they weren’t always men, and not always in uniform. And the Germans were not above trying to make the ‘substitution’. But I’ve probably said enough.”

“Yes. I understand. Much about the war is already

enough.”

Oxford en famille

September 25, 1947. Thursday. Oxford

Martin was showing Clara and Annje his college. They had been to the Lodge and the porters had made a big fuss over Annje. It wasn't yet term time and they were happy with the distraction. Afterwards, the big copper beech in the garden served as a good backdrop and Martin took some colour slides of Annje and Clara. Then they looked in the chapel.

“It is very beautiful, Martin.”

“If we can find someone to babysit Annje, I'll bring you to Evensong. There's no electric light, so we use candles. Great atmosphere.”

“Yes. That would be nice, but Annje still does not speak so well English.”

“She does quite well, but I agree she is too young to push on that front.”

Someone was coming in. It turned out to be George Richmond with a quite attractive girl.

“George! Good to see you.”

“Hello, Martin. Good to see you too. Let me introduce my fiancé. Pamela, this is Martin Tremblay.”

“And I must introduce my wife Clara and our daugh-

ter Annje.”

“You sly fox! That was quick to get a child that old, along with a handsome wife.”

“I was widowed when Annje was very small. Martin has been very kind to take us both,” said Clara.

“Clara and Annje and I were almost all killed by a Teller mine in ’44. We’ve kept in touch and when I went back to Belgium this July, we found we just seemed right for each other. Clara, George recommended the hotel where we stayed in Paris. He’s the brother of a girl I used to go out with.”

“And I was her best friend until I caught George rebuilding his house,” said Pamela.

“I’d heard a little about that. Has Jenny still got her nose out of joint that I didn’t want to go to Rhodesia and you are too – er, down to earth – for George.”

But George jumped in.

“Fraid so, old man. But Jenny’s now got a banker on a short leash, so I don’t think you need worry that she’ll try to displace Clara here. And as long as Henry keeps her pretty arse on a good horse, she’ll at least be cordial to all of us. Are you back to study?”

“No. I’m doing a little work for Bleaney still, but we’ve a passage booked back to Canada – well back for me at least – in November. What about you?”

“I’m going to farm with Pamela. She’s helped me fix up the old cottage – really spiffing job she’s made of it. I

think I'm just the builder's boy, but I like how she get's things done. We're here scouting out the chapel for our wedding after Term ends. We'll have been engaged over a year, but I wanted to at least be able to offer her a roof and food before we faced the vicar. Besides which, the parental unit want to be at the ceremonials, and they're out in Rhodesia still."

"Good for you, anyway. Clara, by the way, just sold her farm in Belgium."

"What type of farm did you have?" Pamela asked.

"Some cows for milk, some fields with potatoes and cabbage and other things, and a big garden for ourselves with some fruit. A few chickens for eggs and meat too. I think you say a mixed farm."

"Yes. We will certainly have the big garden too, in fact we already started it, but I think we may specialize," Pamela said. "Though I think George sometimes wants to specialize in raising children like this gorgeous little one here."

"Uw have cows?" Annje asked.

"Not yet, Annje. But my father has cows. Do you like cows?"

"Cows friends. They know Annje friend too."

"She is mad about cows," Clara explained. "And she knew how to lead them to the milking place – do you say parlour here?"

"Yes. But they would let her lead them?"

“Yes. I think it is that she was both bold but gentle. In any case, they would go without leading I think.”

The conversation split across gender lines and eventually wound down. Addresses and congratulations were exchanged, and George and Pamela stayed to figure out how the wedding guests might be seated in the chapel, while Martin and Clara took Annje outside into the Quad.

There they almost bumped into the Warden.

“Good afternoon, Warden. May I introduce my wife Clara and our daughter Annje? Clara, this is Warden Bowra.”

“Pleased to meet you, Warden. Is that how I should speak to you?”

“Indeed, and welcome Mrs. Tremblay. But you are not Canadian?”

“No I am from Belgium. We met in the war. I was recently widowed when Annje was a baby.”

“Tremblay – I did not know you had married – told me he had been wounded by a mine, with two comrades killed, and a lady with a baby had helped him.”

“That would be me. And we have been married only a few weeks. We had written to each other for three years, and when Martin came to visit we had no plans, but then ...”

“War is generally a bad business. But I am glad you have both found something good from it, and my

best wishes for the future to you all. Now I must see Richmond. Another wedding. Is he still in the chapel?"

"Yes, Warden. Thank you for your good wishes, and I will say my farewells in case we do not get to do so before we sail for Canada in November."

"Bon voyage. And do keep in touch with the College. We like to get you all back for Gaudies."

They walked out of the College, Annje skipping along with them, as Martin explained that Gaudy was a word Clara was unlikely ever to use in Canada in its meaning as a reunion dinner for former students of the College.

On their various outings, they had seen small children on some leather reins that let them run or walk independently to a range of about 5 feet or a metre and a half – Martin or Clara measure – but still not get lost or run away. Apparently there was a big debate over whether this was good management or proper child rearing, but when they saw some in a shop they had bought them. Annje seemed to like the extra freedom to explore a little.

Shopping had more or less become organized. On their first day in Oxford, they had gone to some offices on St. Aldates about ration cards for Clara and Annje. After a bit of redirection, they filled in some forms and were given the book right away. The Labour gov-

ernment was strong on making sure children did not go hungry.

Today they walked into the covered market. Clara had tried Hovis bread at Jane's, and wanted a loaf. Martin teased her that you had to have it with Marmite, and they found that, too, in one of the shops. When they got home, she at first put on far too much of the salty paste. Fortunately, he scraped most of it off and the resulting 'sandwich' was declared 'interesting'. A couple of days later, he caught her eating a Marmite and cheese sandwich.

That evening, the three of them went to the English Country dancing. Martin wanted Clara to see and hear it. Jane was there, and out of Term just a dozen dancers in total, but they did a few dances and Martin was pulled in for some. Clara managed a couple, and for Bonnets so Blue, Martin got Annje to dance with him, where she managed just fine.

They walked back with Jane, but it was well past Annje's bedtime, so they did not stop for a cup of tea. Later, lying in Martin's arms, Clara said:

"It is not at all like the dances of today."

"No. It's the dancing of two hundred years ago."

"And people would dress differently."

"Yes. In fact the coming of corsets meant that this

form of dancing went out of fashion. It can get, as you saw, quite lively, and corsets meant the girls couldn't breathe."

"I liked it. It was friendly, and the music was nice."

"Did you like George who we met in the Chapel?"

"Yes. Did you not say he was a baron or something like that."

"Technically the Honourable George Richmond. Jenny didn't like him getting together with Pamela. Even though Pam was her best friend as a child, Pam is very much lower to middle class here in England. But I think she's very nice. A strong, good-looking girl. Like you!"

"And George obviously adores her."

"He was badly wounded in the war, which is why he has a stick, though around Pam the stick sort of becomes invisible."

"Yes. I hardly noticed it."

"Well, he was a long time getting better, then somehow didn't go out with regular girls, though Jenny thought he went to prostitutes."

"Why? He is an attractive man."

"I think there are a lot of scars under the clothing, and perhaps he worried about that."

"So how did Pam change that?"

"Last summer – over a year ago – he went to live in a dilapidated cottage on his parent's property. The main house was rented out. They have a title but no money,

so his parents are working in Rhodesia, and George and Jenny are at University. Jenny went to relatives in Ireland, but George knew about the cottage and he decided to make it habitable. Pam lives nearby and came to talk to him – I think they may have met on the train when he went down – and then she gave him some ideas.”

“Ideas about the building or about boys and girls?”

“Obviously both. I know she told him that it would be wise to put in a good kitchen and a good bathroom. I strongly suspect that he was shy about his wounds and scars, but she simply told him to stop being silly and let her worry about that. Confidence is important.”

“I’ll remember that. I’ve got to see the people at Harrods.”

Toe in the water

October 23, 1947. Thursday. Oxford.

“Martin, Annje. I’m home.”

“Mama. Mama.” Annje ran towards her.

“Have you been a good girl, Annje?”

“Ja. Martin make welsh rabbit. Lekker.”

“Yes. She likes her ‘rabbit’. How was your meeting in London?” He gave her a kiss.

Clara, with a great deal of trepidation, had written to the buying department in Harrods on behalf of the

Agricultural Foundation, saying that she would be visiting England in September and October and would be much obliged if they would allow her a short meeting to tell them about the products the Foundation could supply and also to learn what products might be of interest to Harrods in the future. She mentioned that she also had contacts in lace, chocolate and beverage companies.

A reply had invited her to a meeting at noon today. At first she had asked Martin if he would come with her, but he said that at some point she would need to be able to do such visits on her own, as long as they did not involve unsafe journeys. This would be in daylight on well-travelled routes – walk or bus to the station, train to Paddington, Tube to South Kensington or Knightsbridge. Reverse to come home. Clara agreed. She should do it on her own.

With careful planning, she made sure she had information copied out on Stichting letterhead with some of the products and current prices. She also made sure she had a notepad. Martin lent her a small briefcase he had, and a clip board to hold a pad. She already had a fountain pen and carefully filled it, though she would use pencil for notes, and made sure there were a couple in the case along with a sharpener. She also put some blotting paper in the briefcase, just in case of leaks.

She would be wearing her dark suit, but no hat. Despite the fashion for hats, she found them uncomfort-

able, and did not have one that went well with this suit. Her raincoat turned out to be needed, and an umbrella. Despite a very dry October, this day had a smattering of rain.

Martin had bought her a small purse for coins. This would go in her raincoat pocket or in the briefcase, and she could put enough money in there to avoid having to open her handbag. She thanked him for this, but actually worked out the fares and put them in old envelopes labelled 'bus', 'train', and 'tube'. There were 2 each of the bus and tube envelopes. English money was still very challenging, especially when she had also to try to understand the local accents. She also had a tube map in the briefcase, as well as some samples of lace and a couple of Leonidas chocolates, the last to be left behind as gifts.

In the event, all had gone extremely well. She had arrived 40 minutes before the meeting, so took half an hour to look over the store to see what they had in different departments. The two people who met with her from the buying department – a man from groceries and a woman from household linens – were friendly and direct. They made it clear that Harrods rarely made purchases from meeting such as this, but nonetheless regarded them as essential for building up an ongoing stable of suppliers from which they would eventually choose items for the grand store. On that basis,

there was a good exchange of information about expectations on quantities, shipping, prices, and conditions, how payments would be made, what documentation might be needed for HM Customs etc. They offered Clara lunch in one of the Harrods restaurants, and over lunch learned how she came to be in England, and that she intended to attempt to set up an agency in Canada. Mr. Sedgewick – the grocery buyer – gave her the name of a friend who had emigrated to Canada and was doing something in groceries for Weston's, he thought. He said he would write with the address this afternoon. Miss Roberts, the linen buyer, was most interested in the lace, but wondered how it could best be marketed to English customers. It was gorgeous, but should you sell it for wedding dresses or table cloths? Clara took notes – if people did not know how to make use of a product, they would not buy it.

Her only difficulty occurred afterwards, when she got on the wrong Tube train. There were several that came on the same platform. Fortunately, she had her map and realized the stations were wrong, so got off and asked a London Transport worker how to get to Paddington. It was a moment of panic, but she sorted herself out, and found the realization that she had managed to overcome the difficulty gave her renewed confidence.

The train home had allowed her time to organize her

notes and expand the quick abbreviations. It had been a good meeting. Something she remembered from the conversation stuck in her mind. She printed it at the bottom of her notes. As Martin poured her a cup of tea, she asked:

“Martin, I got an idea today for the name of an agency business. What do you think?”

She held up the pad:

Best of Belgium

“Excellent. Yes. That would be the right name. Now you just have to find the people who want the stuff and get it for them.”

“It is a pity that the chocolate liqueur and Belgian beer contain alcohol. That will be more trouble to make travel to Canada because of the douanes – customs rules.”

“I think we’ll have to concentrate on lace and chocolate and things like that.”

“Yes. But I need to think more how to sell the lace. I cannot see you wearing it.”

“No. Lace on my underpants is not quite my style.”

They laughed, and Annje said, “Lace on my underpants.”

In the meantime, there had still been the need to

find a steamer trunk for Martin's things. Eventually they had found a rather junky store selling odds and ends of tools and luggage and bric-a-brac not far from the station and brewery. There were several trunks, and Martin chose a quite large one that seemed sturdy. He paid for it, then borrowed a dolly from the lab and walked it all the way home. Of course, he had to walk the dolly to the shop, then back to the lab the next morning.

Now it was time to start packing in earnest. They laid out their things. Some of the household items Clara had brought could be packed right away. They would not be needed until they had their own apartment, and even then would be 'for best'. These they had itemized and packed tightly in Clara's trunk, using the soft items to wrap the few pieces of china that were of either real or sentimental value. However, Martin discovered two photo albums and suggested that they should be put in suitcases.

Martin's books presented the most awkward choices. It might be difficult to get some of them in Toronto, especially for everyday personal use. Eventually, he bought another trunk – much smaller – and used it for almost all the books, packing the small gaps with socks and odds and ends. Martin found a box of condoms fitted nicely on top of a short book when a taller one was its neighbour. His soldering iron and some solder also

went in, as did a couple of less-used tools. His beloved AVO meter and his slide rule would be in a suitcase, as would a small screwdriver and some needle-nose pliers.

This evening, even though it had been a busy day for Clara, they were going to do a trial packing of the other trunks and suitcases. Annje was in bed and Clara came to their living room where everything was laid out, though not necessarily in the right order.

“Did you have a good day with Annje?”

“Yes. She gave very little trouble. Only one grizzle.”

“What was that about?”

“As far as I could understand, she wanted to go outside to see why the rain made rings in the puddles. I was like that as a kid, so I sympathize, but I didn’t want her wet and dirty.”

“No. I would have been cross with you if you had let her.”

“We did go for a walk in the afternoon, then she helped me pack my books. She was less bother than I feared. I fortunately had a nice picture book of Algonquin Park that could go in the trunk last, and that kept her happy for a while.”

“Oh. I would have liked to see that.”

“Maybe we’ll see the real Algonquin Park next summer.”

“Is it a big one?”

“About as big as Banff National Park. But Algo-

nquin is a Provincial Park. Slightly different rules, and there used to be logging there. I only was there once, but it was pretty nice. Lots of mosquitoes though, especially in the evening.

Now. About this stuff. How about Annje's clothes? Are there any she is almost grown out of? We could give them away or try to sell them and get new in Canada."

"If they are available. That is why I've kept them."

"I think we can take a chance. I'll write and ask Mum to be on the lookout. Shall I ask her to watch for a sewing machine too? I've seen you use Wil's."

"You just want to put me to work as a huisvrouw!"

"Then I won't ask her to look out for one."

"I will write tomorrow and ask her myself. I think it will save us money in the long run, and I also think that perhaps I can try out ideas for using Belgian lace as the edge for table cloths or other things so I just buy the lace from Belgium and use a little on each item."

"You got lots of ideas today.

OK. Put Annje's things in 3 piles here on the rug. Keep, Maybe and Out."

In a few minutes they had three approximately equal piles.

"Hold up each of the Maybe items for me, Clara."

"Keep. Keep. Out. Keep. Out. Out."

"That was easy, Martin."

"But do you agree with me?"

“I agree enough. They were already Maybe.”

“Let’s look at your clothes next, especially the ones that will go in the trunk.”

Martin moved the Annje pile to a chair in the corner. He found a piece of paper and wrote down ‘Winter clothes; Sewing machine’, then said

“I’ve put down that you should ask Mum to watch for some winter clothes for us. We’d better measure ourselves for size. I’ve a tape measure somewhere, though I have no idea why I got it.”

“What will we need?”

“Coats, boots, tights for Annje, possibly for you.”

“Tights?”

“Heavy stockings, sewn into the panty. You could wear pants instead or as well. Long underwear for really cold days.”

“How is it long?”

“Like pyjamas, but tighter fitting. Some even are full body, with a door behind so you can use the toilet, but those are pretty old-fashioned.”

“It sounds like a lot of work.”

“Usually only when you want to be outside, like for skating or snow-shoeing.”

“Snow shoes. Are they not boots?”

“No. Sort of like tennis racquets. In French the word is raquette.”

“I have so much to learn. I wonder how I will manage,

since we arrive in winter.”

“I expect it will become normal in a few weeks. The houses are warmer than here or in Belgium. It is, I think, more comfortable generally. And I don’t think there are such shortages of things as there are here. They’ve already ended rationing, and I don’t think clothes were ever rationed, though perhaps they were hard to find.”

“Can we afford new clothes?”

“We’ll manage. I’ve put a bit of money aside. It’s not a fortune, but I think enough. And you don’t spend foolishly – in our short time together, I’ve no complaints that you are extravagant, but we seem to do all right.”

“Thank you, Martin. I sometimes worry that Annje and I are a big load for you.”

“But I don’t feel that at all. It’s been a big change, but I like sharing with you. The other night you asked me about my work and I didn’t have to be vague about it. I could tell you what I was doing, even though I didn’t include a lot of the technical details. With ... well, with Jenny, I would get my head bitten off if I said anything about electronics or wireless unless I was fixing her gramophone or something like that.”

“Did you care about her a lot?”

“No, I don’t think so. She could be fun to be with, but I never felt that she wanted me, Martin, but somebody else who just happened to look like me.”

“I don’t think I shared as much with Luc as I do with you. We mostly talked about the farm, sometimes about the war, but never how we felt. I know he loved me and I loved him. But perhaps we were just pushed together by the way things happened.”

“To change the subject to more immediate needs, let’s put aside the clothes we will wear on the ship. I assume they will have a laundry service, though it will be expensive. So I think we should take plenty of underwear and shirts or blouses, and probably three pairs of trousers for me and at least one pair of slacks for you and a couple of skirts. You’ll need at least one nice outfit for evening. We may have to buy you one! And I’ll need my dinner jacket.”

“Dinner jacket? What is that?”

“This one,” he said, bringing it from the wardrobe. “Sometimes called a tuxedo. I never needed one until Oxford. But on the ship, it is probably not absolutely needed, but good to have.

You know, we’re going to have to repack. Let’s put some of the books in each of the big trunks, and have the small one with us on board. Then we can have enough clothes for warmth if we are outside in St. John’s or Halifax, or on deck, and also still have some glad rags for formal evenings.”

“Glad rags?”

“Sorry. English slang for fancy clothes.”

“Do you think Annje will be accepted on the ship?”

“She cannot be the first child on board. But I’m not planning to spend a lot of time socializing. I think we should keep a fairly simple schedule so Annje doesn’t get tired. And we should take some books to read ourselves, so we are not tempted to spend too long in the bar. I don’t know if this ship has one or two sittings for dinner, but if they have two, we’ll book for the early one with Annje, except for an invite to sit at the Captain’s table. For that, we may want to hire one of the stewards to mind Annje, as I doubt she will sit still for a full dinner.”

“No. But I’m happy you have thought about keeping her with us. I don’t want her to feel pushed aside.”

“As I said from the start, she has to be part of our happiness.”

They continued the packing, and found they had enough room for everything, but that Clara did not have a suitable evening gown. As they drank a cup of tea on stopping for the night, they made a list of things they would need for her:

- warm slacks
- evening dress
- evening shoes
- (possibly) nylon stockings

Martin had found his tailor's tape measure. It was something Miriam had given him, and he now recognized the wisdom of that.

"Here, check my height using that book and putting your finger on the level here by the door."

"OK. I have my finger on the spot at the bottom of the book when it is flat on your head."

"Hold it. 5 feet 8 inches."

"What is that in metres?"

"I'll work it out for you later. But now you stand here and I'll put my finger on the wall."

"It is reading 5 and then 6."

"5 feet 6 inches. That is quite tall for a woman here in England."

"My mother was taller than me. Father too."

"Now the hips. ... 38 inches. I'll write it down."

"Waist. Stand up straight. ... 28 inches."

"It is too thick I think."

"Thick? Oh. You mean plump if you wish to be polite, or fat if you wish to be rather direct. I don't think too fat, and I'm the main judge, right?"

"Yes." she laughed.

"Now the bust."

"You just want to touch my breasts. Do you not say tits?"

"That's slang, though sometimes used more or less correctly for the nipple. You would not use that in

polite company.”

“And you just used ‘bust’, and I have also heard ‘bosom’.”

“I think the dictionary is going to be needed for all those, and I’ll make sure it is in the small trunk for the ship for you. Here it is.

But I’ve measured you now. OK. 36 inches. Now measure my waist, hips, and chest and inner and outer leg.”

They did these, with some laughter and fooling around, then brushed their teeth and curled up together in bed.

The next day, Clara wrote to Miriam and Robert about winter clothing. She measured Annje first, and included all their measurements. With some diffidence, she asked about a sewing machine.

Martin suggested I ask if you could find information about a sewing machine. I know how to use one, and if a good one were not expensive, it would the cost to make clothes for Annje and even for me or Martin make lower. But we have no idea if they are available, and how much they cost.

A sewing machine would also with house things like curtains assist.

Her letter went on to mention her visit to Harrods, and some of the things they had been doing, and finished with saying how she was looking forward to seeing them soon.

Martin was taking Annje to the lab along with some of his things that would not be going to Canada. Then he would take her for a walk and buy her a welsh rarebit for lunch. Annje was almost a pest trying to hurry him up.

After posting the letter, Clara stopped by the Indian Institute to ask Jane where she might find an evening gown for the ship.

“There are a few women’s shops in the Cornmarket and George Street. There’s a small shop or two here in Broad Street or some of the smaller streets.

But don’t buy anything today. Just take a look. Come by my house tonight – bring that husband of yours and Annje for a cup of tea after your meal – and we can discuss what you’ve seen so you know what is good value. It will run you quite a few points on top of the money.”

“Yes. The points are difficult. I like to use them for nice things to eat rather than nice things for my body to wear.”

“Off with you now and do some window shopping, and we’ll talk about the possibilities later.”

In Debenhams, she found the styles rather sombre,

and the prices were high. There were a couple of nice gowns, but so much money – and points – for one or two evenings of wear. However, she found their linens department most interesting, as there were fine tablecloths and napkins and other things where lace could be used. She had a small notepad and pencil, and noted down short descriptions and prices.

“May I help you madam?” said the serving lady, in a rather accusative way, Clara thought.

“I am wanting to perhaps have a table set that is similar ... matching you say I think. But to calculate the price and the ... points. I need to have that information for my husband.”

Poor, absent Martin was a convenient way to explain the note-taking, though of course Clara’s real intention was to get to know the marketplace for table linens in England. She would do the same in Canada later.

That evening, Jane brought out a box in which there was a silk gown that had a plain white top and a black skirt, with a black velvet belt sewn in. It was actually a separate top and skirt, which made it easier to put on. There was a strong smell of moth balls as the tissue paper was lifted away.

“Try this on. You can use the study to change. I’ve had it for years and it no longer fits me, but I think it will just about fit you. If it does, we’ll work out a price.”

“But”

“It is rather nice, and not in a style of any particular time period,” Martin noted.

“Mama pretty”, said Annje when Clara came back from changing.

Clara did look fine in the gown, though she was a couple of inches taller than Jane, and the hem looked too high.

“I was thinking you could trim the hem with some black velvet, and possibly put a little of your lace on the sleeves or neckline,” Jane suggested.

“Perhaps some flat shoes?” Clara ventured, and kicked off her black, mid-heel shoes that were the alternative to her brown walking shoes. Apart from slippers, she had no others. They had left the clogs in Belgium, and in any event did not wish to clean the mud off them.

“It’s gorgeous. What would you like for it?” Martin asked.

“My father paid 3 pounds to buy it for me in 1911. I got to wear it a couple of times, then got married and was widowed before I got much use out of it. Would it be ridiculous to ask 3 pounds?”

“It would be very reasonable at that price.”

“Now Annje and I have some very important business,” said Jane. I have to read her a Rupert story. I think you two should go and have a drink in the Lamb and Flag.

This they did, so Clara got to experience a traditional pub, coming back to find Annje asleep on the sofa.

The following morning – a Saturday – they wanted to look for the flat heeled shoes, at least to make a preliminary search. As it turned out, they found some simple, rather old-fashioned flat-heel shoes with a strap that fitted well and were not too expensive, but they would still require 7 clothing points. They decided this was worthwhile. Annje had really only one pair of shoes, and they bought her a pair of strap shoes too, as Clara was worried the existing pair of shoes was getting tight on the growing girl. Several more points were needed, but Annje needed more than one pair of shoes.

“Do you think we are ready, Martin?”

“I’m sure we’ll think of other things over the next two weeks, but I don’t think we’re that short. Let’s pack tonight again, then if there is any space, perhaps go to the Wednesday market and look for second hand things.”

“Only if they can be washed. I don’t want ... vlooiën.”

“Market, vlooiën, vlooiënmarkt,” chanted Annje.

“I think fleas perhaps,” said Martin. “And Annje is becoming the Greek chorus.”

“How is that? A Greek chorus?”

Martin realized she had never encountered classical subjects. He was weak in them compared to most of his English contemporaries, but realized her knowledge might be non-existent.

“In ancient Greek plays, there would always be a chorus telling what was going on.”

As it turned out, they did find one or two items at the Wednesday market, in fact some slacks that appeared to be ex-military, but meant for women. They were sturdy and warm, but were a wool cloth. However, they appeared to be unused, likely surplus from uniforms.

They bought two pairs, one of which was even lined. And being second-hand, or supposedly second hand, no points were needed. There were also some women’s shirts, and they picked up one of those.

Annje was the most difficult to clothe.

“Martin. Do you think that with a vest and underpants, I can dress her in a wool pullover and a skirt?”

“That would allow for her to grow, they would be fairly warm, and we should be able to find some things like that.”

“ere you are madam. Take a look at this lovely little jumper for the pretty young lady.”

“Martin, it is nice. But why ‘jumper’. I have seen pullover, cardigan and sweater. But here jumper.”

“Let’s buy it and I’ll try to explain,” Martin said in a tired voice.

They did so. In fact they found a skirt with a built-in top and shoulder straps. After money had changed hands, they walked – Annje on her reins – out of the crowded market toward ‘home’.

“The skirt with top and straps is, in Canada, called a jumper. And what they call a jumper here we call a sweater, sometimes a pullover. A cardigan is a wool jacket that buttons up the front. There seem to be differences like that in all the English-speaking countries.”

“Just like Hollands and Vlaamse, I think.”

“Pretty much the same, I’d guess.”

Each day they made sure they had a small excursion. In the last week, they travelled to London and shopped on Oxford Street, using up what they could of their points on some nice cloth that would provide a tight packing for the trunks and a useful stock when they got to Canada. Clara had some ideas.

“That’s not really clothing material, is it?” Martin asked.

“No. I plan to take a bit of the lace I brought with me and make some table linen.”

“And you used clothing points? Very naughty.”

“I thought I didn’t need clothing when I was naughty,” she replied, laughing.

They were near the Tottenham Court Road. Annje

spied the Lyon's Corner House.

“Rabbit. Rabbit. Welsh Rabbit.”

“Do we have any choice?” Martin asked.

“Not if we want to avoid World War Three.”

Farewells

November 6, 1947. Thursday Afternoon

It was their last day in Oxford. Last Sunday David and Esther had come up to wish them farewell. It had been more or less dry, but rather cold as they walked about the city. The Rosenthals had never been to Oxford, and with Annje in her ‘special seat’ they did a bit of a tour.

Overall it was a great day together, but the goodbyes had had a tinge of sadness. After they’d gone, Clara had a bit of a cry, which confused Annje and could not really be easily explained to a child of 3 and a half.

Last night, there had been some bonfires and fireworks. Clara had already asked about a couple of sets of children – almost all boys – each parading a sort of scarecrow effigy in an old pram or push-chair and yelling “Penny for the Guy”. Martin had to explain the 1605 Gunpowder Plot that the children no doubt cared little about, but used the pretext to ask for money for

fireworks.

“Fireworks! After all the bombs and bullets”, Clara exclaimed.

“Fraid so. But it does mean life returning to normal. They will light bonfires and burn the Guy, and set off fireworks.”

One of the groups of children was from a couple of houses away, and as an inducement to get money “for the Guy” they invited Annje to come to the bonfire. They could see the back yard from one of their windows, so when the bonfire was lit, Martin and Clara bundled Annje into her coat and took her round. She didn’t like the bangers, so they kept her away from the fire and stood with the watchful adults, making introductions and smalltalk. There was tea and a strange cake called parkin. Someone had some sparklers and gave one to Annje, which she enjoyed with Clara holding onto her hand to ensure no clothing got scorched. The rockets were also a big hit, along with some of the colourful flares. The catherine wheels were a disappointment, fizzing but not always spinning.

“Martin. They use milk bottles for the rockets”, Clara noted.

“Yes. Seems to be the best way to launch them.”

“Will we have this in Canada too?”

“Not in November. We celebrate Halloween on October 31st, but I’ll explain that when it is time, though it

has costumes rather than fireworks. Some places do allow fireworks on Victoria Day – May 24th – but there’s not usually a bonfire. And sometimes there are fireworks displays run by the city or other organizations for Dominion Day on July 1 or other celebrations.”

Fortunately, the children had not had enough pocket money to buy very many fireworks, and fuel was scarce enough that a big bonfire was out of the question, so they were back to the flat in about three-quarters of an hour.

That was last night. Martin was now in the Post Office, closing his Savings Account.

“Are you sure you don’t want to leave a minimal amount in the account in case you want to use it again?” the clerk asked.

“No thank you. We leave tomorrow to sail for Canada on Saturday.”

“Very well, sir. Let me count out the money for you.”

The money counted out was not going to buy a great deal. It amounted to 32 pounds 11 shillings and 4 pence. Earlier in the day, he had reduced the balance in his external account and used it to buy Canadian dollars, a transaction he had arranged in advance to ensure that they had notes. He thought briefly about getting some Newfoundland currency, but decided he would use either Canadian or American dollars there for the short time involved. Canadian and Newfound-

land dollars were in any case on par.

He had about 110 pounds in his account. He had decided to get \$400, which was almost exactly 100 pounds. He thought possibly the account would be useful if he wanted books or to buy anything in the UK, but there had been pressure on the Pound this year, and he thought a devaluation likely, despite the reassurances of the politicians.

The only nuisance was carrying so much cash. He and Clara had discussed this, and following his previous practice with documents, they had sewn some pockets in vests and shirts so they could distribute the cash about their person while travelling. Both were aware of the vulnerability while travelling. They also made sure to have plenty of ‘pocket money’ to avoid opening purse or wallet in crowded situations.

Before they were joined by Jane for a last meal together – they would use up the last of their food, except for some milk and the Weetabix that Annje loved for breakfast, and give Jane the remaining coupons – they did a last check of their packing lists.

“It all seems in order, but I still don’t feel ready,” Martin said.

“But we have said goodbye to everyone and we have done well to see so much while here.”

“Yes. It has gone well. Anyway, we’ll keep the documents and money with us from now on. I’ll not give

any burglar all that.”

“Burglar? Is that a thief?”

“Yes. One who breaks into a house and takes things.”

“No, we don’t want that.”

The doorbell rang and Clara let Jane in with an enormous trifle.

“I’ve brought dessert. A trifle,” she said.

“We have a beef stew for the main course. But I have only heard of trifle in books and talk. What is it?”

Jane tried to explain the rather eclectic mixture that was quintessentially English. It was, in any event, well-received. With a mixture of good wishes, joy and sadness, they bid Jane goodbye. Then they put Annje to bed, did the dishes and made sure all was closed up and ready for the morning.

The New World

November 20, 1947 Thursday afternoon. Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Clara and Martin were lying on the bed of a hotel room of the Lord Nelson. Annje was sleeping in a cot. The excitement had tired her – everyone – out, and they’d simply taken off their shoes and outer clothes for a rest.

They had arrived at Pier 21 earlier in the day, and Customs and Immigration had been relatively kind to them. Their ship had about 150 people landing, fewer than many. One trunk had been opened as a formality. As they left the customs hall after arranging for the trunks to be transferred to the train they would take tomorrow, they were surprised by finding Robert and Miriam waiting for them.

“Martin! Clara! We decided to take a little holiday and come to meet you,” Miriam cried.

“It is a surprise, but a welcome one,” Martin was a bit overcome.

“Hello, I am Clara. And this is Annje.”

“And you know I’m Robert and this is Miriam.”

“But I don’t know what to call you. Martin says Mum and Dad.”

“Call us that if you like. It’ll be fine.”

They were walking to the exit as they said all this, and Clara did not have to make a definite reply. Martin had booked a room in the Lord Nelson for tonight, as he did not want to have to rush for the train and wanted to see at least a little of Halifax.

“With your luggage, I think you and Mum should take a taxi. I’ll walk. It’s not far,” Robert said. Even with the small trunk being left with the other trunks, they still had enough bags to make this reasonable.

After they’d registered at the hotel, there was a mi-

nor confusion about what to do with the day. Martin noted that they would have a lot of time on the train to chat, and that they should avoid overtiring Annje. It was agreed they'd meet at 6 for dinner in the hotel dining room. This gave Martin and Clara some time to relax and to explore the city a little without a particular timetable. Miriam and Robert wanted to visit the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia and see if they could go in Province House, and then perhaps walk around the Dalhousie University campus.

Annje needed a nap after the excitement of landing and meeting new people, and was asleep very fast, so they were lying down too.

"The bed seems to be moving," Clara said.

"We're not on the ship any more."

"And at first I was so sick. But you and Annje were fine."

"I had a bit of a queasy stomach after the first night, then I was OK. I think Annje was not feeling so well then also. That was when you were really not of this world."

"I was really seasick for a while. I felt it would be easier to die."

"Annje and I dressed warmly and got fresh air. We watched the waves and the gulls."

"Yes. She told me she asked you if you should be called Papa. I don't know where, but she got the idea

that since I was Mama, you must be Papa.”

“I told her she could call me Papa or Dad, or Martin. She said she would tell people I was Papa Martin.”

“I’m glad. I was afraid she might not accept you, or at least not fully. I don’t know what I would do if that happened.”

“It is hard to think about that.”

“What should I call your parents? I felt that I did not know what to say, and I was not expecting to meet them until Ottawa.”

“Nor me. If you want you could call them Mum and Dad. I’ll ask them if you like.”

“I already did. Perhaps better Mother Tremblay and Father Tremblay, or Mother Miriam and Father Robert.”

“The second form makes them sound like a nun and a priest.”

“No. I did not mean that. Maybe just Mother and Father.”

“I think that will be OK. And that won’t be a confusion for Grandma and Grandpa Tremblay. And there is Grandpa Ryan on my mother’s side.”

“But for Annje it is all oneI don’t know the word when there is a family and children then grandchildren.”

“Generation?”

“Yes. One generation more.”

“I think Mother Tremblay would work. We’ll see

what Penny's son Desmond uses. Things will sort themselves out."

They dozed for a while, then Annje woke up again. It was early afternoon, and they had not eaten since breakfast.

"Shall we find something to eat to keep the dragons at bay?" Martin asked.

"Dragons? At bay?"

"Sorry. A dragon is an imaginary animal like a big flying crocodile that breathes fire."

"Een draak. OK"

"'At bay' means keeping them away."

"Our draak is the tummy of a small girl."

"Yes indeed. Our very own fire breather when she gets hungry."

They put on their warm clothes and went out. It would have been nice to go in the Public Gardens, but they turned towards the town. Not far past the Cathedral they found a diner, complete with booths.

"Martin, you used the word 'diner'. I know restaurant and café, and I think that a restaurant is bigger and ... more fancy. But 'diner'?"

"Somewhere between, but like this with booths and a counter with stools, and serving quick meals. We should have hamburgers. I haven't had one for years.

What do you want to drink?"

"Coffee I think."

"I expect you will find it different from at home. I mean, different from Belgium. We'd better start to think what we mean by home."

"Right now I feel very ... lost."

"Me too. I've lived half my life each side of the Atlantic. And I've a Belgian wife, and a new and lovely daughter"

Just then the waitress came.

"Hello. And hello little lady. What can I get you?"

"One coffee, one malted milk, one regular milk, and two hamburgers. And a knife please so we can cut the burgers to give our little girl some."

"Onions on the burger?"

"Better just on one of them, in case someone doesn't like them. Do you bring the relish and mustard separately?"

"Yes, we have a caddy with condiments."

"Thanks. I haven't had a burger since 1938."

"Wow. Where've you been?"

"Living in England, then helping to take care of a certain Mr. Hitler, then finding these two ladies to take care of me."

"You're English."

"No. We are Flemish, from Belgium."

"Well, welcome to Canada. We see lots of folk going through. But you speak pretty good English. You'll do fine."

She left. And Clara asked:

“Martin, what is a hamburger, and why is it called that?”

“It’s a ground – the English say minced – beef patty or meatball in a bun. There’s a lot of talk that it was invented at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, but the name ... I don’t know why the name.”

“So much to learn. And you ordered a malted milk, I will have to learn about that.”

“I saw the sign there for Borden’s malted milk. Another thing I remember as a kid in Ottawa. We’ll see if you and Annje like it.”

“See if Annje like it,” said Annje. She had been quiet up to now, but had been watching everything.

When their order came, the malted milk was a big success. After a sip each, Martin and Clara yielded it to Annje.

“Malt milk. Lekker,” she said, hanging onto the glass with both hands. It was the first time she had used a straw, and the malt was thick, but she managed.

They cut the burgers in half, and Clara asked Annje what she would like.

“Do you want it with onions? Met uien?”

“No. Geen uien. Uien niet goed.”

“Guess it was a good idea not to order both with onions. What about relish, ketchup or mustard?”

“Let’s try without. It will be safer for the clothes.”

This proved a good idea, but they did put a little of each sauce on a plate and tried it with Clara's coffee spoon. Clara had never tried any of the condiments. She decided she liked the pickle relish and put some on her burger. Annje didn't like anything but the ketchup, but they wisely put it very thinly on her quarter burger. Martin ended up eating two halves, Clara an onion half and a plain quarter, and Annje her quarter. It was enough to keep them going until supper. The malt was filling for Annje.

"Is this what Canadians eat?" Clara asked.

"Sometimes. I like it, but probably every day it is too much meat and bread, and not much vegetable. But I think you like the malt better than the coffee. Shall I order you one?"

"No. This is slappe koffie – dishwater – but it is warm and wet and I can drink it, though I may take tea instead in future. Next time we get malted milk for me. Is the glass of milk OK for you?"

"Yes. I guessed when I ordered that she might want the malt. I know I used to love them. Still do."

The waitress slipped the bill on their table.

"Let me pay you now," Martin said.

The waitress took the bills Martin proffered and put some change on the table.

"Thank you, folks. Enjoy your afternoon."

"Oh. Look Annje. There's a dime. And here's the

Bluenose.”

“Annje Bluenose. Kijk Mama. Boot.”

“Yes I see. Better put it in your pocket. In uw sac.”

Martin left a quarter for the waitress.

“Oh. You leave money here, Martin? Like in England, but not so much in Belgium.”

“Yes. A tip. About 10 percent to 15 percent. Especially if the waitress is friendly and efficient like this one was.”

Outside it was cool. Martin saw a taxi and flagged it down.

“In you get, both of you.”

“Where are we going?” Clara asked.

“Driver, can you make a tour around the city so we can see the main sights, including the University, then end up at the Lord Nelson. Maybe about half an hour or so.”

“Sure can! Where do you folks hail from?”

“Until 1938, I was in Ottawa, then in England and on the continent with the RAF. My wife and daughter are Belgian. We’re on our way to Ottawa and then Toronto.”

“Not here in Halifax before?”

“No. It seems a nice town.”

“A bit buttoned up. I’m from here, but got in the Navy for the dust-up. On corvettes, mostly.”

“Pretty rough. I don’t envy you that.”

“Nah. Uncomfortable, cold and wet. But we got around a bit, and I was put on some other boats around D-Day, so I got to London and Southampton. They were more friendly than my home port here. So was St. John’s in Newfoundland. By the way, I’m taking you now past Province House where the Legislature meets. And if you can see up on the other side, there’s the Citadel. Sometimes it’s open, but it’ll be a bit bleak up there today.”

“We came to St. John’s on our way,” said Clara.

“How’d you like it?”

“We were there a bit over a day as there was cargo on the ship. Martin managed to get us to Signal Hill, but it was not so nice weather. But he is in wireless and wanted to see the place. The people were, as you said, friendly. But I could not understand them at all.”

“Us too. Now we’re coming to the Navy base. Goes back a bit, but it’s had a lot of expansion in the last few years. Of course, the city took a lot of damage in the 1917 explosion. 500 acres flattened, and other damage elsewhere, I’ll take you out Armdale way in a while and a ships anchor ended up there, 2 miles from the explosion. That’s why most of the buildings here are sort of newish. It’ll be the thirtieth anniversary in a couple of weeks, so there’ll be a bit of a fuss then I guess.”

The taxi tour turned out to be a good idea. By the

end, Annje was asleep in Martin's lap, and they were ready to take their time before getting ready for supper. There was a bath, and this was welcome after the shower on the ship, especially as they would be on the train for more than a day.

At six they went down to the lobby and met Robert and Miriam.

"Shall we eat?" Robert asked.

"Yes. Let's go in," Clara said.

Once seated, they were given menus by the waitress, who said:

"We also have the Princess Elizabeth Special for to-day, in honour of the Royal Wedding. It's a small steak with Brussel sprouts and carrots and mashed potatoes with a special gravy. It comes with tomato soup first, and there is apple pie and ice cream for dessert, with tea or coffee. I'll be back for your order in a few minutes."

There were glasses of water on the table. Clara said:

"Do they always put water out?"

"Yes. Not like England," Miriam said.

"Nor Belgium and France and Holland. And there is no extra charge for this?"

"No. It is considered part of the service here in North America."

"That I like. But I do not see any wine on the menu. It would be nice to toast our meeting."

"And to welcome you and Annje. But I'm afraid we

still suffer from the efforts of the Temperance movement here. Drinking is allowed, but it is very restricted. Did you notice a bottle opener on the wall of your room?" Robert asked.

"Yes. Wny?"

"That is for opening the bottles of soda that are mixed with hard liquor. You must only drink in your room, or else in the bar, but the rules there are difficult too."

"I didn't know that," said Martin. "Clara, hard liquor is whiskey and gin and rum."

"Oh, like schnapps or genever."

"Genever, genever, jonge genever," sang Annje.

"Here Annje, I have a colouring book and crayons for you," said Miriam.

"Oh, how thoughtful. What do you say to Mother Tremblay, Annje."

"Dank uw... Thank you."

"Very good, Annje," said Miriam, and helped create a space for the book. "I saw it in a Five and Dime and thought it might be useful. Children get bored quickly by us adults. But Annje is a very good child."

The waitress was back. Robert and Miriam both chose the special, but having had the hamburger, Martin chose a pork chop.

"Martin. Did you say scallops were coquilles?"

"Yes."

“Then the scallops please.”

“Grilled or fried, madame?”

“Oh. Martin. I do not quite understand. Is grilled under the heat and fried in the pan? If so grilled.”

“Precisely madame?” said the waitress. “With vegetables and some roast potatoes?”

“Yes please.”

“And for miss?”

“I think some tomato soup. And I saw grilled cheese sandwich,” Martin observed.

“The grilled cheese is normally for lunch, but I think we can manage that. Thank you.”

The waitress disappeared with their order. Annje was flipping through the pages of the colouring book, and found a picture of a sailboat, almost like a schooner.

“Bluenose. Bluenose,” she said.

“Wow. We have a real Canadian here. Already knows about the Bluenose,” said Robert.

“Annje is Bluenose,” said Annje.

Martin, with interjections from Clara, explained the origins of the name. Everyone laughed, including Annje, who by now was colouring in the picture.

“She is very careful,” Miriam noted. “Desmond is rather cavalier about the lines and is inclined to wild choices of colours.”

“Cavalier?” asked Clara.

“Not caring,” said Miriam, “Though the reasons for

the word are a bit complicated. I'll try to explain later when we have a quarter hour."

The meal went quickly. They all had pie of some sort for dessert, Robert and Miriam the apple pie with ice cream, Clara the lemon meringue pie, because it sounded interesting and she had never had it, and Martin and Annje cherry pie because Annje saw the red pie going by to another table. Martin thought he might have to help her finish it, as he had eaten the last quarter of her grilled cheese – declared 'good but not Rabbit' by Annje – but all the pie disappeared apart from the thick crust edge.

"Food is different here," Clara noted. "I like some things like the scallops and the pie, but not the coffee – that's why I asked for tea now – and the rules about wine seem very strange to me."

"We'll definitely have wine for you at home," Miriam said "As long as Martin declares you are not a dipsomaniac – someone who gets drunk."

Clara laughed. "I'm a farm girl. The cows will be cross if you come to them full too much of wine or beer."

"Cows. Kooien," said Annje, who flipped pages and found a picture of a cow in the colouring book.

The next morning, after an early night, they were able to take a quick walk in the Public Gardens before

breakfast, which they had in the diner they'd discovered the day before. Miriam and Robert said they would meet them in the lobby at 9:15, as the Ocean Limited was to leave around ten. The doorman was asked to ensure a large taxi would be ready so they could go together.

In the diner, Martin ordered eggs and bacon and hash-browns, with tea. Clara was not sure what to get, so Martin ordered French toast with a plate for Annje, having ascertained the serving size was large. Clara chose tea this time, and milk for Annje. She thought the malt would be too cold a start.

"Potato for breakfast?" Clara asked, when Martin explained hash-browns.

"Traditional. Have a bite," he answered, then realized he didn't know where the practice arose.

The French toast was another novelty. Clara found she liked jam on hers, but Annje wanted the maple syrup, which meant that they took turns in feeding her bites, rather than risk a sticky child on the train. Fortunately, Annje decided this was a fine way to eat, and did not assert her usual independence.

"I like maple syrup, but I think it would be better on ice-cream or perhaps strawberries," Clara commented. "Where does it come from?"

"Maple trees. We'll go out to a sugar bush in the Spring if we can find one near Toronto. They are more

up near Ottawa and in Quebec.”

“Trees. How?”

“When the snow starts to melt, but while the nights are still cold, the tree sap starts to rise. You hammer a pipe into the tree and hang a bucket on it to gather the sap. Then you have a small cabin or shack where you put the sap in shallow pans, and you gently evaporate the water to concentrate it about 20 times. The pans are even joined so the syrup starts dilute and moves to stronger and stronger concentration.”

“So you boil off the water?”

“You want to avoid really boiling it, or it gets dark and burnt-tasting.”

“It’s nice. Another item for the plus column.”

“We’ll have to try to have a lot more of those than in the minus column.”

“Plus column. Minus column,” said Annje, but didn’t know what that meant.

They had two rooms on the Ocean Limited. Annje would be sleeping with her mother. The rooms were small enough that they could really only all be together at meals, of which there would be just lunch and dinner, since they were supposed to arrive in Montreal early in the morning, then change trains for Ottawa. They would eat breakfast at or near the station, or else on the

train. Clara and Miriam, in a way that Martin almost considered conspiratorial, had arranged somehow to acquire some biscuits, apples, milk and soda water so that Annje could be fed if restaurants were inconvenient in place or time.

They swapped around in the rooms, which were one each side of the train, whenever there was a good view for Clara and Annje. By late afternoon they were going through New Brunswick between Moncton and Bathurst. Clara and Miriam were in one bedroom, and Annje was with the men, who were exploring the train to stretch their legs.

“It is quite a challenge you have taken on to set up a new household,” Miriam said.

“Household. That is not quite ‘house’, right?”

“It means all the things that go along with a family – the people, furniture, possessions, pets.”

“For me it will be the third ‘household’ in three years, not counting Oxford, though I did not set up the farm, my parents did. Luc was killed by the Germans just before Martin and the mine. Then I moved with my Aunt Griet and became an administratif for the Stichting – foundation. So now a new one in Toronto.”

“As a housewife.”

Clara bristled,

“No. Niet as a housewife. I had a man in Belgium, when I was living with Tante Griet. He wanted me to

marry and look after his children, but as huisvrouw. Not so much to marry me as Clara.

I know now that I loved Luc, but I probably married him because he took care of the farm for me after my parents died and I was still just young, only 16. And he too, I think, had been, you say, orphan earlier, but was some years older than me.

Martin I love much because he is a partner, and he shows he loves me by being strong to help me as I try to help him. But I have had a strong man, and one second and he is gone, and never again will I let me be unable to look after myself and Annje. So I will make the household, and I know Martin will share that. But I have an idea to build a business as agent for Belgian products, either to stores or to people. We even have the name 'Best of Belgium'."

She stopped, afraid she had said too much. But Miriam smiled and said,

"I was not thinking. Penny has said the same sort of thing, and the two of you have had similar tragedies. I just hope she will find someone who will give her the companionship everyone needs. But I know she is very clear she won't risk being unable to support herself and Desmond."

"Thank you, Mother Tremblay. I want us to be friends."

"Mother Tremblay. You used that before for Annje.

It'll do fine, though it does make me feel I'm getting old."

"You don't seem old to me. I was the youngest in my family, so my parents were ... I don't quite know how to say ... late in years. But for the names, Martin said we should make different to your husband's parents."

"Yes. We usually call them Grandpa and Grandma Tremblay, or Grandpa Richard and Grandma Agnes, and my father Grandpa Allen or Grandpa Ryan. It will avoid confusion, though of course Robert calls them Ma and Pa.

By the way, I forgot to mention that the black suitcase has some winter clothes. I talked to Penny and Robert's parents, and we simply took your measurements and have some of our old clothes and some from Desmond for Annje that should fit. You can then wear them to keep warm while shopping for things that you really prefer. The one thing that was difficult was winter shoes. We'll have to hope the snow and slush don't come early. So far we've been OK."

"That was a very good idea. We will be able to get things that fit us and that we like the colours."

In the meantime, Martin and Robert with Annje in tow had walked the train and were now in a club car where they could look out the windows. Annje had her

nose to the glass. The conductors would no doubt have to polish out the nose and finger prints.

“I like Clara, Martin. She is very down to earth, which I suppose comes from growing up on a farm.”

“That, and having to take responsibility for so many things, first with the farm under German occupation, then everything, including Annje, after Luc’s killing and the mine explosion, and then the aftermath of the war. She had to rebuild, much more than any of us.”

“Your Mum wondered if she wasn’t happy to be taken care of by you, but I don’t get that impression. In fact, I think your mother might get a surprise that Clara won’t want to just stay at home and be the regular housewife.”

“Not at all. She has a general plan to set up an agency or perhaps an actual importation business. Already has the name: Best of Belgium. And she went to see some people at Harrods to discuss possible purchases from her former contacts in the Stichting or foundation in Ninove. She also has some other business contacts in lace and chocolate and liqueurs.”

“Another thing she told me when we met again in July was that she had been courted by a widower with two children and he wanted her to give it all up and be his stay-at-home wife. After losing first her parents, then Luc, she was determined not to be dependent on anyone, and I think that includes me. On the other hand, she seems pretty firm about us being a partner-

ship, and she is always trying to learn things.”

“It doesn’t hurt that she’s a handsome woman too. I’m sure that didn’t escape you.”

“She is very attractive. She worries that she is not ‘pretty’ in the conventional sense. I think that is because growing up she was in a small community, and the occupation meant that she did not get out much. Also I think most women wanted to avoid any attention by Nazi soldiers. She’s only now realizing a little how she strikes others.”

“And here we have the really pretty lady. What do you see Annje?”

“Bomen. Lots of bomen.”

“Lots of trees. Annje,” Martin corrected.

“Ja. Lots trees. Kijk. Cow. Kanadeze Cow,” She pointed at a large moose that was standing in a marsh some distance.

“That’s a moose. Can you say moose?”

“Mooz. But like cow.”

“I guess a moose looks a bit like a cow. But they are wild, and you cannot milk them. Look how big their horns are, and not at all like a cow’s horns.”

“Mooz. I see mooz.”

* * *

“We’re stopped. What time is it?” Clara asked.

Martin used his generator torch to look at his watch.

“The wee hours of the morning, about 2:30.” He climbed down and leaned across her and Annje – who was dead to the world – and opened the curtain a crack.

“Looks like we’re at Levis, across the St. Lawrence from Quebec City. I can see the lights of the Chateau Frontenac – the big hotel – and there’s a ferry close to the station here.”

“I’d look, but that would wake Annje. I will be stiff in the morning.”

“I’ll trade you if you’d like.”

“No. She’s never woken with you beside her. And though I know she loves you, the surprise might upset her, and we don’t need that. But watch her while I go to the toilet, will you?” When Clara was finished, Martin did not climb up to his bunk straight away, but sat on the floor – the train heating was quite good – with his back to the bunk. Clara put her arm gently around him.

“It’s all so different. Almost like a dream.”

“You’ve had a lot of new experiences in a very short time. All in a foreign language. I think you have been splendid. And Annje has been very good. I’ve been waiting for a tantrum, but we’ve only had a few minor upsets when she’s got tired.”

“You have been so good about watching for her to get tired and either carrying her or finding a taxi like

yesterday.”

“Oh. That was because I was afraid the mother would throw a tantrum,” he teased.

“Maybe I should have a tantrum because I cannot have you. Do you realize the rubber industry will go to faillissement soon?”

“Bankruptcy? That bad is it?”

“Yes,” she giggled softly.

“Let me find the necessary, and I’ll invite you upstairs for a while.”

Annje slept on as they managed to find each other in the tight confines of the upper berth. The train was moving when Clara decided she should descend.

“Make sure you hold on and that you have your feet on the steps properly. I don’t want you falling.”

“Especially as I have no clothing. Pass me my night dress.”

In the morning, Martin noticed she had it on backwards.

Ottawa

November 22, 1947. Saturday. Ottawa.

It was the middle of the day Saturday when their train arrived in Ottawa. There was bustle and jostle,

but they managed to get themselves and their luggage onto the platform, and with the help of the conductor – arranged at the beginning of the journey – ensured the trunks were assembled for transfer to Miriam and Robert’s house.

“Mum. Dad. Over here!” It was Penny. She ran over.

“I’ve a pick-up that Joe has the use of. No need to hire someone. And Grandpa has his car – he’s with the cars now. We can all fit if I take two of you. You must be Clara. And you are Annje.” She pronounced it ‘Anndgye’. “I’m Aunt Penny. And Martin with a beard.” She threw her arms around her brother.

“Ik ben Annje.”

“Ah. Almost like Annie. Annje. I’ve got it.”

“Hello Penny. It is nice to meet you finally. We have much in common, I think, but also much different,” said Clara.

“It’s really thoughtful of you to arrange all this, Pen,” said Robert.

“And we must thank Joe. Where is he today?” said Miriam.

“Helping out cleaning up an old house so they can put a couple of poor families in it over in Mechanicsville.”

With some amount of everyone talking at once, they worked out that Martin and Robert would go with Penny, the three of them carrying as much of the luggage as

they could. Miriam and Clara would stay with Annje and the trunks. The truck came with a luggage dolly, but it would handle only one trunk at a time, so Miriam was going to find a porter to get them to the curb where they could be picked up.

Richard Tremblay was with his car and the truck, parked a short distance from the station proper.

“Martin. How good to see you after a long decade!”

“Really good to see you too, Grandpa. I was beginning to think the war would keep us from ever seeing each other again.”

“Not dead yet. And still enjoying life, thank God. Grandma too. Both slowing down a bit, but still here. Got to look after that sister of yours and her little tear-away.”

“And don’t think I don’t appreciate it, Grandpa,” said Penny, with genuine feeling.

Martin rode with Richard, and Robert with Penny as they manouvered into the loading and unloading area of the station. Miriam had efficiently arranged that the trunks were tidily organized ready for loading. By putting the trunks on end, there was room for the larger suitcases too, but Martin kept his backpack and put it in Richard’s trunk. It was decided – or Penny insisted – that Clara and Annje ride with her in the truck, and they were gone before the rest had time to object. They got in the car – Martin was put in the front – and drove

off.

It was normally less than 10 minutes to the house, but today there had been a Santa Claus parade organized by the Bryson Graham Store, as well as a big fire at Stein's at Bank and Laurier, so they detoured round by Lyon and took about double the usual time. They unloaded and heaved the trunks onto the enclosed porch.

"Do you think they'll be OK here for a bit?" Martin asked.

"They could freeze, and the screen door is not too secure, though I don't think they'd get stolen. It's supposed to rain tonight, and while it won't get in, this raw dampness is likely not good for anything valuable," Robert said. "But I suggest we show you where things are, then we move them inside where you can get at them. There's a basement. Not fancy, but it keeps fairly dry, as we're not right on the river."

"Let's do that, and we don't have to worry so much."

"I've got you in the guest room, though Annje can use my sewing room until my Dad comes for the wedding," Miriam said. There had been surprisingly little discussion about the ceremony, but the date had been set for the Saturday before Christmas, being the date everyone could be 'home', but not right on Christmas itself. There was still a question of where and who would officiate.

With much bumbling and general family fuss, they got things inside. Richard told them Grandma Tremblay had lunch ready when they were and he could wait to transport them. However, Penny reminded him that the truck had to go back to work, and she wanted a lift home, so both vehicles departed with a general agreement to meet at the senior Tremblays' in about 40 minutes. It would be a late lunch, and Miriam had arranged that Penny would get groceries for her, and she would do a Sunday dinner tomorrow, which would be about 5 pm so the children were not kept up late. Saturday, Martin was relieved to learn, they had no plans after lunch.

In fact, it was about 5:30 in the afternoon before they walked back, and it was dark and starting to rain lightly. At the 35 degrees F temperature, this made things raw and uncomfortable and they were glad to get in the house.

“Oh. How nice and warm here,” Clara noted.

“As long as the furnace keeps running and we’ve plenty of oil, we’ll be warm,” Robert explained.

“Furnace?”

“In the basement. You’ll see it if you go down to unpack anything from the trunks. There. It just kicked in because the door was opened and the temperature

went below the thermostat setting.” He pointed to a dial on the wall of the hallway, and she could here a motor running.

“It heats water for the radiators,” Martin explained.

“Oh. Now I remember them. There is one in the bedroom near the wall, it was quite warm.”

“We’ll have to get everyone some slippers to avoid stocking feet,” Miriam said.

“I noticed that at Grandpa and Grandma Tremblay’s.” Clara said. “It makes a lot of sense. And on the farm we used to take off our klompen – sorry clogs – when we’d been out in the mud or the cow barn. It would be a shame to damage these lovely wood floors.”

“Is anyone hungry yet? Grandma had lots of food, so I suspect not. And I wonder if we need to prepare a full meal,” Miriam asked.

“Perhaps some soup would be enough,” Martin suggested “But in an hour or so, then Annje can eat and we can put her to bed before she gets overtired.”

“That would suit me,” said Robert.

“Then it’s an easy night for me,” said Miriam.

After they had put away their coats and hats, they gradually settled in the living room, where Richard had put on a record. Annje had asked for her colouring book, and was quietly occupied with it. Martin was sitting on the sofa and motioned for Clara to join him.

“Here’s today’s Ottawa Journal. We can start to

learn where we can get the things we'll need and what they will cost. I had a brief look at it over at Grandpa's and I realized we may need to plan a little."

"How is your money situation, Martin?" Robert asked.

"We are probably better off than most young families. I've got about \$800 in either Canadian or US cash, and I think there's just under \$200 in the account that I had here that was supposed to be for my education."

"I managed to get \$120 from the farm money." Clara joined in.

"You didn't tell me!"

"I wanted a surprise if we needed something special. Maybe I should have kept secret it now."

"No. I think you should have a bit of money. The newspaper has all sorts of stories about accidents and fires. And both of us know how quickly something bad can happen, though I sure hope nothing will."

"Let's say about \$1000 then." said Robert. "You'll use the rest on winter clothing I think. Not bad for a young couple. What will your assistantship pay?"

"Apparently \$225 a month, with possibly some extra if I teach classes or labs, but the extra is pretty small I think – maybe it adds \$25 a month, but only in the months when there are classes."

"That's an average wage now, so not too bad."

"Yes, I think it is fair enough. What is a concern is rent and setting up a place."

“Accommodation is in pretty short supply, and has been since the beginning of the war as far as I can determine from Grandpa and people at work. You probably saw that there are only 3 ads for apartments to let, none with prices, and at least 4 times that many wanting apartments and willing to pay up to \$125 a month.”

“That is more than the half of the wage,” Clara said.

“Yes. I think it is probably higher than most rents. The real difficulty is finding something. I don’t know if Toronto is as bad. There are rooms, of course, but that means sharing bathrooms and kitchens,” Robert commented.

“I have been used to my own house. It would be very hard to share now,” Clara observed.

“Indeed. Martin. Did the people in U of T have anything to say?”

“Not yet. I asked them to write here.”

“Oh. I forgot. It’s on the desk,” Miriam said, and ran out to get the letter. Martin opened it.

“It’s from a Prof. Burton. He’s one of the top people. Suggests that if I am in Ottawa before the start of December, I arrange to come down and meet some of the people I might work with. There’s a new Ph.D. named Gottlieb doing some work in pulse circuits for computation, as well as some people in Burton’s area of electron microscopy. It sounds like plenty to do.”

“He mentions that family accommodation is a bit

awkward generally, but that one of the faculty is going on a sabbatical to California in January and may be willing to rent their place to us, but are worried that people won't leave when they come home in late August."

"I can ask around work, too. We have some staff in Toronto. Many people are reluctant to rent on the open market," Robert said. "And you are here now, so you could go down to Toronto. I suggest you write Burton tomorrow, and suggest a couple of dates. Would you take Clara?"

"We like to make our decisions together," Martin said.

"Martin is very good about being a partner," Clara said.

"It avoids many quarrels," Miriam noted. Martin thought it interesting that she would use 'quarrel' rather than 'argument' or 'fight'.

"Will Annje come with us?" Martin asked. The object of the question was now fast asleep. Miriam had covered her with an afghan.

"Do you think Annje will be all right here?" Clara asked generally.

"I think with Desmond and all the people, she should be fine," Miriam said. "I suppose you worry about her not being able to communicate."

"Yes. That is it exactly. But she seems to be doing

well, even with many mistakes.”

“You should only be gone two nights, unless you have great troubles finding a place to live,” Robert said.

Martin answered, “It would be helpful if we can rent a place like that of someone going away for a while, as we then don’t have to buy so much. I’ve been looking here and at a guess, I’d say an unfurnished place will need ... let me see, using new prices

\$75 for a fridge

\$100 for a stove

\$100 each for bedroom, living room and kitchen

that makes essentially \$500 when we get it all set up.

Presumably we can do second hand stuff cheaper. However, we also have to get some winter clothes, as Dad said. Our European stuff is OK, but we’ll do better with proper warm things.”

“Penny said she thought Annje might fit into Desmond’s winter coat and mittens. He’s grown out of them. They’re not stylish, but children grow out of things so fast.”

“That would be helpful. For the first year, we can afford to be not in fashion,” Clara said. “Oh. I see a shop has white parachutes for sale for \$16.”

“That’ll be that strange army surplus place on Rideau,” said Robert “They have some nice military parkas there. Keep you really warm. Also some flying boots – \$11 a pair. Very nice.”

“We’ll have to take a look,” Martin said. “It’s better to have good stuff that may not be stylish in this climate.”

“At least food is not rationed. There is much in the advertisements,” Clara said.

“No, food isn’t rationed. Though there’s been some fuss about prices of some things lately. The Government is set to impose restrictions on prices to stop speculation,” Robert commented.

“I must get used to the prices to know what is good. At least in England I learned pounds – not the money but the weighing, though I learned that too, and dollars are easier. Ooh look, a picture of the Princess in her wedding dress.”

Adjusting to Winter

Thursday November 27, 1947. Ottawa.

It turned out that they did buy a white parachute for its cloth, and both Clara and Martin bought parkas and boots. They were not fashionable, but it was fun to be dressed in the same sort of outfit. And Annje fit into Desmond’s coat. She needed some tights, though, for the cold. They shopped in Woolworth’s and Metropolitan, as well as some other places, and got her several pairs, as well as some mittens. Scarves and hats were

knittable, Clara declared, and she had brought her needles, though she needed to figure out the sizes, though for a scarf things were not so tricky. There was a bag of different coloured wool at a steep discount, and they bought that to be used for the scarves, hats and things. They did compromise and buy Annje a toque however. They also got her a pair of boots, a bit over sized to allow for growth and try to get two seasons from them. Also some inexpensive galoshes for themselves. Thick socks were in order – they found some in one of the 5 and dime shops. In one week, their capital depleted by more than \$130, but they were equipped for winter, and with items that should last.

They lunched at the Woolworth's counter on Rideau, their parcels by their feet in front of them as they sat on the stools.

"I'll have the chicken noodle soup, Martin. Can we share a sandwich?"

"Sure. We're not broke yet. Ham and cheese with lettuce?"

"Good. I'm a bit hungry after the shopping, but don't want to eat too much. I hope Grandma and Grandpa Tremblay are managing with Annje."

"We'll have to try, or else plan to take her with us to Toronto. But that will slow us down when we want to see about an apartment."

"Yes. I want us to have a place of our own, and it

will be easier with just two of us. A tired child is an unhappy child.”

“Me too. About our own place I mean. I think it will help us build a good marriage and get settled here in Canada.”

“Waitress, we’ll have two chicken noodle soups and share a ham and cheese sandwich.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Clara. We should talk about Christmas presents.”

“Yes. I see in the paper so much about giving. We did not do so in Flanders. Children got presents, but mostly candy – or should I say sweets – on Sinterklaas – St. Nicholas on December 5th. But not for grown-ups. Will we have to spend much for everyone?”

“I don’t think they expect a lot from us, but I think we will feel better if we have something to give. By the way, sweets is more in England. Candy here. A difference like Flemish and Dutch.”

“I’m beginning to learn the differences.”

“Martin, we have some of the Belgian chocolate – the Leonidas from Gent – that I was going to use for samples. But we could order more for samples and I don’t think we will be ready soon – and there is money for buying samples in Belgium.”

“That would be good. Nobody else can give that.”

“I also have a little lace, and I could make hankerchiefs for the ladies from the parachute with just a little

lace on each. I brought some lace that is like ribbon because I knew that can be put on the side of other cloth.”

“You have been thinking! And I surely appreciate it. That will be fine for the ladies. And a little chocolate for the men, perhaps with something else if I can find it. I think we should have something small for Joseph, too, Penny’s friend who lent the truck.”

“We also have Desmond and Annje, and each other.”

“Can you make a handkerchief for Joe and embroider his initials on it?”

“Yes. Does your mother have a sewing machine?”

“In the sewing room. It’s folded into the sewing table.”

“Putting the edge on a handkerchief takes time.”

“Do you mean the lace, or the hem.”

“The hem. I put the lace on by hand, I think on two sides, and maybe a small piece in the middle. Yes. That will work. And there is enough chocolate to make up three or four small packets. But you didn’t say about the children, nor us.”

“Frankly, for me, the big present is you. But I do have something to give you. Actually maybe to lend you. And I had better not surprise you, or you may misunderstand it.”

“I am ... not understanding ... confused?”

“I told you about the jewelry in the tins from Jack and Jim. I thought perhaps I could give you a piece of

that. But under the same conditions as the engagement ring if anyone ever showed they were the true owners.”

“That would make a nice present, and we would not spend money that we better to have for other things.”

“My thoughts too. And I think perhaps we give Anje things you knit for her, and I saw that Grandpa has a workbench in the basement. She has her doll, but perhaps I can make a cradle for it, and with your help make a blanket too.”

“She will like that, and it will be from you, like the doll, though not from the shop.” She suddenly gave him a kiss.

“Nice to see folk happy together. Enjoy your lunch,” said the waitress.

“Talking of presents, we may get some wedding presents too,” Martin said.

“It is too much! We must tell them no, and if they wish to give us presents, then they should be together with Christmas.”

“I’d feel more comfortable with that, too. This time I’ll write the thank-you letters. My Flemish was not up to it, so it was just letters to David and Esther and to Jane. They wanted to give us something in the way of a present, but I don’t think we could have had better presents than the help they gave us in London and Oxford, and coming to the wedding too.”

“But perhaps you forget Martin. David and Esther

gave us a tray – it is in the bottom of one of the trunks. And Jane also gave us a milk and sugar set for tea. I never had anything nice like that before.”

“True. And Joke and Georges paid the photographer, and Wil and Joop the reception. So generous. We must show Mum and Dad the album.”

“And add the photos of this time. Are you happy with Saturday before Christmas for the ceremony?”

“Yes. Fine. And I’m glad Joe offered to do the service. We don’t need the civil arrangements, so no license, and we can use the house for the small group. It should be quite intimate. I wonder why we didn’t show the photos of Gent before?”

“That is because we looked at them in September – your family may still think of us as unmarried! Do you say ‘living in sin’?”

“More sinning like us would make the world happier. See all the trouble in the so-called Holy Land.”

“Yes. It makes Christmas seem a bit ... like silver when you don’t clean it.”

“Tarnished. Yes.”

“We forgot Desmond!”

“Actually I didn’t. I will make him a wooden model airplane – not a flying one, but one he can play with.”

“Then I feel more happy. Oh. I forgot – you must look after Annje and Desmond on Saturday afternoon.”

“Actually I heard discussions among the female sec-

tion of the family. There's a Fashion Lunch at Freiman's. I think they are going to treat it as a shower for you."

"Shower?"

"A kind of party for the bride. You may even get some more presents, but practical ones. Probably towels and napkins."

"Much to learn."

"How's your soup?"

"Very good. But the bread I find sweet here, and the butter salty. I think we put more salt in bread and do not salt the butter."

Another question. Should we not pay for some of the costs of our living and Christmas."

"I already talked to Mum and Dad about that. They said they'd let me pay them \$50 but no more, and that they would tell Penny that I'd done so. They want to seem balanced between their children. I was prepared to pay double that because we'll be there more than a month and we are eating and bathing and washing clothes."

"Yes. Can we provide some food?"

"And wine or other liquor. I got a temporary permit the other day."

"Temporary permit?"

"Yes. When we're resident, we get a permanent one, like a passport and the LCBO – the liquor control board – puts a record of all your purchases in it. A bit worse

than the Nazis, but only on booze.”

“Booze? That means alcoholic drinks, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. And Canada has a very temperance and puritan history as I told you. Well, we’ll survive with not so much drinking. But I’ll get some wine and some whiskey for Christmas. Maybe some beer too. There’s the wedding ceremony, and we need something to toast our health. Then Christmas weekend – four days.

Oh. I talked to Dad about how to get a driver’s license. I can use their address, then change it later. But it may be useful to be able to borrow a car, and eventually we may want to buy one.”

“Do you know how to drive, Martin?”

“I learned from Bill Parkin in the Squadron. He was dead keen on cars. Used to run racing cars I think. I never got a license though. I’ll have to read the rules for the written test, but Dad has the booklet.”

“So many new things. But we have each other to share them.”

Preparing the future

December 11, Thursday. Ottawa.

Martin was in the basement of his grandparents’ house. He had found enough wood to make a small rocking cradle sized to Annje’s favourite – in fact only

– doll, the one Martin had given her. She had also brought from Belgium a rather tattered and bedraggled but much loved cloth toy that was a bit like a soft doll. Both would fit in the cradle.

Martin also found enough pieces to make a model Typhoon, which he filed and carved until it had the right shape, but was actually much thicker than a real one. Desmond was rather rough.

“Martin. There you are. I hear you passed the driver’s test yesterday,” Richard came into the workshop area.

“Yes. It worked out. I wasn’t too worried about the driving, as we went out about four times. It was mainly the rules of the road stuff.”

“The kiddies will love those. What shall we do for paint?”

“May I use that white over there?”

“Sure. But it’s standard paint. Has lead.”

“Maybe then I could use that linseed oil for Annje’s doll crib. And I’ll go buy a couple of tubes of oil paint from somewhere for the airplane.”

“You may be able to use the oil to seal the wood first on that too. Or use wax crayon then the oil.”

“That may work. And easier to find too. I’ll see if it works.”

“How was your trip to Toronto?”

“Well, it looks like I’m going to find a good welcome

with the engineers. There are a couple of possible supervisors. I've been told to take a month or two to learn about the projects, but any of them are probably OK. Lots of new stuff going on, any of which will let me find an interesting career. And I'm pretty flexible. I like good puzzles to solve."

"What about living?"

"A bit more difficult, but I think we've got it worked out.

The people going away were pretty fussy. They had a big list of do's and don'ts. But they have this nice place in a pretty street, about a mile and a half from the University. About the same distance as the Rosedale hotel where we stayed, but in a different direction. We said we'd think about it and give them a decision in 24 hours.

Anyway, we had been invited to join some of the electrical engineers for coffee – Clara was feeling a bit lost I think among these academics, but she's a nice looking woman so they were very pleasant to her, being an all-male group so far, though there's a pretty high powered woman in aeronautical engineering in Toronto somewhere. Anyway one of the graduate students told me he has an uncle who's got a store on St. Clair Avenue and they're retiring and have rented the store but not the apartment above. They're going to live down by Niagara. He told me his uncle wanted to wait until the

power change next year from 25 cycles to 60 cycles to upgrade some of the wiring and a fan motor or such, and when the store lease runs out, will sell the whole place. He doesn't want a long-term tenant.

So we phoned up the uncle and Clara and I went to see him, and his wife is originally from Ninove, which is where Clara lived. Fellow met her in the First War and so forth. And so we have an apartment. Not fancy, but it has a nice bathroom and small but decent kitchen. Just one true bedroom, but there's a kind of storage space that has a window, and we don't have a lot of stuff. I think we'll be using our trunks for tables, and maybe the small one for Annje's bed. The fridge and stove in the apartment will stay. The stove is gas, and maybe the fridge is too, though I'd prefer not."

"Will you try for some second hand furniture?"

"Probably, but we'll get a new bed and mattress. Good to start with that. For the rest, we'll see what we find. The rent is a bit on the high side – \$85 a month, but the electricity and heat are included. As I said, the stove is gas. I have a feeling that the heat is likely to be a bit up and down, depending on the store below. I just hope they don't rent to something that is going all night, but it's not set up for a restaurant. The new store operators are supposed to be going to sell radios. I might get some business!"

"What did Clara think?"

“She liked the fact we have our own kitchen and bathroom. I honestly think she’d go back to Belgium otherwise. Though I’ve got to admit, I really have had enough myself of putting up with a bunch of other people in the bathroom and such, first in College, then the RAF and then in digs. We need some place to get our family together. And Clara never had a nice bathtub with hot and cold running water before. We had a hotel room with its own bathroom and tub – in Brussels on honeymoon – and I think she really liked that.”

“I can understand that. Lots of young folk have extra pressures of putting up with too many other people around them. Your grandma and I were pretty lucky that way. Same for your parents. Given that space, you and Clara will be fine. She’s a strong person. Sometimes I see a flash of feeling there. It’s good, but you’ll catch the edge of her tongue sometime, my boy.”

“I have already. But I’m genuinely comfortable with her, and we share our decisions. I think St. Clair will work out for us, at least for the next year or two while we find our feet.”

On Ice

December 18, 1947. Thursday. Ottawa.

It had turned cold. The mercury was struggling to

make it to zero on the Fahrenheit scale. Breath steamed and Martin's beard iced. But it was clear and sunny. They had to dig out sunglasses. Martin had fortunately picked up a cheap pair at Woolworth's for Annje, remembering a bright day from when he was not much older than she.

The three of them were in the back of a hardware store on Bank Street that had a skate exchange. However, if you didn't have a pair, they would still let you buy a pair, but at a higher price. Wearing heavy socks, they each tried on pairs. Martin's old skates from the grandparents' basement no longer fitted him and would be part of the exchange.

"We may be better with hockey skates for Annje."

"Why is that, Martin?"

"Girls usually wear figure skates, but the pick on the nose of the skate is used to do fancy figures, not really for skating, and it can grab and tip you over, especially on rough ice."

"And we don't want to have her fall. She could get hurt."

"Yes. The ice can be quite hard! Have you found any skates for yourself?"

"These seem to fit, but they have the pick."

"We can file off the bottom tooth. Maybe they'll do it here. We need to get them sharpened anyway."

They each found a pair, and for only a few dol-

lars were ready to try skating. A few days before, as they walked past a house across the road and a couple of houses down from the Tremblays, they had seen a teenaged girl skating on a small rink that had been made in the back yard. Annje had said, "Schaatsen!" and pulled them down the driveway to look.

"Hi. You look like you've not seen skating before." said the girl, twirling and looping.

"I have, but I was a kid here," said Martin. "But my wife and daughter are from Belgium, and have only seen pictures."

"I saw you arrive at the Tremblays', so I'll guess you've been in England for a while. Their daughter Penny said she had a brother."

"That's me."

"I'm Katie. Katie Smith. If you want to come and try, just give a shout, and if it's cold, we're in the phone book under F H Smith.

It's fun to see the little ones learn how to do it. I've told Penny to bring Desmond when she can, but the ice has just got properly frozen. And the house rules are that if you come, you scrape off the snow."

"You've got a deal there, Katie Smith. And we'll provide the hot chocolate afterwards."

Now they were going to try out the ice. The Smiths had put a small bench beside the home-made rink, which was just banked snow and a flooded square. Some

old rafia matting was in front of the bench and clearly there to protect both skates and what was probably the lawn. A good setup, Martin thought. They put on their skates, Annje fidgety with anticipation.

“Let me give it a try, then I’ll come and help you two,” Martin suggested.

He stumbled on the snowy mat edge of the ice, which was not as smooth as he would like, especially at the edge. Then with a bit of slip and slide, he was away, and in a few seconds his legs found the memory of how to glide. He was not elegant, but he was moving without too much effort. After a couple of circles, he came to the side and, without thinking, used one blade to slow himself while he rode the other.

“Well done. Martin. Shall we come now?”

“One at a time, I think. Annje. Come and try to skate.”

Martin was by now near enough to take her hands. With the temerity of the young, she stomped her way to the edge, slipped and would have gone over but for the fact Martin had her hands well gripped in his. He got her standing on the ice.

“Just stand with the skates straight and I’ll move you.”

Whether she understood or not, this worked.

“I skate!” she squealed.

“Now watch. Kijk. I’ll move one leg forward and the

other will push, but the back skate must be so it can push,” and he demonstrated.

Annje took a couple of steps, but didn’t go anywhere. She tried again, and moved a little. Then she turned the back foot and moved more, but forgot to lift it, and would have fallen but for Martin.

“Fall down,” she said.

“We’ll try to avoid that. But you have to lift your back foot. Can you stand still while I show you?”

“I stand. Martin show.”

“Here I go. Push, lift, push with the other, lift the other, then I turn my foot and come back to you. There.”

“I try!”

There were a few more false starts, then suddenly Annje was managing. Not a brilliant performance, in fact, more of a shuffle, but she was doing it.

“I try by me.”

“All right. But not too fast.”

Away she went, a very, very slow skater, but still doing it. Then a slip, and down she went, but in a crumple rather than a crash. Martin saw Clara start, but there was no howl of pain. Katie had come out. Martin had been watching Annje so intently he hadn’t noticed. She skated over.

“Need some help?”

“I get up,” Annje said.

Annje knelt, then brought up one foot, then the other. She crumpled once more, and the girl said something Martin could not hear, and then Annje figured it out, and was away again. Martin skated over to Clara.

“A natural.”

“She’s wanted to skate ever since she saw a picture of Dutch girls skating. Now I will try.”

Clara was much slower learning than Annje, but in half an hour she managed to take a few steps and glide. Meanwhile, Annje was talking to Katie, who came over hand in hand with Annje.

“Pretty good for her first time. When did you last skate?”

“Over ten years ago. As I mentioned the other day, Annje saw a picture of some Dutch girls skating, and somehow learned that skating was also done in Canada, and she’s been mad to try.”

“Katie makes it look so easy,” said Clara.

“It is when you get used to it.”

“But I think now we are getting cold. Time to go in and have a warm drink.”

“Yes. Hot chocolate,” said the girl.

“Skate. Skate. Hot Chocolate.” said Annje.

A Second Wedding

Saturday, December 20, 1947

Allen Ryan had arrived on Thursday evening. He was in good form, despite being now in his mid-seventies. He and Clara had a long conversation about Belgium and what it was like under the Germans, and also about what he did for the State Department over the years. Martin overheard the mention of ‘Best of Belgium’ and saw Allen ask some questions and Clara answering and clearly asking some questions of her own.

Martin was glad he’d been to the LCBO to get some drink. Actually he’d gone with Richard, and Richard had let him drive to get some practice on icy roads. They’d come back with a load of bottles – four white wine, two red, a dry sherry, a cream sherry, a bottle of scotch, one of rum, a half bottle of brandy, and a dozen beer. There had been a discussion over who would pay, settled with a compromise of half each.

Nobody drank a lot, but with so many occasions, it would disappear. On Thursday, for example, they’d toasted Allen’s arrival. That was the first time Clara had tried sherry. While Martin liked the dry, and Grandma Tremblay the sweeter cream sherry, Clara was not taken by either, which fortunately they tried in very small samples.

“I do not find that it is bad, but not that I like it.”

“I’ll finish it. Have something else. Scotch?”

“I have never tried that either.”

It turned out that she liked the spirity vapour above a small splash of the whiskey, which was a decent brand. She declined ice and water. Allen said, “Woman after my own heart. I like to just sip it slowly and enjoy the way the smell goes up my nose. And I prefer Scotch to our American Bourbon.” On Clara’s query about the difference he explained a bit about Scotch, Bourbon and Rye.

Now it was Saturday afternoon. They would have the ceremony at the Tremblays’, as the living room and dining room opened up one into the other in a long room. Christmas would be at the senior Tremblays’, with each of the ladies contributing part of the meal. Martin was checking his tie. He had on the same suit as at Gent. It was his demob suit. Solid but not very stylish. Clara had helped with some minor alterations, but somehow it still looked like a demob suit. It was, however, all he had in the way of a suit, except for his tuxedo. Before they went down, he reminded Clara to move the wedding ring back to her right hand.

Clara had planned to wear the same grey silk as for the Gent ceremony. Miriam thought this unconventional, but said she looked very nice in it.

“I want the pictures to have Martin and I look the same, so we can put them together like one ceremony.

Two families together,” said Clara.

“That’s very thoughtful. I appreciate it a lot. And you do look nice in that outfit, and it looked very special in the pictures of the Belgian ceremony. It’s just that here girls usually wear a big white dress. I think the stores get us fixed on that so they make more money,” Miriam replied with genuine warmth.

“What happens to the dresses afterwards?”

“Sometimes a sister or a cousin will use it. But many of them get put away in trunks in the attic. If you do any sort of business meetings, your suit will get used and that will help you get established. I forget how hard that is, but I know we had to think of the pennies when we were your age.”

“There is also the gown we bought from Jane,” Martin volunteered.

“Yes. I’ve only worn it for the Captain’s dinner on ship.”

“Go and put it on so we can see,” Miriam said.

Clara disappeared upstairs for a few minutes and returned in the gown.

“I think that is the outfit you should wear,” Miriam stated firmly. And indeed, it did look good on Clara.

“Then Martin must be in his tuxedo”, Clara affirmed. “On the ship people said we looked very good, and I saw us in a big mirror. So, yes, I agree with Mother.”

At one in the afternoon, they assembled in the living

room, with the sliding door open to the dining room. Annje was in the same outfit as in Gent. She had a little bouquet of flowers – Grandma Tremblay had found a florist who prepared a small one for Annje and a larger one for Clara.

Joseph – Joe to everyone, but Martin and Clara tried to use Joseph here and Joe for the one in Sutton – put on an alb and stole over his suit.

“Joe. I never saw you in that before,” said Penny.

“Well. If the Church decides to give me a proper salary, you might just see me in it more often. And then I could make an honest woman of you.”

There was laughter, but Miriam – as Clara noticed – did not really join in.

Joe conducted a simple but pleasant ceremony, which was short enough that the two children did not have time to fuss. Afterwards, there was a buffet lunch – they’d timed the ceremony so it fitted in with that.

Around 2:30, they were generally finished with the ceremony, the eating and the taking of pictures except for cutting the cake, when the doorbell rang. It was Katie and a friend.

“Hi, we wondered if Annie wanted to come skating with us. Oh. You’re having a party, sorry.”

“Actually, we’re having a wedding,” Robert said. “Step in for a minute to keep the cold out.” He’d answered the door, but Clara had been near the entrance to the

hall and was right behind him.

“Yes. Martin and I are having a second ceremony here so the Canadian family can make witness too.”

“What a fantastic idea – you get to have two weddings. By the way, this is Jacqueline. She’s from England, but was evacuated with her mother when she was 4 and hasn’t gone back.”

There was a mumble of acknowledgement from an obviously shy Jacqueline.

“Robert. Do you think it would be very bad if I said I wanted to go with Annje and skate too?”

Robert laughed. “I’m sure there are all kinds of rules of etiquette against it, but I think it’s a grand idea. Otherwise we’ll all stand or sit around eating and drinking and wondering what to do with ourselves.”

“We’d better ask if Desmond wants to come too.”

“Skate! Skate! Skate!” yelled Desmond, who had run for the doorbell too, and Annje joined in the chorus. The adults soon sorted things out. Penny would drive back for Desmond’s skates and clothes, the skaters would change out of their finery into suitable warm things, and they would meet in Katie’s back yard in 20-30 minutes or so. Martin got his skates, and Penny showed up with hers, but Joe and the other adults were left to be spectators, though Martin passed Allen his Leica, which turned out to produce some of the really memorable pictures. He cleverly moved to the other

side of the back yard and got the family members in the pictures. Clara and Annje made some improvement to their skills, but it was not yet quite skating, though they managed not to fall and did get in a couple of circuits of the small rink.

The crowd caught the eye of Katie's parent's who came out to see what was going on.

"It's OK Mum. Annie's parents are getting married," Mrs. Smith's face clouded. "Oops. That sounds wrong. But everything is all right. I'll explain later."

Mr. and Mrs. Smith, Fred and Norma, put on coats and came out. Robert explained what Katie had left hanging, and invited them back for the cake cutting.

"Jackie, Come inside and call your Mum. I don't want her worried, so make sure you tell her where you are. You know the house number of the Tremblays," said Norma.

The quiet response was almost indistinguishable with the hubub as skates were exchanged for boots, but Jackie went inside with Norma. In about 5 minutes, the whole group were back at the Tremblays. Norma brought with her some cookies, and Fred a couple of bottles of soda, knowing the girls would prefer that to tea or even hot chocolate.

"Time to cut the cake," said Agnes.

"But they're not in their wedding clothes," said Miriam.

"Nor am I," said Penny.

“The particular clothing doesn’t make you more or less married,” Joe offered. “I think you’ve had today one of the most unique and happy weddings I’ve ever been at.”

That seemed to settle things. Then the doorbell rang. It was Jacqueline’s mother, Maud.

“When Jackie phoned, I couldn’t let her come without offering something. Here’s some sausage rolls and mince pies.”

“Wonderful!” said Miriam. “We had them in ’38 and ’39, then they started to get scarce as the war went on. We were stuck in England for the war with the High Commission.”

“My husband managed to get us evacuated. Unfortunately, he didn’t evacuate his girlfriend, and now we’re legally separated.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that.”

“It probably would have happened anyway, and the move has been good for Jackie. Better food and lots more opportunity. Even for me. I’m a nurse and have had a job almost from the start. My brother has fitted us up with an apartment in his basement, and I’ve even got a car now. Never would have if I’d stayed in London.”

They did several photos around the cake, pretending to cut it. It had been made at the same time as the Christmas cake, but decorated for the wedding. Not a

huge cake, but there was plenty for everyone to have some. In fact, there was much more food than anyone could eat.

“This is not so different as at the farm in Belgium when I was little and my sister Wil got married,” Clara said.

“You mean friends and family, with food and drink?” Joe asked.

“Yes. But we had to go milk the cows and feed the chickens, even in the middle of the celebrations. And it was summer, so we set up tables outside. Our house was very small compared to this.”

“That was where you met Martin – when the mine went off?”

“Yes. I was walking back from my neighbour’s house. François was helping me after Luc was killed.”

“Penny said something about that. She also showed me the picture Martin took of you at David’s grave. I hope you won’t mind that I saw it.”

“No. But I wonder if the woman in the picture is me!”

“We all have different people inside us who come out from time to time. The secret of a good life is to only let the nice ones be seen, especially by the people we love.”

“Like Penny?”

“Yes. We have to figure out how to make things

work. But what I said earlier may not be so far from the truth. People in the United Church are talking of some social programs where I might get half a salary – now I depend on donations pretty much to live, and that isn't good enough to have a wife and child. If there is a church with a big congregation, they could offer me the other half. We'd not be rich, and Penny might stay working, but we could have a good life."

"I hope you find a way. One does not need to be rich to be happy, but it is very hard when there is not enough to eat or keep warm."

"Thank you, Clara. Now haven't you got to get packed to go on honeymoon?"

"No, we've really been on honeymoon since the beginning of September. First to Brussels, then London, Oxford, on the ship, then the train. Now here, learning about a whole new and young country. And we should not spend more money except in making the new life."

Martin added, "Also I don't want to miss dinner. We're having ham with pineapple, niblets corn and mashed potatoes. It brings back memories of childhood, and I want to see how Clara reacts to having pineapple with the ham. "

"I hadn't thought of things that way," Joe said. It really was a different sort of wedding.

Christmas Day

December 25, 1947. Thursday afternoon. Ottawa.

It was about two o'clock on Christmas Day. All the members of the family were at the house of the Tremblay grandparents for the opening of presents. There had been discussion about which tradition to follow – Christmas Eve after midnight mass, though nobody was going, early morning when everyone woke, or in the afternoon as in English households. With surprisingly little discussion, they decided on the afternoon, though the two infants would get stockings. This was new to both Clara and Annje. However, they set out a stocking – actually a big sock – and Annje was full of delight to find an orange, some nuts, a Hershey chocolate bar, a scarf and a pair of mittens in the morning. The last two items were the result of Clara's needles. She'd even taught Martin to knit on the train to Toronto, and he'd made a square that would be a doll's blanket in the crib.

After a quite simple breakfast of toast and tea to leave room for all that would come later, all except Allen Ryan walked to St. James United Church. It was about a mile each way, but the walk did them good. Allen said he was happy to stay and read. In fact, he prepared some ham sandwiches which were waiting on their return.

Clara was surprised at the size and shape of the

church, a big, domed structure. She found it interesting that people took off their overshoes, and was glad Martin had got her some so she fitted in. The boots were nicer for warmth and ease of walking, but clearly not so useful in buildings. Annje was well-behaved throughout the service – Clara had brought a notepad and pencil for her, and she drew a picture of the church which was surprisingly recognizable. Other children were not so good, either from too much excitement or temperament, and some had to be taken to the entrance vestibule so they did not disturb the congregation.

Clara and Martin had walked to the senior Tremblays' house, but Annje declared she wanted to go with Grandpa Allen.

"I'm glad she is fitting in," Martin said.

"Only glad. I am so relieved I think is the word."

"Yes. It would be terrible if she were clinging all the time. Instead she seems to meet everything head on."

"Did you put the presents in the car, Martin?"

"Yes. I put them in the trunk and told Dad they were there. Except for one."

"What do you mean?"

"I've got yours in my pocket."

"Oh. The one to surprise me."

"Well, you've never seen it before. At least I hope not, or it will have to go back to its rightful owner."

"And I have yours in my purse."

“Oh. I didn’t expect anything. What is it?”

“A surprise.”

So now everyone – Joe was included as he had no real family – was sitting in the living room, where a substantial Christmas tree was dripping with decorations and a string of coloured lights. Annje and Desmond had been full, if somewhat disruptive, participants in the decorating a few days before. Robert and Miriam decided not to put up a tree, but with Clara and Martin did put up a few bits of evergreen and some strings of Christmas cards. Clara and Martin had, in fact, written cards almost as soon as they got to Ottawa, though it appeared likely that they had missed the assured date for European delivery by surface mail.

“Does everyone who wants one have a drink?” Richard asked.

“Can I have another half cup of the egg-nog?” Clara asked. “It is a bit like Advocaat.”

“I put rum in this one. Don’t overdo it. We don’t want Martin to have to carry you home,” Richard teased. “Now. Allen. Will you act as master of ceremonies and distribute the presents. I suggest those at the left side which are for the younger members might best go first.”

Allen did his job well, making sure everyone got something in turn. The children struggled to unwrap some of the packages at first, then soon got the hang of it, demolishing the hopes of Penny and Clara to salvage

some of the wrapping paper. Fortunately, there were their own packages which they could carefully unwrap. The doll-crib and Typhoon model were a big hit. Allen gave each child plasticine, plus an envelope with a \$20 bill to start a savings account that was handed to the parents.

“Annje? What should you say?” Clara asked.

“Thank you. Grandpa Ryan.”

“And you Desmond?” Penny asked.

“Roaaarrr!” Desmond was flying his airplane.

“I’m glad we didn’t get him a drum or a trumpet,” Martin said.

“I’d send you back to England,” laughed Penny, giving up hope of getting Desmond to pay attention at this moment.

Allen moved on to the adults. The handkerchiefs for both the ladies and Joe were very well-received, with comments on how hard Clara had worked. The chocolate was also appreciated, though Martin sensed it would have to be shared with spouses, and the portions would forever be too small.

There were a number of small packages that turned out to be socks or ties, a silk blouse, a small leather purse. There was little that was frivolous – the war years were still not far from top of mind.

“Here’s something from Martin to Clara,” said Allen.

The small package quickly revealed the emerald br-

ooch. Martin's offer to pin it on was accepted, and then Clara had to find a mirror. There was one in the entrance hall. She came back in almost at a run and gave Martin a big kiss, which garnered a lot of applause, which surprised and silenced Desmond's noisy play.

"And an equally small package from Clara to Martin."

Martin had been wondering about this for some time. The box looked like the cardboard ones for sets of handkerchiefs. But Clara had chosen this to fool the recipient. It turned out to be a ball-point pen, a quite good Parker.

"To avoid another Bluenose," she said.

Martin laughed. "Now you will have to explain that to those who still don't know."

"Me Bluenose," said Annje.

"Yes, daughter. You are," and he explained what had happened, concluding with, "So now I have a pen that will hopefully be less likely to get ink all over. And which I can use in my doctoral studies."

"On that point, let us move to the combined wedding and Christmas presents. This first one is from me and Penny and Joe. Penny and I had the idea, and Joe knew where to get it. Here Clara, you open it."

"It's heavy. Oh. It's an Underwood portable typewriter, and paper and spare ribbons. Martin, you will be able to type your thesis and I will be able to type my letters to find customers for Best of Belgium. How

wonderful!”

“Thank you, Grandpa Ryan and Joe and Penny. Though this means I have to learn to type,” Martin chided, and everyone laughed. “It really is thoughtful, and it will help us both a great deal. We had begun to realize that we would eventually need one, so this is excellent timing.”

“And finally from Richard and Agnes and Robert and Miriam. You open this one Martin,” Allen said, stifling a chuckle.

“Woo. Also heavy. You know we have to get all these things to Toronto next week. Ah. It’s a sewing machine. That’s why you were chuckling.”

Clara was open-mouthed, but soon came to her senses.

“It is so generous, but it will so much save us money to be able to make clothes and curtains and other things. I have learned to use one with my sister’s machine, and here with Mother Tremblay. But I know how much these cost – you may have seen me in the newspaper reading as well in the Eaton’s shop and the Murphy Gamble. And look, some reels of thread for it. So, so generous.”

They cleared things away carefully to ensure nothing wanted went into the waste bin. The grown-up ladies salvaged all the wrapping paper they could, along with ribbons and string. There was some oohing and aahing over Clara’s brooch by the ladies.

Allen came over to Martin.

“Here’s an envelope with the receipts for both the typewriter and the sewing machine. Some folk think it’s impolite to have the price, so I’ve sealed it. The main thing is so that you have the date for the warranty on them, which is a year.”

“Thank you, Grandpa Allen. I appreciate the practicality. You’ve made my life much easier over the past year.”

“I got a sense that this wife of yours was special when you talked about her last year at the Savoy. She’s practical too. And I noticed you’ve been saying ‘our daughter’. I think that’s wise, as long as you mean it.”

“When we realized in July that we wanted to be together, that was almost the first thing we talked about – that our happiness wouldn’t work without Annje being part of it. And I suppose that could mean that Annje becomes a little princess, if you know what I mean, but neither of us wants that sort of child.”

“Actually, she is a pretty serious little kid in some ways.

I think you’d have a lot more trouble with Desmond. Our Joe’s going to have to figure that one out I think.”

“Did Penny say anything to you about Joe?”

“Didn’t have to. I’ve been in the diplomatic game too long. And played poker. They want to be together so bad they can taste it, but are both worried about

your parents thinking they can't make a go of it. And to be truthful, Joe better get something a bit more stable for income than what he has, but I think there are conversations going on to try to sort out something."

The women were in the kitchen. It had been decided there would be no starter. There was plenty of food. Grandma Agnes and Penny had taken care of turkey and gravy and cranberry sauce. Clara said she would do the potatoes. Initially she had intended to do kroketten, but had been persuaded that scalloped potatoes – new to her – were simpler in that they just went in the oven under the turkey. Fortunately, the bird was not a huge one. Grandma Agnes knew that left-overs had a declining attraction over a period of just a few days. Miriam did the vegetables – sprouts, parsnips and cauliflower. Mostly the ladies chatted and watched that nothing burned or boiled over. They'd all worked on the pudding some days before, but Agnes was going to make a brandy sauce, and Penny would do the honours of setting it alight to carry in. For now, the pudding steamed gently at the back of the stove.

Desmond and Annje had both fallen asleep on cushions. Annje's doll crib was, for some reason, occupied by the household cat. As with other animals, it took to Annje, while it would run and hide when Desmond approached. Grandpa Richard was snoring softly, and Robert was reading a book he had been given as a

present, perhaps by Joe, who had disappeared outside to start the cars for a few minutes. Good man. Martin had forgotten that exercise, which was needed in cold weather if vehicles were outside.

Joe came back in and took off his winter gear.

“I’d forgotten that you needed to do that,” Martin observed.

“I want to be able to ferry you folks home, then get myself back across town after. It’s been a really nice day, and I’m sure we’ll have a special meal. I appreciate this family making me welcome. After – the fire – I tried not to notice how much it means to be a part of things, even if I do all the work with the church outreach.”

“I suppose that’s a lot of what I’ve been thinking about.”

“Meaning?”

“Well. The last Christmas I had like this was ten years ago. Then we went to England, where almost the first thing I saw was a bunch of thugs threatening Jewish shops in Bethnal Green.”

“I actually read about that. You were there?”

“Mum and I were coming out the Tube station – the one where 170 people died in 1943 in a stampede because a new AA weapon was tested nearby – to look at a flat. We never got there. Turned round and went to Sutton.”

“And then you had to adapt to English life?”

“And the war, rationing, bombs, shortages, yet more bombs, Oxford, David’s death, the RAF, then demob and Oxford again. Now Clara and Annje.”

“All new situations, and being out of your own home territory.”

There was a minor commotion as the women brought the food to the dining room table.

“Yes. And like today. Thursday afternoon.”