I was born on 25th May 1938, in the front bedroom of a house in Orton Road, a house on the outer edge of Raffles, a council estate.

I was a lucky girl. Carlisle City Council was quite flushed with pride over this estate, consisting as it did of two thousand houses. It had responded with enthusiasm to the King's speech of April 1919, in which he had said the only adequate solution to so many of the population living in inadequate housing was to build more houses specifically for the poor. There were lots of 'the poor' in Carlisle, many of them crammed into slum dwellings in Caldewgate, where most of the factories were situated. In 1920, a report on the Sanitary Condition of the City

of Carlisle had condemned the majority of dwellings in Caldewgate as 'unfit for habitation' yet they were all heavily inhabited. The report spoke of 'a bad arrangement of lanes and courts', pointing out how few houses had an internal water supply, and that none had their own lavatory. The yards in 'common' use meant infectious diseases spread rapidly. It was this dire situation that the new council estate, to the north-west of Caldewgate, was built to redress: to get these 'poor' out into the green fields of Raffles.

My parents, though, couldn't be categorised as belonging to 'the poor', but the council was enlightened enough to realise that for the future health of the new estate it might be a good idea to have a few young married couples, just starting off, mixed in with families removed from the slums. My father, a fitter working in Hudson Scott's factory, at least qualified as a manual worker (ninety-one per cent of those allocated houses were manual workers). My mother, who up to marrying in 1931 was a secretary in the Health Department, was strictly speaking a class above him, but, as all women did, she had to give up her job once they married. Both of them were born in Carlisle, and both lived in houses owned by their

parents, small terraced houses in working-class areas but nevertheless owned, not rented. They could well have had to start off married life living with one or other of their parents so they were pleased to be able to rent a new house of their very own, at six shillings a week, just under a quarter of my father's weekly wage.

They had both been familiar with the fields of Raffles before the estate was built. The ninety-eight acres purchased by the council stretched either side of the road leading west to Wigton. Not much had ever grown there, except poor-quality grass, because the soil was thick with clay and drainage was difficult. The new estate wasn't spoiling a beautiful area of countryside. In any case, the idea was that Raffles should be a housing estate of the garden city variety with great care to be given to its layout. There were to be lots of green spaces left, and only twelve houses built on any one acre, with a pleasing mixture of terraces and semi-detached dwellings. There was to be a church, shops and a park. It would be a model of its kind.

The estate had just been completed when my parents moved into Orton Road in 1931. The house was on a corner, facing into Orton Road which skirted the

western side of the estate. It was semi-detached, with a garden on three sides. Inside, there was a living room, a tiny back kitchen, two bedrooms and a bathroom where there was indeed a bath but no sink or lavatory. The lavatory was part of the fabric of the house but could only be reached by going out of the backdoor and into the adjoining outhouse. There had been huge arguments about this at council meetings, mainly over the expense of putting lavatories in bathrooms. Clearly that was ruled out. But the less-expensive possibility of simply knocking through into the outside lavatory from the kitchen was not gone into. Good heavens, these people should be grateful to have their own lavatory even if they often had to get soaked going out to it. And they were.

My parents were ideal tenants. They looked after their rented house perfectly. This maintenance was not easy. The house was heated by an open fire set in the black iron range which filled one wall of the living room. The black leading of this range was an unpleasant job, one that hadn't changed from Victorian times, and the laying and cleaning out of the coal fire was a wearying task. Because of this coal fire, there was always a lot of dust so keeping things clean was a constant challenge. Luckily, perhaps,

there was not much furniture to keep clean: a settee, an armchair, a table, four wooden chairs and a sideboard, most bought in auctions. Quite enough, though, to make the fourteen by twelve foot room look crowded. In the back kitchen there was a gas cooker and a sink, with a wooden board to the left of the sink which served as a worktop. Upstairs, in the room where I was to be born, there was a double bed, a wardrobe, a dressing table and a chest of drawers. Later, when there were three children, an alcove was turned into a Scottish-style bed-in-the-wall, or in other words a mattress was put on top of a board laid across the alcove, with a curtain rigged up in front of it to give an illusion of privacy. There was another small bedroom at the back, in which, for a while, my maternal grandmother stayed, until she died in 1936.

By the time I was born, things were still going well for Raffles, Carlisle's pride and joy. The new park, in particular, was a showpiece. Opened in 1934, it had a miniature golf course and a paddling pool as well as lots of open spaces for children to play. The new church was like a glistening white palace, set almost in the centre of the estate, and well attended. Strangely, there was no school. Children either had to go to Ashley Street, on

the edge of Caldewgate, or Newtown, outside the estate at the other end. The estate still looked sparklingly clean, the roads well swept, the gardens established and, mostly, thriving and well looked after.

So there I was, born in a house in Orton Road, eager to see if the house itself would indeed determine the 'quality, colour, atmosphere and pace' of my life.

It certainly did.

I lived in Orton Road for fourteen years. It was, by any standards, a good house for any child to live in. The fire always burned brightly, there was always food on the table, and that table was covered with a pristine tablecloth for every meal. The sideboard was never without a vase of flowers, picked from our own garden, and the brass ornaments sitting on it were regularly polished. Everything was always tidy, clean and neat. Dishes were never left unwashed, floors never went unswept. Housework was hard, with no labour-saving devices whatsoever, but it was done with back-breaking efficiency. It was a good house to come home to, but by the time I was seven I'd found ways of being in it as little as possible. The truth was I preferred

other houses. The ones which lay on the other side of Orton Road.

Orton Road was a demarcation line. On one side, our side, was the Raffles council estate; on the other were the privately owned houses. Directly opposite our house was the opening to Inglewood Crescent, lined either side with houses that had proper bathrooms, dining rooms as well as sitting rooms, kitchens with (for the 1940s) all mod cons, and upstairs three bedrooms. This crescent seemed to me to epitomise gracious living. Even the concrete road surface, which had stayed almost white, seemed superior to the tarmac roads of our estate. At the top of this crescent were open fields, giving a country feel. The children living in these houses went, on the whole, to the same primary schools as we on the Raffles estate did, so I had friends among them. As soon as I got home from Ashley Street School, I'd be dashing over to some house or other in Inglewood Crescent where I'd collect my friends and we'd go off to play in the disused tennis court behind the houses at the top of the crescent. We used an old hut there as a stage and put on 'shows'. Only when it rained heavily, or began to grow dark, did we go home. I'd usually manage to wriggle my way into

one of the crescent houses for a short while before crossing Orton Road to my own house, wishing passionately that we lived in Inglewood Crescent.

The attraction was the space. In our house, we five – my parents, me, an older brother and a younger sister – were all crammed into one living room where we ate and sat, with the wireless nearly always on. In the Inglewood Crescent houses people were not all obliged to be together. There were electric fires in the different rooms, even some of the bedrooms, so family togetherness was not obligatory. I didn't see my longing for space as any rejection of my own family, just as a natural desire to have the chance not to be forced to be with others all the time. There was one friend, an only child, whose house I particularly liked to be in and luckily her parents liked having me there. I was considered a suitable companion, even though I might have been thought from the wrong side of Orton Road (Raffles by then having begun to be thought 'rough'). But then this friend's father was made Station Master of Silloth Station and they moved. My friend missed me, and soon I was invited to spend the weekend with her in Station House, Silloth.

My father, who had a great reverence for all things to do with trains and stations, and whose favourite outing

was to the little seaside town of Silloth, was very impressed by my good fortune in getting such an invitation. 'Station House' conjured up all sorts of visions for me, though in fact I should have known perfectly well what it looked like because I'd been going to Silloth by train, together with half the population of Carlisle, all my life. It was just that I'd never really looked at the house. I knew it was big, and right opposite the entrance to the station, but there was always such a rush, straight from train to sea, that I'd never taken in what kind of house it was except that it stood on its own. The reality was a little forbidding. Station House was a large, red-brick house, set back slightly from the road. There was a big window to the left of the front door, which had a pointed roof at the top. To the right was a smaller window. There were no flowers growing in the garden, just some dark green shrubs, sprawling and overgrown. The front door was painted black, and had a lion's head as a knocker. These ground-floor windows either side had net curtains over them which to me made it look as though the house had its eyes closed. Inside, it seemed rather dark in the hallway, the only light coming from a landing window. The only two rooms downstairs actually in use were the kitchen, at the back,

and the sitting room leading off it. Both seemed vast, and were sparsely furnished. The family – just my friend and her parents – had moved from a modern semi-detached in Carlisle to this large house and their furniture seemed lost in it.

I'd never imagined that a house could dominate the people in it, but that was what this house did. Every footstep taken echoed, and though my friend and I ran around and made plenty of noise, the moment we sat down the intense silence of the rooms closed in. Their dog, an Alsatian, which, in the house in Carlisle, had seemed too big and energetic for it, here seemed cowed. I did not feel comfortable there even though, theoretically, this was the kind of house I'd wanted to live in. Luckily, we were out most of the time, playing on Silloth Green. My friend had started going to Allonby, a seaside village a couple of miles down the coast, to ride, and that weekend I was asked if I would like to ride too. I said yes at once. Nobody asked if I *could* ride, though surely my friend's parents must have known it was unlikely. Anyway, I firmly believed I could. Had I not ridden donkeys on Silloth Green on day trips from Carlisle, many a time? Of course I had – nothing to it. And in all the stories I read all the children rode, galloping away, just as I was confident I

would be able to do. I could see myself, in a pair of borrowed jodhpurs, wearing one of those special caps, astride a chestnut mare, racing along Allonby sands . . .

At least the riding instructor quickly realised I'd never even sat on a horse in my life. I couldn't get in the saddle without considerable assistance, and when I got there I couldn't sit upright without enormous effort. My horse, doubtless the most docile in the stable, was put on a leading rein, and we only trotted while the others galloped. For a while I was nevertheless in love with my own image of myself, a girl who could ride and lived in a *big house* by the sea, so exciting. At the end of the lesson, I could hardly get off the horse and when I slithered off I could barely walk. For the rest of my three-day stay at Station House I was in agony, though by the time I got home I was already boasting about my ride, how wonderful it had been.

I was invited again to Station House, but I never went. Ever after, I averted my eyes when I came out of Silloth station.

Another big house influenced me soon after, but this house was a school. At eleven, I passed the eleven plus and went

to the Carlisle & County High School for Girls in Lismore Place. The building overawed me. Built in 1909, at a cost of £18,000, it was in the style of an Edwardian mansion, with a lawn in front, used as tennis courts in the summer, and enough land around it to provide ample playing fields. Walking into this building every day thrilled me, especially going into the assembly hall with its stage, and scholarship boards on the walls, and the balcony running along one side. I would like to have lived there, and as it was hung about at the end of each school day, reluctant to leave. Unlike Station House, there didn't seem to me to be anything intimidating or depressing about this much larger 'house'. It seemed full of light, and I failed to notice that by then (1949) the fabric was showing signs of deterioration. I saw only the space. I marvelled at the vastness of the place. My fantasy was that it would become a boarding school (the fees paid by the Council, of course). Going home to Orton Road was a terrible let-down.

But going to-and-from school also taught me a lot about other houses. There were so many different kinds between Orton Road and Lismore Place. I was already thoroughly familiar with semi-detached houses, but Chiswick Street, or Warwick Road, had quite different

buildings. These were three-storey Victorian terraced houses, with doors and windows quite unlike those belonging to the houses on the Raffles estate. The doors in particular impressed me. They looked as though they could keep an army out, they were so solid. Looking at the windows, counting them, I reckoned some of these houses had eight rooms in them, and I wondered what they were all used for. The streets they stood in were quite broad and I liked walking down them. The contrast not just with where I'd started from but with the medieval lanes I'd cut through (once I'd got off the Ribble bus at the Town Hall, to get to them), was marked. There were not many people still living in those lanes by then, but I'd been in some of the tiny, crammed-together houses there and knew how dark and dismal they were. There was a whole history lesson just in contrasting all the various houses, though I had no knowledge then of what it was.

But I knew that any kind of house was preferable to the alternative, a flat or a bed-sitting room. My aunt Jean, my mother's sister, lived in what was really a flat, though it had the appearance of a house. Number 366 Bellshill Road in Motherwell had a proper front door so that it looked as if it led to a house, but once inside it was

revealed as a flat. There were just two rooms and a tiny kitchen area on a landing at the top of a flight of steps which led down to lower ground level, passing a flat below on the way. She and her husband and two sons lived here in this big block, known as The Buildings. Out at the back was a line of washhouses, and further along an old slag heap called 'the bing' where children played. There was a strong communal atmosphere among the women using the washhouses – they all knew each other, and were in and out of each other's 'houses' all the time. Coming home to Orton Road after staying with Aunt Jean I suddenly appreciated what we had there. Slowly, it was beginning to dawn on me that it was all a matter of comparisons. I might yearn for the space and privacy a big house gave you but compared to living in 'The Buildings' I already had it.

Just to confuse things, there was another sort of flat within my experience. My mother's other sister, Nan, lived with her husband and son in a flat above an opticians' in Nottingham. If we weren't spending our holidays in Motherwell, we spent them in Nottingham in an entirely different flat. This one was large, with three bedrooms, and a spacious living room, kitchen and bathroom. It was comfortably furnished, with pale-coloured fitted carpets

throughout, and silk curtains at the windows. There was no garden or outside space but otherwise it seemed to me an attractive place to live. I could live in such a place, I thought, having previously decided I would never want to live in a flat. But of course in Aunt Nan's flat there was no one living above and no one living below (because below was the shop). So it felt quite separate, suffering none of the common disadvantages of flat-dwelling. Still, no garden was a minus, and I went home from this flat grudgingly grateful to live in a house that had one.

I was still, at eleven years old, playing at my version of houses the way other girls played at skipping. It obsessed me. The game consisted of fixing upon an existing house in Carlisle's Norfolk Road, down which we walked to visit our grandparents. In this road, which had no access to traffic at one end, making it very quiet, there were double-fronted Victorian or Edwardian villas, some approached by circular drives, and with imposing iron gates at the entrance, often with stone pillars either side. One or two, at the end of the 1940s, had already been converted into old people's homes but most were still privately owned and lived in by solicitors and managing directors of local firms. This was not in Carlisle's posh area (that was

Stanwix) but this one road, despite being a little too near the Raffles estate, was a desirable road to live in. In my imagination, in this game I played, I already lived in it, though I changed 'my' house regularly. I selected a house and moved out the people living in it. Where to? I had no idea – they were just evicted, it was their problem where they were to go. I took over the minute they had gone, just me, not with my family. I chose a bedroom at the back of whichever house it was, hoping that it looked out onto a garden full of apple trees. (I couldn't see how big the gardens of these houses were, but I was sure they must have lawns and trees.) I wouldn't have curtains at the window, just a blind, the sort I'd seen pictures of in magazines. The walls would be plain white, and the carpet pale green. There would be no dark furniture in this room, everything would be light wood. I hesitated over my bed: brass headboard, or wickerwork? Then I moved into the rest of the house, cautiously investigating room after room, and changing the decor in seconds. There would definitely be a library, though I wasn't sure how to fit in shelves, whether they should go right round the walls or, as in the Tullie House public library, be free-standing. Oh, problems, problems, all of them delightful.

I played this game but I hardly played at all with the doll's house I had. It was no good to me, with my grandiose ideas. My father's brother, Bob, had made it for me when I was seven. It turned out to be deeply disappointing, consisting as it did of a roof over four square rooms, two above, an identical two below, and all of them open at the front. There was no hinged door to close the house so that it would look like a real house. That, I suppose, was beyond Bob's capabilities. After a few half-hearted attempts to paint the rooms and stick bits of plastic on the floors, and scraps of wool to act as carpets, I lost interest. The few bits of doll's furniture I was given looked ridiculous in this open house, and moving them about was no fun at all. I expect I was thought unappreciative, but luckily for me it soon didn't matter because my father had a row with Bob and they didn't speak to each other for the next forty years. Even then, it wasn't a proper conversation. Bob came to my mother's funeral and seeing him standing respectfully outside the church, my father bellowed through the opened car window: 'Bob, you can come to the tea if you want.' Bob shook his head. That was that. The non-speaking continued to the death. After their row, though, the doll's house became tainted,

and I was allowed to give it away. Far better to play houses in my head.

But there was another house, apart from those in Norfolk Road, which fascinated me, and which I thought I could see myself one day living in, if some magic occurred. Morton Manor was just across the Wigton Road, which marked the far edge of the Raffles estate. It couldn't actually be seen because it had a long, high wall separating the grounds it stood in from the road, but once a year Sir Robert and Lady Chance held a garden fete there and we were allowed in, making our way through the big gates and along the driveway which on either side was dense with shrubs and trees. There had been a house on that site since the seventeenth century but the manor as it was that day (or parts of it) had been there since 1807, when the Forster family bought and added to it. The Forster family? How lucky that I didn't know this in the 1940s, when I would immediately have spun a fantasy about myself really belonging to *this* branch of the Border family famously mentioned in Walter Scott's 'Young Lochinvar' and not my own – I'd have cast myself as the long-lost great-granddaughter, the rightful heir. As it was, John Forster

sold the manor in 1837, and eventually it came to belong to Robert Chance.

Coming upon the house was a surprise – it was hidden for so long from visitors winding their way along the drive. The gardens were natural-looking but in fact cleverly designed by a celebrated nineteenth-century gardener, William Sawrey Gilpin. I didn't know anything about garden design and had never heard of Gilpin, but I could see that the Morton Manor gardens were artistic. So was the manor itself. It was a long, low building, just two storeys high, with floor-to-ceiling windows on the ground floor and quite a modest entrance to the house through a curved porch. The whole of this front wall was covered with ivy (though maybe it was Virginia creeper – I never saw it in the autumn). I thought this made it romantic, but my father looked at it and condemned it at once on two grounds: ivy weakened the wall, and it encouraged insects which would get into the rooms. I wondered if I should pass this worrying information on to Sir Robert and Lady Chance, who that day sometimes came among us, but decided not to. We were not, of course, allowed into the house, but I lurked near the generous windows and tried to peer in, ever so casually. I

couldn't see much, just what looked like heavy dark furniture and some large, dark pictures on the walls.

Coming home from Morton Manor, I instantly pictured our council house covered with ivy. It looked much better. But nothing could be done about how the house looked, ivy or no ivy. It looked like a child's drawing, and a child who had no talent for drawing. It was crude in shape, even I could see that without knowing anything about architecture. There were no distinguishing features – well, of course there weren't, the council's money wouldn't run to anything fancy. The front door, like all the other houses on the estate, was painted a dismal shade of green, not fern green, not forest green, but a withered-cabbage green. I looked at it more and more critically once I'd grown accustomed to other styles of houses. I noticed how the top half of the walls, which were rendered, had turned a dirty grey, and I wished they could be whitewashed. That would help. So would reorganising the shape of the garden. Most of it was to the side, which made it very public. If it had been at the back, there would have been some privacy . . . on and on I went, fixing my general discontent on the poor house.

But at least I recognised that, badly arranged